

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

RICHARD R. WILK (Ed.) *Fast Food / Slow Food: The Cultural Economy of the Global Food System*. Lanham, MD: Altamira Press, 2006, vi + 258 p.

Comprised of works by numerous economic and cultural anthropologists, this edited collection offers empirical case studies of how global food systems and corporate globalization intersect with local customs and traditional frameworks.

Fast food is most often associated with globalism, convenience stores, the expansion of eating venues like McDonald's and Kentucky Fried Chicken, as well as agricultural methods (e.g., mono-cropping, use of pesticides/herbicides, genetically-modified seeds) that reflect corporate instead of communal needs. Fast food has been said to obliterate food traditions and local customs. By contrast, slow food has been referred to as a "social movement" that seeks to appreciate local cuisines and preserve regionally specific culinary patterns. Far from eating on the run, slow food takes time – time to grow, time to prepare, and time to eat. The slow food "movement" started after McDonald's tried to open its doors under the historic Spanish Steps in Rome.

The major thesis of *Fast Food / Slow Food* is that food production and consumption is more complicated than the fast/slow dichotomy implies. As Wilk writes in his introduction, one bite of food "may have slow grains and fast oil" (15). Wilk contends that simply invoking the fast/slow dichotomy eschews how fast food relies on local ideas around home and tradition for meaning to be imparted, and how slow food has come to rely on transportation systems that mirror rather than undercut the globalization and industrialization of food.

Indeed, a major point this book makes is that the slow food movement has shifted too much towards taste, style and distinction, and away from the idea of food being slow because it is consumed by those who have a hand in producing it. On this point, Cathy Banwell and colleagues state that slow food in Australia may be more car reliant than fast food, and thus less rather than more environmentally friendly.

Food production and consumption is not only about economic exchange, but also about symbolic registers of meaning. In her piece on "hunger foods" and "heritage foods," Penny van Esterik demonstrates how "fast"

and “slow” food philosophies are mixed in food production and consumption. The same river algae from Laos that acts as insurance for local people against hunger in times of food shortages becomes the treasure of culinary bioprospectors and yuppie chow for slow food buyers in North America. Esterik points out how “foods and their meanings are increasingly mobile in a globalized food market. But the same foods have very different meanings in different contexts...” (93). Similarly, as James Egan and colleagues show, imported and non-traditional foodstuffs that enter into the Yapese cultural economy of food consumption in Micronesia are used in customary expressions of time-honored sociality, which further entrench rather than obliterate localized cultural distinctions. Imported foodstuffs are circulated in routine transfers between kin-based households slotted into Yapese cultural idioms of land and life.

Dolores Koenig shows how middle-class Malians have adopted imported foods into traditional cooking techniques and local networks of food distribution. Melissa Caldwell’s research in Post-Soviet Russia examines various intentional manipulations of food that evoke imagined homelands located in a re-constructed past. Gavin Whitelaw’s piece shows how the “convenience” of rice balls, sold in the Japanese 7-Eleven stores and other konbini, which Theodore Bestor discusses, is linked to the food’s longstanding cultural resonance as easy to eat as much as it is marketing gimmicks.

Fast Food/Slow Food also offers chapters on searches for alternative food systems and some struggles against food industry giants. The chapter by Jeffrey Pilcher documents contestation in Mexico over changing methods of producing tortillas. He claims that “although slow food offers an admirable program for personal life, it will never represent a genuine revolution until it confronts the dilemmas of class that have been complicated but not obviated by increasing globalization” (69). According to Ty Matejowsky, fast food is bringing global tastes to San Fernando in the Philippines, but in ways mediated by local receptivity. Lois Stanford comments on Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) organizations and farmers’ markets. She documents some of the challenges CSA growers face in maintaining alternative forms of direct marketing, and the nervousness of many producers regarding the commercialization of the organic food industry. Sarah Lyon likewise examines some of the contradictions of fair trade coffee. Sidney Mintz argues that the abolition of fast food is unlikely, as is the idea that slow food will be extended to everyone, but stresses the importance of locally grown and consumed food for environmental sustainability.

Resistance to the rapidly changing global food system is much more strategic and widespread than the elite-oriented slow food movement. One issue which is not discussed sufficiently in this book is the impact of biotechnology corporations (e.g., Monsanto) and international financial institutions (e.g., the World Bank) on food production and biodiversity. Fast Food/Slow Food does not quite convey the devastating effects of imposed structural adjustment programs in South Asia, South America and

Africa. Actions against “Frankenfoods” such as genetically modified rice, corn, wheat and canola have been organized by many farmers’ rights and food sovereignty groups. Many groups organize against biopiracy and for sustainable agrarian policy. For instance, La Via Campesina is a peasant movement that coordinates actions between small and medium sized food producers and creates international networks of solidarity.

Fast Food / Slow Food does not offer much by way of farmer-focused research. Heather Paxson’s chapter does explore the production and marketing of artisanal cheese in Vermont, and Valerie Imbruce’s chapter analyzes relations between producers and buyers in the Chinese vegetable trade of New York City markets. But this does not address the lived experiences of impoverished and indigenous farmers.

Despite these minor drawbacks, Fast Food / Slow Food is a great contribution to economic and environmental anthropology. The book will interest anthropologists, sociologists, and nutritional scientists who study food commodification and practices, the cultural meanings of food, consumption and alternative food systems.

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