

Focus

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# ..Writing the Food Studies Movement



## ABSTRACT

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Is it time to establish a food studies canon? In recent years, the field of food studies has come into its own as a means to investigate critical questions about production and consumption. This commentary explores the written sources of two academics' interest in food, and the books that have sparked the food studies movement and today's food revolution. As a topic for readers' consideration, it asks whether food studies has progressed to a stage of development at which it is now possible to identify a core list of books that can be considered to define the field.

Food,  
Culture  
&  
Society

**Keywords:** food, food studies, food movement, food bibliography, food sociology

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### Introduction

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Within my academic lifetime, the use of food as a means to examine critical questions about the causes and consequences of production and consumption has grown dramatically. Indeed, the growth of scholarly interest in food has been so rapid and extensive that the various approaches to such questions—historical, cultural, behavioral, biological and socioeconomic—are now often grouped under the rubric *food studies*. As such, food studies can be considered to constitute a new movement, not only as an academic discipline but also as a means to change society (Berg *et al.*, 2003).

Food studies has deep roots in foodways and other aspects of the humanities and social sciences. Nevertheless, it was only in 1996 that this collective term began to describe a legitimate field of academic study. That year, my department at New York University (NYU) recruited Amy Bentley as its first food studies professor and admitted its first undergraduate, masters, and doctoral students to food studies programs accredited by New York State.

How we were able to create programs under this title was a matter of fortuitous circumstances and a certain amount of preparation. The department, then known as Nutrition, Food, and Hotel Management, already offered courses in food and nutrition. The administrative transfer of its hotel programs to another school at NYU created a vacuum that new food programs could fill. A few years earlier, Julia Child had inspired development of the gastronomy master's program at Boston University. We thought we could do something similar but more academically focused at NYU. Because "studies" would be consistent with existing programs in such fields as Africana, cinema, French, gender and liberal studies, we were certain that the title "food studies" would work better at NYU.

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From the start, we considered food studies to encompass foodways, gastronomy and culinary history, as well as discipline-based approaches to investigating critical social questions about food production or consumption. Today, NYU food studies students can specialize in either food systems (production) or food culture (consumption).

Also from the start, this broad definition of food studies immediately raised questions about its scope, methods and content. To deal with such questions, our department's advisory committee suggested that we identify a food studies "canon"—a set of books that every food scholar should be expected to read, understand and use. In our innocence of the minefields of such a suggestion, we embarked on the project. For some months, we sent out questionnaires, collected suggestions, and struggled with the responses. At the end of this process, beyond *Sweetness and Power* (Mintz 1985), we could not agree on which books—or whose—should be in or out, and we abandoned the idea, some of us more reluctantly than others.

Now, more than a decade later, I wonder whether it is time to reconsider the notion of a common intellectual core. I suggest this on the basis of my own academic history as well as on how the field has progressed, how journalists and writers have used the themes of food studies for advocacy purposes, and how our food studies doctoral candidates have approached the problem of what they need to know. Let me begin this discussion with some remarks about my own experience.

### Some Personal Reflections

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My personal interest in this field dates back to a time when nearly everyone considered food far too common and quotidian to be taken seriously as a field of study, let alone as an agent of social change. As a high school student, I was interested in food but knew only two options for studying it: agriculture and dietetics. A city girl, I did not understand the relevance of agriculture to important social questions, and it took years before I did. That left dietetics. I entered Berkeley to major in dietetics, lasted precisely one day (too much home economics), and fled into science.

Later, during my first university teaching job in the Biology Department at Brandeis University, I was assigned to teach an undergraduate nutrition course. It was like falling in love, and I have never looked back. At last I could return to food. That first course made it clear that it was only possible to understand why people eat the way they do if you also understand how food is produced. My mid-1970s class read *Food for People, Not for Profit* (Lerza and Jacobson 1973), a revelatory collection of short essays about agriculture, food, nutrition and health that was well ahead of its time. They read *Diet for a Small Planet* (Lappé 1971), the now classic book linking

health to plant-based agricultural systems. I also had them read two lengthy and stunningly prescient essays from the *New York Review of Books* by the late historian Geoffrey Barraclough: “The Great World Crisis” and “Wealth and Power: The Politics of Food and Oil” (Barraclough 1975a, 1975b). Both dealt with systemic problems in global policies related to the ways in which money, energy and food are interconnected.

I went on to teach clinical nutrition to medical students at the University of California School of Medicine in San Francisco and to work as a nutrition policy advisor in the federal government. I could not get back to food in any serious way until I came to NYU in 1988. Even then and with tenure, it was not easy to establish a non-science academic career based on food. Universities typically discouraged doctoral students and instructors from wasting time on anything so intellectually trivial. Never mind that *The Jungle*, Upton Sinclair’s muckraking account of the horrors of the Chicago stockyards, impelled Congress to enact food safety laws in 1906. That book appeared nearly a century ago. In the late 1980s, it seemed impossible to imagine that books about food could spark academic and popular social movements. But they have now done exactly that.

From my personal perspective, three books from quite separate genres—cooking, scholarship and journalism—revolutionized popular (and, therefore, academic) thinking about the way food is produced, consumed, and studied. These books not only influenced my own thinking, but also brought food into the mainstream of advocacy for social change. They opened doors for others—scholars as well as journalists and food writers—to examine the profound implications of the way food is used in modern society. All three of these books were best-sellers in their respective fields and are still widely used.

First on my list is *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* (Child *et al.* 1961). This “mere” cookbook completely changed my generation’s understanding of food. The pages of my own copy are yellowed with age and spattered with the results of early experiments with bouillabaisse (pretty terrific, if I remember correctly), soufflés (tricky but worth it) and Hollandaise (never mind). Late in 1991, a most reluctant Julia Child signed it for me the night I had dinner at her house in Cambridge. That event had been arranged by Nancy Harmon Jenkins under the fantastic misapprehension that if Julia met me, she might think better of nutritionists. This did not work. But, as Laura Shapiro (2007) makes clear in her splendid *Julia Child, Mastering* was a monumental work of research that transformed the entire cookbook genre from being viewed as trivially unimportant to occupying a position as a respected cultural indicator worthy of serious scholarly investigation.

*Mastering* was revolutionary in another way. It made many of us realize how impoverished we were with respect to foods that were readily available anywhere in France or Italy. Alice Waters’ insistence that Chez Panisse serve

fresh, seasonal ingredients also served to expose the weaknesses of industrialized agriculture. The connection between the way food is produced and how it tastes on the table became the central theme of her cookbooks as well as the rationale for contemporary accounts of the Alice Waters phenomenon, such as *The United States of Arugula* (Kamp 2006) and *Alice Waters and Chez Panisse* (McNamee 2008).

The second book on my list is the consensus favorite, Sidney Mintz's *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*. I bought a copy when it first came out in 1985. Mintz tells me it is now in its thirty-fifth printing. Then, I was teaching nutrition to medical students in the hope of convincing them that some knowledge of food might improve their ability to help patients. *Sweetness and Power* is an anthropologist's examination of sugar as a means to understand the development of slavery as an institution and the plight of the working class during the industrial revolution. This book sets a standard for how to use food to make complicated political and social issues interesting and accessible to scholarly audiences in many fields.

I credit the third book for kicking off the current frenzy of interest in food issues among the general public. This has to be *Fast Food Nation*, the journalist Eric Schlosser's exposé of the "dark side" of hamburgers and French fries (Schlosser 2001). His account turned masses of readers into food advocates eager to transform the current food system into something healthier for people, food animals and farm workers, as well as for the environment.

### Food as a Social Movement

Along the way, such books encouraged new generations of writers—academic and not—to promote food advocacy. Here, I mention just a few examples. On the academic side, *Appetite for Change: How the Counterculture Took on the Food Industry* (Belasco 1989) establishes the historical basis of the food advocacy movement. *Stuffed and Starved* (Patel 2007) analyzes the causes and consequences of today's globalized food system as a basis for promoting food change. Although I must leave the assessment of their impact to others, I intended my own works—*Food Politics*, *Safe Food*, *What to Eat* and *Pet Food Politics*—to provide a research basis for advocacy for improvements in the quality and safety of food consumption and production.

As for the non-academic side, I continue to be astonished by the number and range of books about food issues produced each year, a phenomenon that itself deserves serious study. The extraordinary popularity of *Omnivore's Dilemma* (Pollan 2006) has made Pollan one of the two leading US advocates for food system reform, along with Alice Waters. Waters, for

example, surely deserves the ultimate credit for inspiring the newly-elected Obama administration to plant organic gardens on the grounds of the White House and US Department of Agriculture. Gardens may not address fundamental food system reforms, but their symbolic value is a powerful incentive to keep advocating for such reforms.

Mr Pollan appears as the leading narrator of three professionally produced, highly instructive and quite entertaining documentary films about food system issues released in 2009: *Food, Inc.*, *Fresh*, and a film based on one of his earlier books, *Botany of Desire*. These and other food documentaries, most notably *Future of Food*, *Our Daily Bread*, and the delightful *King Corn*, have the potential to reach masses of non-readers and are worth serious critical attention in their own right as instigators of food advocacy.

In a food sociology course that I taught with the sociologist Troy Duster, we asked whether food advocacy constituted a social movement. Although we saw little evidence of an organized movement in the traditional sense of those for civil rights, women's rights, or environmental protection, we were impressed by the number and range of mini-movements aimed at improving specific aspects of the health of people, farm animals and the environment. Table 1 lists some examples of these mini-movements and gives just one example of a book that informs the topic. Each of these movements is part of the long tradition of American grassroots democracy—of the people, by the people, for the people. Each constitutes a topic for further scholarly investigation.

**TABLE 1.** *Examples of Food Advocacy Mini-movements and Related Literature*

<b>Food Advocacy Movement</b>	<b>Related Literature</b>
<i>Production</i>	
Good, clean, fair food	Farm Aid, <i>A Song for America</i> (2005)
Slow Food	Carlo Petrini and Gigi Padovani, <i>Slow Food Revolution</i> (2006)
Farm animal welfare	Peter Singer and Jim Mason, <i>The Way We Eat</i> (2006)
Organic food	Samuel Fromartz, <i>Organic, Inc.</i> (2006)
Local food ("locavore")	Brian Halweil, <i>Eat Here</i> (2004)
Agricultural policy reform	Dan Imhoff, <i>Food Fight</i> (2007)
<i>Consumption</i>	
Community food security	Mark Winne, <i>Closing the Food Gap</i> (2008)
Anti-food marketing	Michele Simon, <i>Appetite for Profit</i> (2006)
Anti-obesity	Kelly Brownell, <i>Food Fight</i> (2004)
School food	Janet Poppendieck, <i>Free for All: Fixing School Food in America</i> (2010)

## Food Studies as an Academic Movement

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When we started our food studies programs in 1996, we knew we were breaking new ground. We hoped others would follow. But we had no idea how rapidly the field would expand. The first sign was the publication of food encyclopedias, practically at yearly intervals starting in 1999: The *Oxford Companion to Food* (1999), the two-volume *Cambridge World History of Food* (2000), the three-volume *Encyclopedia of Food and Culture*, the two-volume *Oxford Encyclopedia of Food and Drink in America* (2004), and Praeger's *Critical Food Issues*, also in two volumes (2009). Next came the various series of books on food and culture from academic presses at the University of California, Columbia and the University of Illinois; these have greatly expanded opportunities to publish scholarly works in the field.

Suddenly, library collections of books about food have become viewed as treasures rather than dust collectors, at least at some institutions. William Cagle's catalog of the thousand or so rare international books on food and drink housed at Indiana University is an example of how appreciation of such collections has grown (Cagle, 1999).

In seeking ways to support research in our emergent food studies programs, we had another lucky break. The Fales Special Collections section of the NYU Library chose food studies as a new focus. Since 2003, the Fales has acquired more than 20,000 books about food and cooking and more than 5,000 pamphlets, and is actively engaged in collecting restaurant menus, food brochures, personal papers, oral histories and other such documents. Unlike most libraries at NYU, this one is open to any researcher by appointment.

Most gratifying has been the expansion of food studies into the academy in the United States and elsewhere. I have visited the programs at the University of Adelaide and the University of Gastronomy in Italy. In addition to NYU's food studies programs and the gastronomy program at Boston University, new programs, some formal and some relatively informal, have emerged at the New School in New York (general studies) and at Indiana University (anthropology). Others are under development in Minnesota, the University of California, Davis, and elsewhere. Dillard University in New Orleans has appointed food scholar Jessica Harris to the Ray Charles Chair at the new Institute for the Study of Culinary Cultures. Although I don't have data, I have plenty of anecdotal evidence that it is much easier for doctoral students in humanities and social sciences to develop food dissertation projects now than it was in 1996 when we started all this at NYU.

## Doctoral Research at NYU: The Food Studies Reading List

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This brings us back to the question of a canon or, if you are among academics who object to this term, a core reading list. The mere idea raises questions that are difficult to address, not only about the works that are included or excluded, but also about level and depth of scholarship, core versus specialization, and the intended audience of the books under consideration.

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The NYU food studies doctoral program requires candidates to define a list of twenty books in each of three areas: core, methods, and specialization. Over the years, our four doctoral graduates and ten current students (as of the 2009–10 academic year) have attempted to define a core list of works that all of them ought to read. To prepare for their candidacy examinations, they must select a minimum of ten books from the core list. They may pick the remaining ten from that list or choose others. The appendix gives the current core list.

This list necessarily reflects the breadth of interests of NYU faculty as well as of the food scholars who routinely attend the department's Feast and Famine Colloquium, ongoing for more than a decade now. I am pleased to find my own work on our doctoral students' core list, but I suspect that such a list would look quite different at other institutions. I present this list as a starting point for discussion. Should such a list exist at all? If so, what process should be used to develop it? What criteria should be used for inclusion? What books would others nominate? How should such a list be organized? Should core readings be defined for specialty areas? If so, how? And, most critical, are such questions worth pursuing as food studies matures as a field? I look forward to hearing readers' responses as do the editors of *Food, Culture, and Society*.

And to end on another personal note: I am proud to have had the opportunity to contribute to the Food Studies Movement. Long may it flourish!

## Acknowledgments

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**Appendix: Core Readings for NYU Food Studies Doctoral Students' Candidacy Examination**

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