

Book Review: Food, Power and Agency by Jürgen Martschukat and Bryant Simon

In Food, Power and Agency, editors Jürgen Martschukat and Bryant Simon bring together contributors to explore how food, power and agency contribute to the formation of 'culinary capital' around the world. This is a rich and invigorating account of the forces shaping our everyday food and eating practices, both historically and in the present day, finds Gurbinder Lalli.

Food, Power and Agency. Jürgen Martschukat and Bryant Simon (eds). Bloomsbury. 2017.

Find this book: 

For those interested in exploring the connections between food and power relations, *Food, Power and Agency* offers an invigorating and rich account. Edited by Jürgen Martschukat and Bryant Simon, it is made up of eight key essays by sociologists, historians, anthropologists and cultural studies theorists examining food through a worldwide lens. Whilst the topics of the chapters are distinct, each concerns the link between food, power and agency, which all contribute to the formation of 'culinary capital'.

The definition of power presented by the authors relates specifically to food. Part of the power of food is that it is everywhere. It creates endless notions of good and bad, including good and bad food, good and bad eating practices and good and bad bodies. Food power is not only constraining and repressive, but also enabling and productive (3). Here, links are made to the work of Pierre Bourdieu, which defines how 'cultural capital' inflects one's identity and life chances. For instance, unhealthy food choices follow a socioeconomic gradient that may partly be explained by what is referred to in this book as 'culinary capital'.



The structure and execution of the book is inspired by the work of Roland Barthes in '[Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption](#)'. It has been noted that Barthes's call for a robust interdisciplinary food studies initiative has been overlooked, particularly in the early 1960s. Barthes argued that food is a system and embodies a social environment that is connected with the past and present. He also suggested that if food ties us to knowledge systems and the everyday and invites us to explore differences between imagined national cultures and social groups, then power is an instrumental ingredient in food and reflected by it (2).

In recent years, research on the study of food has flourished. Some of the most notable work has been carried out on the importance of food to colonisation processes and the domestic sphere, but work on how power operates in and through food has largely been neglected until studies by those such as [Charlotte Biltekoff \(2013\)](#) and [Katharina Vester \(2015\)](#), which have begun to explore how it operates in everyday food and eating practices.



Image Credit: (US Department of Agriculture CC BY 2.0)

Food, Power and Agency is divided into two parts. The first section offers a narrative on food and the nation. Overall, these chapters show how food becomes an agent of national identities and is employed by some to accumulate 'culinary capital' (5). Chapter One examines the role of food in the development of ethnic German identities in San Francisco during the twentieth century and investigates the processes that shaped the development of the restaurant. Restaurants were said to come under scrutiny for two reasons: they were increasingly operated by immigrants; and their rise meant less priority being given to food-based establishments like the café, which would typically be used for social gatherings amongst the middle classes.

Chapter Two introduces the influence of Italian cuisine in Japan. The decade between 1985 and 1995 saw the emergence of the golden age of Italian food in Japan. This chapter focuses on the role played by culinary professionals who exercise power in the production and distribution of Italian cuisine in Japan. This is one of the many examples of how 'culinary capital' shapes the discourse around food, power and agency.

The second part of the book explores the anthropological position of food and eating, and how class, race and gender interact here to shape the agency of the players involved (5). Chapter Three examines the representation of waiters in restaurants in the work of Ernest Hemingway to further understand relations of power and agency in the culinary world by exploring the narratives in which they are bound and their performances are evaluated.

Chapter Four, 'The Geography of Silence: Food and Tragedy in Globalizing America', introduces a discussion of state intervention in food. Drawing on cases such as the death of workers in collapsed factories in Bangladesh, burned chicken plants in China and disintegrating, uninspected buildings in Philadelphia, it describes how for workers, the combination of private and state power can act as a muzzle that puts their health and safety at risk (84). Silencing around these issues is sustained and fuelled by a global economy that delivers inexpensive food by deliberately muffling the voices of labourers and state regulators in order to externalise and cover up the costs of the food system (98).

Part Three of the book highlights discourses on food and health through four chapters, two of which address the multifaceted construction of healthy identities, while the others discuss the moral and social boundaries of eating by looking at different types of fat, exploring both a sociological view and a medical or nutritional model of food. Chapter Five uses notes from diaries written by Roscoe Maxwell Rhoads (from the famous Rhoads family, who were in the newspaper business), detailing the social life and customs of late-nineteenth-century Indiana and early-twentieth-century Southern California, to focus on hygiene, physical fitness and health in the modern Western world of self-controlled individuals. These diaries, typically including details of dietary practice and daily caloric intakes, are used to develop the narrative concerning questions of food, power and agency. Rhoads uses the example of the apple pie to illustrate his agency: without striving to resist its temptation, there would be no meaning in dieting and the goal of 'hygienic' eating.

Chapter Six continues along the theme of the quest for health, drawing on 'running and eating right in 1970s America'. In this chapter, fitness is established as a powerful form of capital and, more importantly, is identified as being able to provide a passport to 'the kingdom of the well' (127). These chapters raise potentially new lines of inquiry with regards to both historical and contemporary practices of what it means to eat 'right'.

To return to the original aims of the book, emphasis is placed on the notion that the power of food is everywhere. Furthermore, infinite notions of good and bad are developed in the context of eating practices and the production of bodies. Overall, it is these practices that are involved in shaping power relationships and, to take the view of Bourdieu, this can lead to the accumulation of 'culinary capital': the generation of market value, social boundaries and notions of individual success.

For his PhD, **Gurpinder Lalli** carried out an ethnographic case study on the social aspect of the school meal whilst adopting a social constructivist and Foucauldian lens to explore the relationship between food and power. For this reason, he has since become interested in exploring the social aspect of food. [Read more by Gurpinder Lalli](#).

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.