

BOOK REVIEW

The School Food Revolution: Public Food and the Challenge of Sustainable Development

Kevin Morgan & Roberta Sonnino, Earthscan, London, 240 pages,
<www.earthscan.co.uk>; 19 October 2008, £45.00, ISBN 978-1-84407-482-2

“... food has then become a litmus test of our individual and collective commitment to sustainable development” (Morgan & Sonnino, 2008, p.5).

For the cost of **The School Food Revolution** (£45) a UK school produces 121 children's lunches (37p¹ per meal, p.107). Meanwhile, in the USA, “the most obese nation on Earth”, children view 55 junk food advertisements per day (p.181). In Melbourne, Australia, the *McDonald's* fast food outlet at the entrance to the *Royal Children's Hospital* is described by a paediatrician as a “running sore” (Sweet, 2008, p.336), yet an alternative view is that “it brings much joy to families” (Carol, 2008). The authors of this new book raise the spectre of junk food being “profoundly addictive” (p.170). A UK mother reports of her school-age daughter: “She'll only eat burgers” (p.106).

The School Food Revolution is a timely book for a world of obesogenic food, a world of the fat poor in rich countries, and the hungry poor in poor countries. Worldwide, malnourishment is a marker of poverty. Readers impatient for the revolution are advised to go directly to Chapter 4 - *School Food as Social Justice: The Quality Revolution in Rome*.

Morgan and Sonnino report that “in Italy the public sector has been actively fighting against the generalized deterioration in the population's nutritional habits” (p.65). They identify in Italy “the first organic school meals system”, “the first organic university canteen” and “an organic hospital menu” (p.69). They report Italian legislation that “establishes a direct and explicit link between organic and local food and public sector catering ... This national law created a regulatory context that encouraged many municipalities to turn organic” (p.69).

The reform of school food in Rome “reduced the amount of animal protein to be contained in meals”. It redesigned school menus “on the basis of four quality principles”: *Seasonality*, *Variety*, *Territoriality*, and *Nutritiousness* (p.80). The price paid to contractors per meal is €5.28² (p.83).

The authors report that Rome authorities “identified the improvement of children's health and safety as the paramount goal of its school food revolution”. As a consequence of this refocussing, “organic and ‘bio-dedicated’ products have been prioritized because of the absence of pesticide residues” (p.84). *Bio-dedicated* is a classification reserved for supply chains that are exclusively organic, where “foods are produced, processed, packaged and distributed by firms that operate exclusively in the organic sector”. This reduces “the potential for contamination” (p.81).

The Rome experience for remodelling the acquisition, tendering and supply processes for school food has generated novel techniques for reconciling a variety of “quality conventions” (p.84). Morgan and Sonnino identify three dimensions of quality: health; ecological sustainability; and social justice. In evaluating a tender, the Rome purchasing model attributes points to price as well as a multitude of other socio-environmental factors.

The Rome school meals revolution has “proven crucial to stimulating the organic market” (p.85), and benefitting local producers. “Rome's emphasis on provenance becomes

¹ AU\$0.85

² AU\$9.90

primarily a re-localization strategy, a tool used to promote local economic development and environmental protection, as also implied by the new requirement of *guaranteed freshness*" (p.84). Morgan and Sonnino emphasize that the Rome school revolution has placed an emphasis on continuous improvement and re-evaluation.

In Chapter 3 the authors assert that "New York City leads America on the thorny path towards sustainability" (p.64). It is an extreme stretch to describe the New York model as a revolution. N.Y. City's *SchoolFood* is serving "healthy meals *disguised* as fast food" (p.59). The path has been to "mimic what corporate America is achieving" (p.58). Effort has been made "to create school cafeterias that resemble restaurants ... For example paper or plastic wrapping of certain foods" (p.59); the term "restaurant" is apparently used to mean US fast food outlets. School food reform in New York is linked to a *Department of Defense* program (p.61 *passim*). *SchoolFood* has recently made the move to further colonize the food space of students by additionally offering "free breakfasts to all students" (p.57).

The School Food Revolution is an important book that deserves success. If that success is achieved it will be in some part due to celebrity TV chef Jamie Oliver's prior spade work in raising the public profile of school food. The account in Chapter 5 of what Morgan and Sonnino call the "Jamie Oliver effect" deserves a more thoroughgoing and incisive account than is offered in their book. School catering staff "have neither the profile nor the voice to make themselves seen and heard by service directors and political leaders" (p.109). Greenwich Council's *Greenwich Catering* serves most of the county's schools. After a Jamie Oliver makeover, it now "uses only fresh fruits, vegetable and meat in their menus" and serves "healthier meals" (p.108), however "the only way to persuade the ... kids to eat the healthier food was by ensuring that there was no alternative" (p.107).

In Chapter 6, Morgan and Sonnino "trace the origins of the British school food revolution" and present case studies of three rural counties, in England, Wales and Scotland. These counties have pioneered "the design and delivery of healthy school food that is locally sourced wherever possible" (p.113). South Gloucestershire "has banned GM foods from their school menus" (p.118). "Tea, coffee, sugar and bananas are Fair Trade". Organic potatoes and carrots are supplied without a price premium by "the Prince of Wales's Duchy Farm located in the county" (p.119). The Gloucestershire tendering system is described as "unique". It nominates farmers as "chosen suppliers" and the tender is "only for the delivery of the food" (p.120). In the UK, the devolution of power from London to regions has fostered experimentation with novel food service systems designed for local by locals.

Chapter 7 on Africa is superficial. It is largely a saga of failures, and more digging by the authors is required to unearth some success stories. The premise of the chapter "The School Feeding Revolution" forebodes the failures it unfolds. As in other domains, words have potency. A "feeding" model is essentially a livestock model. A "meals" model has social and conviviality elements. A "catering" model implies a customer to be served. Words are the fuel of revolutions.

Children are the silent constituency in this book, and that is unfortunate. **The School Food Revolution** takes the tack that revolution and food are things that are done to children. This reviewer suspects that while revolutions may be plotted in St Petersburg, for the revolution to endure, the workers - in this case the students - need to be more than consulted, but also engaged and enthused. Whose revolution is it? Of whom, for whom, and by whom?

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References

Carol, 2008, Children's hospital: do you really want fries with that; Your comments, *Crikey*, 14 March <www.crikey.com.au>. Accessed 10 Nov 2008.

Sweet, M., 2008, Public health doctors press hospitals to evict fast food outlets, *British Medical Journal*, 336: 578.

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