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SUSHI: Globalization through Food Culture:

Towards a Study of Global Food Networks

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One way to explore globalization and its effects is through tracing changing food networks and the dispersion of food culture throughout the world. This paper describes the initial stages of a study of globalization that examines the links among Japanese society and culture, the role of fish in Japanese identity, and the spread of sushi, as a global food commodity. In order to understand the global networks within which the production and consumption of sushi are enmeshed the research closely focuses on Tsukiji; the “fish market at the center of the world,” as Bestor’s rich ethnography has it. The fish market is at the nexus of a global commodity network, which includes much of the rest of the world, including the United States. The research will also investigate the increasing consumption of sushi in the United States, the effects of sushi on American food culture, and the possible reciprocal effects of North American sushi culture on Japan. This paper provides background on the project and focuses on the acceptance of sushi in the United States.

Keywords : Cultural Interaction, Globalization, Food culture, Japan, Sushi,
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“A 500-pound tuna is caught off the coast of New England or Spain, flown thousands of miles to Tokyo, sold for tens of thousands of dollars to Japanese buyers . . . and shipped to chefs in New York and Hong Kong? That’s the manic logic of global sushi” (Bestor 2000:54).

INTRODUCTION

This project focuses on sushi as a way of grasping the linkages among global food chains, Japanese society and culture, globalization, and North American food culture. It will examine the role of fish in Japanese culture and society, and how fish, in the form of sushi, link Japan to the rest of the world. This is a preliminary report on this project, in which I will look at how these global food chains have transformed food consumption patterns and food culture in the United States and North America, as well as examining their effects in Japan. One focus of this research is Tsukiji, the Tokyo fish market, described by anthropologist Ted Bestor as the “fish market at the center of the world” (2004).

Using sushi as a way of examining Japan, globalization, and how the international trade in fish has transformed other societies and cultures as well as Japan will enable us to gain a more well-rounded view of

globalization.

Several vignettes help provide context for this work. In his study of Tsukiji, Bestor (2004)¹⁾ explains that he and his wife were living in Tokyo in 1975 studying Japanese. After eying a nearby sushi shop for several days they finally, and with some trepidation, entered it. They were warmly welcomed and soon became regular customers. The Bestors gradually learned more about sushi and “glimpsed an easygoing social milieu where home and workplace often overlapped and where social networks easily cut across household, occupation and neighborhood” (Bestor 2004:3). They also started learning about seasonal changes in the availability of types of fish and the different regions in Japan that yielded specific species of fish, and they “discovered – to our surprise – that some of the fresh seafood before our eyes was from the United States, Canada, or Southeast Asia” (Bestor 2004:3). Learning of the global networks of the fish trade eventually led Bestor to Tsukiji and later to what he calls “inquisitive observation” to study the market and the nexus of global networks that it anchors (Bestor 2003:317). For me the key to this vignette is his discovery of the global sources of fish in the market as an indicator of the extensiveness of globalization in the global trade in fish.

The second vignette reveals something important about when sushi made its entrance into North American food culture, another major theme of this project. In 1966, as a member of the United States Air Force stationed in Japan, I attended Sea Survival Training in Numazu in Shizuoka Prefecture. As the final hurdle for completing the course, we had to eat a piece of raw tuna. For an American at that time, this was an unusual, challenging thing to do. Bestor points out that recipes for sushi began turning up in American magazines in the 1960s, but “the recipes they suggested were canapés like cooked shrimp on caraway rye bread, rather than raw fish on rye” (Bestor 2000:56). By the 1970s, real sushi was beginning to grow in popularity in North America, primarily in Los Angeles.

GLOBALIZATION AND SUSHI

Bestor’s experience in the sushi shop led to his work on global sushi as one aspect of globalization. Globalization is not new. Sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein (1974), for example, suggests that the global economy in which we live emerged in the sixteenth century. What *is* new is the scale and extensiveness of global economic connections. But the connections are not just economic. This project is best seen as a case study in economic sociology, a field that examines the social and cultural embeddedness of markets and economic phenomena. This work examines the interrelations among sushi, Japanese society and culture, and globalization

1) In addition to Bestor’s rich, fascinating ethnography (2004), two recent books have examined sushi and the world sushi trade from different perspectives. I draw on both in this piece. Sasha Issenberg’s *The Sushi Economy: Globalization and the Making of a Modern Delicacy* (2007) outlines the development of sushi as a global food. Trevor Corson, in *The Zen of Fish: The Story of Sushi from Samurai to Supermarket* (2007), published in paperback as *The Story of Sushi: An Unlikely Saga of Raw Fish and Rice* (2008), uses an ongoing class in learning to make sushi to tell the story of this dish. These two books together amount to a culinary biography of sushi and provide a rich understanding of this food.

to trace the relations among economic, social, and cultural phenomena.

Globalization has many critics and many of their criticisms are justified. Among the vast literature and numerous commentators on the topic, Stiglitz²⁾ is one of the most trenchant. He notes that “few subjects have polarized people throughout the world as much as globalization” (Stiglitz 2007:576). Arguing that the outcomes of globalization have differed dramatically for different countries, he notes that societies that have managed their own globalization have generally benefited from it. Japan is one such country. In spite of the undeniable benefits of globalization that accrue to Japan, including those of what Bestor calls “global sushi,” many argue that the worldwide effects of globalization may be devastating and that market forces may lead to increasing polarization of rich and poor nations.

Bestor sees things differently. Rather than viewing the global sushi trade as the inevitable working out of market forces, Bestor draws on the insights of economic anthropology and sociology, which emphasize the cultural and social embeddedness of economic processes and institutions. He draws especially on the work of Mark Granovetter (Granovetter 1985; Swedberg and Granovetter 1992), who argues that “economic activity is firmly embedded in wider structures of social life.” Granovetter’s perspective is based on three interrelated propositions: “that economic action is a form of social action, that economic action takes place in social contexts, and that economic institutions are socially constructed” (Bestor 2004:14). This emphasis on social context powerfully shapes Bestor’s analysis of Tsukiji and the broader networks of the global sushi trade. It also suggests that in looking at and assessing globalization, in general, and global sushi, in particular, we need to consider social and cultural contexts of economic processes. We can see the usefulness of this approach when examining how antiglobalization forces view the globalization of food.

In his recent book, *The Sushi Economy: Globalization and the Making of a Modern Delicacy*, Issenberg (2007) notes that there is a culinary branch of the antiglobalization movement. The Slow Food movement³⁾, along with others such as anti-fast food farmers, vegetarians, and trade unionists, emphasizes acting locally by eating locally. But for Issenberg (2007:xix), “the sushi industry tells another story about globalized food culture and commerce.” He suggests that there is much to admire in the worldwide sushi trade and argues that it shows that “a virtuous global commerce and food culture can exist” (Issenberg 2007:xix). What makes that trade potentially virtuous for him is “on a new landscape of consumption, power is decentralized, and supply and demand are

2) There is a vast technical literature on globalization. Joseph E. Stiglitz’s work provides an accessible and solid point of entry into the topic. Stiglitz is a Nobel Prize winner, former chief economist at the World Bank, a member of President Bill Clinton’s Council of Economic Advisors, and Professor of Economics at Columbia University. See especially his *Globalization and Its Discontents* (2002) and *Making Globalization Work* (2006).

3) Founded in Italy in 1986, the Slow Food movement emphasizes local food production and consumption and the preservation of local food cultures. As Issenberg suggests, many of its arguments mesh those of the antiglobalization movement. Slow Food is still not very influential although the numbers of adherents is growing in the United States. For a useful introduction to the Slow Food movement, see *Slow Food Nation: Why Our Food Should be Clean, and Fair* (Petrini 2007). While the goals of the movement are laudable, it can be argued that they ignore the realities of historical and contemporary global political economy.

regulated not by moguls but by local ideas about value and taste” (xix-xx). In assessing the global sushi trade, it is important to examine not just the production and distribution of fish through the perspective of broader social and cultural structures. It is also necessary to examine changing food cultures within those structures. This project will focus on such changing structures and food networks.

CHANGING FOOD CULTURE IN NORTH AMERICA

My experience of having to eat raw tuna to complete sea survival training in 1966 illustrates that such food was seen as exotic and even distasteful to Americans at that time. The acceptance of sushi in North America was slow and proceeded in several stages. Issenberg explains how sushi became a favorite lunch food in Los Angeles, noting that “for decades, those Angelenos who prefer their lunch to be of the present have been turning to sushi” (2007:80). From beginnings in the Little Tokyo section of the city in the 1950s, eventually “sushi had found its second home” (2007:81).

Although some types of sushi were available in Little Tokyo, sushi’s wave of popularity in Los Angeles came with the movement of Japanese managers and executives to the United States when the Japanese economy was thriving during the 1960s. Their expense accounts enabled them to enjoy the relatively expensive sushi in Los Angeles. It was at this point that nigiri and fish maki began to be available. This led to the launching of new sushi restaurants and the increasing visibility of the dish. Issenberg (2007), from whom I draw this account, also notes some of the barriers to the acceptance of sushi in the United States, noting that “while foreign flavors have long seeped into American foodways, sushi had unique challenges” (2007:92).

Unlike other “ethnic foods,” in America, sushi was not an inexpensive, neighborhood-based food. “In large part because of its celebrated aesthetics, Japanese food was always seen as fussy haute cuisine” (Issenberg 2007:93) and this slowed its acceptance. The image and uses of tuna in the United States held back wide adoption of sushi. Tuna in sushi was “a robust red, straight from the ocean, served in fillets, meticulously sliced, untreated, and heralded for a clean fish taste” (2007:94). This was the opposite of the white, clumpy, tuna-fish that Americans were used to, and that the Japanese now also enjoy.

Attitudes toward sushi began to change with the emergence of a movement extolling “fresh ingredients used simply” (Issenberg 2007:96). Sushi, because of its use of fresh ingredients began to appeal to Southern Californians, as “a thin ideal of beauty inspired a diet craze, and sushi met every standard for being both healthful and light. Above all, sushi was seen as a diet food without social cost” (2007:97). In large part due to these changing perceptions, sushi restaurants began opening up in greater numbers in southern California and other cities around North America. From its initial appeal to Japanese executives, who by then were coming to the United States in lesser numbers, sushi had begun to attract affluent, diet conscious upper-middle class Americans. By the 1980s sushi restaurants were ubiquitous in Los Angeles.

From these beginnings sushi began to take hold in other cities in North America. Issenberg notes that, “sushi may have reached a saturation point in Los Angeles and New York, but elsewhere in the country, new restaurants

continue to proliferate” (2007:146). Among the cities with notable sushi restaurants are Austin, Texas; Stillwater, Oklahoma; and Salt Lake City, Utah. With this proliferation of sushi restaurants, and sushi counters in supermarkets across the country, it is clear that sushi has become widely accepted in the United States. This raises a range of questions that this research is designed to answer.

CONCLUSIONS AND QUESTIONS

This paper describes the preliminary stages of a research project that aims to answer several interrelated questions about global sushi and its impact on North American food culture. A course based on the project will also examine these issues. Perhaps the most basic question takes us back to issues of globalization. Issenberg and Bestor take relatively benign views of the globalization of sushi, but there are competing views. For example, several recent books, discussed by Wilson (2008), raise the specter of the world’s food system collapsing. The Slow Food movement, mentioned above, suggests returning to local and regional food supply chains and away from global ones.

Among the books that Wilson discusses is *Bottomfeeder: How to Eat Ethically in a World of Vanishing Seafood* (Grescoe 2008). Grescoe suggests that current trends in harvesting fish are not sustainable. Tuna is one of the fish he argues have been overfished. He suggests that we eat fish further down the food chain, the bottomfeeders. This is a journalistic work, not social science, but Grescoe raises important issues which should not be ignored and which bear on the future of the global networks of sushi.

Related to those issues are questions about the continuing presence of sushi in North America and its effects on food culture. In *The Zen of Fish*, Corson (2007) uses a semester’s class in sushi making at a California sushi academy to organize his examination of the story of sushi. He looks at the spread of sushi throughout America, while noting that the long term future of world-wide sushi is uncertain. He also focuses on how the social organization and culture of sushi, with its Japanese roots, have been accepted and also transformed in North America. For example, many more women are becoming sushi chefs in America, a significant departure from the situation in Japan.

That suggests a final question that this research will examine. While focusing on how global sushi has transformed American food culture, it is also worth taking a look at possible reciprocal influences that North American sushi culture may have on Japanese food culture. Although this is clearly speculative, is it possible that the greater involvement and acceptance of women in North American sushi making and culture may lead to sushi making in Japan becoming less of the man’s world that it remains? In pursuing this research I will try to answer these and other related questions.

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