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Review of *Introducing the Sociology of Food and Eating* by Anne Murcott

Perry Share

Institute of Technology, Sligo, share.perry@itsligo.ie

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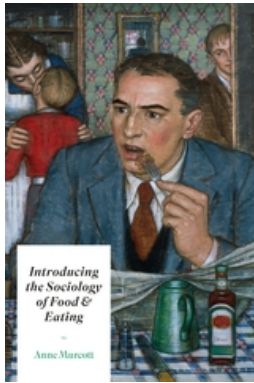
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BOOK REVIEW

Introducing the Sociology of Food and Eating, by Anne Murcott, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019, xii+223pp., ISBN 9781350022034.



Prisons, orphanages, boarding schools, submarines, cruise ships, Oxford colleges, nurses' homes, hospitals, military barracks, hotels, deep-sea trawlers – what do these have in common? They are, as Anne Murcott points out, all “total institutions” that contain “inmates” for 24 hours a day, where they are subjected to the provision of that frightening phenomenon: “institutional food.”

This is a juxtaposition of social sites that immediately piques the reader's interest and reflects the imagination and subtle shifting of perspective that typifies this unique introduction to the sociology of food and eating. It appears in chapter 4 of the book, which focuses on food in institutions, asking “why are hospital meals inadequate, school lunches meagre and prison diets unappetizing?” These questions are drawn from mass media headlines, but also intrinsically of interest to social scientists and, of course, inevitably relate to complex social processes. Of the remaining eleven chapters of this book, topics include food at home and in public (“eating out”); food preparation; food packaging; food hygiene and safety; food and ethnicity; food and power and food waste.

Murcott, in what is a relatively short (effectively 175 pages) but quite dense text, admits that she cannot cover the whole sociological field of food and eating, as it is now so extensive. This was certainly not the case when I gave my own first lecture on the sociology of food (“Why not eat insects?”) at La Trobe University in Melbourne in 1985, just a couple of years after the publication of Murcott's ground-breaking and field-defining *Sociology of food and eating: Essays on the sociological significance of food* (1983) which, fortunately, had made its way to the antipodes. Until that point, food sociology was largely derived from a small number of activist pamphlets; the work of anthropologists such as Mary Douglas, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Jack Goody (who gets a strong thumbs up in Murcott's book), and articles in the excellent, if somewhat dry,

Food Policy journal. The subsequent major UK study headed up by Murcott, *The nation's diet* (1992-1998) was a huge step up in formalising and expanding the field. There is no doubt that Anne Murcott is one of the canonical figures in the field.

In this book Murcott aims to introduce the sociology of food and eating, as well as some pointers to the discipline of sociology itself. The aforementioned dozen chapters deliberately focus on topical food issues (or “obsessions”) and this ensures the attractiveness of the volume from the start. Scholars of food and eating will recognise the urgency of questions around food waste, food poverty or food packaging. Each chapter opens with some mass media headlines and then Murcott applies a common approach to each topic, albeit that the analytical focus shifts as the chapters progress: from the microsociological and domestic to broader considerations of the global food system. This approach is to subvert and reframe the questions themselves and so to draw the reader’s attention to a whole set of much more interesting intellectual challenges.

Murcott is insistent about the particular nature of a sociological, indeed any scientific, approach: it is ranged against what she calls “common sense” or “conventional wisdom” – ways of thinking where taken for granted assumptions are unexamined and unchallenged. As she points out, “one of the book’s main aims is to encourage the scepticism integral to any academic discipline”: this takes work and is indeed “strenuous”. She is critical of aspects of food studies that fail to adopt this stance and quite happy to express her critique of major writers in the field, from Michael Pollan and Tim Lang, to Alan Warde, Claude Fischler and Joanne Finkelstein: particularly when they fail to spell out their assumptions or fall into “common sense” explanations.

Murcott’s position is clearly shaped by the work of the discipline-defining American sociologist, C. Wright Mills. It is Mills’ insistence on the intersection of personal biography (“personal troubles”) and social structure (“public issues”) that shapes Murcott’s analysis. In every case she draws out the centrality of an historical perspective. For example, in her dissection of the concept of the “family meal”, she succeeds in showing us that this concept arose only in the nineteenth century and, furthermore, within particular social and geographical contexts. She leaves no key concept unexplored: whether a “common sense” term such as “eating out” or a more technical one such as “commensality”. To do this, Murcott often draws on the work of historians (“essential”) but also geographers, anthropologists and, when useful, but always critically, on those in business and market research; she has little time for psychologists!

Suffice to say that the content of this book is fascinating and will quickly draw in any person interested in the study of the social aspects of food and eating. To take as representative example, the chapter on food waste (chap. 9), having established the popular resonance of the question “how does so much perfectly edible food get thrown away?” almost immediately starts to question our “common sense” understanding of

“food waste.” Stressing that how food gets “named” as waste is inevitably a social process, she takes us on a journey from the businesses and charities that now, across the rich world, recycle leftover food from supermarkets and restaurants, to the “jewellers” of nineteenth century Paris who made a business of selling the leftovers of the rich to the poor, to the activities of contemporary urban foragers and “dumpster divers.” Then, via a consideration of how domestic families manage (or fail to satisfactorily manage) their food waste she launches into a discussion of “food regimes” theory and how different global systems of food production shape our understanding of “leftovers.” She concludes with a section on practice theory (drawing on the work of her sometime collaborator David Evans) to explore how competing discourses of food waste and food hygiene conspire to create difficult choices and trade-offs for contemporary citizens. Finally, as she does in all of her later chapters, she deliberately ties the concepts she has been discussing back into the broader processes of the “food system” reminding us of the key role that powerful producer and retail interests have in shaping our everyday experience of food and eating.

This is a highly stimulating text. Instead of homogenising and simplifying, as so many introductory texts do, it complicates and complexifies the issues: while always remaining readable and interesting. Admirably, it moves beyond the usual Anglo-American approach to introduce research about and from a broad range of societies: from Togo to Mexico to Ireland. It draws on both the “food studies” and “agro-food” bodies of knowledge: something that is all too rare in this field. Within the text, theory is dispensed in small doses and the inevitable “boxes” beloved of publishers provide mini-intros to key sociological concepts (such as sex/gender; mass media) and sociological research methods (focus groups; ethnography; surveys), as well as “key points” for each chapter, in case you haven’t been paying attention. In my view these do not add a great deal and the space would have been better allocated to further discussion of the central issues.

The topics explored in the text are inevitably selective and it would have been satisfying to see Murcott train her critical eye on the ubiquitous and highly contentious field of obesity. But she does make the point that this book is not about *what* to think about food and eating, but rather *how* to think about these aspects of social life. I would love to have had it to hand when trying to cobble together my first lecture on the sociology of food and eating; it would be a fantastic resource for anyone running a complete module on the topic today. Every chapter provides numerous thinking and jumping-off points for further debate, analysis and exploration. Despite containing the quantum of errors and typos that seem to be normal today for products of academic publishers, this is an attractively produced text with a meaningful cover image (deconstructed early on by the author) and well worth your time and money.

Dr Perry Share

Institute of Technology Sligo, Ireland