



## Book Reviews

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Johnston, Josée and Shyon Baumann. *Foodies: Democracy and Distinction in the Gourmet Foodscape*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, New York and Oxford: Routledge, 2015. 260 pp.

By investigating foodies in the United States, Canadian sociologists Josée Johnston and Shyon Baumann are undertaking a bold endeavor. On the one hand, food and foodies are omnipresent in US popular culture. On the other hand, while food studies has developed into a rich interdisciplinary field, eating has not historically been incorporated into general sociological enquiry. As the authors stress, despite some recent interest, sociologists, marked by the propensity of Western thought to value the ideal and the intellectual—more than the material and the practical—in human life, tend to consider diet as something frivolous, as a question of individual and private options not worthy of analysis or explanation.

J. Johnston and S. Baumann present a careful sociological study. They start with a working definition of the foodie: “a person who devotes considerable time and energy to eating and learning about good food, however ‘good food’ is defined” (p. x). More than focusing on what foodies eat, the authors identify what is sociologically significant about them: how they think, speak, and write about food—in essence, foodie discourse (more than foodie food). Then, the authors describe the pertinent characteristics of the US cultural context: on the one hand, the belief in democratic ideals and the rejection of snobbery; and on the other hand, pronounced political and social inequality. They devise a theoretical framework using analytical and conceptual tools from food studies, general sociology, and the sociology of social movements. They define the sociological questions that foodie discourse allows to be studied: inequality, class, and culture. They construct a concept, that of “foodscape”: the field of food culture and materiality, composed of practical agents and practices, structured by discourses, embedded in political and economic systems, contextualized in certain places. In these terms, foodies occupy the “gourmet foodscape.” Finally, the authors analyze the discourse and content of written sources

produced by foodies (magazines and blogs in particular) as well as in-depth interviews with foodies.

The findings give rise to a complex and nuanced argument. The US gourmet foodscape embodies a tension between ideas of democracy and the realities of distinction. On the one hand, at the individual level, foodies subscribe to values of equality and inclusivity by embracing new food cultures. On the other hand, at the collective level, the gourmet foodscape perpetuates phenomena of inequality, exclusion, and exploitation by providing imperceptible ways of demonstrating superior social status, by sustaining divisive politics of identity and class, and by failing to call into question the food system.

Johnston and Baumann meticulously unpack this tension between democracy and distinction. The foodie discourse is built on two frameworks: authenticity and exoticism. On the one hand, authenticity entails genuine social and democratic orientation, by valuing food marked as simple, rooted in its time and in its space, personally relevant, and with ethnic connotations. On the other hand, it inadvertently fosters elitism by placing value on rare and expensive foods. On the one hand, exoticism promotes cosmopolitan openness. On the other hand, it starts from the statutory hierarchies and stereotypes inherited from colonialism. To be sure, foodies are aware of the political problems around food and the food system. However, their stances are individualized and focused on ethics and the environment—rather than heeding the collective and focusing on solving structural problems. Foodie discourse trivializes ideas of class and status. But it preserves realities of hierarchy and distinction by using food as a tool to demonstrate cultural sophistication. Finally, this new edition studies gender issues, in a final chapter written with Kate Cairns. Although foodie culture has fomented an unprecedented interest in food among men while allowing women to seek pleasure and new experiences (typically male pursuits), traditional patterns persist in terms of the division by gender of domestic chores. In foodie households, women tend to take charge of caring and of health concerns.

More than an attempt to document the foodie phenomenon casually, or to explain it causally based on phenomena of power or class, *Foodies: Democracy and Distinction in the Gourmet Foodscape* provides a multifaceted sociological contribution. First, it is an empirical investigation into food and culture in the United States. Second, it is an exploration of a novel object of cultural analysis—foodie discourse—in a complex cultural context. Third, it is a demonstration of how food, in all its banality, allows important political and social problems to be tackled, and big sociological questions to be posed. Finally, it sheds light on hidden—but potent—forms of inequality

in contexts of post-scarcity economies, identities based on lifestyle (more than work), and the social unacceptability of flaunting wealth and status.

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