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Book Review

DeSoucey, Michaela. 2016. *Contested Tastes—Foie Gras and the Politics of Food*. Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press

What can a sociologist actually learn by looking at *foie gras* lying on their plate? What can we say about culture, ethics, taste, relations, social movements, consumers, and producers, looking at food? To what extent can food become the object, the protagonist of sociological analysis? These are the questions which Michaela DeSoucey is attempting to address in her book reviewed here.

The book may be located within a broad interdisciplinary trend of research into social, economic, and cultural aspects of food. One of its poles is marked by economized, neo-Marxist analyses of industrial and alternative networks of food production (e.g., Goodman, DuPuis, and Goodman 2014). The other trend, definitely closer to the author of the reviewed book, analyzes food from the perspective of anthropology and studies of culture (e.g., Ashley et al. 2004; Belasco 2007). The analyses from this circle treat food as a cultural phenomenon, an artifact which may be used to decode crucial phenomena, or processes occurring in a society. This is distinctive of anthropology of food which perceives food as a cultural construct (e.g., Counihan and van Esterik 2013). Tracing food, we may get insight into the

universe of religious rituals, control, and individual identity (Douglas 2013), look at class divisions (Bourdieu 2013), the development of ethnic identity, the history of entire continents (Mintz 2013). In an engaged variety—these studies focus on the issues of citizenship (Bilewicz and Śpiewak 2015), social justice, sexuality, gender, and race (e.g., Alkon and Agyeman 2011).

Food is treated by the researcher as a mirror in which a reflection of the society may be seen, or a black box the decoding of which may disclose the way the social world is constructed. The author approached the issue of food in a similar way, building her story around *foie gras* mentioned in the title and attempting to describe the cultural and political controversies connected with food. The dish in question is the ground on the basis of which DeSoucey talks about the construction of controversy, morality of taste, nationalism and sense of national belonging, industrialization of production, social movements, and consumer activism. Looking at the dish made from fattened duck or goose liver, the author attempts to tell the reader how local and national identities are constructed and reconstructed, how the class indi-

cators of taste have been changing, and how consumer movements of protest are initiated.

From the formal angle, the book is divided into five chapters by subject matter. The first (“What Can We Learn from Liver”) briefly introduces the reader into the issues and specificity of food studies, describes the history of controversies around the product, and also uses the category of **gastropolitics** which is key to this work. Chapter two (“Vive le Foie Gras!”) provides the reader with the insight into the phenomenon of *foie gras*, accounts the history, and industrial transformation of the product, locates it within the national, cultural, and technological context. Chapter three (“Gastronationalism on the Ground”) focuses on local conditionings of production—refers to the role and meaning of identity, the construction of national idylls and political movements connected with them. The fourth part of the book (“Foiehibition”) takes the reader to Chicago and describes the conflict which exploded in this city around local producers and restaurateurs serving dishes from *foie gras*. This chapter supplements the publication with studies on social movements, consumer activism—it emphasizes the dynamic nature of the debate which erupted around the controversial technology of the production of *foie gras*. Chapter five (“Paradox of Perspective”) concentrates on the reconstruction of the perspectives of the two sides of this conflict, stressing the symbolic meaning of food.

The narration begins with a description of damages done by activists fighting for animal rights, who repainted the house of one of the most famous lawyers and restaurateurs serving *foie gras* in the American county of Sonoma. The author uses this event

and the description of the process of *gavage*, the process of force-feeding geese and ducks, to immerse in the considerations on the morality and taste. There appear threads pertaining to the class character of food, the construction of products, moral disgust and social movements developed around it, cultural anchors, and individual or collective identities accompanying the product. The framework overarching the chapter is the key notion of **gastropolitics** viewed and defined as one of the symbolic politics which specifies the authority of particular actors to define and construct the surrounding world. In other words, it is a fight for the opportunity to assign cultural meanings and enforce particular interpretations and behaviors of other people. This is highlighted by the dynamic and culture-bound nature of food. In a sense, the production and consumption of food is a social practice which can be defined, using the definition by Susan Mylan (2015), at the intersection of materiality, cultural meanings, and knowledge. The very notion of gastropolitics is yet connected with the concept of the politics of desires borrowed from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari and by Melanie DuPuis and transformed by her (DuPuis 2006:124). Briefly, the politics of desires assumes that human desires and images form frameworks, maps which shape the world as a mirror reflection of unreal dreams. It seems that this metaphor well-illustrates the idea of both the first chapter and the whole publication being reviewed. It presents the conflict over the authority to assign meanings, define fragments of reality by the producers of *foie gras*, on the one hand, and the activists connected with the animal rights protection movement, on the other. The dispute exceeds the simple discussion on the way of feeding animals and

touches upon the fundamentally different visions of relations between the human being and nature. Likewise Mary Douglas (2008), DeSoucey treats eating and food as the field for activity, a medium by means of which other categories exert influence. By analyzing the conflict around the pate, the author tries to comment on a deep crack in culture. In a sense, the book reviewed is a story about wars occurring at the intersection between the countryside and the city, the state and social movements, the conservatives and the liberals, the market and the citizen society. Referring to the author's words: "Considering food through the lens of cultural sociology—especially how some foods become the foci of public sentiment—similarly sharpens our theories of how cultural categories are substantiated, and how cultural power is deployed, harnessed, suppressed, and contested" (p. 17). An opinion which seems to be close to the book under review is the one expressed by Alison Hope Alkon and Julian Agyeman (2011:2) who claim that for those involved the choice of dish has a deep political meaning; it is a choice of a particular construction of the world, a set of symbols which determines that group's vision of the world.

The author thus goes beyond the classic framework established by food studies; she does not focus on the deconstruction of industrial or alternative production systems. Also, she reaches beyond cultural anthropology, emphasizing the dynamic nature of eating. She treats the dispute around *foie gras* as a theatre play, analyzing the motivations, attitudes, and values of the actors engaged. In her work, she uses the term "performance"—treating the behaviors of producers and gourmets, as well as the opponents of

foie gras as a performance built around controversy. In the discussed chapter, DeSoucey describes how actors prepare to play their parts, what role scientific controversy and moral disgust play in this process, how particular groups of experts—scientists, cooks, ethicists, activists, consumers—are recruited. Describing this process, the author avoids simply supporting one of the conflicting sides, which is one of the characteristic elements of the engaged food studies (e.g., Lyson 2004). The described performance takes place in a triangle whose poles are marked by the market, the state, and social movements. According to the author, the symbolic food policy occurs within the framework determined by tensions and commonalities generated by those three types of group actors. Analyzing the controversies around *foie gras*, the author—anthropologist—refers to the classic definitions of political activities in social movements. She describes the process of industrialization and de-industrialization of food production and consumption, indicates the state as the regulator of both the law and the symbolic field where the production and consumption take place, and, finally, discusses how social movements are built and mobilized around controversy. The dialectic combination of taste and disgust is capable of generating institutionalized and informal loads of political activity in whose symbolic center the decoded food is located.

In the second chapter ("Vive le Foie Gras!"), the author takes the reader on a journey to the region of the French Strasbourg. This part contains the description of the significance of the dish and the changing process of its production. The author begins her story by deconstructing the myth being created around *foie gras*. She uses food to describe the retrospective

constructions of national identities. Food may be used to culturally strengthen the boundaries, to define members of the group and those who do not belong to it. Obviously, this is not the first attempt of this kind. For example, Mary Douglas (2013:48) described the religious meaning of selected eating habits in a similar way. Psyche Williams-Forsion (2006), in her brilliant study, describes how food (in this particular case, chicken legs) may be used to create, strengthen, and cross race barriers. Here, it is worth stopping for a while. In our view, food may play the role of a mediator—by means of symbols assigned to it, it may connect or divide within the same culture, gender, or ethnos. Symbols rooted in a society are embedded in food, as well as in the process of eating. This explains the Scandinavians' maniac attachment to pickled herring or the time spent selecting wine in the South of Europe. These are activities exceeding the physiological limits of taste—by choosing and eating we make ourselves assigned to a particular community and its traditions, we define our attitude to the dominant group or a minority. It is no chance that food was one of the key elements, or symbols around which affiliation to counter-cultures was built (Belasco 2007) or the most important consumer movements were built (Devltere and Pollet 2005). This is caused by the very essence, idea of eating with its intimate crossing of barriers between what is social and individual, between culture and the body, biology and sensuality. In this sense, food and its consumption are connected with individual and social identity. It is the sense of belonging and the construction of symbolic areas of reference that Marie DeSoucey describes. For her, *foie gras* is linked with the project of **patrimony**—the idealized vision of a French nation-

al community with its heritage and attachment to the *terroir*—the place the meaning of which reaches beyond the simple geographical conditioning. DeSoucey accounts the development of the myth around a national, patriotic sentiment. Describing a dream of the Breton countryside, an image of an old woman feeding geese, the author deconstructs origin stories which were initially transmitted orally, and later used by industry and advertising. This is a type of myth which leads to the rooting; which locates individual identity within the national symbolic field. In the case of the dish under analysis, these are respectively: territory, family celebration, the iconic image of grandmother, reference to rurality. These bind the consuming individual with the idea of the nation.

Foie gras becomes a tool in the fight for maintaining national identity. This is proved by one of the more interesting examples presented in the book. Expanding its outlet markets, one of the bigger companies producing liver pates decided to produce it so that it would be Halal—allowed to be eaten also by Muslims observing the rules of their religion. This triggered the fury of extreme national organizations which started the consumer boycott of this type of product. The coherence of the symbolic field was infringed, it was intruded by new actors inconsistent with the conservative idea of patrimony. This led to the establishment of a new reactive movement whose objective was to protect the "purity" of food and national values encoded by it.

DeSoucey also addresses the issue of the industrial transformation of the product. She describes an interesting combination of images pertaining to food

and the production mode which is inconsistent with it. For a very long time *foie gras* had been feast day food and connected with the upper class. As pointed out by Pierre Bourdieu (2013:32), this type of rich, expensive dish requiring sensory training were characteristic of the bourgeoisie. Industrial revolution changed everything. Food became commonly available, industrial techniques and tricks reduced production costs (Conkin 2008). Belt-system production, industrial techniques, equipment for birds mass feeding and processing led to the production of “Bloc de Foie Gras,” a modified molded block at a definitely lower price. Interestingly, in spite of disconnecting the product from the area and changing the regime of production, the set of symbols encoded by such food has not changed. Consumers of *foie gras* do not imagine the gloominess of factory, the system of pipes for force-feeding animals, the production belt, but still refer to the idyllic vision of patrimony. We consider it a worthwhile observation, as it indicates the disconnection of materiality and meanings. Despite the radically different mode of production, the values encoded by the product have not changed. Materiality and meanings, enframed by our desires get disconnected from the physical world. Looking at a tin of industrially processed pate, we still see a never existent imagined community. Industrial revolution caused the patrimony to lose its class nature, and at the supermarket shelf it has become available to all.

Chapter three (“Gastronationalism on the Ground”) is devoted by the author to the issues of shaping the imagined national community. DeSoucey uses the notion of **gastronationalism**. It implies that the production, processing, and consumption of food:

“create and sustain the emotive power of national attachment” (DeSoucey 2012:433). In the book, one may find two ways of understanding this notion. On the macro-scale it defines a set of symbols connected with a community; on the micro-scale it draws the line between the group members and strangers. Food is used in the fight for national identity as a symbol activating cultural script of affiliation to a community, but also as a weapon supposed to humiliate. It is worth mentioning some examples of using pork by national organizations—in the case of the Polish Defense League (Polska Liga Obrony), slices of bacon were sent to members of the Muslim Religious Association (Muzułmański Związek Religijny).¹ Pork is also frequently used in Europe as a symbol, for example, it is found at construction sites of new mosques.²

The example of *foie gras* described in the book is a little less extreme, but it refers to a similar phenomenon. The author describes the renaissance of the craftsman ways of the production of this food, analyzing how the symbols of attachment to the nation are constructed and strengthened. She mentions an interesting thread of cultural nostalgia, power of sentiment, and how this influences the specificity of the community, the economic potential of producers, or even space construction. The cultural reconstruction involves legal regulations; there are certificates to guarantee quality or regional

¹From “Gazeta Wyborcza” article “Polscy islamofobi mają nowy genialny pomysł” by Łukasz Woźnicki. Retrieved September 08, 2017 (http://wyborcza.pl/1,76842,16020932,Polscy_islamofobi_maja_nowy_genialny_pomysl___Wysylamy.html).

² From news portal www.natemat.pl article “Podłożyć świnie muzułmaninowi” by Janusz Wójcik. Retrieved September 08, 2017 (<http://janwojcik.natemat.pl/86007,podlozyc-swiniemuzułmaninowi>).

origin. The connection between the *terroir* and patrimony is thus institutionalized and codified. What is more, this law becomes the weapon in the fight for the consolidation of cultural constructions and economic interests. The struggle to be listed among regional products certified by the European Union; using state institutions for protection by means of a certificate system (e.g., the famous French AOC, or the Italian DOC). An equally interesting thread, described by the author, is the creation of countryside idylls, neo-ruralism. *Foie gras*, together with other regional products, may be a powerful tool attracting tourists and consumers to the area. The thing is that what consumers find on the spot must correspond with their projections. If we speak about food, then it must be produced by an old farmer, processed by his wife, and the place where it happens must be a charming, small village somewhere in the provinces. Obviously, this is not a phenomenon limited to France. Similar processes are described by Fabio Parasecoli (2014:260) in the case of Italy arguing that what we define as Italian cuisine is in fact illusion, mirage basing on ephemeral national identity. Consumers’ visions and desires receive the power to transform the world by means of market mechanisms of supply and demand. Thanks to it, it is possible to move a highlander inn, which is a simulation itself, to the beach in Sopot. This phenomenon is analyzed by Brian Short (2006:143) in his study on the rural idyll. Referring to John Urry, he stresses that the society is being saturated with pre-industrial symbols attracting the middle-class who are willing to pay for such an illusion (Short 2006:143). The neo-ruralism and the rural idyll are approached similarly by David Bell (2006), who emphasizes the metropolitan source of symbols and

images referring to the countryside and food. This author also used the notion of gastro-idyll. It refers to the connection between food and consumer desires, and may have various facets: local, ecological, health-related. Coming back to the reviewed book, DeSoucey describes the process of the emergence of such idyllic visions. She analyzes the transformations of regions, their economies, or even the landscape which occurs around the cultural anchor of *foie gras*. Tourist routes, spots of tasting, restaurants, farms, or even art in the described regions are subordinated to a defined utopian vision of locality, one of the main symbols of which is *foie gras*.

In chapter four (“Foiehibition”) of the reviewed book, we leave the French province and move to Chicago. The very title of the chapter is a word-play joining *foie gras* and prohibition, which well-reflects the content of this section. The narration is built around the prohibition of producing and selling *foie gras* which for some time was in force in this U.S. city. The nature of the dish and the production technology based on force-feeding result in the fact that the goose or duck liver pate locates in the very center of cultural war. On the one side of the barricade there are representatives of the middle-class and cooks who value the patrimonial imagery and sensory qualities. On the other side, there are representatives of the same metropolitan middle-class yet engaged in social anti-consumer movements. For the latter group, *foie gras* has become the symbol of fighting cruelty and lack of transparent systems of animal production, or even broader—the contemporary capitalism. Using the range of direct and political activities typical of social movements, part of the activists contributed to the passing of the law

penalizing the production and selling of this type of food. In the chapter, the author describes the set of activities of consumer movements and counter-movements. From the analytical perspective, an interesting element is the emerging class threads. These types of cultural wars for food take place between people of similar backgrounds and cultural capital. Researchers investigating alternative food movements often point out that their mobilization potential may be limited to white metropolitan well-educated consumers (Goodman, DuPuis, Goodman 2104). Moreover, both the opponents and supporters of this particular technique of food production fight for the access to the same social niche. Using the language borrowed from Pierre Bourdieu, DeSoucey points out that: “taste is a ‘practical operator’ in this regard, transforming objects such as foods and culinary styles into distinct signs of class position. For the sociologist, then, contested tastes necessarily manifest, develop, and reproduce within the settings of classed social relations” (p. 139). One element of this chapter raises certain doubts—analyzing the behaviors of social movements, the author rejects consumer subjectivity—she considers their actual impact as minor. It is our conviction that the role of consumer’s agency should not be underestimated. There are studies proving that by empowering the buyers, it is possible to correct the functioning of a system to some extent (Bevir and Trentmann 2007). The example of the increasing popularity of vegetarianism or organic food shows that even a small group of consumers with a class-rooted persuasion potential may influence others even by establishing trends or fashions. In other words, in the long-term perspective, a small conflict of consumers in one American city may sig-

nal the changes in the approach to consumption, production standards, relations between the individual and the industrial complex.

In the last subject-matter chapter (“The Paradox of Perspective”), DeSoucey goes beyond the sociology of social movements or political activities—this conflict is analyzed from the perspective of an anthropologist of culture. For the author, it is most of all the fight for the possibility to define the symbolic field. An important mechanism to do it is moral disgust. The feeding and raising of animals play the role of a symbol, they allow one to focus their actions on one’s particular goal. Here emerges the phenomenon identified as the paradox of perception. The thing is that there is no clear information whether the process of production causes the suffering of animals, nor whether it negatively stands alone against the background of the industrialized agribusiness. Using different terminology—in order for materiality to take shape, it needs to be accompanied by meanings and context knowledge. However, the controversies around food show that even within the same class there exist completely dissimilar symbolic fields which construct the perception of materiality in a different way. What for some will be a barbarian manifestation of the human dominance over the animal, for others will be sanctified by tradition. Every group will have its advocates, experts, scientists. The controversial foods will be space for the symbolic tug of war, the fight for dominance over the field of symbols. Describing this battle, DeSoucey reconstructs an entire repository of “weaponry” used by both sides. Ranging from advertising campaigns, urban guerrilla, taking advantage of the media, lawsuits, and

institutional lobbying to attacks on property—the scope of activities of the participants in the conflict over food happens to be really wide. This does not refer only to bird liver pate—different kinds of conflict pertaining to the production of beef, whaling, seal hunting, shark fin soup provoke both sides to a heated debate. The arguments in these disputes are most often similar—one side of the conflict refers to the construction of patrimony, and the other to the social construction of suffering. Simultaneously, everywhere common, apparently trivial, problems lead to intensive clashing of particular consumer and activist groups. Considering the actual social potential of food, we have to agree with the statement by Charles Levkoe (2013:587) who argues that: “food can be a powerful metaphor for the way we organize and relate to society. Beyond subsistence, food is a social and cultural expression of individuals. It acts as an entry point into larger debates and discourses around a multitude of issues.” DeSoucey shows that looking at a plate with *foie gras*, listening to the voices of delighted consumers or outraged activists, we are able to notice serious social and cultural cracks.

Let us now proceed to the conclusions, that is the least pleasurable part of every review. The reader has surely noticed that the reviewed book has gained the approval of the authors of this review. Among other things, it has been facilitated by the construction of the book that relies on the description of one product. It is evident that DeSoucey has succeeded in her in-depth analysis, has immersed in the described world. At the same time, she has successfully avoided the one-dimension perception of the investigated world, typical of

food studies. The author attempts to reconstruct the motivations and the ways of thinking of both sides of the conflict. The applied perspective connecting anthropology with political studies is also interesting. The use of the theory of social movements and political activities enabled the author to create an original, and, more importantly, dynamic framework of studies on social and cultural importance of food. The sensitivity to notions is also impressive. DeSoucey applies a series of original or borrowed categories which enrich the toolkit of a food researcher. On writing these words, in the beginning, it seemed rather controversial to build the text based on the plan of the letter V—two extreme geographical and subject-matter cases were described. DeSoucey took the readers on a tour of France and Chicago, leaving out what lies in between. It has to be admitted, though, that being aware of the program simplification, we accept such a dichotomous comparison of the analyzed cases—it results in a more distinct outline of the phenomenon under study.

Obviously, the book is not error free; we are not entirely sure what research the author had conducted nor how; how the respondents had been selected nor what research techniques used; what the scheme and mode of analysis had been. The story, perhaps a bit methodologically disorganized, is based on an attempt to deeply investigate, to reflectively reconstruct the discourse, values, and tensions. DeSoucey swiftly moves between the French province and local food processors and a kebab bar offering *foie gras* sauce, which has become extremely popular in Chicago. Additionally, in this journey, besides the deep description of the very phenomenon, one may

also find a whole variety of notions, concepts, ideas aiming at the reconstruction of a fragment of the contemporary world.

The book is situated at the boundary between scientific books and the popular science ones, with all its consequences. However, this does not change the two most important advantages of this book. The first, significant from our research perspective, pertains to the quality of the work and its potential to attract researchers to studies on social and

cultural conditionings of food. In our part of Europe, it is still a new discipline, struggling to gain its scientific status, and every valuable published work deserves to be disseminated. The other advantage is a more down-to-earth one; the reviewed book is simply well-written and it engrosses the reader and draws them into the story about cultural and social functions of a plate full of *foie gras*. This is yet sufficient for us to recommend the book to readers interested in the political consequences of controversies in culture.

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