

REVIEW ARTICLE

NATIONALIZING CUISINES: AN EXPLORATION OF ALIMENTARY ALLEGIANCES AND CULINARY COMMUNITIES

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Atsuko Ichijo, Venetia Johannes and Ronald Ranta (eds.), *The emergence of national food: the dynamics of food and nationalism*, London: Bloomsbury Academic 2019, 236 pp. ISBN: 978-1350080485.

Jukka Gronow and Lotte Holm (eds.), *Everyday eating in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden: a comparative study of meal patterns 1997-2012*, London: Bloomsbury Academic 2019, 207 pp. ISBN: 978-1350074132.

Whether it is one-minute recipe videos on YouTube and Facebook or carefully constructed food images on Instagram, the topic of food dominates both the contemporary mass media and academic research. Moving away from its initial placement as an object within biological, nutritional and consumption-oriented research spaces, the socio-political and cultural fascination with food has grown considerably. As a result, a sociological approach to researching food has emerged, situating food as a dimension of social life that is demonstrative of contextual social conditions, social organizations and dynamics. Through its exploration, food offers researchers glimpses into the multitude of relations that generate and perpetuate the sociocultural idiosyncrasies of a given society, especially as it relates to notions of ‘identity’. In both *The emergence of national food* and *Everyday eating*, the ways in which a certain ‘food nationalism’ arises or does not arise are explored through various case studies.

While both texts play with the idea of this notion of a shared culinary tradition or heritage, which is then linked to national identity under a nation-state paradigm, *Everyday eating*

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functions purely under the assumption that such a thing exists to begin with. Starting from the perspective that, despite different nation-state designations, Nordic populations potentially share similar foods and eating histories and practices, *Everyday eating* examines the eating patterns of Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden over a fifteen-year period. In order to capture the potential shifts and changes in all four Nordic countries, Gronow et al. frame the complex process of eating within a so-called ‘eating system’ which combines the physical, organizational and socio-cultural aspects of eating in order to narrow down the research’s focus to three elements: eating patterns, meal formats and the social organization of eating. Consequently most of their research findings provide entire inventories of typically eaten meal foods (for which they offer both distinct definitions and criteria), insights into the daily rhythms of eating across these populations (e.g. timings for mealtimes and the general temporality of eating) , commensality practices, perspectives on gender in relation to food and cooking, and commentaries on issues of sustainability, food insecurity and dietary health within the Nordic countries.

Through this framing, *Everyday eating* generates a uniform research model which unites its twelve chapters under the aforementioned focuses as guiding themes. Drawing on two data sets, one collected in 1997 and the other in 2012, Gronow et al. utilized telephone and web-based surveys that were representative of these populations to interview over 13,000 people living in these four Nordic countries. The research questions focused on discerning whether shared eating rhythms existed among the Nordic countries and whether the eating rhythms and practices they identified were simply declining or disappearing altogether (Gronow et al., 2019). This seemingly systematic approach, they argue, allows data comparisons between the countries across the two time periods, thus demonstrating the distinctions between culturally or nationally idiosyncratic phenomena (Gronow et al., 2019: 10).

While Gronow et al. provide ample amounts of data to support some of their claims, there are moments in the text when their conclusions for each chapter seem to contradict one another or are presented as definitive despite the ambiguity of their findings. For instance, in discussing the changes in the types of foods that are eaten during meals in the Nordic countries, the authors stressed that ‘traditional Nordic national food cultures’ persisted over the fifteen-year period of research through the presence of distinctive hot and cold lunch cultures, overall simplistic meal formats and the prominent inclusion of meat in dinner dishes, while also saying that there were numerous changes which challenged the existence of these ‘national food cultures’ (Gronow et

al. 2019: 30). Among the changes they identified in food consumption, it was noted that meal choices included more wholesome and ‘healthier’ options that centred around fruit, vegetarian options, less sugary items (e.g. cakes) and increased water consumption – trends that the authors argued demonstrated a ‘harmonization’ and ‘homogenizing’ of Nordic food culture – while also maintaining two sentences later, rather confusingly, that ‘underlying distinct national patterns’ remain consistent (ibid.). In another chapter on Nordic countries’ daily rhythms of eating, the authors address this tendency and claim that ‘shared eating rhythms’ will continue into the future despite the inconclusiveness of their findings: ‘Despite this ambiguous finding, we believe it is justifiable to extrapolate from our results...’ (Gronow et al. 2019: 53). Although nuance and scepticism are inherent in nearly all research, the authors’ seem to draw stark conclusions despite the absence of data which would directly support their claims.

While carefully crafted, the text has an interesting isolating aspect to it: despite focuses on the shifts in the behaviour of populations, it ignores the demographic fluctuations in each Nordic country. This weakness is touched upon in the text’s conclusion, which calls for further in-depth research on the same topics in response to new demographic changes and the de-homogenizing of Nordic populations. Methodologically the text suffers from the problem of the incomparability of the two data sets, based respectively on telephone interviewing in 1997 and an internet survey in 2012. While the authors argue that this difference in survey method does not impact on their results, one might ask whether research participants would have devoted the same level of attention and detail to their responses through web-based surveys than through direct telephone interviews.

Despite its acknowledged limitations, *Everyday eating* offers a well-organized and detailed account of Nordic eating patterns between the late 1990s and 2010s. Overall the text reads fairly easily, being usefully supplemented with detailed tables that were clear and not in the least overwhelming. While it lacks some critical analysis regarding the ways in which each Nordic country has changed since the turn of the millennium, it offers solid data on what Nordic countries are eating, how they are eating them and how they feel about it. The text’s findings reinforce this idea of a shared, core, Nordic food identity, as well as noting the influence of the social organization of daily life as a dominating factor in shaping eating patterns. Many of its findings suggest that fluctuations in socioeconomic status, in conjunction with age, have produced noticeable changes in eating patterns and practices, thus producing a sense of

‘desynchronization’. This attention to transformation and in food and eating practices further substantiates the relevance of the authors’ research within Nordic countries’ rapidly evolving foodscapes (Gronow et al., 2019: 46).

In sharp contrast, Ichijo et. al’s *The emergence of national food* presents a critical analysis of the ideas of ‘national food’ and ‘food nationalism’. Organized into three thematic parts, the authors provide fourteen chapters that elaborate on the emergence of ‘national food’, distinctive examples and accounts of national foods, and examples and accounts that criticize the existence of national foods. Although numerous ‘obvious’ examples of national food are avoided (e.g. France, Italy, India and Japan), this volume provides a diverse collection of accounts which traverse often overlooked groups and regions in food studies such as eastern Europe, Latin America, Scotland, Palestine and Catalonia. *The emergence of national food* highlights a number of foods which tend to be repeatedly contested for the designation of ‘national foods’: can one food, or several types of food, truly embody the diversity of the human experience for an entire nation? This inquiry is but one of many addressed in the text: as Ichijo et al. stress, ‘this volume does not claim to have defined the method of studying food and nationalism...it showcases what different methods and different combinations of methods can reveal’ (Ichijo et al. 2019: 12).

The first section presents an assemblage of case studies which embody an ‘orthodox’ understanding of national food, meaning that such foods are composed and fixed within a process of nation- and state-building endeavours. Whether it is Bacalhau (salted cod) in Portugal, Potica (hearty leavened bread) in Slovenia or the microculture *Bacillus Bulgaricus* in Bulgaria, such foods are staples in what it means to be a part of the said nation; consumption and appreciation of ‘national foods’ become necessary in shared national identities. Many of these case studies drew most of their ‘national food’ designations from observances of historical cookbook and cooking texts throughout the ages, allowing the long-held significance of certain foods within given nation-state contexts to be traced. For some examples, such as Slovenian Potica, the authors combine historical narratives with current events to explain this hearty type of bread’s rise to global fame as demonstrated through interactions between the Pope, U.S. President Donald Trump and First Lady Melania Trump. The interweaving of historical and current events as a format for many of the case studies explains and outlines the origins and potential trajectories of designated ‘national foods’.

The second section of the text provides more examples of national food within a framework taken from cultural studies and historical analysis, which in combination critically analyse the said ‘national foods’ as signifiers of specific (often sociocultural) dynamics. From poverty and class in relation to Scottish Haggis and deep-fried Mars Bars to various Catalan delights, this section stresses the idea of food and national food(s) as being indicative of several overlaid identities of populations. Given that the identified ‘national foods’ are so closely interlinked with notions of identity, some examples highlighted different forms of protest and resistance through foods, while others focused on differentiating ethnic heritage and regional affiliations from nation states. Venetia Johannes discusses how the Barcelona chef Ada Parellada created a charity dinner menu that showcased the colour yellow in order to signify the importance of differentiating Catalonian cuisine from Spanish cuisine: ‘[Chefs] tread a fine line between celebrating their Catalan heritage as a part of their personal brand and avoiding the negative associations with being “Catalan” in Spain today’ (Venetia Johannes in Ichijo et al. 2019: 94). Similarly, Mona Nikolić examines how the homogenization of numerous forms of identity (e.g. regional, religious, ethnic) exemplifies the power dynamics that exist between various groups in attempting to achieve a unified ‘national identity’ in food and cuisine. The inclusion of anecdotes of resistance through food and cuisine was an incredibly enriching aspect of this volume, as they demonstrated the complexity of attempting to classify populations’ foodways and cuisine systematically within the restrictive frameworks of ‘national foods’.

The final section is entirely existential, with its constant battle over whether or not ‘national foods’ are a universally observed phenomenon that actually exists. From analysis of *cuy* in Andean Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia, Poutine in Canada and New England cuisine in the United States, Ichijo et al. simply conclude that ‘it depends’ (Ichijo et al. 2019: 175). The most intriguing set of examples in this section was that of Israeli ‘national foods’ in juxtaposition to designated Palestinian ones; both case studies cite ‘modernity’ and the other’s foodways as shapers of current perspectives on what ‘national foods’ meant for each. This choice to highlight the historically turbulent relationship between Israel and Palestine demonstrates how, as a medium, food acts as a form of diplomacy and an indicator of social relations and dynamics.

Overall, *The emergence of national food* is a thought-provoking read with interesting case studies. The text differentiates itself by focusing on case studies of ‘national foods’ and ‘national cuisines’ by actively seeking research on underexplored groups in food studies. It provides a

wide selection of methodologies from the social sciences which contribute to the continuance of the study of food and nationalism while inviting further holistic approaches. The text could have benefited from expansion of the plethora of perspectives around boundary-making, nation-building and the dichotomies between regional pride and ethnic pride, but as it stands it is still very good.

Although both *Everyday eating* and *The emergence of national food* provide collections of case studies outlining the extensively complex topic of food within the framework of a conceptualization of nationalism, each has its own unique perspective and approach. Read together they appear to be diametrically opposed, but as stand-alone texts they are well-researched, insightful volumes on their respective topics. Regardless of the research focus, these two works will make interesting reading for food scholars, food researchers and food enthusiasts alike.