

# The Culture of Food

BY NORMAN WIRZBA

**Our problems about food, ranging from its wasteful production and inequitable distribution to its reduction to a mere commodity, bespeak a defilement of God's good gifts. We have what we need to make our way—a world blessed with abundant fertility. What we still await is a culture devoted to the just production and sharing of this blessing.**

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**F**ood is not something we worry about. Living in developed countries, we believe that food will always be readily and cheaply available at our grocery stores. We are, after all, the beneficiaries of the Green Revolution that made it possible to dramatically improve crop yields. Indeed, we have been so successful at food production that fewer people than ever before are directly involved in its growth and harvest (the farm population has decreased so much—we have fewer farmers in the United States than prison inmates—that farmers are considered a statistically irrelevant group by the Census Bureau). How many of us have ever seen empty shelves at the store?

If we admit that a food problem exists, we think it is someone else's problem. More specifically, we think the problem stems from explosive population growth in developing countries: there simply are too many people in those places and not enough food. These people cannot be expected to feed themselves, and so we take some comfort in promoting the Green Revolution abroad and advocating for food aid at home. Given sufficient technology and government intervention, particularly through programs of the World Trade Organization and the World Bank, these countries too will soon reap the blessings of readily available food. Problem solved.

## REPAIRING THE LANDSCAPE OF HUNGER

According to the writers gathered by Douglas H. Boucher in *The Paradox of Plenty: Hunger in a Bountiful World* (Oakland, CA: Food First Books, 1999, 348 pp., \$18.95), virtually all of the aforementioned assumptions are misguided. Moreover, if continued, they present an effective barrier to understanding and addressing the very real problems of global hunger and food insecurity. These essays shift our frame of reference away from concerns about rising populations and food scarcity, and replace them with an awareness of wasted land, vast poverty, inadequate access to land, breakdowns in the world food system, and the lack of genuine economic citizenship. If we can address these latter concerns, the authors argue, we will discover that the world can produce more than enough food to feed everyone.

Francis Moore Lappé, Joseph Collins, and Peter Rosset put the issue most directly when they say, “the root cause of hunger isn’t scarcity of food or land; it’s a *scarcity of democracy*” (p. 6). What they mean is that over the past several decades farmers have been driven from the land, sometimes by force and sometimes by economic necessity, and the land taken up by large, often foreign-controlled, landholders who adjust production to suit export markets (for flowers, coffee, or bananas, for example). Farmland, which once provided for local food needs, is held captive by volatile global markets that have the interests of the wealthy in mind. The result is that local populations, now made poor and helpless due to land dispossession, go hungry while export granaries are full to bursting. The solution to this problem, as phrased by Li Kheng Poh, is clear: “The only durable way to alleviate hunger is to support the grassroots efforts of local people to change the way food is grown, distributed and consumed inside their own country” (p. 203). The path to food security, in other words, is through local control of land and democratic citizenship in which people have the power and the responsibility to care for themselves. We know, for instance, that small, diverse farms are usually much more productive than their agribusiness, monoculture counterparts. The world needs more of these farms, not less.

Of course, this is more easily said than done. The world food system, which includes banks and international aid agencies, is heavily influenced by corporations that have the economic bottom line rather than local food independence foremost in mind. Trade agreements often specify that local farming markets be dismantled so that foreign imports—in seed, fertilizer, pesticides, and farm equipment—can gain a foothold. Even direct food aid from developed countries can be destructive if it undermines local food economies, driving more farmers off their land. Moreover, it is becoming clear that American policymakers are not as interested in feeding the starving (much of the food that is dumped in developing countries is known to be too expensive for the poor to purchase it) as they are in ridding U.S.

markets of price-depressing domestic surpluses, in opening new markets for sale of U.S. farm products, or pressuring foreign governments to be more accommodating of U.S. economic and military interests.

This is a rich, prodigiously researched collection of essays that will go a long way toward helping us become better informed about the problems of global hunger. Besides addressing the themes already mentioned, authors also discuss how land and biological resources are wasted through inefficient and unsustainable farming practices, or through the production of food for animals rather than humans (e.g., vast amounts of fossil fuel, feed, and water are used to produce protein—beef, pork, poultry—in large confinement operations that have as one of their byproducts huge quantities of toxic waste). We learn that the Green Revolution itself, because of its heavy reliance on fossil fuel and chemical fertilizers and poisons, is not sustainable over the long term and that a broad effort toward diverse, ecologically-informed farming practices must become one of our highest cultural priorities. Nevertheless, the overriding message of *The Paradox of Plenty* is not gloom and doom. We have what we need to make our way—a world blessed with abundant fertility. What we still await is a political and economic culture devoted to the just production and sharing of this blessing.

#### **MAKING WISER CHOICES AMID ABUNDANCE**

Marion Nestle's *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002, 457 pp., \$15.95) demonstrates in great detail how cultural factors and regulatory bodies like the USDA can distort the blessing of food even in the context of food abundance. Nestle brings to her work a great deal of expertise as an academic (she chairs the department of Nutrition, Food Studies, and Public Health at New York University) and an advisor to government agencies (she edited the 1988 Surgeon General's Report on Nutrition and Health). Her central question is this: how, in the face of food abundance and relative wealth, can we have so many people making poor food choices that contribute to overall ill-health?

For Nestle, as with the writers gathered by Boucher, the issues of health and food security need to be examined from the perspectives of politics and economics. In our culture, food has been transformed into a commodity (which, as we will see later, has serious significance). Since Americans are relatively affluent, they have more than enough money to buy food to meet their nutritional needs. Yet affluence sets the stage for intense competition within the food industry among the suppliers, distributors, regulators, restaurants, and so on. Food companies thus expend extraordinary amounts of resources to lobby government agencies, develop marketing strategies, and create products that will sell regardless of their nutritional effects. Nestle makes this point early and starkly: "Food companies will make and market any product that sells, regardless of its

nutritional value or its effect on health. In this regard, food companies hardly differ from cigarette companies" (p. viii).

The history of food in America in the twentieth century is largely about how players within the food industry fight to increase market share. They not only increase the amount of food available, but also promote certain foods as cheap, attractive, or convenient. Widely accepted scientific evidence routinely is withheld or distorted so that a product's sale potential will not be undermined. Government agencies charged with the protection of consumer health find themselves in a bind since they are also charged with protecting the business interests of food suppliers. So far, Nestle notes, the suppliers have been winning.

She describes this tension beautifully by recounting the history of the food pyramid chart. What many of us do not know is that intense battles were fought over how the chart should be drawn (including whether it should be a pyramid), and how many daily servings in each category—vegetables, grains, fruit, dairy, proteins, sweets, and fats—should be recommended. (Clearly, recommending more servings from one category over another has tremendous economic effects.) From a scientific point of view we know that whole grains and ample servings of fruits and vegetables (the less processed the better) are best for our health. As we might imagine, however, representatives from the beef and poultry industries, as well as makers of highly refined food products (like sodas, candies, and convenience snacks), hardly saw this as advancing their business interests. Their proposal was to formulate vague, misleading counter-statements like the following: "balance, variety, and moderation are the keys to healthful diets; there is no such thing as a good or a bad food; all foods can be part of healthful diets; it's the total diet that counts" (p. 91).

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Nestle thoroughly discusses topics ranging from the mechanics of food lobbies and the exploitation of children as food consumers to the regulatory battles over dietary supplements and the development of technofoods like olestra. Her concluding message is simple: our primary job as citizens is to become responsible eaters, recognizing that with every bite we are making not only a nutritional, but also a political statement. *Food*

*Politics*, because it also provides numerous practical suggestions, will go a long way toward helping us become more informed and healthier eaters.

### **ENCOUNTERING GRACE**

The great merit of Michael Schut's anthology, *Food & Faith: Justice, Joy and Daily Bread* (Denver, CO: Living the Good News, 2002, 296 pp., \$14.95), is to remind us that food is much more than a commodity susceptible to the vicissitudes of global economies or corporate power. Because food is essential to the processes of all life, it connects us directly to God as the Source of life. Whenever we eat, we are not simply consuming a fuel to get us through another day; rather we are participating intimately in God's divine economy of life and death. Eating is a sacramental act, an act that has the potential to bind us faithfully and charitably to each other, the creation as a whole, and God.

Schut covers many dimensions of food, ranging from its production and distribution to problems in industrial agriculture and global poverty. Writers as diverse as Wendell Berry, Diane Ackerman, Eric Schlosser, Vandana Shiva, and M. F. K. Fisher take us to the heart of understanding spiritual, physical, and cultural health. Even the themes taken up by Boucher and Nestle are included, yet amplified so that we can see the spiritual side of food consumption. Why do we take such pleasure in eating? And how is it that food tastes better in the company of others (remembering that the Latin word for companion refers to the sharing of bread)? Reading these essays, we sense how our engagement with food is always an encounter with grace. How we practically handle this divine creation, whether in sacrilegious or sacramental eating, may represent the most honest accounting of our love and our piety.

Though our food industry bespeaks in many ways a defilement of God's good gifts, this is not how it needs to be. Our congregations can become places wherein food's deep spiritual resonances are heard and celebrated. With greater attention to the religious dimensions of food, we can become members of grateful, sharing communities rather than remain isolated, fretful consumers. To encourage us to enter into joyful and just community, Schut includes a study guide for church people. Practical suggestions and useful tips (including a list of organizations and bibliographic/internet resources) round out this excellent and timely collection.

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