

Consuming the World: Eating and Drinking in Culture, History, and Environment Workshop Report

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Conveners: Michelle Mart (Penn State University, Berks Campus), Christof Mauch (Rachel Carson Center), Daniel Philippon (University of Minnesota, Twin Cities), Hanna Schösler (University of Bayreuth)

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The workshop “Consuming the World: Eating and Drinking in Culture, History, and Environment,” held at the Rachel Carson Center in March 2016, brought together sixteen participants, and numerous interested observers, for two days of discussions on the dynamic relationship between food, environment, history, and culture. Opening the workshop with some theoretical reflections to frame the papers, **Dan Philippon** (University of Minnesota) emphasized food’s symbolic and material properties which make it such a basic, and powerful, expression of people’s culture and their relationship to the environment—our understandings of who we are and where we live. Simultaneously a complex and emergent system, an embodied practice, a material object with its own agency, a discursive formation framing patterns of production and consumption, and a transformation, the food we eat and produce was explored in its complex and multifaceted dimensions over the course of this interdisciplinary workshop.

The first panel, “Place and Food Cultures,” explored the relationship between food and place, raising issues of identity, locality, and typicality. **Susanne Scharnowski** (Freie Universität Berlin) compared the national agrarian notions of the German *Heimat* and the “English countryside.” These have a lot in common not only with each other, but also with contemporary alternative food movements that focus on rural living and a sense of connectedness with the land. Such cultural movements have been criticized for reasons ranging from a nostalgic opposition to technological progress and “ecological modernization,” to a chauvinistic and exclusionary sense of place. Yet Scharnowski also identified a left-wing love of place and writings that focused on modern multicultural societies, particularly in the UK. She concluded by noting that *Heimat* had recently found expression in marketing campaigns and questioned the implications of this. **Dan Philippon** further explored the themes of agrarianism and nostalgia through a close reading of the work of the “farmer-writer” Wendell Berry. Drawing on a comparison with religious communities, Philippon suggested that food communities, too, are formed through both beliefs and practices, raising questions about what food communities ought to do, and what kind of relationships between consumers and producers might emerge as a result. Finally, **Stefano Magagnoli** (University of Parma) considered “typical” food products, which are tied to a particular place of origin, often through legal instruments. Noting that we do not just eat food but also “symbols, history, tradition, and memory,” Magagnoli proposed a way of thinking about typical products as “Avatars” (invisible in their original form and only visible through imitations) to explore the gap between the elusive “original” typical products and their industrial counterparts.

The panel was followed by the keynote talk, delivered by **Ursula Heinzlmann**, food writer, director of the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery, and author of the recent book, *Beyond Bratwurst: A History of Food in Germany*. Starting from the question “What is German food?,” Heinzlmann showed that German food was not limited to the typical Oktoberfest fare. Rather, she pointed to a dynamic, changing food culture, with a diversity of regional traditions and a long-standing openness to culinary

influences from other countries. Germany's geographic and climatic variation, its social and economic history, and its decentralized political structure (often seen as a problem) have together promoted this receptiveness and plurality.

The second day of the workshop began with the panel, "'Natural Foods,' Organic Farming, and Nutrition." **Sookyong Hong** (Cornell University) detailed the birth of the natural foods movement in pre-war Japan. The *shokuyō* movement is based on a holistic understanding of the body, food, and the environment as interconnected. While its post-war incarnations have largely been progressive, pacifist, and environmentalist, the movement's pre-war origins are less well-known. At times nationalistic and imperialist, the pre-war movement above all offered a response to the changes wrought by modernization and a way of "eating right" in a changing world. **Laura Sayre** (French National Institute of Agronomic Research) presented a literary history of the organic movement, focusing not on how it is represented in literature, but rather on how it is grounded in particular texts, some of which have continued to be influential where others have faded into obscurity. Her paper also traced the influence on these texts of the particular places and times they were written, linking some of the foundational texts of the movement with the invisible landscapes of organic history. **Michelle Mart** (Penn State University) explored the evolution of nutritional guidelines and the federal school lunch program in the USA—both cases where it was assumed that the government, not just families, had some responsibility for what citizens ate, and which also offered possible solutions to the problem of the overproduction of agricultural commodities. Both reinforced a scientific understanding of food as composed of different nutrients, not as a site of cultural memory. Yet both ultimately also failed, as evidenced by the current prevalence of diet-related chronic health conditions.

The panel "Changing Traditions in Global Food Cultures" highlighted the interconnectedness of the globalized food system. **Graham H. Cornwell's** (Georgetown University) paper started from the question of why sweetened green tea had become a key signifier of Moroccan identity, when tea and sugar were both imported crops, introduced into Morocco through French colonialism. He explored how French policies designed to make Moroccan agriculture more productive removed people from the land, leading to a greater reliance on imported food—a transition from food sovereignty to food security. **Ernst Langthaler** (Institute of Rural History) explored the history of globalization through the lens of soy. While soy might not appear to be a large part of the typical Western diet, in the forms of soybean oil and animal feed cake made from soy, it has in fact played a central—if hidden—role in post-war dietary change in the West by enabling the increased consumption of meat and oil. Yet soy also has an antagonistic role vis-à-vis the Western diet as a symbol of alternative food cultures. **Bridget Love** (University of Oklahoma) focused on questions of food safety and farming in Japan after the Fukushima nuclear disaster. Government officials and farmers claim that "rumor damage," in the form of falling sales and consumer boycotts of food from affected areas, has inflicted collateral harm on producers in already struggling rural areas. Campaigns urge consumers to show solidarity with farmers by purchasing domestic foods and downplay consumers' concerns about the health impacts of radiation. This serves as a way of suggesting the disaster is resolved, while preventing discussions of food safety and failing to resolve underlying issues in the food system.

The final panel, "Changing Traditions in North American Food Cultures," explored a range of issues around industrialization, modernization, colonialism, and identity. **Matthew Booker** (North Carolina State University) focused on food regulation in the twentieth century USA, demonstrating how the rise of food regulation and inspection involved a transformation of how people understood the role of

government and the responsibility for managing risk. Although food regulation can favor certain kinds of industries, Booker suggested that regulatory systems, while largely invisible, are helpful in protecting against epidemic disease, which may be a bigger risk than commonly thought. **Paul Josephson** (Colby College, Maine, and Tomsk State University, Russia) explored the development of the broiler chicken industry in American culture. Once raised on small farms, mostly by women, for extra income, chickens are now a highly engineered and hybridized bird, and the basis of an industry that produces odorless, bloodless, plastic-wrapped chicken for a vastly enlarged market. The industry is moreover concentrated in Southern states with the weakest unions and environmental and public health protections. The “meaty superchicken” is both an animal and a biological object, and also part of a vast industrial machine. **Cindy Ott** (LMU Munich) explored questions of food, heritage, and identity among Crow Indians. Through the example of Alma Snell (“the Julia Child of Crow Indian cuisine”), Ott demonstrated how Crow Indians routinely incorporate non-native plants and twentieth-century foods into their gardening and cooking, and are more likely to look to recent generations than the pre-colonial era for an idea of traditional food. Instead of assuming that “authentic” Indian food is pre-colonial, focusing on these practices values people’s daily existence and affirms their own identity. **Sasha Gora** (Rachel Carson Center) drew on artistic sources to explore the visual representation of the beaver. Arguably a Canadian national emblem, the beaver has historically been imagined as animal, as symbol, and as food. By exploring Canada’s changing relationship to the beaver, Gora also interrogated the shifting boundaries of what is considered edible.

The workshop closed with a discussion that drew together the key themes of the workshop and looked ahead to possible publications. Food is at once deeply personal and intimate, and a site of encounters with others—whether on the level of families, communities, nation states, or the globalized agri-food system. A source of power for nation states and transnational corporations, food also offers the potential for bottom-up histories and narratives, since everybody has a relationship with food. While the oppositions between “industrial” and “natural” foods, globalization and nostalgia, city and country, and scientific knowledge and other forms of knowledge all offered instructive ways to think about food’s role in culture and the environment, the papers also problematized and moved beyond these binaries. The questions of what it means to make claims for foods being “local” or “national,” or whether scientific knowledge and government regulation serve consumers or powerful producers, among others, are complex, dynamic, and contested, as shown by the diverse range of papers at the workshop.