

Central and Eastern European Review

Melissa L. Caldwell (ed.), *Food and Everyday Life in the Post-Socialist World*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2009. 231 pp.

Two things are striking at once about this book: first, that it comes from a series of lively interactive meetings amongst a group of writers sharing enthusiasm for their topics; second, there is a shared deep respect for the leadership of Melissa Caldwell in drawing together the variety of papers on Food Studies. Each of the eight chapters starts with an amusing and relevant anecdote. Every contribution is thoroughly footnoted, and the book is enhanced with several topical photographs.

All the chapters relate to the former Soviet Union, except for one each on Hungary and Bulgaria. Initially Marion Nestle's Foreword shares her expertise on Eastern Europe at the time when the Soviet Union was still off limits to American researchers.

The book describes how the most influential changes to food production, both under Communism and following the fall of Communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, involved the setting up of communal kitchens and public canteens, and then later the abandonment of those same institutions. Initially these kitchens were seen as liberating citizens, especially women from everything involved in food production from shopping through to cleaning up. Early on this also led to the Soviet demand that each country under its power should focus on production of whatever food best suited its climate, forcing them to become interdependent. Through large scale but often ineffective organization, leading to scarcity, people who wished to purchase their own supplies found that shopping involved a whole series of queues (first to choose the item, second to pay for it, third to pick it up). Shortages led to

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stockpiling whenever goods became available. Now the food shortages—so frequent under Communism—have been replaced by inaccessibility for many, due to the very high price of food in relationship to wages.

Elizabeth Cullen Dunn explains that by focusing on the big issues, *Food Studies* is differentiated from the ‘food porn’ of glossy studies of culinary pleasure; it ‘is a way of understanding those political and economic systems ...’ (p. 208). We learn from her also that by 1970, through the development of freezers, it had become possible to purchase ice cream in every village in the Soviet Union—a particular effort was made to provide this pleasure to counteract other extreme hardships.

Each contributor uses their very personal involvement in a quite specific aspect of current food production; analysing its relationships to drastically changing times. Yuson Jung’s focus is on the production, in Bulgaria, of lytenitza (a pepper-tomato puree used as a garnish; also known as ajvar in other Balkan countries). She concludes that socialism, just like capitalism, seeks the same principles of ‘scientific management’. Yet individuals take great pride in producing their own version of the garnish. But under both Communism and EU standardizations, exact quantities and ingredients disallow any personal input in creating the marketed product. Moreover, a major change in food preservation methods has been brought about by the availability of fridges and freezers.

Conforming to current trends to ensure anthropology’s regard for the personal and individual observation, several of the authors depend on highly subjective views and information. Jung quotes Daniela ‘whose ex-boyfriend’s mother had worked as a seller in a ready-made food store’.

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In her chapter, Zsuzsa Gille takes up the 2004 ‘paprika scandal’, after the Hungarian government had to ban the sale of paprika, due to a possible contamination from some imported peppers from Brazil and Spain. Hungary exports about a tenth of all the world’s paprika, and Gille discusses the devastating impact that EU rules have had on this industry. Now Hungary and Spain, as EU members, share a common border, so there is no import duty. The author supplies a useful chart depicting the ‘Race to the Bottom’ (Neoliberal Capitalism) versus the ‘Race to the Top’ (Neoliberal Capitalist Protectionism). She also points out the injustice to small growers: developing countries are not allowed to subsidize their farmers, whereas the EU countries do, thus increasing the cost of developing countries’ exports and impoverishing their farmers.

Diana Mincyte discusses the increasing difficulties facing the informal dairy markets, involving mostly women, in Lithuania. She records a similar situation to that of Beryl Nicholson who followed the situation of women selling milk in southern Albania in the 1990s (‘Informal marketing of milk in Albania’, *Anthropology of East Europe Review* 21 (1):149–158) . In Lithuania this informal marketing is present in every urban area, working from street pavements (‘curbs’ in American)—Mincyte sees this as involving older women, unable to compete in the wider economy, finding a manageable niche for themselves in society, helping them to build their autonomy and dignity in otherwise increasingly difficult circumstances. They are unable to afford the equipment to comply with EU regulations, but serve communities who prefer to purchase locally and more economically. There is also, especially in the rural areas, a pride in personal production and being seen physically to feed one’s own family through hard work. EU funding to produce on a larger scale is seen as something unattainable, but also undesirable ‘the

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milk from the farmer is embedded in face-to-face interactions'. However, this system is becoming marginalized by government legislation.

The editor's chapter discusses the wide range of venues for drinking coffee, and also the wide ranging issues that surround this very social institution as it changes, especially in response to globalization; intimacy giving way to greater consumption: many of her conclusions could equally apply worldwide (for example the disappearance of cheap coffee stalls, and the rise in public coffee drinking in pedestrian zones). She comments on the popularity of MacDonalD's and also the relaxed attitude of Moscow's MacDonalD's towards customers bringing their own food to their tables. She also reports growing fears about traditional food markets, exacerbated by TV programmes highlighting fraud in these markets.

Neringa Klumbyte focuses on the changing face of the sausage industry in Lithuania; in particular the difference now perceived since the country's entry into the EU in 2004. The names of the two most successful brands are 'Soviet' and 'Euro', but contrary to expectations, while the former name implies backwardness and the latter modernization, Klumbyte finds that the 'Soviet' brand is far the most popular. Regardless of the content of the actual sausages, it seems that marketing of the 'Soviet' is able to appeal strongly to buyers along with the 'Soviet-Lithuanian tradition of good taste' (p.136); the appeal is even stronger when the product is thought to be homemade. Klumbyte found those she interviewed to be suspicious of sausages which had been made following EU standards and regulations.

Stas Shechtman traces the importance of state influence in food production, confirming other contributors' descriptions of the role of communal kitchens during the Communist era, when very strict limitations were made on exact quantities and ingredients of the food served.

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His main focus is on competitive culinary events which were first established in Moscow and developed into major festivals incorporating also song and dance. It was only from 2002 onwards that such events were opened to competitors outside Moscow. As in the Communist era, these culinary competitions ruled strictly on the range and quantities of ingredients used to produce entries. The Championships continue to be held, but now have an age limit such that competitors cannot be over 27 years old. Thus young people then become enmeshed in market relations, as 'ideological workers' for the (capitalist) restaurant industry, but they also are then equipped to 'shape and inform the practices and meanings of consumption' (p.183) in the wider community.

Katherine Metzko draws attention to the high incidence of vodka drinking, pointing out that alcohol problems for men are seen as acceptable unless it takes them to total dereliction; women on the other hand, are expected to be in complete control, and never be seen to have had more than minimal amounts. This ambiguity is quite a worldwide phenomenon. However, in what is now the former Soviet Union, women are held responsible for managing their husbands' alcoholism. Metzko mentions that there has been an increase in alcohol-related deaths starting from the 1990s; this correlates with the devastating economic conditions since the fall of Communism. Metzko's chapter, based on time spent with a formerly nomadic group in Buriatia, Siberia, is interspersed with pieces of biography relating to a woman to whom she became close over a period of years; the friend's increasing alcoholism led to her death, after which there was silence about the victim even amongst other close friends. There is also discussion of the importance of food in showing hospitality; for example, in Buriatia, it is milk, representing the key role of dairy products, in subsistence; milk is a sacred food, and it is this which is offered to

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the guest.

This is an unusual collection of articles, on an often neglected contemporary topic in a society undergoing change.

Antonia Young