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Comment on Josée Johnston and Shyon Baumann/1

Foodies Aesthetics and their Reconciliatory View of Food Politics

by Federica Davolio *and* Roberta Sassatelli

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As the sources and quality of food are increasingly invisible to consumers in modern globalizing industrial food systems [Lien and Nerlich 2004], a discourse on food quality is becoming paramount, and food lovers, or foodies, appear to deploy increasingly politicized frames which place them as the vanguard of renewed forms of consumer awareness. The social sciences on their part, have long shown that food, food choices and food practices are political: food unites – meals bring people together in social collectivities – and divides – food may express cultural conflicts and meals can also be quite alienating events. A functionalist view of food politics has probably tended to be more prevalent among sociologists and anthropologists. Certainly, as Johnston and Baumann’s interesting paper seems to demonstrate, something of the kind characterizes foodies discourse. Indeed, we read Johnston and Baumann’s discussion of the “implicit” and “explicit” politics of gourmet foodscape as showing that foodies discourse obliterate the negative potential of food as an element in social conflict through what we call a reconciliatory view of food politics.

Let us briefly recall the fascinating plot and data that Johnston and Baumann present the reader with. Food fads for foodies in the US recently took up political and ethical issues and combined them with more traditional gourmet topics such as restaurants’ charts, tastings or food travel accounts. Gourmet food magazines are analyzed to address this process, showing the rich rhetoric deployed to incorporate *certain* political themes into a prevalent aesthetic view of food. Besides this, the authors conducted several interviews with foodies, that further document the endorse-

ment of political themes. They also mention in passing another important sign of politicization, namely the role of environmentally aware chefs. Indeed, a new wave in branded cheffing [Ashley *et al.* 2004] is spreading: top chefs increasingly adopt a stance toward “sustainability” making a pledge for local, seasonal food with a clean record, actually gaining both economic and social rewards for such an outlook.¹ Many other phenomena could have been added to contextualize the politicization of current foodie discourse. On our part, we would like to include the increasingly importance of Slow Food, whose memberships is rapidly growing in the US,² and whose current problematization of food, food practices and food choices is also predicated on an intriguing mixture of political and aesthetic themes [see Sassatelli and Davolio 2008]. Slow Food in the US has commanded the same kind of criticisms it has attracted in Italy, its homeland: elitism, commodity fetishism, nostalgia and culinary luddism [Gaytan 2004; Pratt 2007; Leitch 2003; Meneley 2004; Wilk 2006]. These critiques have also been applied to contemporary foodism and its results at large [Cragg 1996; Guthman 2002; Guthman 2003], something which brings to the fore questions as to the kind of politicization brought forward by foodism today.

In our view, the combination of distinction and commitment which Johnston and Baumann find in foodie discourse as articulated by gourmet magazines and foodies’ accounts reverberates, from a characteristic position, a broader trend in the contemporary foodscape (production, consumption and, of course, representation): the development of various and diverse forms of “critical consumption” (from organics to Fair trade, from community supported agriculture to basket schemes and farmers’ market) whose current spread has also much to do with Alterglobal sentiments and movements [Sassatelli 2004; Sassatelli 2006]. Building on Belasco’s work [Belasco 1989] on countercultural cuisine, Johnston and Baumann maintain that the Sixties and Seventies countercultural elements have now been taken up and translated into an aesthetically compatible format by mainstream foodism, but they fail to locate the political shift of contemporary foodism in the contemporary wave of “political consumerism” [Micheletti 2003], or, more broadly and more aptly, in the current political investment of the (food) consumer. As a result, which is the positioning of foodist discourse in the broader field of food representation is left largely unexplored,

¹The most recent example we came across is the 2009 nomination of Dan Barber, a pioneer of the so called farm-to-table restaurant movement as the nation’s best chef by the James Beard Foundation – the Oscars of the food world.

²Slow Food US counts 16,000 members distributed on more than 200 local chapters – a relevant growth rate, considering that the American branch of the association was started in 2000 (www.slowfoodusa.org). The main testimonials of the association in the US are prominent and controversial figures such as Michael Pollan and Alice Waters, whose role in the American food movement is mentioned by Johnston and Baumann.

something which would indeed be very important if we are to consider the particular variety of politicization foodism is expression of.

Following from this, in our brief comment we point to the central arguments of Johnston and Baumann's paper, raising three main interrelated issues: *a*) the meaning and scope of politicization; *b*) the relation between implicit and explicit politics; *c*) the relation between politics and discourse. As repeatedly illustrated by the authors, within foodie discourse explicit political commitments are oriented toward realizing "progressive goals" regarding the environment, the local community and, to a lesser extent, animal welfare, leaving political dimensions such as labour rights and the North-South unbalance out of the picture. Anti-sweatshop campaigns and fair trade initiatives are instead crucial to critical consumption cultures, whose aesthetic orientations may appear as subordinated to product fairness.³ We know very well that food and its manners are key elements in the establishment of social and cultural boundaries, inclusion and exclusion, but the political problematization of food (its explicit politics in Johnston and Baumann's preferred terminology) may take different shapes, which we should be alert of, as they characterize both different periods and different phenomena.

For example, the continuous flow of gastronomic works which appeared across Europe from at least the nineteenth century responded to an articulated and quite often explicit political agenda, including the education of the public, the consolidation of a sense of national identity (and superiority) and even the marketing of one's own national heritage. By and large, this set of issues amounts to a *politico-aesthetic problematization* of food which deals with taste, its education and its pleasures. As shown elsewhere [Sassatelli and Davolio 2008], an international but locally grounded network of associations such as Slow Food may well represent the contemporary, post-nationalistic and post-elitarian, version of such politico-aesthetic problematization – one that has been increasingly influenced by a dialectical engagement with the social and environmental impact of globalization. We feel that, to an extent, foodie discourse is approaching a similar politico-aesthetic problematization of food and distancing itself from politico-ethical or politico-economic problematizations.⁴ These

³ A broad qualitative study of the Italian field of critical consumption shows that there are convergences between different actors and discourses especially on the growing importance of hedonistic rhetoric, but that, for example, critical consumers still regard themselves as quite different from Slow Food members precisely in terms of the specific pleasures that they identify [Leonini and Sassatelli 2008].

⁴ To analyse Slow Food rhetorics, besides the politico-aesthetic family, we also considered a *politico-ethical* family and a *politico-economic* family of problematizations [Sassatelli and Davolio 2008]. Also running quite back in history [Friedman 1999], the former comprises issues, ranging from concerns for the common good (environment, humanity and community) to justice which are today

different varieties of political problematization may be conflicting or synergic, and in their clashes or associations we may detect the consolidation of new definitions of food quality and the cultural standardization of principles of food appreciation [Sassatelli 2004]. This in turn, allows to consider that aesthetics, just like politics, come of different varieties, their precise articulation being something which, as we shall argue below, is crucial for an appreciation of current foodism. Indeed, allowing for the specificity of contemporary foodism both with respect to similar and dissimilar forms of food problematization, we consider that the paper would have gained in perspective and persuasiveness by providing a more contextual discussion along these lines.

Considering the specificity of foodies explicit politics would have helped, we reckon, to keep it linked to its implicit politics, or at least provide some hints as to how they are linked. An analytical distinction between implicit and explicit may be useful, but it would have needed further specification to avoid the impression that foodie discourse is either schizophrenic or blatantly ideological. Indeed, as conveyed in the Baumann and Johnston's paper, the relationship between explicit and implicit politics seems to imply a sort of "false consciousness" that acts through foodies' views, simply preventing them to address the link between class and food practices or taste. A "false consciousness" which, as it fits such notion, is functional to the reproduction of privilege: foodies – the authors say – patently express ecological, animal welfare and local development concerns when promoting seasonal or local food, but besides that a "hidden" politics can be detected that, through a (ultimately cosmetic) emphasis on classlessness, perpetuates social distances and privileges. An anti-snobish, omnivorous, democratic outlook looks like the last transfiguration of "symbolic domination" (to use Bourdieu) or "simulation" (to evoke Baudrillard). Despite these intimations, however, the paper leaves unvoiced what the relationship between these two politics is: are they hierarchically organized or cognitively sequenced? Are they equally open to discussion? Are they explicitly linked? Are they arranged in a coherent whole or do they remain rather disjointed, operating on two different levels? Still, by and large, the reader is allowed to infer that implicit politics is in the driving seat. This is probably the effect of what we all experiment as language inertia, but it is characteristically akin to a central tenet in food studies: snobbish or not, elitism is confirmed as the major charge against foodism and the major source of skepticism about the effective political potential of its recent attention to political issues. Still, the

articulated by, among others, Fair Trade initiatives [Goodman 2003; Sassatelli 2006]. The latter, in its turn, typically deals with prices, safety and transparency of information on one hand (i.e. civic consumerist initiatives such as those promoted by consumer protection organizations) and with food access and security on the other hand (i.e. variety of international initiative, including those pursued by FAO).

paper does not pursue a class-conscious approach to foodism, neither a classical one – i.e. deploying for example the notions of “ideology” and “hegemony” – nor a more post-structuralist one – i.e. taking seriously people’s agencies and their pleasures. We are left with a number of quite significant questions unanswered: how functional is foodies anti-snobbism to distinction as compared to other elitist modes? Why is it successful and persuasive in contemporary culture? How does it manage to counter criticism? And, of course, considering agency: what does it mean to be a foodie in an epoch of individual resistance to the erosion of personal pleasures? How is foodie aesthetics changed by its selective politicization, and viceversa? How are pleasure and duty articulated in foodie discourse? Drawing on the recent literature on alternative hedonism [see Soper *et al.* 2009], we presume that a more contextualized, longer term perspective could have helped to consider foodie politics, considering that a peculiar merging of priorities grounded in aesthetics is not necessarily functional to the reproduction of order.

Let’s explore a third, important issue, the role of food magazines as cultural objects. Magazines are certainly crucial among the many sources of foodies’ representation of products, places and techniques. Representation in turn may be considered as the discursive process by which cultural meaning is produced [Hall 1997; Du Gay *et al.* 1997], and the social persona of the foodie is called into being and defined. Foodism has been investigated by the authors mainly via texts, specifically gourmet food magazines. It is of course a strictly relevant framing, but not a neutral or a-problematic one. In fact, this kind of magazines – the high range of consumer periodicals – offer themselves as a viable intersection for a multiple readership with different interests and aims, from high-end, educated consumers to professionals in the catering business, to trendsetters [Davolio 2007]. It’s no surprise, thus, that buzzwords such as “food miles,” “sustainable,” or “organic” are portrayed as the last “must be” or that the aura of this new trend is empirically conveyed through the most classical features of these kind of magazines (restaurant and product reviews to begin). No surprise either that distinction elements explicitly or implicitly pervade the text. As the medium in which cultural representation is enacted can never be considered neutral, it would have been interesting to get a bit more information about the system in which these pieces of culture are created and evaluated. Or about the way in which the food press sets itself up as a field [Bourdieu 1994], with market constraints and consequent well-defined target profiles that extend to personal attitudes toward ethical claims [Johnson *et al.* 1999; McKay 2000]. A more institutional approach would have helped precisely to address the reconciliatory nature of foodie politics, considering, among other things, its possible internal differences. On these premises, we may wonder what kind of representation of foodie politics may we

find in middle-end magazines, whose target may be more interested than gourmets in affordable-fares-to-be-set-up-quickly and nonetheless define themselves as “food lovers.” What kind of mechanisms and categories would a discourse analysis show in this case? Should we expect imitative trickle-down of motives, or rather “original” configurations of pleasure-*cum*-consciousness – perhaps with price a relevant criterion of choice, and cooking education as a strategy to gain healthier food and not only as the connoisseur’s discretion display? Unless we assume that “people with serious interest in eating and learning about food” can only be recruited among the wealthy and well-educated gourmets, studying the politicization of foodie discourse in a less polarized medium may have indeed been a stronger heuristic move.

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Foodies Aesthetics and their Reconciliatory View of Food Politics

Abstract: What does it mean to engage with “food politics”? This article seeks to investigate the implicit and explicit dimensions of food politics by exploring the various ways political goals are both articulated and submerged. Our focus is on foodie discourse, which we argue combines classical gourmet concerns with the progressive impulses of the 1960s and 1970s countercuisine. Within this discourse, explicit political commitments focus on progressive goals regarding the environment and animal welfare, giving less attention to other political dimensions – like labour rights and food security. While explicit political commitments are important, we argue that the implicit political implications of foodie culture are also important to explore. At this implicit level, the politics of social inequality remain largely unarticulated, despite the role that food choices and preferences have historically played in generating status distinctions, and despite the growing disparity between rich and poor in the United States. To make our argument, we draw on an analysis of American food journalism as well as in-depth interviews with foodies.

Keywords: foodie, omnivore, food politics, inequality.

Federica Davolio is a PhD candidate in sociology at the Graduate School in Social, Economic and Political Sciences of the University of Milan. Her main research interests are in the field of consumption and food studies, mass media, new social movements. Her dissertation research investigates the cultural politics and the organization of the Slow Food movement.

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