

Review: Eating Together: Food, Friendship, and Inequality

By Alice P. Julier

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Julier, Alice P. *Eating Together: Food, Friendship, and Inequality*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013. ix, 237 pp.,. ISBN: 9780252037634. US\$85.00, cloth. Also available as a paperback and an electronic book.

In her first book, *Eating Together: Food, Friendship, and Inequality*, sociologist Alice P. Julier mixes food studies with social sciences into, if I may say so, an original recipe. The sociological grounds for food studies are linked with the consequences of the choices and decisions made by individuals, and go beyond the agreements about the menus for future meals: "Decisions about whom we eat with, in what manner, and what kinds of food are inextricably tied to social boundaries" (p. 2).

Drawing on the founding works of German sociologist and theoretician Georg Simmel (1858-1918) but concentrating on the USA, Professor Julier (from Chatham University) considers multiple dimensions and variables in her inquiry:

"How is the cultural geography of space in households – the size of a kitchen, the privacy of bedrooms and bathrooms – implicated in the structure of the event and the kinds of relationships that develop?" (p. 6).

Unsurprisingly, various types of food are compared and evaluated, neither in themselves nor for nutritious grounds, but according to how individuals value and use them on a daily basis or for special events: "Some of the most charged terrain rests between the industrially produced and 'homemade' foods, a set of distinctions that are, themselves, often problematic" (p. 8).

Issues studied here are related mainly to lifestyles, gender (who cooks and who cleans the kitchen?), ethnicity (will we cook a French, an Italian, Chinese or Indian meal?), and social class (see the reflections about the "snob dinner", p. 182). Obviously, individual backgrounds and race play a determining role, as demonstrated in specialized cookbooks targeting a specific audience or ethnic group, for example the classic *"Historical Cookbook of the American Negro"* produced in 1958 by the National Council of Negro Women (p. 40). Various types of meetings are compared, each one bringing its specific uses: family meals, dinner parties, brunches, and even potlucks in a local cooperative farm (p. 184). In our modern societies where all members are working according to sometimes incompatible schedules, eating "home-cooked" meals altogether remains a rare but nonetheless important part of family life and group identity. This is despite the omnipresence of mass-produced frozen dishes and easy-to-use microwave ovens which have individualized the consumption of food and minimized the role of family traditions transferred between generations (p. 20).

Among countless accurate observations, Alice Julier explains that food can take several circuits or networks, depending on your budget and where you live; matters of food distribution can have many direct impacts on what is being actually offered to the consumer, depending whether buyers go to standardized supermarkets or to the small, exotic and specialized outlets which rely on alternative chains:

“Ironically, local products, farm-produced items, and foods from geographically specific peasant cuisines are now more expensive than the convenience foods that are so ubiquitous in westernized countries” (p. 18).

Many theoretical dimensions are analyzed in *Eating Together: Food, Friendship, and Inequality* and that makes it excellent reading, even for undergraduates and non-scholars. This is the type of lively book that can make laypeople understand what sociology is all about.

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