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THE GEOGRAPHY OF FOOD

Abstract - This paper offers a brief overview of «the geography of food», a strand of research appeared in the last decade, merging into the so-called «critical food studies». It highlights how food is a topic which has been at the core of recent geographical debates in Italy and overseas. In the conclusion, the paper mentions Milan's 2015 Expo and the European Union's Horizon 2020 Programme in order to emphasise that food is a crucial topic in contemporary politics, which demands geographers' attention.

This essay aims at offering a brief overview of «the geography of food», a strand of research which has established itself in the last decade, merging into the so-called «critical food studies». These latter are an interdisciplinary field, between the humanities and the social sciences, which embraces a large variety of theoretical and methodological approaches, and which explores topics such as the production, transformation, communication, circulation, representation, consumption, disposal, and recycling of food. Critical food studies focus on the analysis of, for example, food chains, discourses and practices of food preparation and consumption, rituals and traditions, public health, organic food, fair-trade commerce, grassroots movements such as Slow Food, food's role in the media and in education, food and wine tourism, diets such as vegetarianism and veganism, food disorders, the relationship between food and identity. Anthropology has long been at the vanguard in making of food an object of critical analysis (notably Claude Lévi-Strauss's 1966 work; see Mintz and Du Buois, 2002). However, it is important to highlight here how geographers have long been exploring food and its multiple geographies, thus fundamentally contributing to the development of critical food studies.

In the last years, particularly in Anglo-American human geography, there has been an «explosion» of studies around food (Cook *et al.*, 2013, p. 343). According to Winter (2003, p. 505), geography's interest in food begins in the 1980s when some rural geographers adopted political economy as an approach useful to investigate what happens to produce once it has left the fields, and to see it as something more complex than a simple «raw commodity». Geographical research on food seems to increase, in particular, even if not exclusively, through the intertwinement of the so-called «consumption turn» – consolidating around the mid-1990s and bridging economic and cultural geography (Jackson, 2002) – with rural sociology. Food has in fact offered to geographers the opportunity to reflect on the practices and spaces of its production, circulation and consumption; food security; and the relationship between the body, identity, and mobility, for example (Crewe, 2001; Jackson and Thrift, 1995; Mansvelt, 2008).

Considering the burgeoning of publications on food, it would be impossible to offer here a comprehensive review of geographers' contribution to critical food studies. The works of Cook *et al.* (2006, 2008 and 2011) and Winter (2003, 2004 and 2005) offer more detailed accounts of geographical research on food. In this short paper, I discuss some of the key-themes that emerged in the international debate, starting with a brief overview of Italian scholars' contribution to the field.

In Italy, amongst geographers, it is important to recall Armando Montanari's (2002) work «Food and Environment: Geographies of Taste»; Grillotti Di Giacomo's recent book (2012) on the interrelation between nutrition, agriculture and the environment; Rondinone's (2005) analysis of the spread of Indian cuisine in Italy; Papotti and Brusa's study of rice districts (2007); and the research of the «Turin School», which has been working on Slow Food and the Piedmontese agro-gastronomic system (cf. Dansero and Puttilli, 2013; Dansero *et al.*, 2013; Giaccaria, Rota and Salone, 2013; Giorda, 2014; see also Barbera *et al.*, 2014 and Colombino and Giaccaria, 2013). Outside geography, it is important to mention the works of the historian Massimo Montanari (e.g. 2002) on the construction of culinary identities; of anthropologists Franco la Cecla (2002) and Alessandro Vienna and Massimo Cresta (2002); of philosophers such as Pedrag Matveievic (2010) and Nicola Perullo (e.g. 2008 and 2012); and of the agrarian economist Gianluca Brunori (e.g. Brunori *et al.*, 2012).

In the Anglo-American debate (which is at the heart of the present paper), one of the first books on food's geographies is David Bell and Gill Valentine's «Consuming Geographies: We are Where We eat» (1997), which analyses the sphere of consumption by focusing, amongst other things, on socio-cultural practices such as cooking, eating, shopping, and representing food. The volume deals with key-themes that the body of work published in the last two decades has subsequently developed: the relationship between culinary practices and identity (of individuals, groups, and places at different scales; see e.g. Caldwell, 2009; Parasecoli, 2008; Shortbridge, 2013); food and the body (e.g. Guthman, 2013); city and food (e.g. Atkins *et al.* 2007). Bell and Valentine's work tends, however, to neglect to explore the social inequalities and the environmental impact that underlie the production and circulation of food; namely, two issues explored by those geographers who have focused on «alternative food networks».

A very rich body of publications has been developed in the past decade on alternative food networks (Goodman *et al.*, 2011; Treager, 2003; Whatmore *et al.*, 2003); namely, those networks which present themselves as different from global food chains and which, according to Goodman and Goodman's definition (2009), include short food chains, fair trade, organic, local and traditional food and specialities, such as Slow Food presidia, for example. There are four main critiques emerging from the most recent literature on alternative food networks. First, Allen *et al.* (2013) notice that several studies have not paid attention to the social relations behind the production of «alternative food», thus taking for granted that these networks are intrinsically more equal than the long networks of production and circulation of industrial food. Second, Barbera *et al.* (2014) argue that the *a priori* assumption that short food chains are more environmentally and economically sustainable has still to be demonstrated, and suggest that this must be verified through transdisciplinary investigations. Third, it has been recently noted that alternative food networks (farmers markets and organic food, in particular) constitute a socio-economic phenomenon, especially investigated in Western Europe and in the USA, practiced by customers with a high spending capacity (see Cook *et al.*, 2011; Goodman, 2009). However, an emerging body of work has started to look at alternative food networks in Central-Eastern Europe and to analyse food self-provisioning practices and farmer markets in post-socialist countries (e.g. Jehlicka *et al.*, 2008; Spilková and Perlín,

2013). This literature has demonstrated how individuals with a variety of socio-economic backgrounds consume food circulated through these networks. Finally, scholars have started to ask how alternative these networks really are, if today, as Goodman and Goodman (2009) notice, supermarkets have entire sections for local specialties, «high quality» and organic food (think, for example, of the national and international expansion of the food mall Eataly, originally inspired by Slow Food's philosophy). Perhaps, as suggested by Sonnino and Marsden (2005) and Treager (2011), the theoretical division between conventional and alternative food networks is no longer useful to analyse contemporary geographies of food.

In general, research on alternative food networks has shown how the global food industry has a negative impact on the environment and is often based on the exploitation of farmers. However, there are two other theoretical frameworks that aptly bring to light how the production and consumption of food is imbued with social inequalities: the so-called «global commodity chain approach», deeply indebted to political economy, and the approach known as «follow the thing», which combines political economy with actor network theory (Latour, 2005) and cultural studies on consumption and production. Both approaches broadly understand food as an object and a commodity that «places us into networks» together with people and places that might also be located far away from our kitchens.

One of the ways in which it is possible to understand this relationship is to think about how our meals are composed of different ingredients, produced in different areas of the world, and by emphasising how they come to our tables thanks to the work of the people who work for producing and circulating these ingredients (Harvey, 1990; see also Cook and Crang, 1996). This perspective has been adopted by those geographers who, embracing a political economy approach aimed at unveiling the fetishism of commodities, have intended to bring into light the complicated geographies of production – often imbued with social inequalities – that lie behind the consumption of food. In so doing, geographers have underlined how consumers might be in part responsible for the exploitation of workers and the reproduction of capitalism (see for example Goodman and Watts, 1997; Hughes and Reimer, 2004; Kalra, 2004).

However, as it has often been noticed (e.g. Mansvelt 2014, pp. 279-280), political economy studies of food have tended to privilege the analysis of production and to neglect the consumption of food, and to see these spheres as two chronologically distinct moments in the «biography» of a commodity. Food consumption and its geographies are however much more complex than food's hierarchical trajectories brought to light by global agro-food chains studies.

A substantial strand of research that efficiently highlights the complicated geographies of food is constituted by the works adopting the so-called «follow the thing» approach, based on multi-site ethnography (Hannerz, 2004; Marcus, 1995), and developed in geography by Ian Cook (e.g. Cook *et al.*, 2013). There are several studies that can be connected to this methodological umbrella and that have «followed» a variety of food such as the papaya (Cook, 2004); French beans (Freidberg, 2004); fish (Bestor, 2005; Mansfield 2003a and 2003b); tomatoes (Barndt, 2002); broccoli (Fisher and Benson, 2006); tortilla (Lind and Barham, 2004); bananas (Shreck, 2002 and 2005); hot pepper sauce (Cook and Harrison, 2007); and chewing gum (Redclift, 2004).

Follow the thing is a research methodology that, combining key concepts from actor network theory with Appadurai (1986) and Kopytoff's (1986) idea that objects have a «social life» and, subsequently, a biography (namely, a history and geography; see Minca and Colombino, 2012, pp. 148-156), represents a «lateral» (Jackson, 2002, p. 9), rather than «vertical», perspective often implicated in political economy approaches to food and

its networks (Bridge and Smith, 2003, p. 259; Leslie, 2009, pp. 271-272). In other words, this approach critiques the idea that the consumption of food is simply a practice that comes after its production, and understands it as a series of creative, complicated, contradictory, embodied, emotional practices interrelated with the sphere of production, which can be analysed by following a variety of different directions and traces. Therefore, when exploring food and its geographies, researchers do not have to start where they assume that a specific food originates – also because, as the works that have adopted this approach have demonstrated, it is sometimes very difficult to identify the multiple origins of processed food, considering that they are composed of several ingredients which, in turn, may be processed in different locations (Cook *et al.*, 2007). According to this approach, it is possible to explore food's geographies by using a range of ethnographic techniques and starting from any point or node in the life of a food, and following the multiple tracks that it undertakes.

There are several advantages in adopting this framework (for a detailed discussion see Cook and Woodyer, 2012). First, this approach offers a methodological guide that shows well the complexity of food's geography, highlighting how it is not a networked geography of temporal steps in which food proceeds from one node to the other in the chain. Second, this approach opens up the possibility of investigating what else, besides the exploitation of workers – efficiently highlighted by political economy studies – is implicated in the production and consumption of food. Research that «follows» food, and commodities more generally, has suggested that workers' exploitation in fields and factories is not the only relationship that underlies the production, circulation and consumption of food. Tracking back and analysing fragments of food's biographies can also reveal how the processes that bring some products to our tables might hide moments of emancipation from poverty for some of the social actors involved in these processes (cf. Cook, 2011; RGS and IBG, 2012). In brief, «follow the thing» is a perspective that does not stop at exposing the social injustices that sustain capitalism; yet it leaves the door open to opportunities for emancipation and calls researchers and citizens to intervene and make a change (see Cook *et al.*, 2013). Finally, it is a methodology that hooks well into the new strand of geographical research that explores the relationship between food and the body.

There is in fact a growing interest for the material and emotional registers of food, and how these are interconnected with bodies through the act of eating or, more broadly, manipulating food (such as cultivating the fields, harvesting, transporting, selling and cooking food, for example). One of the ways in which these registers can be analysed is by focusing on the sensations produced by the contact between food and the body (Cook *et al.*, 2013, p. 344). It has been noted that there are in fact «hidden geographies» where «food links up with ideas, memories, sounds, visions, beliefs, past experiences, moods [and] worries, all of which combine to become material – to become bodily, physical sensations» (Cook *et al.*, 2011, p. 113). It must be recalled that «follow the thing» is an approach that theorizes food's trajectories in a very broad sense; that is, it encourages researchers to «follow» food along tracks that can be at the same time individual and collective, material and real, immaterial and emotional, sensorial and cognitive. It is therefore a perspective useful to explore the «visceral» registers of food (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy, 2010); namely, what food does to the bodies and psyches' of the people eating it, or to the bodies of the individuals who touch it during food's production and transportation (think, for example, of how some of the phases of processing a product might harm the bodies of the people who touch it through, for example, the use of pesticides or dangerous tools as those employed in the slaughtering of animals; cf. Cook, 2004). The relationship between food and the body is a strand of

research that has been intensifying in geography since a decade (see Crewe, 2001 and Probyn, 1999). One of the most important works in this field is Guthman's (2009, 2011 and 2013) recent research on the impact of environmental factors on obesity. It is a study particularly important as it offers a novel geographical perspective on some assumptions of what is considered to be one of the «diseases» of our times. Guthman's work questions the existence of an obesity epidemic in the United States, and highlights how it is probably not sufficient to eat «good food» to solve such an assumed epidemic, and thus challenges the arguments of famous gurus of «healthy nutrition» such as Michael Pollan (2009).

To conclude, it is worthwhile underlining that food represents a field which intertwines with several dimensions of our everyday life, including politics, as emphasised by those geographers that have been preoccupied with territorial development (e.g. Giaccaria *et al.*, 2013); by the above mentioned works of Guthman (who highlights how the relationship between food and built environment affects citizens' health); and as the title of Milan's 2015 Expo – «Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life» – indicates. The 2015 Expo encompasses large themes that geographers have been tackling for a long time: food security and waste, sustainable development, food cultures, agro-food chains, for example. Furthermore, it is important to highlight that food is a crucial topic in current European Union financial schemes for research, in particular within the 2020 Horizon Programme, which offers funding to projects that focus, for example, on food safety, health and nutrition, food frauds, and innovation in agro-food systems. Finally, on the one hand, as recently Caldwell (2013) has argued on «Gastronomica» (the North-American journal of critical food studies), we do not know how to theorise precisely what food exactly is. On the other hand, we are sure that it represents a field that allows us to tackle a series of themes which are at the core of contemporary (social) sciences and politics; a field of research that geographers are methodologically and theoretically well equipped to explore.

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