

IN YOUR FACE:

**Why Food Is Politics
and Why We Are Finally Starting to Admit It**

Michael M. Bell

There you are, at the end of your day, sitting down to tuck into your vittles. At the end of your day, when you try to slough off the mud and the grime that accumulated on the undercarriage of your mind after slogging through the dirty streets of daily life. At the end of your day, when you seek release and freedom, a measure of pleasure, some bit of delight to salve and soothe the little woes that nettle the spirit. You want taste. You want conviviality. You want a comforting feeling of gentle excess, swelling the belly just enough to warm you into restful sloth and ease. You don't want politics.

But if there is food before you, there are politics too. Seventeen minutes before I sat down to start to write this chapter – at 12:57pm, Central Standard Time, Friday, May 29th, 2015 – the *New York Times* posted on its website a Reuters story that, according to the United Nations World Food Programme, upwards of 200,000 people are facing starvation in northern Cameroon after Boko Haram stormed across the border from Nigeria, forcing villagers to flee their villages and abandon their fields.¹ Earlier in the day, a *New York Times* story appeared about how Israel is overcoming water-shortages through desalinization, waste-water recycling, and higher water prices for farmers and city-dwellers. 'There was a lot of hydro-politics,' the article quotes a faculty member at the Hebrew University as saying – and still are, as anyone familiar with Israeli and Palestinian politics will know.² A third story for the day relates the struggles of Ariana Miyamoto, recently crowned Miss Universe Japan 2015. Ariana is a 'hafu' person,

Japanese for someone born of mixed racial parentage – in her case an African-American sailor in the US Navy and a local Japanese woman. When she sits down to eat at a restaurant in Japan, where she was raised, Ariana apparently is commonly presented with an English menu and praised for her expert chopstick use. But when she spent two years with her father’s family in rural Arkansas during high school, “she found herself growing homesick and pining for Japanese food.”³ And two days before, the *New York Times* ran a story about a new report from the UN Food and Agriculture Organization which finds that both the percentage and absolute number of the world’s hungry has declined over the last twenty-five years, from 23.3 percent to 12.9 percent, and from 991 million to 780 million. While noting much unevenness in improvement around the world, the report praises the new international political cooperation in hunger reduction since the establishment of the Millennium Development Goals in 2000.⁴

That’s only three days’ news. I could go on and maybe expand my searches to the *The Guardian* in Britain, *Le Monde* in France, *The New Zealand Herald* in New Zealand, or perhaps *The Sowetan* in South Africa. But I don’t have to. Each day’s papers, blogs, Facebook postings, and Tweets bring a steady harvest of like kind, as the days since I did that search of the *New York Times* and wrote these lines I’m sure have shown.

We eat politics, literally. May I coin a slogan? Food: it’s always in your face.



Food scholars are increasingly coming to accept this spiciness of the political. Food isn’t so bland anymore. It’s a hot topic, in so many ways, as the contributions to

this volume abundantly show. Food fills us with contentedness, but also contentiousness. The more we look and listen, the more it seems that food isn't something we're going to solve anytime soon, whether we're trying to figure out what all of us can tolerate to eat together around a middle class family dinner table or trying to figure out how we're going to manage to have anything for dinner at all around a cook fire outside the family hut. The more scholars fill up on the subject of food, the more we realize that there is a lot to digest – as well as a lot of perpetual indigestion of enduring conflicts, both human and non-human.

Herein lies one of the three main reasons I'll suggest for why we are starting to acknowledge the political taste of all food, and the most generous to the practice of scholarship: We're studying food way more now, and we have been empirically committed enough to recognize that it is profusely political, whether we like it or not. Good.

My second reason is less generous, and starts by asking why we weren't studying food with such seriousness earlier. How could we have missed such a fundamental aspect of human society and existence and our relationship with the rest of the world? To my mind, it surely can't be accidental that the rise of food studies across the academe tracks so closely with the wide acceptance of the principles of feminism, albeit often by other names. We'd long been studying the production side of the equation, the culturally more manly act of yanking yields from the ground and selling them in the marketplace. We still study production, of course, as we should, and as this volume continues to do. But why do I teach in a college of agriculture, not a college of food – or, even better, a college of food and agriculture? Because when such colleges were being founded,

prestige lay with men's concerns. Studies of food, such as they were, became either opportunities for burly industrialization through technological manipulation of nutrients or were relegated to women's scholarship in the distinctly lower prestige colleges of 'home economics,' as they were then known before a wave of embarrassed renaming and reconfiguring in the 1970s and 1980s. What a loss. The phrase 'home economics' is a lovely one, and is far more resonant of the broadness of vision and care that the term "biological economics" I think wants to connote. For a home should be understood as human and non-human and immediately ecological, given that the root of ecology, *ecos*, means exactly that: home. Let's bring home economics 'back in.'

But even if we don't, the embrace of food scholarship within the context of feminist ideas brought with it a crucial feminist point, even if not always recognized as such: the inescapably political character of human life and its institutions. To be alert to food within the context of the cultural changes wrought by feminism is to be alert to the political.

Bringing food 'back in' went hand in hand with a broader shift away from a sense that scholarship is, or should be, politically neutral. (Feminism wasn't the only factor in that shift, although it was certainly a mighty one.) This leads me to my third reason for the widening acknowledgement of the political fiber of all food: the widening acknowledgement of the political fiber of all human relationships that has come with the critique of positivism, a critique so widespread that there can now be only a few neo-classical economists and evolutionary psychologists who have not heard the roar of its downpour from deep in their academic caves. For positivism, most fundamentally, was non-politicalism – which was itself a powerful politics, powerful in large measure

because its politics were not openly acknowledged. They were not openly acknowledged because that lack of acknowledgement was precisely the mind-move of positivism: No politics here. Its brothers - modernism and structuralism - were part of the same movement of mind into the remotest caverns of human denial.

An emergence into the sunlight of the political – for all that is good and wicked, gratifying and frustrating, about politics – is central to the energies of this volume. To be a post-positivist, a post-modernist, a post-structuralist, a ‘post-structural...political economist,’ or a post-humanist means, if nothing else, that one understands that we live in an immanent world of conflicts and desires, as well as a world of the equally political phenomena of cooperation and bonhomie – plus bon-non-homie! We are all local to ourselves and our contexts, and thus have ambitions and values and needs and logics that differ. As we should. If nothing else, it makes for a much more varied and interesting menu of life.

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That’s all welcome. But I have something to complain about in this volume too: the continued appeal of metaphors and habits of thought that make it hard to admit the disconnections and conflicts that are as central to the political as any sweet connections and happy resolutions. (You knew I would. I’ve done it before.⁵) Why do we continue to love the word *systems* and the various unlovely phrases built upon it, like *food systems*, *agricultural systems*, *agroecosystems*, and *agri-food systems*? And why do we rush to similar images of blissful respect and kind mutualism such as, I fear, assemblages and post-humanism?

Don't get me wrong. I'm all in favor of respect and mutualism, and also for building connections and finding resolutions. But that's not all life is about. Let's not lose the fullness of a political imagination about food and agriculture just as we are starting to finally get one.

Warning: I'm going to be a bit of a mosquito for a while, supping from our bloodlines of debate, to try to keep our political itch going.

Here's my first bite. Words and images like *system*, *assemblage*, and *post-humanism* are great for emphasizing cooperation and connection in a relational world that de-centers the self and the human. But they seem to take for granted the very matters they ask us to appreciate. In a relationship? Nice. Congratulations. But it takes work, constant work, if it is going to last. If you treat a relationship as something that is just there, pretty soon it won't be. The fact of a connection indicates a difference, not an easy unity of sameness. Otherwise there would be nothing to connect and relate. Connections don't just happen. And we can't just assert a system, an assemblage, or a post-human rejection of the arrogance of a Noah's ark view of ecology. You have to do it.

Here's my second bite. Not only do such imaginaries take connections for granted, they take them as unproblematic. The relational becomes a lovefest, a happy unity of holism, diversity, and difference, where every one and every thing is respected for what they bring to the great assemblage of actants. 'You see,' we say with a friendly smile, 'everything's connected, everything's important, and everyone and every perspective and every discipline is wanted and valued because we're all in this together. So let's have a hug.' But don't go giving out hugs before others are ready for it. If there's some difference, there's some conflict, at least potentially. And that's not

necessarily a bad thing. Difference and conflict can be immensely creative. That creativity is another reason why relationality takes work, because the relationship is always changing – a point I'll get back to in a minute.

But first, I'll take a couple more bites. Here's my third: We actually don't want a world that is all connected up. Not only does connection imply disconnection. Many aspects of our world we definitely want to keep separate. We want disconnection as much as we want connection. Because we're not all one. We don't want fertilizer to get into the groundwater. We don't want pesticide residues in our food. We don't want smallpox. We don't want the NSA snooping in our email. We don't want mosquitos biting us. And mosquitos don't want frogs and barn swallows eating them – or us slapping them before they manage the momentary connection of skin to proboscis. Sometimes these disconnections are not easy to manage. Disconnections often take a lot of work to maintain, just as connections do. And disconnections can do good, just as connections can do bad. Deciding which are good and which are bad is, of course, a matter of the deepest politics of perspective and interest. I fully intend to slap the next mosquito that lands on my arm before what I take to be an unhappy unity can transpire, much as the mosquito might see it differently. I also regard Monsanto as altogether too well assembled into a connected-up system – one that is not the least bit post-human – that I would very much like to see disaggregated back into its bits.

My fourth bite is that I would ask us to be very wary of the tendency of metaphors of unity to universalize. Got a problem with your corn? Have I got a cropping system for you, says the scientist and the Monsanto chemical salesperson. Got a problem getting a CSA going that reaches more than the usual the white, middle class crowd? Set up a

post-human assemblage like they did in my town and it will all work out. Universal unity quickly becomes a sales pitch, a science pitch, a moral pitch. But one situation's problems are always a little bit different from another's because, well, it is a different situation. And that situation's solutions are always a bit different too.

My fifth and last bite – for now anyway, if I can continue to dodge the swat of the academic hand – is that these happy metaphors provide little insight into why life is constantly changing. The circuit board image of hard systems theory is nice when I urge my fingers to the keys and hope to see the intended letters appear on the screen. A static view of life assembled is also nice when I try to persuade you of something that I claim will make your life (and mine) better. And it is nice when I am professing my unending ecocentric love for all of post-human creation, stating my commitment to all others in the presence of all others, a wedding of de-centeredness. But life never works out so easily. Computers break, and so do relationships. They do so because, try as unities might to assert a common commitment, there is always a multiplicity of logics, a pluralism of purposes, a many-ness of situations involved in any connection or disconnection. Out of this unending variety comes unending variation, ever working out and re-working out the balances and imbalances of each new day.



That's not what you meant when you mouthed that hissing word *systems*, or those awkward words and phrases *assemblages*, *post-humanism*, and *biological economy*? Probably not. But read over my little caricature of the unwelcome mosquito and tell me you really don't see any of yourself there. Come on.... I know I do – and not just as the

mosquito! After all, I currently direct an academic unit called the Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. I didn't name it, but nonetheless I do sometimes use the phrases *food systems* and *agricultural systems* and *agri-food systems*, especially when talking to natural scientists, college deans, and newspaper reporters about why the social sciences and humanities and post-humanities have something to offer to discussions about food and agriculture, and why the situation is more involved than some kind of techno-capitalist-fix is going to handle. I don't say *assemblage* and *post-human* much, although I'm fine with it when I see others grappling for something to correct our reductionism and separatism and species arrogance. There is useful work, political work, relational work that we attempt with these words.

But I think we can do better, at least when chatting among ourselves as social and post-human scholars, awaiting the development of a conceptual language that might both be more accurate and yet still resonant with natural scientists and deans and reporters. I have a few suggestions of where to begin.

First, rather than relying on metaphors of connection, which then make it hard for us to talk about disconnection, difference, and conflict, I would urge us to focus more on two other *con-* words: *consequence* and *context*. The point I think we are really trying to get at when we fume over our reductionism, separatism, and arrogance is not so much the presence of connection as it is recognizing that life has consequences. Everything we do, if we've done anything at all, has consequences. We should not confuse the importance of recognizing consequence with proclaiming metaphors of connection. Have we thought those consequences all out? Probably not. Indeed, certainly not. There is too much in motion, and simply too much, for that. Plus connections that you thought were there

often weren't, just as disconnections you thought were there weren't. Help doesn't come and listeria gets into the food. So a large measure of humility and openness to the unexpected is always in order, and thus always in disorder.

We open ourselves to a deeper appreciation of consequence when we start to think not in terms of the dream of universal fellow-feeling among non-hierarchical equals but in terms of context, with all its difference, dynamism, and disconnection – as well as connection. There is much about one context that extends to another, like a stream flowing down a mountain side. But there is always more than one stream washing through any one situation. They typically flow both ways at once. And they splash and play amid the rocks of their locality in ways that constantly re-erode the channels of flow and re-shape the standing waves of conflict.⁶

I like to think about it as a matter of grasping the *multilogics* of context and consequence.⁷ We don't need to think in terms of a single, universal logic to understand the world. And we don't, much as we have often tried to persuade ourselves that we should. You think differently than I, and my cat thinks differently than both of us. That's not because one of us is wrong, necessarily. It's because we are trying to understand contexts that are at least slightly different. I might be wrong, though. There might be something about your context that you can point out is actually flowing into mine, and that I hadn't noticed among all the various cross-currents. And vice versa. So we have a lot to learn from each other, a lot to connect about – precisely because we are not fully connected.

Plus I don't even think with one logic myself. For my context isn't a oneness either. My context is really just an analytic artifice that I come up with to limit my focus

enough so I can notice something going on in the crashing and splashing all around that sometimes seems about to drown me. I use one manner of thinking for one such artifice, and another for another. And I get really confused when I find that the streams of flow they help me visualize actually converge, forcing me to confront their incompatibilities – only to see them later diverge, just when I thought I had a handle on them. And, I suspect, the same for you. You have multiple logics too, which complicates our efforts to communicate, bringing together yet more factors of potential conflict. But it also heightens the potential delight and surprise of our communion, however passing or lasting that communion may turn out to be.

Multilogics is an unlovely word too – as bad as assemblages and post-human and biological economy, and does not have the familiar ring of the word systems, which is seemingly everywhere now. So I don't think it will work well for my dean in justifying my work or that of the Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems. The Center for Integrated Agri-food Multilogics? I don't think so.

So at our center we keep the word systems in our name, at least for now. But we also try to talk in the next breathe about context and consequence, which are also familiar words, giving us a great way to take the conversation deeper. And we also talk a lot about dialogue and engagement, which do much the same narrative work as multilogics, without bogging things down in long technical explanations.⁸ I think we might want to use the word *enact* more, though. That one is also familiar sounding and nicely conjures the activeness of the relational that I have been stressing. Good word. Thanks, Mike Carolan. You too, Phillip Lowe.

In the meantime, we should keep experimenting with language that both specifies what we want it to and readily communicates it to others. For we are not what we once thought we could be: singular, universal, transcendent, and value-free. And it is increasingly acceptable to be what we are: plural, local, immanent, and value-engaged. The inescapable politics of the edible is forcing us to recognize the diversity of tongues, what they taste, what they say, and what they sometimes spit and shout. Capitalists and rationalists alike beware, for there is no way around it: Not everyone likes the same food.

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Endnotes

¹ Reuters (2015).

² Kershner (2015).

³ Fackler (2015).

⁴ Gladstone (2015).

⁵ Bell (2009), Bell (2011), Bland and Bell (2007 and 2009).

⁶ For more on the stream metaphor, see Orne and Bell (2015).

⁷ Bell (2011) and Orne and Bell (2015).

⁸ See Bell (2011) for more on the relationship of dialogue or dialogics to multilogics.