Appetite 119 (2017) 41–47

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Appetite

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/appet

Bringing the immigrant back into the sociology of taste

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 12 August 2016
Accepted 10 October 2016
Available online 15 October 2016

Keywords:
Immigration
Ethnicity
Cultural sociology
Taste

ABSTRACT

The sociology of food consumption has emerged as a robust field with rich empirical material and engaged theorization about taste, omnivorousness, distinction, and practice theory. Nevertheless, there are continuing empirical and conceptual lacunae. Although transnational and rural-to-urban migrants play a crucial role in food businesses in many global cities, they are mostly unaccounted for in the sociology of taste. Taking the American case, in particular based on data from New York City, this article provides reasons for that gap and shows what might be gained if migrants were accounted for in the urban sociology of taste.

1. Introduction

United States Census data on occupations and birthplace, which we have since 1850 (Ruggles Alexander, Genadek, Goeken, Schroeder et al., 2004), show that the foreign-born have dominated food-related occupations such as baker, butcher, brewer, saloon keeper, and restaurateur. Although the source of migration changed from Northern Europe in the middle of the nineteenth century, to the Mediterranean at the end of the nineteenth century, then to Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean in the second half of the twentieth century, migrants continued to dominate food-making occupations. On the eve of the Civil War, for instance, seventy percent of bakers in NYC were immigrants, often German and Irish. In spite of some variation through the decennial Census, those patterns remain remarkably consistent. In contrast, lawyers and school teachers, among all the occupations, had the least number of foreign-born – only five to ten percent. By 2010, seventy-five percent of chefs and head cooks in NYC were foreign born, while thirty-five percent were so nationally. Nearly one-half of all small business owners in New York City today are immigrants, including 69 percent of restaurant owners, and 84 percent of small grocery store owners (Foner, 2013, p. 21, Kallick in Foner, 2013, p. 80). Given this kind of data it would be perverse to be interested in immigrant lives and uninterested in food. Yet that has been the norm.

2. The historiography of labor and immigration

Although the journalistic material is replete with stories of immigrant restaurateurs there is surprisingly little scholarly work of greater duration that theoretically engages with taste in the metropolis from the point of view of the foreign-born. Among scholars, historians have been better at recording the doings of immigrant shopkeepers and grocers, because, often literate, they keep records. In particular, labor and immigration historians are particularly good at picking up the scent of food in poor peoples' records (Levenstein, 1988, 1993; Gabaccia, 1998; Diner, 2003; Pilcher, 2012, 2016). Of course the task is easier said than done, especially in history writing, both due to attitudes and sources, or lack of it. Sometimes, the archives do not collaborate with the good intentions of scholars working on the non-literate poor.

In sociology there is a robust literature on ethnic entrepreneurship with a number of strong claims: low capital requirements make it relatively easier for foreign-born entrepreneurs to enter into the highly competitive business of feeding others that most native-born do not find desirable. Niche cultural knowledge gives them a competitive edge over better-capitalized mainstream entrepreneurs. Kin or fictive kin networks of loyalty allow the lending of money on a rotating basis without collateral. Self-exploitation—long hours of work and unpaid labor of kin and fictive kin—permits these enterprises to compete with better-capitalized businesses. Large corporations often cannot respond quickly to fickle changes in fashion, while small enterprises can adapt with speed. Finally, both migration and entrepreneurship exhibit serial patterns. People who know each other typically migrate from the same regions and work in and own similar enterprises, which are

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2016.10.013
0195-6663/

built with money and expertise borrowed from co-ethnics. They effectively develop an informal, intra-ethnic, consulting and banking system. Co-ethnicity is also a powerful labor recruitment and management system that allows quiescence and exploitation (see Waldinger, 1986, 1990, 1992; Bailey, 1985; Bailey & Waldinger, 1991; Foner, Rumbaut, & Gold, 2000; Granovetter 1985, 1995; Portes 1995; Landa, 1981; Light, 1972; Light & Bonacich, 1988; Rogers & Vertovec, 1995; Sassen, 1995; Westwood & Bhachu, 1988; Zhou, 2004).

This, of course, is a broad prototype of a structural explanation that needs to be fleshed out with the activity of real, everyday people. The structural model cannot explain, for instance, why and how the first Bangladeshi or Pakistani entered the Indian restaurant business in New York City. That demands biographies and micro-histories. In *Bengali Harlem* (2013) Vivek Bald reveals those potentialities in his finely drawn portraiture of about two dozen itinerant Bengali peddlers of chikan (a textile) circulating from Hoogly through London, Durban, New York, to New Orleans in fin de siècle nineteenth century, sliding into the interstices of the British Empire and the American emporium.[1] As these men left some of their compatriots behind to keep the tethering posts of their networks in place in distant cities, they in turn, out of pure necessity and unrestrained desire, built some of the earliest South Asian boarding houses, coffee shops, eateries, and restaurants in their places of inhabitance, occupying the "thin edge between Indophilia and xenophobia" (Bald, 2013, p. 46). I want to make a case here for immigrant insertion in metropolitan discussions of tastes at the intersection of micro-history and structural sociology.

Much of the ethnicity and entrepreneurship literature attends to economics and politics, but only as if immigrants are creatures of politicaleconomy who never think about taste, beauty, and how such things might intersect with their practical-moral universe. A recent illustration is Roger Waldinger's *The Cross-Border Connection: Immigrants, Emigrants and Their Homelands* (2015) which is an attempt to update Oscar Handlin's view of the suffering, oppressed, immigrant in *The Uprooted* (1951). Handlin was part of the generation of scholars who re-focused the locus of American history from the frontier to the immigrant experience. Handlin famously wrote in the opening lines of his book, "Once I thought to write a history of the immigrants in America. Then I discovered that the immigrants *were* American history" (1951: 3). Waldinger's thesis isn't equal to Handlin's in terms of drama but he makes an important point: instead of suffering and loss, Waldinger turns to migrant agency. As a result, his focus is on migrant access to resources in the USA (high-wage labor market) and back home (property, kith and kin), the persistence of *trans* national connections (instead of uprooting), and the extension of societies and cultures of the global south into territories of the north. Nevertheless, while Handlin devoted a whole chapter to "The Daily Bread" and such mundane materialities of immigrant life, Waldinger's migrants do not eat, drink, sleep, dance or sing. The index does not list food, shelter, or culture.[2] Waldinger's immigrants do remit money home, they do talk on the phone, and face the big challenges of law and policy. He makes many interesting points about remittances, telephony, laws, and transnationalism (with pointed arguments against nationalists and globalists), but his migrants are purely political-economic ideas without bodies and hence innocent of the challenges of nursing them with materials and memories that matter affectively. Waldinger's migrant is a peculiar inversion of the soulful, suffering, uprooted, subject of Handlin. Migrants, of course, do not just labor, suffer, or create problems for the rest of us, which is often the only way of accounting for them in the socio-cultural sciences. They are also filled with joy and pleasure, and much of that is expressed through good food and music.

The propensity to ignore immigrant bodies in the broader disciplinary discussion of taste may be a product of the tendency to see discussions of taste as marginal to the real lives of marginal peoples. In this conception, poor, hard-working people can teach us about poverty and suffering, hierarchy and symbolic violence, but never about taste. That might be one of the unfortunate consequences of the over whelming dominance of Pierre Bourdieu's framework of analysis in sociology, as we will see below.

A number of additional technical and conceptual reasons can be attributed to the blindness about the ethnic provider of good food. Low prestige of care-work, unheroic labor of micro entrepreneurship, the inability to articulate in language the taste of the tongue, limited language skills of scholars working with the metropolitan material (especially in the languages of recent migrants), the overworked migrant without the time to write, and the illiteracy of many immigrants, have compounded our access to that perspective. One example that brings together a number of these reasons should suffice here: although the Chinese have dominated the feeding and cleaning occupations in the United States from the middle of the nineteenth century, we do not get a book length treatment of their perspective in establishing and running the quintessential American ethnic restaurant until the twenty-first century (J. 8. Lee, 2009; Cho, 2010). That is an extraordinary deferral. The reason is both the theoretical problem with cooked food in the modern Western imagination, especially within academic scholarship, and the subordination of the cooking subject. Little else can explain such a notable and durable silence.

3. The sociology of taste

In American Sociology — one of the disciplines where urban immigrant communities have figured prominently – taste has been studied most extensively over the last decade in the subfield of "cultures of consumption," which builds on Bourdieu's *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 1984).[3] The latest iteration of such disciplinary attention in North America is Josée Johnston and Shyon Baumann's *Foodies: Democracy and Distinction in the Gourmet Foodscape* (Johnston and Baumann, 2010). Johnston and Baumann argue that in spite of broadening palates, the gastronomic discussion in representative newspapers and food magazines is burdened with the quest for class distinctions. This, they contend, is happening despite the decline of old-fashioned snobbery.[4] Their book confirms Tony Bennett et al.'s (2009) detailed empirical work on the United Kingdom in arguing that taste hierarchies exist, culture irrevocably marks class, and omnivorousness is a rarefied (but not rare) phenomenon where the rich and the better educated devour even

[1] According to Claude Markovits (2008) these peddlers may have added up to a quarter million merchants and financiers operating outside the subcontinent, mostly in the Indian Ocean world, between 1830 and 1930. Caroline Adams (1987) provides us with an analogous handful of Bengali pioneers in UK.

[2] Combining macro and micro-level analysis Nancy Foner's edited volume (2013) allows richer attention to material and affective worlds of music, worship and food in sections such as "Eating, Drinking and Acculturation" (pp. 108–112) and "Korean Enclaves in New York City" (pp. 155–159), etc.

[3] Other recent directions of research have focused on practice theory (Warde, 2016), organization theory (Rao, Monin, & Durand, 2003, 2005), small-group interaction, workplace dynamics and aesthetics of work (Fine, 1996), field theory (Ferguson, 1998, 2004) and nutrition-related science-and-technological studies (Schleifer 2012; 2013).

[4] They base their theoretical contention of omnivorousness on van Eijck (2001); Peterson (1997); Peterson and Kern (1996); Peterson and Simkus (1992); Zavisca (2005); DiMaggiao and Mukhtar (2004); Fisher and Preece (2003); Lopez Sintas and Garcia Álvarez (2004); and Vander Stichele and Laermans (2006).