

Michaela DeSoucey: Contested Tastes: Foie Gras and the Politics of Food. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016. 296 pp. \$29.95, cloth.

What is foie gras? Is it an everyday food item made available to mass consumers via standard processes of production and distribution, a centerpiece foodstuff emblematic of the greatness of a centuries-old French tradition of gastronomy, or an indelible part of France's contribution to world culture? Is it an artisanal product made by small producers interested in the maintenance and survival of their craft or a key ingredient of the luxury dishes available to elite consumers in global cities at the top of the global food scene ladder? Or is it an inherently immoral product generated via inhumane production techniques (e.g., *gavage*, or the force-feeding of ducks and geese via a metal tube inserted into the esophagus to enlarge the liver) that inflict deep pain, suffering, or even torture upon defenseless animals?

The many radically competing definitions have implications for who gets (or who has the cultural authority) to decide how foie gras is to be classified and evaluated. The list of contenders is long: gourmet food journalists; corporate executive chefs in Paris, New York, San Francisco, and Chicago; animal rights activists; food tourists interested in discovering the wonders of the French countryside; members of the French National Assembly; captains of the French food industry; EU bureaucrats in Brussels in charge of special product designations; life scientists with expertise in waterfowl biology; small-scale French farmers who just want to make a living; and even state and city-level politicians in the United States.

The easy answer, and one that *Contested Tastes* strongly hints at but quickly goes beyond, is that foie gras is all of these things, and all of these actors are involved, to varying degrees, in this contested definitional terrain. Yes, foie gras is a polyvocal object capable of meaning multiple things to different parties—and thus capable of having diametric moral and emotional valences, from a source of pride and pleasure to a source of shame, anger, and disgust. But there is more.

To grasp what DeSoucey accomplishes in this book, it helps to understand recent changes in organizational theory. Three major “turns” have revitalized organization theory in the last decade or so. First, the social movements turn sought to boost the dominant institutionalist paradigm by pointing out that the definitional strengths of social movement theory—namely, a robust conceptualization of agency, conflict, contestation, and politics in generating social change—could help shore up traditional weaknesses of institutional analysis. Second, the categories turn has prompted a renewed concern with processes of conformity, differentiation, and collective enforcement with respect to established codes required for identifying products, producers, and audiences. Third, the cultural turn has sought to move away from outdated conceptions of the culture concept by importing insights from recent strands of cultural analysis in sociology. This work shifts the focus toward cultural processes, allowing analysts to account for the agentic use of cultural resources, discourses, and codes for purposes of sensemaking, adaptation, and innovation.

DeSoucey leverages the fascinating case of foie gras as a strategic research site to help us gain insights germane to all three recent turns in organization theory, while providing a way to see

how they can work together. In this respect, DeSoucey provides a model useful for organization scholars interested in the interplay of social movements and politics in organizational fields, the emergence and entrenchment of novel product categories in markets, and cultural processes of moralization and symbolic boundary-drawing at multiple analytic levels.

The key insight of DeSoucey's work is that product and producer categories do not require a complete state of settlement or fieldwide consensus to be endowed with cultural and moral force; categorical contestation is the norm rather than the exception. This allows her to link insights from the social movement turn in organization theory with the observation from the categories turn that we will see most of the action in the domain of classification and differentiation.

DeSoucey joins these findings to the contribution from the cultural turn that it is via cultural processes, through which actors draw on a more-or-less organized toolkit of discourses and vocabularies to justify and frame their actions, that we will uncover the mechanisms linking contestation and categorical differentiation to the ultimate outcomes obtained on the ground.

DeSoucey's methodological bet is that she can recover the structure of the field of political and moral classification revolving around foie gras through ethnographic work by following all of the players involved in the definitional and evaluative contest. In this way, *Contested Tastes* masterfully reveals the distribution of perceptions of the focal object and thus the contours of a coherent arena of contestation, fueled by the pursuit of political, moral, financial, and even national interests.

The key conceptual hinge uniting all of these actors and projects is the notion of gastropolitics: the concerted symbolic contest, across a wide variety of individual and corporate players, over the meanings and implications (moral, cultural, and material) of food production, distribution, preparation, and consumption. A particular brand of gastropolitics, which DeSoucey refers to as gastronationalism, emerges when gastropolitics becomes imbricated with issues of national identity, national pride, and even the definition of the essence of nationhood as an “imagined community” in Benedict Anderson’s (1983) sense, but even more importantly issues of the essence of national uniqueness on a global stage.

In this last respect, one of the key empirical contributions of *Contested Tastes* consists of laying out precisely how foie gras became central to French national identity, a dynamic that was aided by the emergence of definitions of the cultural object outside of France as a symbol of cruelty and moral opprobrium. All the while the quiet but inexorable industrialization of foie gras production in the French market, aided by the French state, was taking the product from a specialty craft object to a mass-produced and ubiquitous presence in the lives of French consumers. Ironically, the mass production of foie gras, rather than resulting in a devaluation or trivialization of the object, as we would expect from a standard consumer-culture-theory analysis, made it more central to the identity of the French consumer and even more entrenched as a uniquely French product, especially in the face of increasingly vocal international opposition.

This dynamic underscores the central conceptual contribution of the book: that a gastropolitical

object can become a relatively stable focal point of an entire field even as its very identity and moral status are constantly contested. This happens precisely because competing definitions mutually reinforce one another in ways that may be obscure even to the very players championing different construals of the object.

Thus animal rights activists in Europe and the U.S. may strive to make foie gras and the practice of *gavage* a metonym for what they see as the cruel treatment of animals by the industrialized food system across the globe. But insofar as the French perceive the most vocal voices to come from outside of France, in spite of plenty of opposition within France, attacks on foie gras that attempt to key an animal rights frame end up activating a defensive national identity frame that prevents critical consideration of food production practices. Accordingly, an attack on foie gras comes to be interpreted as an attack on French culinary traditions and practices and ultimately French culture itself.

In the same way, provincial tourist offices interested in bringing American and European visitors to partake of French culinary traditions rooted in territory (*terroir*) and region become committed to defining foie gras as an authentic artisanal product. They end up being complicit in hiding the fact that the great majority of foie gras in France is produced via mechanized production techniques enjoying economies of scale and not traditional craft processes. The result is that, ironically, in activating defensive national pride and craft product frames, animal rights activists end up contributing to the symbolic and material reproduction of foie gras as an entrenched cultural object supported by state and market institutions.

An advantage of DeSoucey's comparative design is that it gives us a window into the very different way in which foie gras gastropolitics plays out in the U.S. context, in which foie gras is nothing short of an abstraction. Here, DeSoucey shows that the very lack of material and experiential reality of foie gras leads to a relative facility of it being portrayed as foreign and elite. The ease of evoking this elite-food frame, in turn, allows activists to attach negative connotations to its production and consumption without encountering robust counter-attempts by interested players to redefine it positively. Episodes such as the city of Chicago's "foiehibition" saga covered in chapter 4 illustrate this dynamic well. Here, the symbolic meaning of the outsized regulatory attempt at a ban far outweighs its actual impact on the ground. The consequence is that the overall message intended by activists behind the ban—to underscore the brutality of the food-industrial complex—fails because certain actors can easily use satire, trivialization, or other resistance means to point to the disproportionality between the regulatory instrument used and the intended effect.

In all, *Contested Tastes* is an insightful and multifaceted work that should be of interest to all scholars interested in the intersection of category studies, cultural analysis, and the role of social movements and (gastro)politics in organizational fields and markets.

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