

Action Research and Social Engagement

Food Studies in Practice

AMY BENTLEY, JENNIFER BERG, CAROLYN DIMITRI,
MARION NESTLÉ, FABIO PARASECOLI, KRISHNENDU RAY

As mentioned in the introduction and demonstrated throughout the chapters of this volume, NYU food studies is a product of its location (New York City, New York University, a professionally oriented school within NYU, and a department shared with a nutrition program) as well as its methodologically and disciplinarily diverse faculty. The program is also very much part of the development of food studies as a field, contributing to its evolving dialogue with food cultures and food systems around the world and its growing desire to address their most urgent issues. Moreover, NYU food studies is shaped by its orientation to its students, the majority of whom are pursuing master's degrees with an eye toward employment in the private or public sectors (as opposed to academia). To that end, as faculty, our research and fieldwork tend to lean toward scholarship with an interdisciplinary, applied bent.

This is partly the result of the abovementioned physical realities and pragmatic considerations. We are in a professional school that trains professionals for "real-world" jobs, for example, and our course content—assignments and projects—is designed with an eye toward this goal. Further, we believe in the necessity of teaching the subject of food from an interdisciplinary perspective. There is no other way that approaches the topic thoroughly and provides knowledge and experience that can help solve real world problems. Finally, our scholarship, similar to our teaching, is at the intersection of application and theory.

Our scholarship and fieldwork tend to be located within this intersection not only because we find the problems there important, but because the theoretical perspectives many of us find compelling push us in this

direction. These often focus around issues of power and agency: Can mere humans, for example, effect change in the face of huge, seemingly insurmountable institutions of power and privilege? Instead of admitting defeat by “wicked” problems in the food system, how can we take back ownership and agency—how can we make a difference? Thus, the work of French culture theorist Michel de Certeau is compelling. His book *The Practice of Everyday Life* finds human agency in small everyday tasks such as walking, talking, reading, and cooking, “tactics” that counter the power of institutions, entities, and persons with power and wealth (1984). The mundane task of cooking, tiny as it is, may then contribute to countering large food corporations’ attempts to dominate food choices, habits, and health. Similarly relevant and compelling is the work of British sociologist Alan Warde and his notion of *practice theory* (2014, 2016). Meaning, instead of residing in things or ideas, is located in practices and actions. Culture is something humans “do,” which again points to human action and agency as key. These theoretical underpinnings provide ballast for scholarship that is focused on community engagement, is interdisciplinary in nature, and addresses real-world problems. In a broader political and cultural sense, there is a premium on maintaining this perspective. This optimistic perspective may be labeled naive by some, but the current global political climate, for example with its growing fascist impulses, requires that humans retain some sense of agency to counter the ominous institutional powers and pressures. For this reason, methodologies such participatory action research, codesign, public humanities, and other forms of embedded and practice-based and community-engaged scholarship are becoming increasingly relevant in a field that deals with urgent issues that cannot be addressed by academics only (Chevalier and Buckles 2019; Gordon Da Cruz 2018; Manzini 2015).

Recounted in first person, NYU food studies faculty members explain here how they have translated food studies into practice, and in doing so the following themes emerge: advocacy, professional expertise and assistance, experiential education, and public programming and knowledge creation. Although we thought it was important to hear the individual voices of those involved, these experiences are examples of the increasingly engaged work and research that is emerging in food studies as a field, shaping its present while pointing to the future.

Advocacy: Marion Nestle and Krishnendu Ray describe their work as advocates for public policy and social justice, highlighting Nestle's work on behalf of the Mexico soda tax initiative and Ray's work with New York City's Street Vendor Project.

Professional Expertise Sharing: Carolyn Dimitri and Fabio Parasecoli discuss their collaborations with others with the goal of improving food systems nationally and globally. Dimitri describes her involvement in NGOs that seek to reduce social/environmental costs of conventional agriculture, and Parasecoli, with colleagues in Poland, establishes collaborative partnerships that strengthen commitments to food in academic and public settings.

Experiential Education: Jennifer Berg and Amy Bentley describe their efforts to enhance the classroom experience. Berg discusses food studies travel courses that take students deep into the NYC outer boroughs as well as globally, and Bentley and Berg describe the NYU Urban Farm Lab experiential hands-on learning lab for teaching and research.

Public Programming and Knowledge Creation: Amy Bentley discusses two collaborative public-facing entities, the Experimental Cuisine Collective and the Food and COVID-19 NYC Digital Archive and Collection, designed not only to appeal to the general public but to involve them in knowledge making.

Advocacy

Marion Nestle

I want my applied work in food politics to inspire students and anyone else it reaches to become advocates for healthier and more sustainable food systems. My purpose in writing articles and books, teaching, giving public lectures, and talking to media reporters is to explain how almost everything about food involves politics and how necessary it is to engage in politics if we want to improve dietary health and planetary sustainability.

That is why I teach food advocacy. The basis of successful advocacy is well established. Advocates must define a clear goal and identify precisely what they want to achieve or change. They must do their homework and provide data and documentation for the need for that change. They must locate a specific target of their campaign—the person

or institution with the power to make the desired change. They must convince as many people and groups as possible to join them in their cause. Building community is the key to successful advocacy; campaigns require a broad base of public support. Working closely with allies, advocates must develop strategies to convince their target to act, and then they must implement those strategies. If their campaign fails, they need to analyze why and start over. Standard advocacy methods are entirely analogous to those taught in program planning and policy development courses offered by schools of public health and public policy. To the extent that advocates adhere to theoretical methods—especially those that involve community support—their campaigns are likely to succeed.

I do not have the temperament to be an on-the-ground community organizer. Instead, I see my role as developing the research basis for food advocacy, as I did in my book *Soda Politics: Taking on Big Food (and Winning)*. I intended this book as an advocacy manual for campaigns to reduce consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages by taxing them, removing them from schools, stopping companies from marketing them to children, and placing warning labels on soda cans and bottles. I wrote my book with Kerry Trueman, *Let's Ask Marion*, to convince students and readers that engaging in politics is essential for creating more democratic and more equitable food systems, those that will prevent hunger, promote public health, and prevent environmental damage. I have been accused of writing polemics and am guilty as charged, but I document what I write as carefully as I can, and in great detail.

In recent years, I have presented the results of my research to advocates for food and nutrition policy in Australia, for soda taxes in Mexico, for warning labels on ultra-processed foods in Chile, and for curbing corporate involvement in nutrition policy in China, Brazil, and Israel, to pick a few examples. Throughout the world, food advocates face similar barriers: weak government support, a largely disengaged civil society, strong and well-organized food industry opposition, and lack of financial resources.

Despite these challenges, advocacy groups have found ways to gain enough support to make real progress on food issues through sound research, clear identification of goals and targets, and close attention to building community coalitions. These skills necessarily draw on lessons learned from sociology, anthropology, political science, economics, and public health science.

Another example: I used a Fulbright Specialist Fellowship developed in collaboration with Mexico's Instituto Nacional de Salud Pública (National Institute of Public Health) to collaborate with the institute's team working on chronic disease prevention. These researchers and their civil society partners, most notably El Poder del Consumidor (consumer power) and its coalition of advocacy groups, La Alianza por la Salud Alimentaria (nutritional health alliance), had succeeded in getting the Mexican government to tax sugar-sweetened beverages and were evaluating its effects and pressing for improvements in the policy. The alliance, working with the Public Health Institute, had accomplished this by drawing on the full range of interdisciplinary skills required for public health planning, implementation, and evaluation: research, target setting, coalition building, strategic planning, media work, and resource acquisition. The strength of these skills—and their potential for success—was so apparent that the Bloomberg Foundation volunteered to fund the work of these groups and did, generously. My role was to give lectures on the broader public health and international context of the Mexican soda tax initiatives and to publicly provide international support for the work of this advocacy alliance. If my work can contribute to such efforts, I consider it entirely worth the time and effort I put into it.

Practicing Food Studies

Edited by

Amy Bentley,

Fabio Parasecoli, and

Krishnendu Ray

Looking forward
to more collaborations
FR

Foreword by Marion Nestle

Marion
It has been
quite a ride!
K. Ray
Marion
We did it!!
xox Amy 2/27/24



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