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Peter Farb and George Armelagos, Consuming Passions: The Anthropology of Eating

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Peter Farb and George Armelagos, *Consuming Passions: The Anthropology of Eating*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980. 279 pp. \$12.95.

Review by Deborah K. DeCorso

Eating, as everyone knows, is a biological necessity. It can also be a pleasant social event, a setting for the transaction of business, a religious ritual, a compulsion. *Consuming Passions: The Anthropology of Eating* is a survey of human eating habits, past and present, which

brings to light many interesting facts about food preferences, preparation, and symbolism among the varied cultures of the world. But this book is not just a collection of gastronomic trivia; it is a well-documented synthesis of anthropological thought on this familiar human function. Extensive reference notes and a thorough bibliography cite studies of such well-known anthropologists as Claude Levi-Strauss and Bronoslaw Malinowski. The authors use the findings of these and many others to support their thesis that a society's eating habits reflect many aspects of their social life, culture, and behavior:

An anthropologist who knows what the members of a society eat already knows a lot about them. Learning how the food is obtained and who prepares it adds considerably to the anthropologist's store of information about the way that society functions. And once the anthropologist finds out where, when and with whom the food is eaten, just about everything else can be inferred about the relations among the society's members.

As omnivorous animals, humans must make decisions about which foods to consume out of the many available possibilities. Through eating with others, children learn what foods their own society considers to be edible. The types of foods eaten (or forbidden) may have social, ethnic, or religious significance. A familiar example of the latter is the pork prohibition of Moslems and Jews. Ethnic groups are frequently identified by characteristic foods, spices, or methods of preparation. Indeed, in modern America, ethnic origins which have disappeared in other aspects of daily life often find renewed expression at mealtime. Finally, social class or caste can be distinguished by what is eaten; caviar says "upper class" today just as surely as white bread did in ancient times.

Human interaction at the meal will indicate relationships

among social classes, age groups, kinship groups, and the sexes. The Chinese prefer to dine in family groups; the Trobriand Islanders commonly eat alone. Males and females may eat separately; adolescents may dine apart from adults. Children in a patrilineal society ordinarily eat with one group of kin; in a matrilineal society, they would probably eat with the opposite side of the family. Tasks of preparation and serving of meals may indicate sex roles or class relationships; in many societies, these duties are assigned to women or lower-ranked castes.

The subsistence pattern is a major influence on the structure of the society. Each of the systems — hunting and gathering, horticulture, pastoralism, modern agriculture — has different implications for kinship alignment, political structure, sex roles, and class divisions. In a hunting and gathering society, for example, there are no privileged classes. The pattern of consumption is the same for everyone because of intricate social rules for sharing of food. Redistribution is also important in the more settled horticultural societies; exchanges can even take on the elaborate formality of the potlatch of the Northwest Coast Indians. But political entities usually play a larger role in these societies; lineages and clans control ownership of the essential commodity of land.

Though eating habits, technology, environment, social institutions, and ideology are difficult to separate, the authors have divided the book into three major sections. The first deals with the biological aspects of eating: nutrition, the evolution of human eating habits, the relationship of eating to life's milestones, such as pregnancy, infancy, marriage, old age. The second section of the work focuses on the many symbolic implications of eating: social status, religion and ritual, food taboos, sacrifice and cannibalism, fasting and feasting. Finally, the authors discuss "cuisine" as the logical synthesis of environment, technology, social structure, and ideology.

Farb and Armelagos include many exotic societies in their discussions, ranging from the beer-drinking Bemba of Zambia to the cannibalistic Fore of New Guinea. However, some of the book's most interesting observations come from impartially viewing our

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own American eating habits. For example, consider the subconscious decisions we make about social relationships when we invite people to eat with us:

A cold lunch is at the threshold of the intimacy that is symbolized by an invitation to a complete dinner. . . . Other such bridges are the buffet, the cookout, and the barbecue, which extend friendship to a greater extent than an invitation to morning coffee, but less so than an invitation to a sit-down dinner.

The authors see the phenomenal growth of fast-food restaurants in the United States as an expression of the need for ritual in our society. As traditional social rituals based on religion and the family have declined, the gap has been filled by automobiles, technology, and fast-food. By going to McDonald's, people find the security of a constant product (Big Mac and fries), a familiar environment (distinguished by the symbolic Golden Arches), and the reassurance of a standard verbal exchange ("Have a nice day!").

The authors raise some potentially controversial points in their work. For example, they compare the notorious sacred cattle of India to the "sacred dogs" of America. The dogs come out poorly in the comparison. The authors argue that it would be uneconomical for cattle to be used for meat in India because of various factors of environment and technology. Indeed, they are essential to India's agriculture as draft animals. By comparison, our large population of "untouchable" animals makes little sense; America's dogs are characterized as "practically useless, competing with humans for protein."

Another interesting issue is the question of the efficiency of various subsistence methods. It is generally believed that hunters and gatherers spend most of their time searching for food. Through use of

a formula which relates the amount of food produced to the energy expended to produce it, the authors demonstrate that simpler societies may actually be more efficient than modern ones. Therefore, despite technological developments, people in simpler societies do not work as hard for their food as we do. In fact, the authors propose that the 40-hour work week would be considered unendurable in many less complex societies.

Though students and researchers will find plenty of information in this book, *Consuming Passions* is written so that it can be read for pure enjoyment, like Farb's other popular books on the natural and human sciences: *Man's Rise to Civilization* (1968), *Face of North America* (1963), and *Word Play* (1974). Before his death in April of 1980, Farb had a varied career as curator at the Riverside Museum in New York, visiting lecturer at Yale, consultant to the Smithsonian, as well as a free-lance writer and researcher. His collaborator, George Armelagos, is currently a professor of Anthropology at the University of Massachusetts.