Book Reviews


This book’s goal is to address the question “If the world produces enough food to feed everyone in the world, why do 40 million people die from hunger-related diseases every year?” The authors show how the food chain is affected by changing lifestyles, political economy, history, and natural disasters. The three-page introduction highlights the theme that poor nutrition is not a result of food scarcity but rather of poverty and lack of resources and access to food. The book traces the interconnections and paths of the food supply chain, as well as the increasing distance between producer and consumer, which frequently results in food contamination. The authors also critically examine the role of cheap oil in making extensive food transport possible, with resulting damaging fuel emissions contributing to climate change problems. They suggest that current modes of food production, processing, transport, and consumption prevail because in the short term they are the most profitable. But they believe that they are not the most healthy or the most environmentally sustainable. They argue for more rational and just food policies.

The book is divided into five parts. Each of the first four consists of a number of two-page sections, consisting of a text introduction accompanied by tables and maps illustrating the main issues. For example, Section 1 of part one, entitled Feeding the World, describes the numbers of people throughout the world suffering from undernutrition, and provides worldwide food production data. The section includes a world map showing average daily caloric consumption by the country, a figure showing world’s over- and undernutrition, as well as a graph illustrating average grain production per person by region of the world. Part one, entitled, Contemporary Challenges, covers issues such as population and productivity, environmental challenges, water, food-borne disease, under and overnutrition, food aid,
and food aid as power. Part two deals with farming, part three trade, and part four processing, retailing, and consumption. Part five, *World Tables*, provides tables on agriculture and consumption worldwide.

A number of the topics covered are critically important for understanding contemporary issues related to food consumption and food policy, including animal feed, pesticides, agricultural biodiversity and sustainable farming, worldwide animal transport, food miles, and food additives. The authors also examine the issue of power, from the alternative perspectives of food aid, the giant, often multinational, food processing companies, and the retail market. And the important First World issues of eating out and fast food consumption are also addressed.

This book is very well suited for use in classes on nutritional anthropology, food and culture, and/or development. It provides a brief yet clear overview of the macro-context—political, economic, and agricultural—which is often omitted from the anthropological microcultural focus on these topics. Another aspect of the book that I particularly liked was that as an English publication its maps do not locate the United States in the center of the pages, but rather off to one side. Data and examples are given from many different countries; we learn that the Japanese eat more per person meals out than do people in the United States, as do, to a lesser extent, most western Europeans. Students in the United States need to learn that the rest of the world exists, and this book will help in that process.

The final section of the book gives references for each chapter. Unfortunately, these are mostly websites; it would have been useful to have provided more traditional references as well. My only other reservation about the book is a question of how fast it will become outdated—although the general patterns discussed have will and persist for some time, the statistics themselves will of course change somewhat, it is to be hoped for the better.

In summary, this book provides an interesting and accessible approach to some very important material and should have a place as a text in a number of different types of classes devoted to the interactions of food, society, and culture. It will also make informative reading for the lay reader interested in these issues.

Roberta D. Baer

*Department of Anthropology*
*University of South Florida*
*Tampa, Florida 33620–8100*
*e-mail: baer@cas.usf.edu*