

Single Book Review

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Pressure Cooker: Why Home Cooking Won't Solve Our Problems and What We Can Do about It

New York: Oxford University Press, 2019, \$24.95 hbk (ISBN: 9780190663292), 337 pp.

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As a central facet of human life, it is tempting to think of food as a potential cure for all ills. If only we could get the food right, perhaps there would be no problems with agriculture, health, or the environment? One of the recent widespread suggestions for individuals is to start cooking again. This would enable them to be in control of what they eat, take better care of themselves and their family members, potentially improve the livelihoods of people involved in the food production, and support environmental sustainability.

The authors of *Pressure Cooker* make an argument against the omnipotence of home cooking in the constraining conditions of neoliberalism. They claim that the current food discourse, primarily dominated by white men (p. 224), is placing too heavy a burden on individuals responsible for cooking (usually women). By emphasizing individual responsibility, this discourse maintains that all the shortcomings related to food are due to erroneous individual choices. For instance, a body that does not fit the normative image is seen as a sign of personal failure, as it is about making the wrong decisions, not restricting oneself, not exercising enough, not cooking for oneself (pp. 41–42), not thinking about the environment, not being a good citizen.

The majority of the book is devoted to retelling the stories of women shopping for food, cooking, feeding their families, while facing all kinds of constraints. This richness of the data makes the book compelling (after all, storytelling is something central to human cultures), but it also becomes its biggest problem, as a lot of the material is left open for interpretation. The field notes and anecdotal evidence are organized around ‘seven foodie messages’ (p. 12). Unfortunately, the authors only briefly engage with these messages that they want to problematize. The ethnographic data presented could be used to prove many (possibly contradicting) arguments. It is on the way in becoming a thick description, but it lacks the overarching analysis that would bring it all together.

One thing that the stories presented in the book demonstrate is that mothers can successfully juggle many duties and take pride in doing so. Leanne states that the kitchen is one place where she ‘feels a semblance of control in her life’ (p. 2). But the demand of feeding (rather picky) kids (and often husbands, too) exerts pressure on these women. A bit of pressure can perhaps enhance the performance, but go beyond a certain point and the stress levels become too high. The parallel with the pressure cooker becomes evident.

If little pressure is used wisely, the device can produce nutritious meals very efficiently. But if too much pressure is used, an explosion is likely to follow.

Home cooking is not a magical cure for the problems that people face (p. 2). Many women, both poor and well-off, are already in the kitchen and they are trying hard. And if the children are overweight or unhealthy, it is tempting to look for mistakes in the decisions the mother has made. For instance, Melanie eventually purchases a large bag of multi-colored Goldfish (p. 128), even though in the beginning of her shopping spree she says that 'crackers are just flour and butter, and we don't need that' (p. 127). Is it a weakness of character? Or a desire to be a good mother and get the kids something they really like? These authors suggest we should look away from the individuals and focus on the system. Why is there so much cheap junk food available? Why is fresh produce hard to access?

The authors argue that condemning mothers into the kitchen only worsens the inequality. Richer people have healthier diets, as they have better access to fresh food, they are often more in charge of their schedule, and they can hire helpers if necessary. Proportionally poor people spend more money on food than the wealthy (p. 222). The solutions to our broken food system need to be broader and collective and many of them are already in action. On a state level, food needs to be acknowledged as a fundamental human right for everyone, whether they want to cook it themselves or not.

What happens in families may seem like a private and personal problem, but the fact that many families face similar concerns (time, money, picky eaters, health) means that these are public issues that demand collective responses (p. 230). To reduce food insecurity, it is necessary to tackle the underlying conditions that cause poverty (p. 227). The detailed stories presented in the book demonstrate that mothers and grandmothers are not doing too little. Rather, they might be doing too much, trying to assume the responsibility for things that are beyond their reach.