


Boni, Zofia: Feeding Anxieties: The Politics of Children's Food in Poland

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BOOK REVIEW

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Adults' health and life expectancy largely depend on the food they consume and the eating habits they adopt from childhood. Cardiovascular diseases and cancer are among the leading causes of death in East Central Europe and are closely linked to nutrition, among other factors. The region is home to a very high proportion of obese and overweight people and people with body image disorders, not only among adults but also among children. While the above highlights that nutritional habits in the second half of the 20th century were largely inadequate, surveys of children today indicate that the region, including Poland, has not yet managed to eliminate problems related to nutritional health. This may also suggest why gastronomy is currently attracting so much attention. Everyday eating habits are extremely important, not only in the daily lives of individuals but also in wider communities.

Anthropologist and sociologist Zofia Boni is a senior lecturer at the Institute of Anthropology and Ethnology at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poland and a postdoctoral research fellow at the SOAS Food Studies Centre in London. Her recently published book *Feeding Anxieties: The Politics of Children's Food in Poland* takes an ethnographic approach to the issue of nutrition and catering for children, offering an innovative perspective. The book draws on her PhD dissertation *Children and Food in Warsaw: Negotiating Feeding and Eating*, which she defended in 2016 at the Doctoral School of Anthropology and Sociology at SOAS University. Some chapters of the book have previously been published as individual papers but have been revised and extended by the author for inclusion in this overall treatment of the subject.

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Zofia Boni's main research subjects are childhood and the moral and political economy of food and health, and in this context, the social problem of childhood obesity. The present volume takes a bottom-up approach to the food system in Poland, focusing on consumers, and especially children — a group that has so far received almost no attention in research on food culture. Her ethnographic approach makes her descriptions particularly compelling. She often quotes her interviewees, describing in detail their emotions and the activities she has observed during her fieldwork, and she complements this with her own impressions and thoughts as a researcher — for example, after eating a school lunch — thus bringing the problems experienced closer to the reader.

In outlining the subject of children's feeding, the author touches on the hidden, elusive concerns and anxieties within the catering system. Around this concept and the keyword highlighted in the title, she has been able to construct her analysis and interpretation of the subject. The volume addresses concerns related to the "proper" nutrition and feeding of children, starting from families and the "real" citizens who take responsibility for their health. It includes the perspective of individual actors — the schools, the food industry, and the state. This very well-edited volume follows the hierarchical system inherent in the subject, pointing out to the reader the interrelationships among the individual actors, their connections, interactions, conflicts, emotions, expectations, and the rules and norms that keep the system running.

The ethnographic data on which the book is based is well-defined regarding time and space and the selected data sources. Between 2012 and 2019, Boni regularly visited middle-class and upper-middle-class families in Warsaw, where her interviewees were mainly mothers. She undertook observations in the canteens of several schools. She carried out interviews with parents, children between the ages of six and twelve, teachers, and school kitchen staff, as well as food companies and representatives of official institutions responsible for health policy. The interviews focused not only on the present day but also on the past, going back to the last decades of the twentieth century. This was a fascinating period in East Central Europe, with the transition from socialism to a market economy in the former socialist countries, the change of political and economic regimes, and accession to the European Union — all of which had an impact on everyday life and lifestyles as a whole.

The research highlights several critical points that make eating and the related everyday practices uncertain and a source of conflict. The controversial situation surrounding food culture today is clearly illustrated in the following quotation: "Feeding children is a deeply personal as well as a political act. When you scratch the surface and look at what lies underneath people's worries about how children eat, it turns out many things are hidden there: concerns about what 'being Polish' means today and what it will develop into in the future; worries about being judged and criticized; different ideas of what health is and how to obtain it; financial concerns and economic issues; tension between citizenship and consumerism; struggles about rights and responsibilities; problems with trust; fears about tangible treats, such as sugar and dental caries, and abstract future; and striving to fulfill the expectations of modern personhood" (p. 168).

Looking after children, planning family meals, and cooking are still largely the responsibility of mothers in Polish middle-class families, with men and grandparents participating only to a lesser extent in the family division of labor. For this reason, it is mothers who are most affected by the concerns and anxieties related to children's nutrition. Actors in the food system also hold mothers responsible for ensuring that children eat healthy food and that future generations



develop into healthy adults who follow appropriate habits. However, there are many obstacles to this in today's food culture in Poland.

The first chapter, *Eat in Context: On Post-Socialist Transformations, Mothering and Making Citizen-Consumers with Food*, reviews dietary changes from the period of the regime change to accession to the European Union, from the days of the shortage economy to the era of the market economy. It is fascinating to trace the past and present life strategies of three generations, who are currently living together, in light of their own individual pasts and life experiences, and to observe how access to meal and the value and meaning of food have changed during this period. This encompasses issues such as the meaning of "proper" nutrition, "good" or "bad" food, the transformation of eating habits, and how appropriate diet has become an individual responsibility. The views of families with young children differ in many respects from the views of grandparents. The role of children in the family has changed a great deal over the decades, along with the family's approach to feeding them. New forms of parenting behavior have appeared, influenced by powerful social pressures. These processes are also reflected in the meanings represented by food — chocolate, for example, which has long been available in Poland, appears to be a less unhealthy treat to Poles than marshmallows, which have a shorter history in the country and which are a symbol of the American lifestyle.

The second chapter, *Eat and Have Some Fun*, sheds light on the impact of the food industry and trade on consumption patterns. It is fascinating to trace how, after the change of political regime, the food market created special food categories, especially sweets for children. Research in this area is focused primarily on purchasing patterns — that is, the concerns and conflicts behind consumer choices. For parents, the impact of food products on health is crucial, while for children, for example, the purchasing of sweets can also represent prestige consumption and an opportunity to belong to a peer group.

The third chapter, *Eat Just a Little Bit More: On Family Meals, Balancing Acts and Intergenerational Negotiations*, describes present-day family meals. At the same time, it also highlights that the basic framework of nutrition, the order and frequency of daily meals that provide the rhythm of eating, and whether a hot, cooked meal is served with soup as a starter, all have a long history. The only noticeable change is in the importance and structure of weekday and weekend meals: weekends spent in the family circle compensate for the hectic weekday meals. However, Boni is not greatly optimistic about the future, because education with respect to housework and cooking skills has disappeared from domestic practice in many places. Families and mothers have to strive for a balance amidst the many nutrition-related pressures and expectations coming from grandparents, school caterers, the food industry, and the state to provide adequate nutrition for their children.

The fourth chapter, *Eat Like a Normal Person*, presents the school as an important setting in children's everyday lives, where children eat not only in the dining hall but also in classrooms, school snack bars, corridors, and, of course, outside the building, from street vendors. Here, conflicting expectations stretch the boundaries of children's catering. The meals and food consumed are largely outside parental control, while nutrition is based on the catering standards of the local authorities and the state that run the school canteens. Children have to adapt to a centrally organized form of catering. They can express their opinion only by either eating or refusing the given meals.

The aptly titled fifth chapter, *Eat for the Greater Good*, discusses food-related norms and the possibilities/means of educating conscious consumers. European Union directives



(and WHO directives at international level) underline the responsibility of the state. Thus, for example, a child's meals in Warsaw have become a European and global issue, an aspect of biopolitics as an instrument of power in Foucault's sense of the word. Healthy eating is the responsibility of the individual, but the state uses school education to shape tastes and eating habits, create rules, and issue nutritional standards. However, this education is rarely translated into practice, as the study reveals. School education programs can only supplement but not replace skills that are taught at home. However, as we have seen from the above, when the parents' nutrition culture no longer has a firm footing, it leads to profound problems that cannot be addressed effectively at central level or in the form of central regulations. Health education should be about more than just food. It seems to be an insoluble contradiction that the daily lives of children, and through them the daily lives of their families, are dictated by the schedules of school life and parents' work, while in many ways these schedules go against the principles of a healthy lifestyle — and not only in terms of nutrition.

The writer of the present review has been eagerly awaiting the publication of this book, as her personal discussions with the author on the issue of school catering have greatly inspired the approach adopted by her Hungarian interdisciplinary research team and the work it has carried out. Studies on school food with an ethnographic focus began independently in the two countries almost at the same time. Another common feature is that, besides the communal, institutional, and school background, family meals have also been given particular emphasis. The research in Hungary is ongoing, although the outcomes to date show many similarities: several of Zofia Boni's findings apply almost entirely to the situation in Hungary. (To mention just one example, the same processes can be observed in terms of the EU-funded school fruit, vegetable, and milk scheme. The aim is to promote access to healthy foods, although, in reality, the scheme contributes significantly to food waste production.) The parallels are presumably due to economic and social processes that share common features in Poland and Hungary: the transition to a market economy has had a similar impact on family nutrition, consumption habits, and the role of children within the family.

Zofia Boni's work does not tell us how children's feeding should be managed properly. However, it does provide a very colorful and informative picture of how interactions between individuals and the community turn a diversely meaningful individual biological need and how that need is met into the subject of a multidimensional social and cultural debate, which affects the shared present and future of consumer society not only in Poland but in many other parts of the world. Besides those interested in ethnography and anthropology, I would recommend this work to any readers — whether parents, teachers, or health policymakers — who seek a better understanding of the dynamics of food culture and the world of children today.

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