

# Singh Lalli, Gurpinder: Schools, Space and Culinary Capital.

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VIRA RÉKA NICKEL\*

Institute of Ethnology, HUN-REN Research Centre for the Humanities, Hungary

## BOOK REVIEW

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A sociologist and ethnographer by training, Gurpinder Singh Lalli's research is of great social utility: he is an expert researcher on social diversity, equality, and social justice, and his principal research area is school education. He is a co-investigator for the UK School Meals Service project, which is currently carrying out comprehensive historical and ethnographical basic research in the field of school catering, with a particular emphasis on the intergenerational experiences of the providers and recipients of school meals. As a lecturer at the University of Wolverhampton, he shares his field experience and research findings with his students in the School of Education. This is the third volume published by him and follows *Schools, Food and Social Learning* (Routledge, 2019) and *School Farms: Feeding and Educating Children* (Routledge, 2021), examining school meals from the perspective not only of physical health but also of social science in particular, with a special focus on school socialization and social justice.

This attractive hardcover book is a pleasure to hold in the hand. The author uses the example of an English school to examine, among other things, the concept of "culinary capital," a term used by Bourdieu as an extension of the concept of cultural capital, the presence of which is seen as a privilege, while its absence represents a disadvantage within school society. The book allows readers to trace some of the key issues of social inequality and the instability of food supply in England, and the relationship between the two. Interviews with pupils, teachers, and other school staff provide insights into school food practices, including both positive and negative examples.

The book has a clear structure, making the ideas presented easily accessible. In the introduction, the author reviews the literature on school meals in England and immediately

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\* Corresponding author. E-mail: nickel.reka@abtk.hu

highlights important phenomena such as the sharing of tables in the school dining room: Who likes eating with whom? Do Black children prefer eating with other Black children? And if so, why? Given the fact that the school population largely comprises White British children, the food served also primarily “caters to” their cultural heritage and is primarily for their benefit. The author makes the point, which he emphasizes throughout his book, that this is not a criticism of school catering managers or of the school itself but a very important element of the reality of school life, as experienced by schoolchildren on a daily basis. How can we educate young people to be accepting, open, and cooperative unless we provide them with a variety of meals, introduce them to each other’s traditional, typical dishes, and encourage them to try new flavors and meals? How are the two problems connected? The author highlights how issues and debates around food poverty are constantly on the agenda and widely discussed in British public discourse, although in many respects, hunger is more easily addressed than the apparently more persistent racial inequalities. Since the school is a microcosm of society, such social inequalities are (re)produced in the school canteen. Gurbinder Singh Lalli highlights the emergence of social problems in school society with sound critical sense and commendable insight.

The reviewer is herself a member of an ethnographically focused research group in Hungary investigating the issue of public catering for children thus she is able to confirm the emergence of racial prejudice in school canteens in the Central European context. Her research has generally been conducted in schools with an artificial seating arrangement, with long tables typically occupied by one class at a time. One exception to this is the group comprising older students in the upper grades of high school, who make their way to the dining hall individually rather than as a class and who always sit with their friends, usually in groups of two or three. The number of Black children in Hungary is negligible, while the Chinese and Gypsy ethnic minorities are more typically present in schools. In my experience, White children have an unproblematic relationship with their Chinese classmates, who are almost entirely integrated into the group, unlike children of Gypsy origin, who form the biggest ethnic minority in schools and who, unfortunately, are not always welcome at the same table as their classmates even today. Another important aspect of this phenomenon is that children of Gypsy origin in Hungary, especially in rural schools, are unfortunately still the poorest, most disadvantaged members of society; often neglected and traumatized by domestic abuse, their clothing, hygiene, and behavior may differ from that of the better-off, predominantly White pupils. We would be more than happy if this problem had been solved and we were not obliged to talk about racism in Hungary in the 21st century, but the reality is that it persists in various areas of Hungarian society. How can the understanding of our history contribute to a more effective response to current human issues? Can we explain today’s world in terms of its genealogy and future direction? Answers to these questions are being sought not only in Britain but also in Central Europe.

After outlining the issue in his introduction, the author discusses the research findings in three thematic chapters. The research focuses on childhood and adolescence, which are critical years in terms of socialization, and examines the contribution made by school meals. Few other studies have examined socialization processes in the context of school catering and their impact on socio-cultural life. The first chapter provides background information about the location of the research and fieldwork. It places the research within a broader context by briefly introducing English school catering and discussing the concept of culinary capital. The author outlines in detail the many ways in which food and eating are connected to the various categories of society: the feeling of belonging to the same gender, class, or even race. Eating together is one of the most



defining experiences in human society. It is for this reason that the management of mealtimes in schools in the modern age deserves particular attention. The average time allowed for school meals in the UK is 20 min, just as it is in Hungary. If this time could be extended, it would ensure that, besides having access to nutritious food, children would also have the opportunity and space to interact with their peers and teachers at lunchtime. Short mealtimes, inadequate dining rooms, and cramped, crowded, or noisy spaces can all have a destructive effect on children's experiences of eating and can significantly reduce opportunities for social learning during mealtimes. Mealtimes can be examined as a clear reflection of human relationships by means of participant observation in schools. This research phase took place in 2018–2019 and addressed two important questions: How do school meals promote different forms of socially valuable capital, and to what extent has the UK's 2013 School Food Plan successfully bridged inequalities?

Chapter 2 presents the development of school meals in England and the important role they play in contemporary social policy. The author describes the tensions within the UK children's catering system that prevent school meals from undergoing coherent reform. Another major obstacle is the ever-expanding administrative structure that likewise affects school catering. Measuring the success of efforts is another problematic issue: it is not enough to rely solely on statistical reports to demonstrate the success or failure of a reform. Besides statistics, there is an important role in social science research, participant observation, and the observation of daily interactions during meals. The following chapters describe this research.

In Chapter 3, the author examines the relationship between family meals, school meals, and, of course, food. After all, the enjoyment or rejection of particular foods is something we carry with us throughout our lives as a result of childhood socialization within the family, just like the habits associated with the consumption of food. Family meals are intimate events, an important opportunity for family members to bond, to be together, and to develop intimate, close relationships. Cooking and eating together have a major impact not only on physical health but also on mental health. Although family meals in Victorian times were more formal than today, the time allocated for eating together — today and historically — is a conscious (or sometimes unconscious) expression of family cohesion and stability. In busy, hectic everyday lives in post-industrial society, more and more factors are preventing families from eating together, despite the well-known English saying: "Families that eat together stay together."

Drawing on ethnographic data, the author explores the socialization processes that underpin school meals. He shows how everyday interactions and cultural practices shape and mold eating spaces in school settings. School dining rooms have become significantly smaller in the 21st century, while multifunctional spaces are becoming increasingly common. According to Gurpinder Singh Lalli, this trend is a legitimate cause for concern among school staff. The phenomenon of shrinking spaces can also be found in Central and Eastern Europe, primarily due to the rising numbers of children. Either the school has to use the dining room for educational purposes, or, conversely, due to the increasing number of students eating school meals, spaces not previously used for dining (e.g., classrooms or corridors next to the dining room) have to be used as catering spaces. However, one English example presents an entirely different problem in relation to the use of dining spaces. It describes a space with comfortable seating, like a reconditioned cinema, where, rather than facing each other, the children watch educational materials or children's programs on the surrounding screens while eating. This completely undermines any of the positive socialization effects of eating together. Lastly, the author examines free school



meals, sharing his own experiences to analyze how free school meals are associated with students' autonomous decisions and food choices; how this can lead to childhood obesity; and the respective role of nutrition education.

Chapter 4 discusses eating in the school environment from the children's perspective: we are shown the school dining hall, the seating spaces where children eat together, the "top-up" machine used for the meals, the wall displays, the clothing, and the atmosphere of the dining space. For children and young people, spaces that help them to connect with each other play a particularly significant role. These include school playgrounds, play areas, and communal dining areas. This is often their only way of connecting with their peers outside school, either because they live a long way from each other, or because they have too little time to meet up, thus, at most they continue conversations started at school online. Gurbinder Singh Lalli looks at school dining spaces from an interesting point of view, not just as a place where children can learn school norms related to eating and food: he also observes that the dining area provides opportunities for broader education, where children might even learn how to be "good citizens." Is the school dining hall a place for making new friends? Do children really prefer packed lunches to school meals? The author explores these questions in depth from several perspectives throughout the chapter. One interesting aspect that was not investigated in the Hungarian research on school meals is how children are very keen to share the contents of the lunchboxes they bring from home, thus making connections with one another, getting to know each other better, and, last but not least, trying out new flavors and foods. Hot meals at school are generally considered to be healthy, although this is only an assumption. In reality, although caterers try to serve healthy food with lots of fruit and vegetables, a lot still depends on which parts of the lunch the children eat and which parts they leave on their plates. Gurbinder Singh Lalli's research reveals that although the Maple Field Academy, the main field of his research, offers a wide range of vegetables, the overwhelming majority of the pupils surveyed named chicken nuggets and chips as their favorite meal. This meal has also captured the hearts of Hungarian children in much the same way as spaghetti bolognese or pizza.

Chapter 5 focuses on culinary capital and examines the institution of school catering from this perspective. It highlights some thought-provoking connections between social inequality and the school environment. The author stresses that school meals provide a good pedagogical opportunity to eliminate, or at least reduce, social inequalities.

The final chapter touches on key issues in the ongoing global debate on education policy.

Overall, this is a very important and exciting volume that provides a significant contribution to the picture of school life and school years, presenting this familiar picture from the innovative perspective of food and communal eating. The author can be commended for providing examples that successfully expose latent aspects of social inequalities in everyday school experiences. Although the case study focuses on a school in the UK, the book is an ideal starting point and provides powerful motivation to investigate social inequalities from the perspective of school meals in other countries. For teachers, it offers an important example of how the school dining hall can be an excellent place to teach social studies, or even citizenship, in a more accessible manner.

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