Review

Eating anxiety: The perils of food politics

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University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2013, 240pp., ISBN: 978-0816680924

Contemporary Political Theory (2015) **14**, e26–e30. doi:10.1057/cpt.2014.8;
published online 25 November 2014

Eating Anxiety is an ambitious work both in its scope of all things digestive – from obesity to dieting logics, eating etiquette to the terms of disgust, organics to grassroots localism movements, vegetarianism to cannibalism – and its introduction of such widespread practices and scholarship to the field of political theory. Perhaps the greatest achievement in this engagement is the argument woven throughout that behind each of these historical shifts and the anxieties that fuel them is the underlying and inescapable dominance of a sense of self, place and politics that all things digestive work to undermine. The consuming, digesting, excreting body, Lavin persuasively shows, is a site where discourses of autonomy and individuality at once are fervently asserted and continually break down, and thus proves a fulcrum for broader debates of identity, agency and democracy, and the affects that drive them.

At stake, here – and wherever eating practices occur – is the entrenched but ever inadequate liberal model of the self. Lavin reveals through each of his cases both the insufficiency of this model and its resilience nonetheless. In eating, we ingest, become transformed by and ‘become momentarily indistinguishable from the world that surrounds us’ (p. x). The lines firmly drawn between my body and my environment, myself and others – the integrity and sovereignty of identity that is presumed in so much political theorizing and policy – become blurred. In fact, Lavin shows it is not just the boundary of one body to another that is contested in every act of eating; the lines between private and public, human and nonhuman, that are just as essential to liberal models of identity and politics are radically challenged. With every bite, we nibble at the edges – and reveal the fragility – of these ontopolitical assumptions that ground liberal thought and, with it, current terms for political action and institutions.

Lavin traces the genealogies of both eating practices and political ideologies along with broader scientific, technological and economic shifts that accompany them to draw attention to how these have worked in tandem since the seventeenth century. For anxieties about the digestive body and the privatization of food began, *contra* the common conception that tells a story of twentieth century retreat, with the early

modern period's decline in public festivals, privatization of public dining areas and dramatic increase in taboos concerning digestive processes. Lavin shows how the shrouding of all things digestive – the denial of 'our animality, our mortality, and our vulnerability' (p. 27) – took place alongside not simply the privatization of property, but, more importantly, the paradigmatic shift from the 'body politic' to the 'social contract' as the metaphor for political life. In a word, changes in our eating practices reflected a deeper anxiety of the body's threat to ideals of independence of self and separation from world central to the rise of modern liberalism. This anxiety, in fact, is written into liberal theory itself: Lavin explores Locke's grasping of notions of singular subjectivity in spite of material change, the obsession of Hobbes with vulnerability and the threat of invasion, the fervent assertion within both that in the undeniable transactions and transformations of eating and labor, self becomes world while world does not – cannot – become self. Both in theory and practice, liberal ideals that ground identity, authenticity and responsibility are only purchased through the denial of digestive processes.

With scientific developments of the nineteenth century and, in particular, the emergence of thermodynamics and its shift in focus from matter and force to heat, motion and energy, these liberal foundations prove even more fragile. In the work of Darwin, we become a species embedded in and responsive to context; in the work of Moleschott, we are reduced to merely another dynamic expression of the matter that surrounds us, in a reversal of Locke where matter is constant despite change of form; with Büchner, the primacy of matter in flux is replaced with the primacy of force – flux – itself. Our presumptions of individualism, sovereignty and terms for responsibility now being under scientific siege, we see political theory take a 'digestive turn' away from the language of legality and metaphors of the visual, to a new lens of the corporeal. For Hegel, transformation is no longer the exception but the rule, and the politics of recognition, though motivated by the desire for sovereignty, is doomed to fail; for Marx, industrial society mirrors the laws of thermodynamics through the mechanical transfer of energy; for Nietzsche, digestive metaphors proliferate in his account of protean will and diagnosis of *ressentiment*.

This 'digestive turn' certainly captures something of our embodied experiences in excess of liberal notions of identity, place and politics. And yet, though Lavin shows repeatedly how dynamically and doggedly all experiences of digestion exceed and disrupt liberal ideals, contemporary perceptions and responses to such experience remain nothing so much as obstinately liberal. We are at once held captive by our relatedness and dependence on the world, and our belief that this cannot possibly be the case. In three twentieth century dieting ideologies – metabolic, desire and information approaches, each with an 'elective affinity' to industrial, service and communication revolutions, respectively – he shows that all share in common efforts to reassert sovereignty and self-control over a wholly rationalized body. With the discourse of obesity, we see anxiety of this ostensible 'epidemic' borne of its challenge to liberal values of self-discipline and individual autonomy. In organic and

localist food movements, we see the mobilization of liberal concerns for purity and sovereignty. While the taboo against cannibalism reinforces a belief in human exceptionalism, vegetarianism's focus on animal welfare provokes anxiety by undermining the human/nonhuman divide that grounds modern liberalism, and, with it, the terms for representative government, human rights and personal responsibility. And with each of these cases, we see linkages to broader anxieties over the infringement and tenuousness of borders, whether due to globalization, terrorism or surveillance. Our deepest anxieties, more broadly writ but crystallized within our eating practices, reveal how reliant we still are on liberal tenants of fixed boundaries and certain place for the very terms of politics.

This is never more apparent – nor with more profound consequences – than in the turn to individual and often private practices in prevalent responses to such anxieties. In the call to 'eat deliberately' (p. 103), whether via a local, organic, vegetarian or healthier diet, Lavin shows that the most dominant and, at times, only clear forms of action remain at the individual level. This stems from a greater set of anxieties than those borne of liberal indigestion; Lavin makes clear that a widespread distrust and cynicism regarding formal institutions charged with protecting us and the possibilities for collective action – and a more general sense of powerlessness in the face of faceless, global and systemic issues entailed in globalization, neoliberalism and environmental damage – make recourse to what we, in our own quiet lives, can do seem like the only means on hand to make meaningful change. As Michael Pollan writes, when '[s]o much about life in a global economy feels...beyond the individual's control...somehow food feels a little different. We can still decide, every day. What we're going to put in our bodies' (quoted p. 110).

But such a response not only stems from and reasserts a liberal notion of identity that privileges individual responsibility and the centrality of the private sphere; it also precipitates a retreat from political life that erodes both our democratic culture and the equally vital conviction in collective action and formal politics that undergirds it. Situating political response in the micropractices of the everyday might provide tangible strategies for responding to a growing sense of cynicism and powerlessness, but it also reduces 'politics to consumerism and economics to ethics' (p. 94). Moreover, it reinforces the primacy of the market, and our acts of consumption within it, as the only political game in town, and reduces the public good to an amalgam of private interests. In the process, it masks not only the systemic and environmental causes of what is experienced at the personal level, or the rife inequalities that enable a select few to 'eat deliberately' while others toil under unjust working conditions to provide for such eating, but also a broader range of sites and practices available to us as political actors.

Precisely because such liberal ideals hold too firm a grip on our political imagination, Lavin argues that emergent alternatives have difficulty attaining resonance in theory or practice. Most significantly, in working outside the terms of individual autonomy and the concomitant institutions of a liberal politics, Lavin

argues that a turn to ethics, posthumanism, localism or the paradigm of ‘networks’ to replace that of the social contract may intensify a sense of mutual care and obligation, but cannot provide ‘reliable codes to guide our behavior’ (p. 127) or the terms needed for collective action and formal politics. In defying present terms for political organization and accountability, in the very employment of ‘a different set of ideas about identity, authenticity, and responsibility, [they] risk abandoning ideals like individual and national sovereignty that are predicated on a liberal ontopolitics without offering a coherent or convincing alternative’ (p. 112).

And yet, Lavin’s account of such alternatives might prove the only point at which the analysis might be stronger, for a liberal paradigm appears to set the conceptual and practical limits within his own critique. In place of a liberal model of the self, Lavin offers us what he calls the ‘digestive subjectivity’, to at once rework traditional ideals surrounding knowledge, identity and power, and provide critical resources for responding to current political crises in light of globalization, neoliberalism and democracy. In examining each case of eating practices, he mobilizes such a sensibility to reveal the limits of current models and responses, and their potentially disempowering, quietist or complicit consequences. But where Lavin considers alternative approaches to food theory and practice, this subjectivity slips from view, and, perhaps entirely appropriate in such a narrative, liberal values once again reclaim priority as the frame beyond which we – and Lavin – cannot see.

Certainly, akin to the disruption and anxiety precipitated in eating practices themselves, political approaches that seek terms beyond those of modern liberalism undermine prevailing resources for collective action, formal institutions and representative democracy. Certainly, too, local and anarchic forms of political response, particularly where private and consumer-based, are easily complicit in, or co-opted by, neoliberal and capitalist energies. But to acknowledge these risks is not enough to reduce such actions to liberal or neoliberal frames, and to argue a lack of viability due to presently lacking institutional form or ‘compelling ontology’ (p. 112) indeed rings tautological at certain points in the analysis: they are not politically viable alternatives to liberalism because they do not meet the liberal terms of current politics. Employing such terms, Lavin finds localism’s efforts to foster anarchic forms of community and conviviality merely a retreat from politics by sovereign, responsible individuals (p. 103), while an ethical approach is conceived as an ‘entirely inward-looking response’ that cannot hold agents accountable (p. 129). Likewise, to claim that posthumanism, ethics or the model of ‘networks’ do not provide salient frameworks for politics because they defy the terms of current institutions and practices is to overlook how, in highlighting dynamic assemblages and our indebtedness within them, in foregrounding an agonist and situated approach to political life, in refusing decontextualized codes implied in the ‘body politic’ or ‘social contract’, they might do precisely this.

Perhaps even more than ‘network’, the metaphor of ‘ecology’ briefly mentioned in the work (p. 129) and mobilized extensively elsewhere captures this new imaginary more fully: in contrast to the ‘solidarity and dependence’ of the body politic or the

‘autonomy and choice’ of the social contract (p. 131), ‘ecology’ offers a paradigm of interdependence in motion, and intimates the ethics and politics this demands. An ecologist approach not only speaks to our indebtedness and obligation to one another, but also to the world beyond human terms; it strives for a dynamic balance borne of increased ‘vigilance, responsibility and humility that accompany living in a world so newly, and differently, inhabited’ (Wolfe, quoted p. 129) – not the organic cohesion of the body politic, not the willed artifice of the social contract, but an agonistic, embedded and everchanging equilibrium between ourselves and our world.

The question, then, becomes whether we want a vision of ‘an expansive collective identity or public good’ (p. 109), and if so, whether this necessarily requires liberal terms. Can responsibility be enacted without recourse to fictions of the autonomous individual? Can we be seen to constitute publics without distinct lines and cohesive identities to define them? Might we explore how a truly ‘digestive sensibility’ would translate into and radically reconfigure formal institutions? Lavin acknowledges that liberal ideals fall apart both at the level of bodies and practices, and at the level of the ‘human condition’, characterized by ‘vulnerability, disability, mortality, desire, and dependence’ (p. 144); this demands concerted attention to the middle ground of social organization at present governed by these very ideals. In exploring the previous paradigm of the body politic, Lavin shows we are not locked in to the social contract; that while entrenched, current political vocabularies are not the only ones available to us, and others might not only prove more accurate and preferable, but politically viable. As Lavin states in the context of posthumanism, ‘the problem...is not that it is wrong, but that it lacks a viable politics’ (p. 132). Can we, in employing a digestive sensibility, see past the terms of liberal politics to perceive how, in theory and practice, it might in fact offer just this?

Eating Anxiety’s incisive, illuminating critique of current practices and the liberal paradigm that informs them brings such questions to the fore, and highlights both the necessity of and risks entailed in the asking. It makes a timely contribution to the recent surge in embodiment and affect in political theory, by providing a wide-reaching and provocative account of the politics of digestion and refining the sensibilities required to critically engage them.

Reference

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