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BOOK REVIEWS

Eating NAFTA: Trade, Food Policies, and the Destruction of Mexico

ALYSHIA GÁLVEZ

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS, OAKLAND, 2018
270 PP. \$85.00 HARDCOVER; \$29.95 PAPERBACK;
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REVIEWED BY LAURA KIHILSTRÖM

In her multi-sited ethnography, Alyshia Gálvez asks what happens when food systems—which are deeply cultural practices of producing, distributing, and consuming foods—are subjected to neoliberal market logics. At the heart of this question is a controversial trade policy, the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), that merged Canada, United States, and Mexico into a single market for goods and services to be traded. During a time when critiques of the trade agreement often focus on its adverse impacts on workers in the United States,

Gálvez shifts the focus south of the U.S. border to Mexico. During the past twenty years, she says the North American Free Trade Agreement caused a drastic decline in Mexico's crop diversity, alienated millions of small-scale farmers due to aggressive attempts to strive for 'progress' and 'modernity' as part of neoliberal reforms, as well as caused a public health crisis due to the overabundance of cheap, imported processed foods and increases in the prices of healthier foods.

While the book revolves around this critique of capitalist economics, at its center is the story Gálvez weaves around the changing political and social life and inequalities around and within farming systems in Mexico. The global rise in status of Mexican food has allowed the Mexican government and transnational corporations to capitalize on so called 'traditional' farming systems, characterized by unique methods such as rain-fed milpas. *Milpa* farming has been celebrated as a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)-recognized heritage to preserve, while at the same time *milpa* farmers have not received any tangible government support during an economic transition.

Furthermore, the quest for so-called authentic Mexican cuisine in the West juxtaposes so-called traditional farming with modern farming, despite the many changes and adaptations that have taken place in *milpa* farming systems throughout centuries. The transnational focus in *Eating NAFTA* extends the study of these changes in local farming systems outside of Mexico's borders and into the U.S., tracing the social and political life of foodways (Galt 2013). The result is a book that draws on a variety of sources including ethnographic fieldwork in Mexico and the U.S., policy papers, historical documents, and images from popular media. The book is divided into five main body chapters that weave together a story of the transnational commodification of food.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the political economic shifts in Mexico that preceded the 1994 implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement. During this period, small-scale farming, particularly the slash-and-burn style *milpa* agriculture practiced by Yucatec Maya-speaking locals, was framed as inefficient and as a roadblock toward 'progress' for Mexico, a move similar from several other regions in the world, where agrarianism and peasantry have been depicted as

impediments to more modern and efficient ways of producing food (Aistara 2018:38). Similarly, arguments prior to the implementation of the trade agreement involved shifting the rhetoric around food production by stressing the need to focus on national food security. Those pushing for the North American Free Trade Agreement in Mexico framed that neoliberal solutions in agriculture would be the most effective way to ensure food security for the growing population. This example highlights how issues of power are not merely based on economic means but also on ideological hegemony (Crehan 2016:4). Such a neoliberal logic gives little attention to the ecology of food systems, particularly as they contribute to local food security the preservation of biodiversity.

Chapter 2 depicts how the three-country trade agreement, after its implementation, quickly altered the economic landscape and foodways of Mexico. Rather than benefitting small-scale farmers, the trade agreement increased the power of corporations and those with larger landholdings. This was made possible by the deregulation requirements built in the deal which encouraged Mexico to withdraw from protectionism and rely more on foreign direct investment. United States companies, such as Walmart, were able to expand across a new market, and the company now captures 20% of the food retail sphere in Mexico.

The influx of foreign corporations into Mexico's food system has mediated the nutrition transition which exemplifies how economic policies at the macro level affect access to and availability of food at the micro level, which in turn have increased obesity rates (Popkin 2001; Himmelgreen 2013). The nutrition transition in Mexico, as Gálvez points out, has been interconnected with the dramatic shift in farming practices. As a result of a decline in *milpa* style farming, more people have moved to the cities to work in the tourism industry, while those who remain in rural areas have shifted to more lucrative options, such as indus-

trialized egg farming.

Chapter 3 describes Mexico's public response to the obesity crisis. Gálvez argues that the obesity crisis is a result of both macroeconomic changes and a shift towards a neoliberal ideology which emphasizes individual responsibility over collective well-being. In other words, not only do trade deals such as the North American Free Trade Agreement alter social contracts regarding how we trade food, but they also influence how we think about food-related social problems. In the case of Mexico, she shows that solutions to the obesity crisis have been caught up in ideological debates on whether the public health issue should be solved in a relationship with the state or at the individual level. She further asserts that the public health steps taken by the Mexican government have disproportionately been used to police racialized working-class people.

Chapter 4 deals with another aftermath of the trade deal between the three countries: the rise in type 2 diabetes, which Gálvez approaches using a transnational approach. Comparing and contrasting the experiences of migrants in Mexico and in the United States, Gálvez brings up the adverse health effects of transnational migration, a phenomenon well documented in the literature (Martínez 2013). Gálvez argues that immigrant health issues must be understood from a broader framework of structural violence and a syndemic interplay of the trauma of migration caused by displacement, change in cultural values, as well as changes in food and foodways.

Chapter 5 deals with the marketing efforts of food companies during the post-1994 era, which tap into the cultural significance of food and foodways. Gálvez writes about the nostalgia that people feel about 'authentic' food of the past, and how companies such as McDonalds rely upon these affective responses as part of their marketing strategy. The chapter also

touches upon the changing face of capitalism and economic development. When in the past capitalist expansion has focused on increasing consumption, today expansion is also aggressively geographical. When market saturation is reached in one place, companies seek to make profits elsewhere. *Eating NAFTA* demonstrates how the penetration of relatively affordable processed foods into Mexico during the past decades is one manifestation of this.

To conclude, *Eating NAFTA* is a timely and well-researched book on how neoliberalism, through transnational trade deals and ideological shifts, impacts people's sovereignty in defining their own food systems and foodways. The book demonstrates that the effects of this trade deal have not been uniform on the Mexican people. Elites and those with more privileges have reaped economic benefits, while those most marginalized within the country have experienced devastating consequences. The book is also an intervention to the literature on food security. When national and transnational conversations revolve merely around the concept of food security, they undermine "the need to preserve the livelihoods of people who are most dependent on ecological capital" (Gálvez 2018).

The book would have benefitted from a chapter that would have focused solely on the political ecology of food and farming systems in Mexico. Many of the book's central themes are brought forward through discussing corn, a dominant and historically important crop in the region. However, other scholars have also noted how agricultural trade liberalization through the North American Free Trade Agreement dramatically decreased farming areas in Mexico for other crops like beans and chickpeas while increasing farming areas for export-oriented crops such as avocado, mango, and lime (Orozco-Ramírez et al. 2017). Thus, there would have been potential for the book to further explore the regional differences in farming practices, crop selections, as well as changes to those practices post-1994.

Finally, a transnational view on the North American Free Trade Agreement could have included an analysis of similarities in the experiences of small-scale farmers both in the United States and Mexico. In the United States, farming is becoming an ever-consolidating, ever-expanding capitalist venture, making it difficult for small-scale family farmers to stay in business, despite attempts to diversify and alter their business models. Gálvez' view on this process as well as a commentary on the possibilities of transnational 'solidarities of the shaken for all their contradiction and conflict' (Patocka 1999: xv) would have been an intriguing read.

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