

# Graduate Association for **Food Studies**

**Title:** Review of “Oil for Food: The Global Food Crisis and the Middle East” by Eckart Woertz

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Hayden-Smith's primary goal is to cultivate the American landscape with twenty-first-century gardens in the pattern of World War I "Victory Gardens" (a posthumous appellation, as Hayden-Smith notes). *Sowing the Seeds of Victory* is written for a public audience and has an explicit activist bent; the academic apparatus of footnotes and extensive bibliography are confined to the back of the paperback. The conclusion includes a list of ten items of action for food activists today, accessible for both the uninitiated and the Greenpeace warrior. The twenty-first-century American public is intensely interested in food systems, judging by the meteoric rise of Michael Pollan, Mark Bittman, and the revival of the cult of Alice Waters; this book seeks to capitalize on that interest among a variety of audiences.

Hayden-Smith envisions a food future grounded in youth education, localized food systems, urban gardening, and reorganized crop classifications to promote vegetable produce over cash-crop commodities like soy and corn. Some of these recommendations are in keeping with her World War I subjects (emphasis on children's education and nutrition), and others are not (school lunch programs, which began in the 1930s). This raises questions about how we use history; for example, does her vision of the future include a generation of small-scale farmers oriented toward diversified market production, actively dying out in the World War I era? Or is her vision one of family production for domestic consumption across the American populace, as in Victory Gardens—or a combination of both? Unfortunately, Hayden-Smith leaves history behind in her prescriptive conclusion, so the reader is left to wonder.

While the book has been criticized for its presentist slant, simply raising these questions about how to practically apply history is valuable in and of itself (not to mention the questions raised about the future of food systems). While Hayden-Smith's activism may depart and arguably distract from her history at times, she provides an example for young scholars of one way to combine activism and academia within a book aimed at public audiences. Any undergraduate class on American history or food history would benefit from seeing how the past is relevant to the problems of today as well as from Hayden's portrayal of the World War I home front. Ultimately, blending the past with contemporary politics seems appropriate here. In her own activism, Hayden-Smith continues very much in the vein of the Progressive Era reformers who appropriated America's history of gardening for modernist agendas ranging from Americanization to women's rights; likewise, Hayden-Smith seizes upon Progressive Era garden history to promote a twenty-first-century future.

## BOOK REVIEW | M. RUTH DIKE

### *Oil for Food: The Global Food Crisis and the Middle East* Eckart Woertz

New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. iii, 268 pp.

Eckart Woertz discusses various courses of action that governments in the Persian Gulf took in order to improve their countries' food security after the 2008 global food crisis in *Oil for Food*. The extremely well-researched book takes a historical and political economic approach to examine food security in Gulf countries at a regional and national level. Throughout the book, Woertz moves from the origins of food security concerns in the Middle East during World War II to various efforts to become self-sufficient through mechanized agriculture; later he traces agro-investments in developing nations from the 1970s to the present. Ultimately, Woertz argues that Gulf food security hinges on Gulf countries' ability to pay for external food imports, rather than self-sufficiency through agriculture, which has proven untenable due to water scarcity.

Chapter one discusses the current food security issues in the Gulf—mainly the rising prices of food on the international market, the importance of low food prices for political legitimacy in the Gulf, lack of water for domestic agriculture, lowering water tables, and the import dependence of food items by country. In part one, chapters two through four give a twentieth-century history of food security in the region. Setting the stage for future food security concerns, chapter two explains the food shortages before World War II and famines in the Gulf, which were only averted during the war due to supplies from the Allied Middle East Supply Center in Cairo. In chapter three, Woertz analyzes the industrialization of agriculture in the Gulf after World War II, emphasizing the use of irrigation and mechanization. For example, in the 1970s and 1980s, Saudi Arabia tried to become self-sufficient in wheat consumption with the launch of various industrial farm projects. Chapter four focuses on food as a political weapon, mainly in relation to US-Middle East relations. The US withdrew subsidized food aid from the Food for Peace program in the 1960s to influence Egyptian foreign policy, threatened food embargos after the Arab oil boycott in the 1970s, and considered a "Grain OPEC" to increase its political leverage. However, in the 1980s, the US tried to distance itself from its former policies and threats by depoliticizing food trade in hopes of stimulating commerce. The UN's decision to embargo Iraq during the 1990s posed

a serious threat to Iraqi food security and served as a severe warning for surrounding Arab countries.

Part two focuses on the Gulf's global interactions in relation to food security. Moving outside the Gulf region, chapter five discusses Arab investment in farmland in Africa and Asia, despite various potential setbacks like Chinese and Western investors competing for the same land, global climate change, ecological degradation, population growth, and potential conflicts with local stakeholders. Honing into a specific context, chapter six analyzes the failed 1970s attempt to make Sudan the Gulf's personal breadbasket. Despite this, history seems to be repeating itself with new calls for land investments into Sudan in response to the 2008 global food crisis and potentially the announcements of a government-sponsored dam project and "agricultural revival" program in the 2000s. In addition to Sudan, Woertz also examines land investments in Ethiopia, Pakistan, and the Philippines, despite these countries' inability to provide enough food for their own citizens, in chapter seven. Investments from Saudi Arabia and Qatar are emphasized due to their institutionalized agro-investment policies, which are frequently implemented through sovereign wealth funds. Moving from publicity to reality, chapter eight focuses on the discrepancy between ambitious announcements of agricultural land investments throughout the world compared to relatively modest action on the ground. This is largely due to the difficulty of working in underdeveloped nations, ecological constraints, and a general resistance from local grassroots organizations despite upper-level government officials' desire for foreign investment projects. In order for the Gulf countries to ensure food security in the future, Woertz argues in chapter nine that Gulf countries must diversify their economies. Woertz recognizes that self-sufficiency based on domestic agriculture is impossible in the Gulf due to low water levels. Domestic policies should be instituted to maintain water levels, curb overconsumption, and stretch the life of oil reserves, in order to be able to pay for imported food over the long run.

This book adds to the dearth of food-focused books about the Middle East. It does an excellent job of connecting disparate strains of political and economic policies, organizations, and actions into a coherent narrative. Despite the book's focus on larger government-instituted policies, it does not fail to recognize the importance of more local desires of people near and on agro-investment lands in developing countries. The book also provides valuable insight into the historical and psychological reasons for a fear of food insecurity in the Gulf. However, some readers

might be overwhelmed by the sheer number of details provided. A wide variety of students and scholars would find this book to be interesting and useful for their studies, but it would be most useful for policymakers, graduate students, and faculty seeking to understand food security in the Gulf. This book is also important for any scholar in food studies or social sciences interested in food security, land grabs, historical examples of food as political weapon, and geopolitical aspects of food sovereignty.

#### BOOK REVIEW | HAILEY GROHMAN

### *Word of Mouth: What We Talk About When We Talk About Food* Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson

Oakland: University of California Press. 2014. xxiv, 203 pp.

Describing a food chain as "farm to fork" may miss a crucial link: post-meal conversation. In *Word of Mouth*, Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson assesses this gap in the food studies literature by examining the rhetoric of food, that which comes out of our mouths rather than in. Drawing on varied secondary sources as well as her own previous research on world-class chefs, Ferguson illustrates how "food talk" both informs and reflects the ways that cultures understand food. In three parts, she leads the reader to an understanding of the close relationship between food discourse of all kinds and the lived food experience.

Ferguson's sociological background leads her to situate her data firmly within a social and historical context. She gives equal analytical weight to the venerable and the quotidian, the haute menu and the comic strip. Guiding her methodology is cultural critic Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*, an unconventional history of Paris told through texts of all types. In Ferguson's adaptation of this method, culinary sources from cookbooks to New Yorker cartoons share a stage. This assortment of cultural miscellany, which she dubs "methodological eclecticism," guides a larger narrative of the history of hosting and dining, cooking and cheffing, eating and talking (xviii). Throughout, Ferguson sees a changing culinary landscape—one becoming less formal and more global—and shows how this landscape is reflected by the discourse around it.

The book is divided into three discrete sections, brought together by an epilogue centered around the Pixar film *Ratatouille*. Part one introduces food texts that