

PREFACE

IN MANY ways, this book has been in the making for a long time. I have been interested in international politics for many years: I studied it in college, I worked for a few years as a foreign affairs reporter, and even when I became a food writer, and then a food scholar, I continued to observe the political aspects of what we eat, how, and why. In my opinion, you cannot separate politics from food. We may enjoy reveling in memories and pastoral fantasies, celebrating flavors and traditions, and admiring the craft of chefs and artisans, but I believe there is more to food. Why has culinary nostalgia become so widespread? Why do we care about traditions? And why do chefs and artisans have plenty of customers who can understand and appreciate what they do, happy to pay a premium for it? These are profoundly political questions that I have been musing on for a long time in my research on the history and culture of food in Italy, popular culture, media, film, place-based labels, and food systems.

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Such political questions have become more pressing. In recent years, I have watched countries where I live and do research (or have done research) fall into a spiral of a rabid populism, allowing the emergence of politicians that take advantage of widespread discontent to promote isolationism, conservatism, and various degrees of xenophobia. The United States, Italy, Poland, France, Brazil, China, India . . . all these places I have a connection with are now rife with conflicts and increasingly unsettled. Disgruntlement has turned into indignation and rage, and what and how people eat is often featured front and center in these dynamics.

Not for the first time, food plays a central role in politics, especially when not enough of it is produced or imported, or if people do not have enough to eat, for reasons ranging from natural disasters to social turmoil. While those concerns are still essential to most legitimate and illegitimate authorities at any scale, issues connected with individual and collective identities have taken center stage in ways that have turned food into a powerful ideological tool in political debates, protests, and negotiations. Food can be wielded as a weapon in cultural wars that, at times, become all too real, with devastating consequences for their victims. Moreover, while the apparent focus is on local or national issues, the horizon in which these tensions play out is more and more global.

Globalization appears to generate a need for community and rootedness that can be channeled into all kinds of political projects, operating at scales varying from the hyperlocal to the international. I have been looking for ways to make sense of these shifts both in my academic work and in other forms of

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communication, from books for general audiences to my own blog. In November 2019, I participated in the “Cucina Politica” conference at Bologna University. In Italian, the title means both political cuisine and political kitchen. Among the conversations that took place over the coffee breaks during the meeting, one stuck with me: some of the participants observed that the Italian left seems to have lost its capacity to relate effectively to politically charged ideas like nation or patriotism, which, in that country, have become the almost exclusive domain of right-wing and conservative discourse.

That exchange got me thinking, as it became apparent that the phenomenon was not limited to Italy. Why and how had that happened? Why are liberals and progressives less inclined to tackle those themes? Why can’t the governments they head come up with effective yet humane and fair policies to manage migration flows, in order to prevent the rise of political forces that channel prejudice, racism, and xenophobia? Why don’t enlightened intelligentsias seriously address concerns about the loss of cultural identity (even when it is mixed with racist and bigoted proclamations)? These matters cannot just be discounted, regardless of what we think of them or whether we consider them legitimate or based on facts. They exist and have tangible political implications. Liberal and progressive politicians appear to be aware of the consequences of the growing economic inequalities, both domestically and internationally, the transfer of blue-collar jobs to other countries, and the lowering of social status and standards of living among the middle and the working classes in high-income countries as well. However, their positions and declarations are often denounced as

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condescending and out of touch by those who bear the brunt of these epochal changes.

I am lucky enough not to share those same worries. I am part of the privileged, cosmopolitan, educated elite that populisms despise. I am an expert with credentials from prestigious institutions of higher education and I proudly strive to improve my expertise. I am an immigrant, although one of luxury, who relocated to a new country because of a cool job. I have all the traits of a globalist, to use a term very much *en vogue* in populist and nativist circles. I studied in different countries and traveled extensively as a journalist. Working in media, I witnessed the epochal transformation from local print and broadcast media to the present-day global circulation of news and images on the Internet. I still remember when we started talking about the Internet 2.0 and when I stopped using film to take pictures with an actual camera for my stories. Yet my personal path is not just that. I am not independently wealthy. My family, back in Italy, is neither powerful nor well connected. I guess I am among those who were able to ride the wave of globalization and make the most of it.

However, I am also well aware that many others did not have the same opportunities and were not able to access the same tools I mustered to advance my career. Some of them are among my friends and family. These reflections led me to read more about the contemporary politics of tribalism, populism, sovereignty, nativism, nationalism, and all the other isms that are evoked to make sense of what we have been observing in the last couple of decades. I went back to classics of political thought, from Karl Polanyi to Hannah Arendt, but also started following

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right-wing media, although I must admit I could not force myself to read the most extreme publications for long. My goal was to get a better understanding of worldviews I deeply and viscerally disagree with. It was an intellectual endeavor as much as an existential one: taking a few steps back from current events to look at the big picture helped me maintain some sanity. I have always found writing therapeutic.

Each example I mention in the chapters that follow deserves deeper and more extensive exploration. The academic and general readership articles, as well as the books, throughout the endnotes, point to the importance of studies focusing on specific locations. I relied on sources in languages other than English to provide a variety of perspectives. I built on the wisdom of this material, together with my own research and reflection. However, I chose a different path, one that requires not only meticulous inquiry and observation but also the possibly reckless attempt at jumping high to embrace a bird's-eye perspective and detect patterns that would otherwise remain invisible on the ground. We know that maps are abstractions, but they are useful ones. They help us understand reality, taking us places we can then explore more closely. Different methods produce different maps, each with its own priorities and goals. No map gives us total knowledge, and we are aware we can get a variety of information by examining more than one map. In these pages I make a first attempt at a global map using food to detect possible patterns emerging from current events.

However, I am fully aware that these patterns are tentative, unstable, and shifting. They may disappear as soon as we recognize them, and there is no predetermined direction in which

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they are heading, since we shape them as we go: all is based on contingency and on the decisions of myriad actors. Anything can happen. For this reason, this book does not claim to have all the answers or, worse, to have found *the* answer to the current zeitgeist. Actually, it raises questions rather than offering solutions. However, it proposes one point of view, food and its ideological uses, to read events and tensions that are obviously much larger than what we eat or, rather, what the right stuff for us to eat is supposed to be. I turned to food not only because it is what I do for a living but also because food is an important aspect of the phenomena that are reshaping the global political landscape, although it is, at times, disregarded or treated with condescension. Food cultures and customs are not inconsequential ideological weapons. They have concrete impacts on the economic, legal, and social dimensions of our daily lives. For this reason, this book is not meant to be exclusively academic, although based on years of scholarly investigation and fieldwork. The topic is obvious and relevant to everybody, so I made my reflections as accessible as possible, with fewer endnotes than most scholarly works.

The past months have been extraordinary, and what happened, inevitably, has had an impact on my research and my writing. In early 2020, the pandemic upended our lives, forcing us into lockdown and changing the way we buy food or socialize around it. The summer of 2020 was marked by the Black Lives Matter protests, which put issues of systemic racism in the U.S. and elsewhere front and center, as the movement spread worldwide. At the same time, the food scarcity that whole populations have experienced during the pandemic has pointed to

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inequalities in the global food system that politicians were leveraging in all kinds of ways. I was completing the first draft of this book when, on January 6, 2021, Trump supporters stormed Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. They were not only right-wing extremists but also businesspeople, former soldiers, and policemen. The whole world watched, realizing how fragile the American political experiment is. The attack on the electoral process, fomented by the president himself, showed how shaky the foundations of democratic institutions are.

If anything, those events and incidents made writing this book even more urgent for me. The tense landscape of 2020 and 2021 has permeated all aspects of our social and personal life, food included. I hope that the following pages will help you look with fresh eyes at the ideological and political uses of food in the current state of affairs.

