

WHY SHOULD WE CARE? TWO EXPERIENCES IN THE POLITICS OF FOOD AND FOOD RESEARCH

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The aim of this article is to analyse the political aspects of food and their significance as an object of study. The first author of the article has studied Polish society as an insider, while the other author had previously conducted research in other countries, before three years ago starting to explore Poland and Polish gastronomy, and thus finding himself in the role of outsider. The two scholars have recently been working together. The power relations between the societies and the academic worlds from which they come turned out to be crucial to the research dynamics and became one of the paper's key interests. Two main topics provide the structure of the collaborative paper: 1) the question of the authors' positionality; 2) the legitimacy issues related to the study of food within academia and to scholars' engagement outside it. The authors agree that an inextricable connection of food and politics has not only an academic or theoretical dimension, but also impacts on the realities of people's lives.

KEYWORDS: food studies, food politics, positionality, academic power relations, gastronomy field, public engagement

This article analyses the political aspects of food, their significance as an object of study and their impact on food research. Our goal is not so much to summarize empirical material gathered by the authors, nor to provide a definitive theoretical or methodological contribution to established fields, such as sociology of knowledge or institutional ethnography; rather, we provide comparative auto-ethnographic notes and a self-reflection on the political meanings, entanglements and implications of the authors' experience in food-related research, with a particular emphasis on their work in Poland and the Polish context in which they operate. This, we hope, will serve as material for future exploration on the form and tasks of food research, especially when it comes to international collaborations.

The political nature of food inevitably influences the way we look at it, and vice versa: our attention to food turns it into a more sensitive issue than simply that of physical sustenance. We argue that, although often perceived as not rigorous enough and erroneously discounted as dealing with the ordinary, food research should gain

greater recognition because of its political significance. Through our emphasis on the problem of positionality and the context of Eastern Europe compared to global centres, we consider politics in a broad sense: as an attempt at creating and governing communities while assessing their past, negotiating their present and imagining their future. Politics also refers to dealing with differences and hierarchies inside a society, while imaging particular forms of interactions with the external environment. In fact, food research (including ours) highlights how food practices and the discourses that support them reveal power relations, social inequalities and cultural differences among individuals and groups: the question of how such research hides or legitimizes these dynamics through research must be critically discussed.

Although certainly not all these topics can be covered in one article, we want to address some of them by reflecting on and comparing our two different academic experiences in researching food. We especially take into account the study of food and of the gastronomy field in Poland, the context in which we collaborate.¹ The first goal of the paper relates to positionality. We examine our different positions in the field: what does it mean to do research on food in Poland from both an (Eastern) insider's and (Western) outsider's perspective? We do not claim that this East v. West opposition is the only possible framework for reflection, but we acknowledge that in our experience it does matter. The juxtaposition of our different academic position- alities and biographies allows us to achieve the second goal of the paper, which is to highlight some of the political aspects of food research by focusing on the differences between Polish and American academia, on their contrasting statuses and circum- stances, as well as on how these distinctive power relations are reflected in our own experiences and collaboration.

The first author of the article is Agata Bachórz, who has studied Polish society – through food amongst a number of other topics – as an insider. The other author is Fabio Parasecoli, who had previously conducted research in other countries and three years ago started exploring Poland and Polish gastronomy, and thus inevitably found himself in the role of an outsider. We have recently been working together in an ethnographic and media analysis project about the revaluation of traditional and regional food in Poland among urban, educated and upwardly mobile middle classes. The project, launched in 2018 with funding from the National Science Centre, aims to explore this apparent revaluation in terms of space – through the re-articulation of the categories of local, regional and national – and time, through discourses around

1 We refer to the gastronomy field (Matta 2019) in the Bourdieusian sense of a social field (Bourdieu 1993; Hilgers and Mangez 2014), as a dynamic and competitive interaction between people, institu- tions, materials, ideas, values and practices that determine the cultural aspects of the production and consumption of food, as well as its symbolic understanding. Of course, the structural and superstructural aspects of these matters cannot be totally separated, as Gramsci argued long ago in his critique of rigid Marxian approaches (Gramsci 2000; Laclau and Mouffe 1985).

history and tradition which include debates on authenticity. We try to examine new forms of cosmopolitanism resulting both from homegrown social dynamics and expanding entanglements with global cultures and practices through social media and other forms of communication. We also aim to understand how forms of cosmopolitanism expressed through the revaluation of Polish food influence the experience of national identity and heritage in everyday life. The research is ongoing, in collaboration with a third team member, Mateusz Halawa from the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at the Polish Academy of Sciences. This paper is largely based on the notes and conversations that accompany the development of this project.

We have organized our collaborative reflection around two topics, which provide the structure of the article: first, the question of the authors' positionality, and second the legitimacy issues related to studying food within academia and to scholars' engagement outside it. We refer to and take examples both from our previous fieldwork and our experiences in and beyond academia, as well as from our joint research project on the revaluation of food in contemporary Poland. We compared our reflections on the two topics and built a dialogic, however not always smooth, narrative which led us to shared conclusions.

POSITIONALITY AND HOW IT INFLUENCES FOOD RESEARCH

The power relations between the societies and the academic worlds from which we come constitute the background of our collaboration: we suggest that a centre-periphery frame is an accurate conceptualization of this relationship (Canagarajah 2002; Bennett 2014). We understand it results in circumstances that are difficult to overcome for individual scholars who may seek personal recognition by agreeing to unequal relations, however symbiotic they may be, with a global centre. Such structural dimensions of research cannot be omitted when talking about the individual achievements of scholars engaged in the process of knowledge production in semiperipheral contexts (Duszak 2006; Wagner 2012). In our case there are two separate but connected issues: the first one is a question of the authors' positionality in academia at large and more specifically in food research. The second is that of their dynamics within the particular research field of food and gastronomy: issues of access to the field, availability of information and perceptions by interlocutors in the study which may help or disturb ethnographic work. Although the situation in food research would not seem to differ radically from that of other fields, we are not aware of a focused analysis that would apply to this particular context.

It is not without significance that a number of sociological and anthropological studies on "food in the Eastern Bloc" and "food in Poland" before and after 1989 have been carried out by Western European and American universities and publishing houses. After 1989, the new "postsocialist framework" was applied to replace and

redefine the former East-West division, recognized as reproducing inequality (e.g. Caldwell, Dunn and Nestle 2009; Yung, Klein and Caldwell 2014). However, this did not eliminate doubts regarding the inequalities and positionality issues embedded in knowledge production, even in cases where scholars themselves came from the countries studied.

In the field of food-related research, the use of postsocialism as the main framework led to, for example, imagining “everyday”, or even “peasant”, food as the only food worth studying in Poland, with gourmet food and fine dining construed as a privilege of the West. Speaking more generally, using postsocialism as a framework has turned out to be problematic and controversial, and has not achieved a levelling of the hierarchies built into academia (Stenning and Hörschelmann 2008; Müller 2019, cf. Kopczyńska and Bachórz 2018). In fact, while for some “postsocialism” was a lens to focus on agency with a goal of recognizing the value of local resources (Dunn 2004), others claimed it still maintained a binary picture of Europe under a new name and did not give a voice to representatives of the former Eastern Bloc (Červinkova 2012). A problem that arose in this kind of studies was an international division of labour in the academic field in which theoretical frameworks and analytical concepts were developed in dominant centres, while local scholars played the role of those who provided empirical data and “local knowledge” (Buchowski 2004; Buchowski and Červinkova 2015).

However, Eastern European scholars have highlighted the theoretical contributions that derive precisely from doing research in the periphery (Jehlička et al. 2020). In Bachórz’s study (2018) of intergenerational food transfers within urban families in contemporary Poland, it turned out that in many cases urban modernity is conditioned by quasi-traditional relations in families, embodied in the circulation of food between parents’ and adult children’s households. In our shared project we have observed chefs and food producers who, although curious about international trends and cosmopolitan practices (also because they are more frequently featured in upscale Polish food media), are determined to find their own Polish way to achieve the high standards that they see in the international gastronomy field: standards which they appreciate, but towards which they also maintain a certain level of criticism or at least scepticism. As a result, we posit more complex under the surface links between “tradition” and “modernity” than the opposition often expressed in popular discourse, which tends to contrast these two conditions instead of showing their hybridity. Through dynamics of dialogue, acceptance and resistance, the local context refuses direct insertion into a globally produced framework in a way which helps to understand the hybridity of Eastern-European transformations (cf. Smith and Jehlička 2007; Jehlička, Kostelecky and Smith 2013) and provides further support for notions of non-Western realizations of modernity. We hope our work will also be in line with this approach, for instance by contributing to reflections on the role of nodes at all scales and of multidimensional networks in globalized cultural formations (Dürschmidt and Kautt 2019; Parasecoli

and Halawa 2020), as well as on postcolonial analysis in the supposed absence in Eastern Europe of typical forms of colonization (Kołodziejczyk 2013; Bjelić 2016; Sobieraj-Skorski 2019).

How is this dynamic reflected on or dealt with in the academic work we are conducting in Poland? How do we engage with this imbalance of power? Beyond our shared experience in the research project in Poland, there are significant differences between our situations which affect our positionality both in and outside academia, as well as the methods and the practices we embrace. We have been quite straightforward in discussing the power relations among us, determined by factors inherent to the administrative organization of the research (Parasecoli is the principal investigator), being at different phases in our careers, our different education backgrounds, gender dynamics, our local and international visibility inside and outside academia, and our previous experiences, both in terms of research and of relationships with peers and individuals in higher and lower hierarchical positions.

Parasecoli, despite his background in history and media, would identify himself primarily as a food scholar, without a specific affiliation in any traditional discipline. As we will discuss, his opportunities to work within interdisciplinary programs and later in a department formally identified as “food studies” have given him a certain latitude in his intellectual pursuits. His past experience as a food writer for a well-known Italian food and wine media company, as well his current employment as a tenured, full professor in such a prestigious (and wealthy) American institution as New York University allow him to enjoy great independence in his choice of research projects, publications and relationships with actors in local food worlds and with other academics.

While Parasecoli belongs to a clear and distinct academic environment with food at its centre, Bachórz’s entry into the field of food research may be treated as a new and probably not last stage in her academic career. She has previously studied food patterns as a sociologist interested also in questions of cultural participation, tourism and leisure, often using a postcolonial frame and focusing on East-West relations. She comes from an academic context where institutionalised food studies, in the sense of an identifiable field of research and pedagogy and structured programs or departments, has not developed and food scholars conduct valuable research in a variety of disciplines and departments. In Poland, academic explorations of food have expanded in a variety of directions, all deserving attention. For example, the growing omnivorousness displayed by Poles has entered the area of interest of scholars focusing on social structures (Domański et al. 2015; Cebula 2018). In addition to this specific aspect, relevant research is also taking place in history (e.g. Dumanowski 2016; Dias-Lewandowska and Kurczewski 2018; Milewska 2018; Sikorska 2019) and the social sciences (e.g. Leńska-Bąk 2010; Jarecka and Wiczorkiewicz 2014; Kopczyńska 2017; 2018; Straczuk 2018; Boni 2017; Hryciuk 2018; 2019; Krukowska and Rancew-Sikora 2018; Mroczkowska

2019). In particular, we have observed a consolidation of research on alternative food networks conducted by social scientists from the rural sociology field, including the question of political activism through food provisioning and a local Polish specificity (e.g. Bilewicz and Śpiewak 2018; Goszczyński et al. 2019); the examination of cultural, legal and political tensions around local/regional food (e.g. Kleśta-Nawrocka and Kleśta-Nawrocki 2018; Stasik 2018; Boni 2019); food in art and popular culture (e.g. Drzał-Sierocka 2014; Michalak 2018; Stronciwilk 2019); and the intersections of food and medicine (e.g. Chowaniec-Rylke 2018; Rajtar 2019).

In terms of the consolidation and institutionalisation of food research in Poland, we wish to highlight bottom-up networking initiatives. First and foremost, both in terms of study curriculum and food research, we note the role of the “critical food studies” circle that operates mainly at the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology of the University of Warsaw.² However, despite the multiplicity of interests, the high quality of publications, and the frequency of talks and academic events concerned with food, many researchers would welcome greater collaboration between one another, which could be boosted by a national network or some kind of formal organization. This desire has been expressed in regular meetings among scholars from all over the country under the name of the Food and Drink Researchers’ Network (*Sieć Badaczy i Badaczek Jedzenia i Picia*), which are also intended to provide support for participants in their individual work and to generate some impact in terms of greater interest, visibility and legitimacy within universities. Furthermore, the meetings also aim to contribute to overcome the centre-periphery dynamics in action also within Polish academia, which have often seen Warsaw at the forefront of new initiatives.

In Parasecoli’s experience, the chance to work in a multidisciplinary environment brings opportunities to look at complex issues from a variety of points of view, which in turns allows for more holistic approaches. Conversely, those scholars more closely connected to a specific discipline at times feel that their food-related work does not meet the expectations of their peers in that discipline, a situation that may generate anxieties about recognition and legitimacy. Bachórz, however, acknowledges that being rooted in a discipline (sociology, in her case) rather than in interdisciplinary food studies has at least one important advantage: a habit of treating food as an indicator with reference to other issues, which can be used as an argument to give legitimacy to the study of food. Although Parasecoli operates in a well-established food studies

2 See the regular food seminar organized by Renata E. Hryciuk, Justyna Straczuk, Joanna Mroczkowska and Zofia Boni in 2013–2016: <https://www.etnologia.uw.edu.pl/wokol-etnologii/seminaria/seminaria-jedzeniowe> and the ethnographic laboratory “*Antropologia (nie)równości: praktyki jedzeniowe w Warszawie*” for ethnology students, organized by Renata E. Hryciuk and E. Katarzyna Król in 2020–2022 <https://www.etnologia.uw.edu.pl/dla-studentow/studia/laboratoria-etnograficzne>.

department in a well-known university and food studies as a field is acquiring increasing respect and legitimacy, at times he still has to deal with peers from more established disciplines that look at his work as not rigorous or dealing with inconsequential matters. Such situations are arguably even more frequent for Agata Bachórz who represents a rather peripheral field inside a semi-peripheral academia. Moreover, despite various collaborative experiences, she is affiliated with the University of Gdańsk, which is far from being central in Polish academia and may allow her more limited access to resources and visibility. Her academic career is largely marked by a sense of being on the outskirts and searching for peer support. The necessity of doing small-scale research, which may give her some academic freedom, at the same time makes her particularly sensitive to such structural constraints. This is why the above-mentioned possibility of treating food research as a set of case studies referring to broader theoretical or abstract issues helps by adding a value of universality to her work.

What interests us most for this paper is noticing that these dynamics – together with the semi-peripheral location of Poland and the quasi-colonial relationship between “the West” and “the East” – influence the research field, which in our case is gastronomy. Gastronomy has evolved differently in the USA and Poland, which means that its study must take into account some inevitable dissimilarities. Historically, food in Poland on the one hand has belonged to the private sphere, while on the other, after the end of World War II, it became a responsibility for a state which was supposed to provide for its citizens. While it existed as a social practice among pre-WWII elites, eating out as a public leisure activity is a relatively new phenomenon for the majority of Poles: the gastronomy field here can be described as partly imitative and “in the making”, searching for its identity while trying to gain visibility and reflect global trends. In our research, we have noticed how our interlocutors are not only interested and sensitive to what happens outside Poland, but also often ask Parasecoli about emerging trends, up-and-coming chefs or new media, revealing a built-in sense of operating in a periphery. As a consequence, his contribution (which he tries to provide beyond his personal opinions and preferences) is sought after and appreciated in the development of local projects, from farmers’ markets to conferences and museums.

Parasecoli’s first exposure to the Polish culinary landscape happened during a visit for food writers, funded in 2016 by the Adam Mickiewicz Institute, which immediately made him visible in local gastronomy circles. As a matter of fact, the decision to conduct an organized, long-term study partly derived from his ease in accessing interlocutors and interacting with them, often being invited to give academic talks, to participate in food events and to give interviews on Polish media outlets. We have observed that access to him is actually desired by local actors, who see a confirmation of the value of Polish food in his interest in it and his engagement with them. After one recent talk at the University of Warsaw, for instance, Parasecoli was given various types of *kielbasa* as a gift from an audience member, a food professional he knew and

had previously interacted with. This rather unusual performance, at least in academic circumstances, confirms that the gift-giver interpreted the event as a professional culinary one and behaved accordingly. In the past, Parasecoli has been invited to be a judge in culinary contests for specialties he was not previously familiar with, from *nalewki* to *czernina*, precisely because of his position as a foreigner with different taste categories. His participation was welcomed to give more gravitas, status and visibility to the contests and their participants. When food professionals launched the idea of “Twaróg Day” as a way to celebrate a simple but ubiquitous, traditional (and often handmade) product, Parasecoli was invited to be one of the signatories of the document: a gesture which points to how he is now considered not only an observer, but actually a participant in the changes taking place in the Polish foodscape (the declaration expressed both respect for existing practice and the desire to elevate the product to better fit higher standards of quality and taste). Furthermore, Parasecoli’s notoriety has been leveraged to turn him into a Polish food ambassador of sorts. A Polish institution asked Parasecoli if he wanted to prepare an itinerary for foreign chefs visiting Poland as he was supposed to be better positioned to understand their interests and preferences (he politely declined, pointing out that there are very capable Polish food professionals who could do this). He has also been invited to give talks about Polish food in events organized abroad by, or in collaboration with, Polish institutions. This prompts us to again raise long-honoured questions in ethnography about the extent to which the researcher’s very presence and actions shape the researched reality. In Parasecoli’s case, the ambiguous and not entirely equal relation between the researcher and the field may be compounded by the fact that Parasecoli plays a dual role in the gastronomy field as a scholar and a journalist, and that he comes not just from outside Central-Eastern Europe, but in particular from the Italian culinary world and from American academia, both prestigious in their own right. A Western journalist and intellectual provides reassurance to a culinary world that feels stuck in the periphery and that often discounts its own value. In line with a postcolonial pattern, recognition and confirmation of value still come from outside. Parasecoli finds himself constantly trying to maintain access to interlocutors, while underlining time and time again that his role in Poland is an academic one, gently reminding actors in the gastronomy fields that some of their expectations cannot be met due to the researcher’s conflicts of interest.

The occurrences and dynamics we have just described suggest that the gastronomy field is a dimension of the food system in which power relations, inequalities and conflicts around recognition become particularly visible through dynamics of taste, access and interests. This is the case also for us, but our positionality generates different experiences. Parasecoli has been invited to do research in some of the most expensive food establishments in Poland, from Michelin-starred restaurants to countryside spas, whose public relation operatives see in his presence an opportunity for visibility, also

because he still writes for media outlets outside academia. Paradoxically, it is easier for him to get acquainted with the upper echelons of Polish gastronomy than to explore the domestic sphere or less reputed restaurants or stores. It needs to be underlined that the aspect of performance that is part of any ethnographic fieldwork is amplified by his presence, as interlocutors want to showcase their best and, when possible, influence his perceptions and experiences. Furthermore, it is easier for English or French-speaking individuals to have access to him. These factors indicate the centrality of shared cultural and social backgrounds among researchers and interlocutors in shaping fieldwork.

Bachórz's role in the research is more difficult to describe because it is not so visible: there are not as many ethnographic facts to recall as in Parasecoli's case. Her presence does not manifest itself through vivid incidents that can illustrate her interventions. She also does not have – at least so far – many experiences of engagement with food-related activities in non-academic roles; this is probably more about her not being publicly recognizable than her being Polish. It is particularly interesting that her role is never linked to the evaluation of food as such, in terms of taste, quality or authenticity. As a sociologist, sometimes she is asked to comment on eating patterns, but not on food *per se*. We link this to the fact that Bachórz's first role is that of being a sociologist, while in Parasecoli's case food itself constitutes his primary public identity. Her role – we assume – is more clear and easy to define for people in the field.

Bachórz is usually well received by participants in her research, but her presence in the field is not particularly celebrated. For instance, she rarely experiences such benefits as a tasting opportunity and often has to deal with the limited time of her potential interviewees. Bachórz's limited public visibility, however, cannot be perceived only as disadvantageous because it does not give her such free access to the gastronomy field: in fact, her presence causes less doubts about her position when doing fieldwork. Perhaps this is to some extent a delusion of “transparency”, but it can be assumed that the motivations of her interlocutors are less instrumental and that relations with them turn out to be less hierarchical. For example, only sometimes – when her role is misunderstood and not clearly linked to academia – did she have the impression of being expected to increase the visibility of an interlocutor's business. In general, she has not felt she has any debt to (symbolically) pay back, which does not guarantee, but is conducive to, a more critical approach.

THE LEGITIMACY OF FOOD STUDIES: INSIDE AND OUTSIDE ACADEMIA

As we have already mentioned, food scholars often have to struggle with the necessity of justifying their work as rigorous, legitimate and significant. The reason for this is not only the position of food research within academia, but also in public debates

around policies which may or may not recognize food as a central issue in social life, from local to national and international levels.

In the United States, the public is showing growing interest in food-related matters, from health and nutrition to gastronomy, sustainability and social justice (Nestle 2002; Poppendieck 2010; Fisher 2018). In a country that is ethnically and racially quite varied, food's centrality in the development of individual and communal identities is also increasingly understood among the general public. These themes are well developed within food studies and food research in the humanities and social sciences (Counihan and Williams-Forson 2012; Parasecoli 2019). This was not always the case: the field struggled to establish itself and was often branded as irrelevant, too connected to the banality of everyday life and the feminine sphere, and "light" from a scholarly point of view. However, as already discussed, it has grown exponentially since its inception in the late 1990s in terms of university programs, research, journals and books, acquiring legitimacy and visibility among both the general public and academia.

For these reasons, it is not unusual for Parasecoli and his department colleagues at NYU to be interviewed in newspapers and on radio shows, to be asked to contribute to museum exhibitions or online databases, and to act as consultants in matters ranging from culture to entrepreneurship. By engaging with traditional and social media, they are constantly prompted to explain complex issues in accessible ways to the general public. At times their books may not be strictly academic, but instead support important discussions in civil society. Parasecoli's book on food systems, published by MIT (2019), is an example of this kind of public engagement, which nonetheless also increases his legitimacy in academic circles.

This participation in important debates and in civic life makes food research more relevant and well respected also within the university and academia more widely, as is reflected also in terms of grants, funding and access to scholarly publishing. It thus becomes easier to be involved in large-scale projects, also with scholars and practitioners from other disciplines. Parasecoli, for instance, has increasingly participated in research and activities with designers and design theorists, which in turn has allowed him to expand his theoretical outlook and his research methods. In Poland, academia and the general public look suspiciously at the study of food as lacking rigour and relevance. Yes, everyone is interested in food, but it is – with exceptions – generally relegated to the category of leisure interests. Even though scholars who deal with food-related topics are aware of the political meanings and consequences of their work (we briefly described the field in the previous sections), the task of convincing practitioners and politicians is still an uphill battle. We assume there are two categories of reasons for this situation. The first is situated outside academia and reflects the historical experience of the progressive displacement of food into the private sphere. This may seem quite paradoxical, as after World War II food provisioning, understood in economic terms, became a matter of urgent political concern to the ruling socialist regime. The

central distribution of food products was combined with a particular food pedagogy, and served as legitimization of the governing party system. It was also a part of a socialist modernisation project that included the intentional building of a new – rational, non-traditional – lifestyle. Nevertheless, in the face of the limited effectiveness of these policies and the lack of trust in state institutions, bottom-up resourcefulness, self-provisioning and informal economic practices elaborated inside households turned out to be a more significant hallmark of food-related behaviours in Eastern and Central Europe, including Poland (Smith and Stenning 2006; Alber and Kohler 2008). We have encountered this understanding also during our work. Foraging, for instance, is often mentioned in our fieldwork as an aspect of the continuing resistance of the domestic sphere to massification and as an effective reaction to scarcity caused by government ineptitude. Food provisioning is continuously connected to the private sphere, while state production and state control over food distribution are – also in the light of our media analysis – perceived as not worthy of attention. The years of socialism are constantly construed as a time when traditions were lost, artisanal know-how was forgotten and local plant varieties and animal breeds were pushed aside in the interest of larger – but blander and less culturally meaningful – yields.

Another set of possible reasons why Polish foodways are explained mostly in private, domestic terms is connected to the systemic transformation in Poland after 1989 and its cultural consequences. Food choices – as a part of a wider set of consumer choices – started to be perceived as a manifestation of personal preferences, rather than being associated with communal identities and external constraints. Individuality – instead of collectivity – became a synonym of progress. This neoliberal approach has been gaining terrain after 1989, not only accustoming people to discount the structural aspects of their lives (such as class), but also leading to a favouring of an individualistic explanatory framework in public discourse and even in the social sciences. Warczok and Zarycki (2014) claim, with reference to Polish post-transformation sociology, that there has been a tendency to marginalise any approach describing social life in terms of conflict (including class-related), with individualistic and psychologizing explanations dominating instead. This probably constitutes one of the reasons why authorities at local and national levels have not engaged with far-reaching policies, including in the dimension of food, a phenomenon which also reflects general difficulties with long-term planning and strategic thinking. It is also important to reflect on the intra-academia circumstances that cause the importance of food studies to be downplayed. These topics were discussed during the Food and Drink Researchers' Network meetings in Cracow (5 April, 2019) and Gdańsk (4 October, 2019), during which food scholars in Poland indicated a lack of visibility as a part of their circumstances. Although being rooted in particular disciplines (like sociology, anthropology or history) has positive dimensions, as we suggest above, the structural framework of academia makes it difficult to achieve a strong voice under conditions of small-scale, individual,

and dispersed research, which are typical for scientific institutions in Poland. Scholars conducting small-scale and often bottom-up research may find it difficult to make broader conclusions referring to different social contexts or to the macro-level of social analysis. This systemic “shyness” is a part of Agata Bachórz’s experience; she admittedly tries to extrapolate on ethnographic observations, like in her research on intra-family food knowledge transfer (Bachórz 2018), but at the same time she would like to further root her conclusions in broader empirical material. This is obviously not a problem exclusive to the field of food research, but it becomes vivid in the case of this newly emerging area. What we get is a vicious circle in which scholars have to convince the public and financing institutions of the meaningfulness of food-related research in a situation where prior support is needed to reach meaningful conclusions.

In this context, the public engagement of food scholars – like that of any scholars – must be also regularly and carefully questioned, not in order to retreat from the expression of urgent and engaged positions, but in order to examine them critically. In Poland (not only in food research), scholars’ practical engagement with various industries and their role as public intellectuals clashes with the idea of social criticism, as Warczok and Zarycki (2014) claim for the field of sociology. This assessment cannot simply be transferred into the field of food research, but nonetheless this argumentation does have traction in explaining the specificities of Polish academia and the public activities of its members, as the limited doses of critical approaches on display in fact often contribute to sustaining the political *status quo*. It needs to be underlined, however, that the involvement of academics working on food in social debates is problematic in the US as well, as there too they can easily get sucked into partisan politics and ideological battles. Moreover, due to the funding structure of US private universities, there have been cases in which funders have influenced – or at least they have tried to influence – food related research, especially in the field of nutrition and food science (Nestle 2018).

Hidden ideological assumptions and different forms of inequality among academic and research fields may also have tangible consequences when scholars operate beyond academia. Most of all, one must be aware of using “inequality-blind” research in shaping or influencing local or national policies. It is possible that, although acting in good faith, due to a lack of data-driven policies scholars may apply knowledge about food-related behaviours and meanings that favour particular groups’ interests or dominant lifestyles.

Agata Bachórz, for instance, collaborated in the revitalization project of a local food market. On the one hand, data-based sociological analysis of the situation in which the market operated was important also for the local community and the people working there. On the other hand, as a researcher she was afraid of being used either as an instrumental smokescreen or to support changes in a direction that would turn the market into a space inaccessible to its existing users, mostly elderly local dwellers.

Parasecoli has been invited to participate in various capacities to public and private initiatives meant to celebrate Polish food at the national level. While he had conversations with the organizations involved, Parasecoli did not contribute directly because his very presence could have given legitimacy to approaches that promote ideas and values he found went against his opposition to nativist and exclusionary takes on national cuisines. In fact, another important question regarding a scholar's participation in civil society debates and initiatives concerns the use of knowledge to change the *status quo* (as in development projects) and the ways in which scholars should communicate not only their findings, but also their underlying values and goals to the wider public.

In our shared project, we also deal with the question of social inequalities and in particular of middle-classness. This is why we devote some space to the problem of the entanglement of social research in dominant discourses. While observing the revaluation of regional and traditional food in Poland, a trend that is still limited to a small segment of the population (so far, mostly urban, well educated and upwardly mobile), we have noticed that some themes and discursive elements are trickling down. We observe how media are interested in these trends, covering them in newspapers, magazines and, above all, in TV shows with large audiences. The promotion of traditional food as a part not only of subjective, private, intra-family experience, but also as knowledge-based, demanding cultural heritage and expertise, is part of the media coverage addressed to the middle class, rather than to other segments of society. At the same time, locality and seasonality are presented as democratic, easy-accessible and cheap options, without noticing their socially distinctive character (in fact, they are time- or capital-demanding, or both). The naturalization of such approaches deserves critical attention and constant reflexive work in order to avoid marginalizing or even erasing large swathes of social experience, and thus supporting hegemonic worldviews and turning them into seemingly universal perspectives.

These issues, however, constitute the core of any reflection about the relationship between science and its non-academic environment. Is the issue of the public engagement of food scholars different from that in other disciplines? In our opinion: yes. Food is perceived as a most common and universal platform connecting people because "everybody eats". However, the truth is that everybody eats in different ways, which may express their positions in society. Seemingly innocent, food is interesting almost for everybody and carries hidden political meanings, some of which may be revealed when it is used by authorities and organizers of cultural activities as a convenient tool to conduct participatory projects, for instance in cultural (Krukowska 2017) or even in social welfare institutions, as well as in urban revitalization projects (Parham 2012, Newmann and Burnett 2013). The presence of food in public spaces can positively influence social inclusion or improve access to quality food, while at the same time there is a risk of strengthening particular worldviews on food itself. In public discourse,

in turn, the attractiveness of a seemingly “innocent” foodie culture may transform it into an arena for public “quasi-pedagogy” (de Solier 2008, cf. Bachórz 2019).

CONCLUSION

This article is the result of shared conversations between the two authors on various political dimensions of food and food research, especially the research we conduct together. We have found ourselves dealing with ambiguous issues in food research, linked to our respective positionalities and experiences, that take us beyond proving the obvious fact that “food is political”. We are aware that in this article we have not addressed the links between food and climate change, questions of ethical/non-ethical consumption, debates about the cultural identities expressed through food or the meanings of alternative food networks in the Polish context. It was not our intention to provide broad theoretical contributions, but rather to share material from our ethnographic fieldwork, empirical data, experiences and auto-ethnographic reflections as we try to make sense of the specificities we encounter.

One of our focuses was on how our own positionalities and the impact they had in the work dynamics among the two of us reflect wider global power inequalities and their influence on the academic world. We both found ourselves inevitably confronting how our own background may influence our perceptions and even the topics we are drawn to. As both of us are urban, upwardly mobile and educated individuals, just like the interlocutors whose practices and discourse we are studying in our shared project, we constantly need to remind ourselves (and the audience) of our positionality in terms of class, access, gender, age and other socio-cultural factors that could generate bias and various forms of “blindness” to the dynamics of which we ourselves are part. As we stated above, this risk is even greater for Parasecoli, who as a foreigner finds it easier to connect with people who also have travelled and lived abroad, speak foreign languages and share cultural and political outlooks. We do not mean, however, that middle class scholars (including ourselves) should not study privileged sections of societies, like the middle or upper classes (cf. Nader 1972), but that we should do so critically, being aware that this is in fact a study of specific segments and not a whole society. We should also carefully think about not only the (hidden) assumptions, but also the reasonings behind doing research on the middle classes. To some extent, middle class imagery does not belong only to the middle class itself, since this imagery serves as a transparent and quasi-universal social ideal embedded in popular culture and public institutions. It makes sense to deconstruct this imagery or – let us repeat – public “quasi-pedagogy”, also in the realm of food media. Studying the processes underway in generating Polish middle class lifestyles in particular – as stereotypically associated with those identified with Western “centre” – may also be useful in

examining local versions of modernization outside the above-mentioned unilinear approach.

We certainly do not want to state that cross-cultural research or cross-cultural scholarly cooperation is pointless because of embedded structural inequalities – this would be naive and also a loss of theoretical reflection (cf. Jehlička et al. 2020). We rather think critically about conducting joint projects, while overcoming the “local empirical knowledge versus global theory-making” trap. Our own experience points to many advantages in having different backgrounds, points of views and even methodological approaches, as long as we maintain a self-reflective attitude and are not afraid of discussing our own roles and our own entanglements with power structures. As academics, we are trained to identify and address these issues theoretically, but we are often less equipped to deal with them in interpersonal relationships and within institutional hierarchies, with all the emotional baggage that these incorporate. We acknowledge that in our work and public presence Bachorz’s positionality ends up being somehow transparent and naturalized, almost “innocent”, in the Polish context. In writing this article it was at times even difficult to find examples of “her role”, while as an outsider Parasecoli can be more easily noticed, observed, analysed and critiqued in terms of the privilege his positionality affords him. Paradoxically, at the end of the day it may turn out that circumstances force Parasecoli to be more attentive and aware of his role and impact in the field and to constantly negotiate his presence.

While trying not to sound paternalistic and avoiding any unilinear evolutionary framework when juxtaposing the two academies in which we operate (Poland and the US) and their transitions of food research into food studies, we have used our own experiences as “lessons learnt” in order to underline the fact that it is impossible to disconnect the politics of food from the politics of doing food research in terms of involvement with power structures, hierarchies and hegemonic dynamics both in the public sphere and within academia itself. To some extent every food scholar has to deal with it – this is our shared position despite all our differences in positionality and experiences. We also agree that this inextricable connection of food and politics has not only an academic or theoretical dimension, but also impacts on people’s lives. Food, although discursive, symbolic and imaginative, is also material and physical. Treating it seriously is not merely about recognition for “marginal” scholars, but is a basic demand of respect for cultural identities and – obviously – for the human right to food.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work was supported by the Narodowe Centrum Nauki [DEC-2017/27/B/HS2/01338], New York University Steinhardt, University of Gdańsk (Institute of Philosophy and Sociology), and Polish Academy of Sciences (Institute of Philosophy and Sociology). We want to thank Mateusz Halawa and the

participants of the Polish Food and Drink Researchers' Network, especially Ewa Kopczyńska and Agata Stasik, for sharing ideas and observations. Some of the topics covered by the paper were inspired by discussions that took place during the Network meetings. We are also grateful to Renata Hryciuk and Katarzyna Król for their insightful comments referring to the first version of this paper.

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