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Interviews

INTERVIEW WITH FABIO PARASECOLI ON FOOD CULTURES

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Fabio Parasecoli ile yaptığımız görüşmeyi deşifre eden Hacettepe Üniversitesi İletişim Fakültesi İletişim Bilimleri Arş. Gör. Hakan Soner'e teşekkür ederiz.

Fabio Parasecoli is a Professor of Food Studies in the Department of Nutrition and Food Studies at New York University. His research explores the cultural politics of food, particularly in media, design, and heritage. Parasecoli has lectured at Bologna Business School, the Scuola Politecnica di Design in Milan, the Politecnico in Milan, the Elisava School of Design in Barcelona, and the University of Gastronomic Sciences in Bra, Italy. He also writes about gastronomy for various magazines.

He is currently working in Poland with the support of the Polish Academy of Sciences on a study on the revaluation of regional and traditional foods. He is also developing a project in Spain on gastronomic heritage and design. In his latest work, Parasecoli introduced the concept of gastronativism to food studies.

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- Food Culture in Italy (2004)
- Bite Me: Food in Popular Culture (2008). Bloomsbury Publishing

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Prof. Parasecoli, what was or what is your motivation for studying food?

As many Italians, I grew up in a house where my mother cooked every day. When we get together, we eat food. So there was already that, but that's part of everybody's experience around the Mediterranean. I think in Turkey it may be basically the same. Later, when I was working as a journalist in international affairs, I traveled around the world, mostly to Asia. And while I was traveling, I was eating, of course, and exploring new places. I started being surprised by the variety of food and the different traditions; I got interested in food as a way to also understand the way people lived. When I was doing this work in international affairs, I started collaborating with a food and wine magazine in Italy called Gambero Rosso. At first, they asked me to write little reviews of ethnic restaurants in Italy, because I had lived in China and Japan, and traveled anywhere from Turkey and Syria, to the Philippines. And so I started writing these little texts, professionally. Later, the publisher Stefano Bonilli (who sadly passed away a few years ago) asked me to write longer feature pieces and he sent me to Spain, France, and England. The fact that I spoke different languages helped, of course.

Then, in 1998, he asked me to drop international affairs, which was what I had studied. I had studied political science, and the contemporary history of China in particular, but I liked food. I was enjoying this new career. That year I moved to New York as the US correspondent for Gambero Rosso, which at the time allowed me to write about food not just from the point of view of restaurants and dishes: I was able to develop broad stories in which I could explore the culture of a place or a city through food. I found that really, really interesting. I could write more than reviews of restaurants and advice for travelers. As I was in New York City, I started attending a seminar that still continues at New York University, called Feast and Famine, where scholars, food experts, writers, and journalists would meet. Every month or so, there would be a presentation and discussion of somebody's work. I really liked that: it was then that I realized I could also think and write about food in a much deeper, slower way, maybe, but an interesting one: when you write

for a magazine or a newspaper, you have to write fast. When you do academic work, you have more time to do your research, your literature analysis, and you can think about your methodologies and theoretical approaches.

And so while I was still working as a journalist, I also started writing scholarly material. I remember the first formal academic paper I wrote was in the first issue of the journal *Gastronomica*, about Ferran Adrià and deconstruction. It's still, for me, one of the best pieces I have written: it was very experimental in its structure, it had philosophy, and it had food, design, and communication. So many of the themes that then I would develop over time were there. Then I started writing books: *Food Culture in Italy* in 2004, and *Bite Me: Food in Popular Culture* in 2008. At that point, I had already decided to switch from journalism to academia, so I went back to school and got my doctorate at Hohenheim University in Germany. I got my first full-time academic job at the New School in NYC where I launched the food studies major, and then in 2018, I moved to New York University, where I am now.

Yeah, that's a very intense story. I didn't know much about it. So that's a very good path, I think, yes.

It was not a direct path into academia. To this day, I write academic material but still enjoy writing for the general public and working with journalists. I've not completely abandoned my journalist life. This allows me to look at the same reality but I can describe it and understand it in different ways. As people who study communication, you understand the importance of media. As a journalist, for instance, I have learned how to do interviews, how to observe, and also how to use language to describe food sensations. On the other hand, in academia, I can work with big ideas, with theories. I have to be more precise with the methodologies. But I must say the skills I learned as a journalist are still very useful also in academia because they allow me to write fast, once I have done my research.

Professor, how do you define food studies as a field and food culture in general?

Well, for me, food culture was the first entrance into food. Coming from journalism, it was the way I experienced and understood food: I analyzed it as an expression of culture. It was through that that I came into food studies. At first, I mostly wrote about media and film, as well as Italian food because I happened to be Italian and I had worked for years for an Italian food magazine, so I had a certain expertise in that. Coming to New York in 1998 and getting involved with this NYU environment also allowed me to become part of the food studies world, which was still at the beginning. I remember the first ASFS (Association for the Study of Food and Society) meetings I attended were small, but they were important for us because many worked in departments where they did not understand what food studies was. So if you were a sociologist, a historian, or an anthropologist back in the early 2000s and you worked on food, your colleagues often wondered whether that was important or even legitimate research. ASFS was a way for us

to support each other, also emotionally: we were trying to show that what we did was relevant. Now it's much more accepted, but 20 years ago, it was not. So that's how I got into food studies. I've seen it develop in different ways.

I also have moved in different ways. Since I had studied political science, it was always my interest to look at political issues connected with food, which of course very often also overlap with communication issues. In my last book, *Gastronativism*, I look at how food is used as an ideological tool in politics. That for me was really going back full circle: from media and communication to food and then back to politics. So the aspect of politics and economics has also become very important to me. I turned to food systems and I realized that in food studies at times, we have on one side the humanities, history, culture, media, and communication, which look at cultural issues, and on the other hand we have food systems, where we focus on economics, politics, and environmental issues. So on the one hand, we look at the agency of individuals and communities, and on the other hand, we emphasize structures.

I realized that we need both to have a good understanding of any phenomenon, whether we work on the cultural side or we work on the system side. That's been a little bit of my work in the past few years. So the book, *Food*, which I published with MIT in 2019, expressed the desire of bringing together these two components in food studies. Recently, I found that design is a good way to be both interested in culture, how people think, how people speak, and what they do, while working on interventions, which requires thinking about change. I happened to start working with designers when I was at the New School because they have a very prestigious school of design called Parsons, one of the best in the world. I was lucky, as more and more designers invited me to participate in various projects that had to do with food.

Design became also an important part of research that I developed in different projects that may not be specifically about applying design methods, analysis, and approaches. For instance, in my work in Poland, I haven't just done observation and interviews and media analysis, but I also organized a workshop, for instance, with chefs where we used design methods to have them work on projects and see how they think, how they perceive the world, and how they see themselves in the future. This for me really shows that food studies need not only to be interdisciplinary but also to become more and more transdisciplinary. You have to figure out ways to bring together different forms of knowledge and different methodologies in ways that might create something new. It's not just a collaboration. Sometimes by putting different approaches together to assess one specific phenomenon, you might find something that it's not design, it's not anthropology, it's not media analysis but it's something different. So I hope that we will have more and more of that in food studies.

Yeah, that was an important point, I think. Not only interdisciplinarity but also transdisciplinarity. That's a new approach that I have heard for the first time. And we can say that food and food studies are about everything.

Well, in a way, food is a total social fact, to use Marcel Mauss' expression. It's so central to our lives that it ends up in the environment where we live, in nutrition, science, and politics. Food studies should reflect that.

Why do you think there's an increase both in the national and global public and academic interests, as well as in media or food media, we can say?

I've been thinking quite a bit about that. I think there are different factors and one might be the reaction to globalization as we have experienced it in the past forty years or so. We're exposed to so many foods from all over the world, including delocalized industrial food. It doesn't matter where Pringles come from. A Pringle is a Pringle, right? Because of that, there is the desire to find roots, anchorage, something that can somehow define our identities as individuals and as members of communities. Food is part of our daily life, it has very important emotional, psychological connections with who we are. When everything seems the same, food can offer good reasons to find some stability, in terms of identity.

Another element is the growing concerns about the environment. It started in the 1960s, with Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring*, the environmental movement, and the development of ecological approaches to study the environment. That inevitably led to pointing out how food is such an important component of our environment. We change our environment to eat and produce food. Now it's become clear that agriculture and animal husbandry are big contributors to climate change.

Another element that makes food interesting is the rediscovery of the connection between food and health. That was there for centuries: think about the Greek humoral theories that were translated into Arabic and then brought back into Europe in the Renaissance. If you read some of the Enlightenment philosophers, you have the sense that they know very well that food is important for the health of the individual body and of the body politic. With the quick industrialization of the 19th century, we were so enthusiastic about having a lot of convenient, cheap food. Finally, we could fight hunger. With the green revolution, we found new ways to grow more food. With genetic modification, we created new organisms. Suddenly all that caught up with us. People started gaining weight and having diet-related diseases all over the world and not only in rich countries. You can be malnourished and obese because you can eat lots of bad food, cheap, mass-produced, calorie-rich, but nutrient-poor food. There is a rediscovery of the connection between food and health, as the phenomenon of superfoods suggests. Communication is central to their success. For the past 20 years, we've been discovering new superfoods: quinoa, chia, moringa, and goji berries. We look at food as an easy answer to our health problems: we have this fantasy of finding that one food that can make

us all better, which is much easier than changing our diet or our lifestyle. It's a kind of contemporary magical thinking, in my opinion.

Moreover, food has become a spectacle. There was already food in media, in magazines, and on the radio, but with TV you are able to see it. And so food shows become very successful: here in the US, with Julia Child, for instance. But from the late 1990s, food TV has exploded. The spectacular potential of food has been discovered by cable TV. As cable TV grew, it needed a lot of content that had to be developed fast without being expensive. It had to be entertaining, so you start seeing all the interesting chefs; cooking at times became a competition, with *Iron Chef*, *Top Chef*, *Master Chefs*, and all the shows where people compete around food to provide a spectacle. And then we have food travel shows, like Anthony Bourdain or more recently Stanley Tucci.

I also noticed the transformation in how younger people think about a possible future in food. It's not so crazy for them to want to open a cheese shop or produce wine or be a chef. When I was growing up, my parents would have been quite shocked. I must say they were shocked when I told them I was going to China to study, but that was another kind of shock... There is a revaluation of food as a legitimate career. It's the connection of these different components that has made food so central.

So is it also kind of not an acceptable profession to be a chef in Italy as well?

Back then when I was growing up in Italy, it was a working-class job. Famous chefs, like Gualtiero Marchesi, were exceptions. Very often restaurants were family businesses, handed down from generation to generation. It was fine for those families, but it would have been a little strange for somebody to start doing it anew. Things have changed. Now young people have examples like Massimo Bottura or Ferran Adriá: doing that is possible and legitimate.

How do you explain the increasing politicization of food as an everyday practice in the last decades?

I think it connects with what I was saying before. Food has a very central role in determining the identity of individuals and communities. You know, I'm a Roman. I grew up eating certain things and those things are part of who I am, in a way. If I see on Instagram somebody that makes some crazy carbonara, I'm like, whoa, what is that? Because of that, politicians have been able to use food as an ideological weapon, as a way to make a simple message effective without too much thinking. Food is immediate. We all eat. In a way, we're all food experts. When, for instance, posters appeared in Italy that read “yes to polenta, not to couscous,” everybody immediately knew what they were talking about. It goes straight to the gut, literally. And this is very useful for politicians because they don't have to be there to explain. No, you understand. If you're one

of “us,” you understand. Because of that, food has been used as a weapon to determine who belongs and who doesn't belong to a community.

That's the phenomenon I call gastronativism: the use of food to define who's in and who's out. It can define all sorts of communities. In the case of the couscous and polenta, clearly, it was something against immigration. In Denmark, when there was an attempt at introducing pork meatballs in school meals, it was clearly against immigrants, i.e. Muslims that don't eat pork. But how about the Danish Jews who have been in Denmark forever and don't eat pork? So the unexpressed question was, who is the real Dane? Are Jews really Danes if they don't eat pork? Here in the US, food appears in the debates between progressives and conservatives. Progressives think about the environment and want organic food and go to the farmer's market. Other people feel that real Americans eat tons of meat, grill burgers, and go to fast food. The fact that former President Trump would offer fast food during official events at the White House says a lot. In 2021 the news circulated that Biden wanted to stop Americans from eating meat because meat is bad for climate change and for the environment. He never said anything like that. He was referring to an academic study from the University of Michigan, but a UK tabloid took that and turned it into a big issue that traveled back to America. So suddenly, we'll all have to grill Brussels sprout for the 4th of July instead of meat. This connection between the 4th of July, which is a very patriotic holiday here, and meat, says a lot.

Think about what's happening in India around beef and how the Modi government and that kind of conservative, fundamentalist Hinduism are trying to push out all those who are different: Muslims, Christians, people from other religions, and even Dalits. In that case, you know, the “us and them” is predicated on religion. It can be nationality, it can be ethnicity, it can be gender. This use of food is particularly visible in populist movements that try to talk to people that may be unhappy about globalization, but that is a larger conversation. For those who can’t make a living because their jobs have moved somewhere else or those who feel their culture is not being respected because cosmopolitan elites try to impose other ways of thinking, food becomes such an easy anchor to create an identity and for politicians to talk to them.

We know borders are blurry and how do you assess the emergence and functionality of the concepts of gastronationalism? Or national cuisine?

The nation is one of the dimensions in which you can use food as a political tool. Our world is organized around nation-states. It could have been organized in different ways: think about the Islamic Umma in the 12th century or the Chinese empire. Those were different kinds of polities and political organizations, but because of the history of the 19th century and colonization, the world is organized around nations. It's very easy to use food as a tool for what Michael Billig called banal nationalism. In everyday life, it's a way to create a sense of belonging to a community, an imagined community at that, as Benedict Anderson pointed

out. The fact that I was born in Rome connects me somehow with somebody born in Milan even if we have never met. There is the need to create elements that bring people together as members of nations. Food has been very good for that.

We can see it from the 19th century when the idea of national food became quite clear. French food was so important at the time that other countries felt that if they were nation-states, they also needed to have their own gastronomy. Italy is one of those examples. The first cookbook that tries to outline Italian cuisine as an expression of the newly unified nation is from 1891. It's called *The Science in the Kitchen and the Art of Eating Well* by Pellegrino Artusi. It's a delightful book to read because it feels like you're talking to an old uncle telling stories. But it was trying to identify and define what Italian food was. Now food has become central in what's called gastrodiplomacy: the use of food as a form of soft diplomacy to present one's country, make it more interesting, more appealing. Eastern Asian countries have been great at that: Thailand, Taiwan, South Korea... Peru is really working around those approaches.

The fact that in 2010, food-related practices became part of the UNESCO Reference List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity is also very important. UNESCO is an international organization through which different nations present themselves and have themselves recognized. But this is quite problematic: who decides what is worth being considered national food and what is just regional? You have ethnic issues, gender issues, class issues. In Turkey, who decides what counts as national cuisine and what dishes are still considered either too local or too lower class or belonging to non-Turkish ethnicities? Who has the authority to decide? Who has the power?

The definition of national food is quite complicated when it comes to its political aspects. It is really hard to identify döner kebab in Germany: is it German or Turkish or Arabic or Kurdish, maybe, in a sense? Döner kebab you find around Europe is the result of Turkish immigrants in Germany creating their own industrial and trade system. In Italy, we eat that kind of döner kebab. And when Italians go to Turkey, they're surprised it is different. It's the same thing with Italian food. Many people eat pizza around the world and when they come to Italy they find it different. Certain national dishes become very popular here in New York: kebab, köfte, people know about that. As they become part of the common language, they get adapted, both because the locals adapted it and because maybe Turks that prepare köfte for American customers tweak it so that it's more palatable for them.

In the past, they often couldn't find all the ingredients. So that's one of the drivers, for instance, in the emergence of Italian-American cuisine. When I first came to the US in 1998, I was invited to an Italian-American big meal. My grandmother's sister moved here in the 1930s, so I have tons of cousins here. But I was the first one coming from Italy. They organized this big meal and I couldn't recognize the food. And they were like, what do you mean you don't recognize the food? This is Italian food. That experience really

introduced me to this cuisine, which is now its own thing. Maybe Italian food and Italian-American food started from the same place, but because of history, and different locations, they both developed in different directions. If you taste the food of Italians in Southern Brazil, it's yet a different thing. I'm sure you have the same experience with Turkish migration.

So, we know the meaning and the importance of migrant communities or minority groups being able to cook their own food and access their own flavors in public spaces. What would you say about the unifying and or divisive sides of food in the context of migrant and minority groups and the whole society? And how does the balance of dominance change over the years?

That's also a very complicated issue. Just today, I was reviewing an article about what and how refugees eat when they find themselves not only in another place but also in a transitory moment. They're not migrants that have settled down to start a new life. They've been unrooted from where they live and they find themselves with thousands of other people in refugee camps. How do you feed these people? How do you give them a sense of home when there are priorities of food safety and food security? You want to make sure that they get enough nutrition, but maybe you offer them food that doesn't make sense to them or it's not prepared in a way that generates community. That's an extreme situation, but I think most migrants may find themselves in new places and new contexts where the ingredients that they're used to are not available. On the one hand, there is the desire of staying close to one's tradition, to one's comfort foods. But at the same time, those same comfort foods mark them as different. Think about the smells, for instance, of certain fermented shrimp in Filipino or kimchi in Korean cuisine. Many Americans find those smells just unbearable.

For those populations, using those ingredients means recreating the food of home, but if you're trying to start a new life in a new place, you don't want to be marked as completely different, somebody who will never be part of the community. There is always that tension, and it may play even within migrants' homes. At times, it might be men that have a more public life, so that when they go home, they want to find more familiar food. Women are the ones that have to shop, cook, feed the children, and they might be a little more flexible. But women may actually become the guardians of the traditions, especially when it's an important holiday or a special occasion. It's the desire of showing one's skills and reconnecting with one's tradition. Moreover, big shifts happen when the cuisines of immigrants are commodified, becoming products in restaurants and snacks and food trucks that sell food to the host community. At that point, there is, on the one hand, the pride in one's traditions, and on the other hand, there is the need for a business to make money and to be accepted. That also changes the way migrants cook food for the host community.

Plus, the host community may not understand if, within a migrant community, there are people from different areas, with different culinary customs. When Italians got here, Americans didn't care if they were

from Naples, Sicily, or Turin. They were Italians. And so, Italians found themselves figuring out a common language that would make sense to their American clients in an Italian restaurant. Very often, migrant communities start from the bottom and their restaurants are considered cheap. Their food is considered not very prestigious. And then, as communities improve their social status, the appreciation for their food also changes. Now, we have upscale Italian restaurants. Korean food is going in that direction. But for instance, Chinese and Mexican food, although very common here in the US, still have a hard time presenting themselves as complex cuisines that deserve high prices in fine dining establishments. Eating migrants' food doesn't necessarily mean appreciating their cultures. It's nutritious food, it's cheap, it's simple. They're just providing a service, so many people eat it. I'm sure many of the people that clamor for a wall at the border with Mexico have no problems eating tacos.

There's a concept you mentioned. It's also the name of your latest work, *Gastronativism*. Can you explain this concept to our readers? And what kind of contribution do you think it will provide to food and cultural studies?

As I was mentioning before, I explain gastronativism as the ideological use of food in politics to determine who belongs to a specific community and who doesn't, in any way you define the community: nation, religion, ethnicity, gender. It also works at different scales: the community may be about a city, a region, or a whole country. It is about using food to create barriers. I remember in one of the first pieces I wrote as an academic, I pointed out that the table unites and divides: it can unite people that decide to eat together, but at the same time, it isolates the people who are not invited to the table. Gastronativism is that. I started using that term instead of gastronationalism because I think gastronationalism is just one of the many aspects of the larger phenomenon that is gastronativism. When it's about the nation, then it becomes gastronationalism, but it can be about religion or politics, as in the example of conservatives and progressives in the US. So I was trying to find a definition for this larger phenomenon, and I came up with this idea connected with nativism, which is a recurrent phenomenon here in the US where newcomers may not be accepted at first, but later they become part of the community and they do not accept the following waves of newcomers. In the US, this phenomenon is very visible because it's an immigrant country. So from the 17th century, there have always been new waves of migration. That's why nativism has been studied in the US more closely, but now I think it's becoming a global experience in many high-income countries.

Last and the shortest question maybe. What can you suggest to young scholars who are interested in food studies in Turkey?

First of all, I think Turkish food is understudied in general. I mean it is not studied enough in its contemporary reality, looking at the different regions, the influence of foreign food in Turkey, and how Turkish food is becoming global. Those are all very interesting topics. More work on Turkish migrant

communities and how they're influencing global food would be a really interesting starting point. How is the emerging global Turkish food connected to Turkish communities? Since we're talking about communication, I think work on film and media is quite important. How is food being used to define Turkishness, to define the nation? How is it used in political controversies? How is it used in religious debates, maybe between conservatives and progressive Muslims or maybe in the relationships with other religions, the Christians, the Alawite… There is also so much work to do in Ottoman studies: how did Ottoman food work, and how was it connected to politics? We know that in the Ottoman Empire, food was very important in terms of the power of the Sultan and his prestige. Ottoman cuisine has influenced cuisines all over the Middle East, Greece, and Saudi Arabia. Turkey has such a long history when it comes to food; there is so much, from antiquity to modernity!