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BOOK REVIEW

Annemarie Mol: Eating in theory

Duke University Press, Durham, NC, USA, 2021, 199 pp, ISBN: 978-1-4780-1141-5

Pieter Lagerwaard[1]

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Several controversial topics require a "trigger warning" in my philosophy of social science lectures, yet I did not expect that *Eating in Theory*, by philosopher and anthropologist Annemarie Mol, would require one as well. The mundane practice of eating turned out to be just as sensitive as gender or race. Due to eating disorders and political and religious convictions, eating and reading about eating proved to be not mundane or neutral, but personal and political. What lessons does theorizing about eating hold for us as social scientists studying agriculture and food?

The book was published in 2021 and is inspiring scholars studying subjects like the human body, relationality, and care, but also sustainability, metabolic politics, and the Anthropocene. Its appeal becomes evident in the introduction, where Mol lays out her "empirical philosophy" that challenges conventional metaphysics. Instead of detaching philosophy from reality– *Meta*-physics– Mol aims at "robbing philosophy of its alleged transcendence and tracing the empirical realities that inhabit prevailing theoretical tropes" (p. 5).

To do so, the introduction questions a common and widespread hierarchical framework, often deeply ingrained in Western philosophy. Mol questions the philosophy of Hannah Arendt, who ranked *physical* survival at the bottom of the hierarchy, while the "political being" that *thinks*, ranks at the top (p. 9). A similar hierarchy can be found in Maslow's famous pyramid, where physiological needs– food!– are placed at the bottom, and transcendence at the top.

Mol turns this way of thinking around, taking ethnographic observations of "bodily sustenance" (p. 1)– i.e., staying alive– as her philosophical starting point. She challenges Descartes' famous phrase, "I think, therefore I am," by pointing to the fact that Descartes "may have insisted that his *thinking* (not his eating) proves his being, but in letters to his learned female friends, he used to dwell for pages on end on dietary advice" (p. 11). Instead, Mol argues that "I *am* only to the extent that I exchange stuff with my surroundings" (p. 33). Eating, then, is not just a precondition for (political) thinking; it holds theoretical salience in its own right.

The book is structured in four parts that relate to eating: *being*, *knowing*, *doing*, and *relating*. This structure feels a little patchy and seems a collateral consequence of avoiding analytical hierarchy, linearity, or chronology. Mol has a sharp pen and writes clearly and honestly; yet, this structure, in combination with the intriguing in-text side stories on topics as "colonial bodies" and "feeding relations," makes reading at times a convoluted affair.

But it's worth the effort! The first chapter on *being* is an intellectual pleasure. Mol takes us on her hiking experience to show that eating is not a demarcated, clearly bordered practice, but that as an eater, one is "externally entangled and internally differentiated" (p. 40). The "body incorporates bits and pieces of the outside world" (p. 41) and is "semipermeable" (p. 49); that is, it allows (certain) substances to travel through it in differentiated ways (sweating, defecating, urinating, spitting, belching). According to Mol: "I do not first and foremost apprehend my surroundings, but become mixed up with them. The edible parts of those surroundings, in their turn, wherever they were located beforehand, become assembled inside me" (p. 30).

These observations are important to the study of agriculture and food because they demonstrate that both cannot be seen as distinct from the human body. Dominant debates in *Agriculture and Human Values* involve the sustainability of (industrial) agriculture, biodiversity, and the future of agriculture. What Mol demonstrates is that the human body cannot be considered marginal in these debates. Her

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autoethnography shows that the body is spatially entangled with food production:

> I may stay put, but the food that I ingest has traveled toward me. Even if [I] hide in my flat, then as soon as I drink a cup of tea, I fold into my body stuff imported from China or Sri Lanka. Thanks to the chocolate I savor, bits of 'Africa, Latin America, and Asia' come to be juxtaposed inside me. (p. 46)

The chapter on *doing*—for our purposes, I skim over the chapter on *knowing*, which includes an interesting (though expansive) debate on perception, sensing, and how knowledge is the product of active engagement—shows how these spatial entanglements challenge a clear centralization of eating practices. According to Mol, eating is not an individual practice nor a natural process, but part of a collective including a plethora of actors– humans, but also non-humans such as micro bacteria and technologies.

Agriculture and (the preparation of) food, then, cannot be seen as distinct from the functioning of the human body, its organs, its liquids, its processing, digestion, excreting– its sustenance. Mol reconnects the body to agriculture by arguing that "generations of farmers have changed cultivars so as to adapt them to the palates and the bowels of the people bound to eat their produce" (p. 100). From this viewpoint, the body becomes a key actor in the production of food, and its eating becomes "technically and socially mediated" (p. 96), involving "agriculture, distribution networks, skills, equipment, shops, and money: in short, the efforts of a socio-material distributed collective" (p. 96).

Understanding food production as a distributed collective, including the body, allows for the observation of how actors *relate* in sometimes existential ways. Eater and feeder relations are not just destructive, Mol posits, but generative, because eating "allows for the growth of the creatures on which I feed" (p. 111). Mol observes that "while my eating destroys the single apple being eaten, it contributes to the survival of its kind" (p. 125). This conception opens imaginative doors to understanding human relationality with other critters not in terms of a familial evolutionary tree, but as part of a shared relational ecological cycle that collectively evolves and ensures individual sustenance. "For if the *I* destroys the conditions of possibility on which countless others depend for their life," Mol warns, "this is inevitably self-destructive, too" (p. 124).

While these lessons render the book invaluable for social scientists studying agriculture, they do not yet explain why eating proved to be such a sensitive and politicized topic to discuss with my students. Indeed, Mol elaborates on ethics (p. 99), good and bad (pp. 100–101), the asymmetry of eating/feeding relations (pp. 119–124), and the concluding chapter "intellectual ingredients" turns specifically to the question of politics, arguing that eating "does not mean, that as they labor, humans set their own laws. […] It involves ongoing negotiations: among humans, with other creatures, converting materials—obdurate or fragile things—and the earth we share" (pp. 136–137)

Yet, the politics of eating remains abstract and, in contrast to the rest of the book, not very empirical. My students addressed topics such as diseases like anorexia and bulimia, Ramadan (which coincided with a tutorial on eating together), the politics of veganism and vegetarianism, and the food systems these practices render (im)possible. *Eating in Theory* rightfully positions eating and the human body in contemporary debates, yet especially regarding the future of (industrial) agriculture, its politics could deserve an equal footing on the pyramid.

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