

BOOK REVIEWS

Food as a Mechanism of Control and Resistance in Jails and Prisons: Diets of Disrepute

by Salvador Jimenez Murguía

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Reviewed by Lucas Ridgeway

Like the plots found in literature and film, food tells a story. *Food as a Mechanism of Control and Resistance in Jails and Prisons* is a short book about food and foodways associated with the experience of serving time in jails and prisons. The stories told therein are from an academic perspective that is concerned with how the experience of food in jails and prisons can be moved beyond an item of necessity for survival into the navigation of informal economies to establish autonomy and, most importantly, as an item of both control and resistance. Taken from an examination of several international models, Salvador Jimenez Murguía offers us a vivid survey of several case studies that document how prison food is politicized as philosophies of control and resistance.

As we open and explore this hardcover edition, the reader finds that the first chapter explores how food is used as a mechanism of control. The author considers how food is manipulated to serve the interests of the correctional staff and administration and, specifically, the implications of employing food, as opposed to the use of time, in disciplinary action. Later chapters survey the quality of food in prison by taking a closer look at the qualitative attributes associated with food, inclusive of appearance, taste, nutritional values, and its distribution. Moving forward, the reader discovers chapters dedicated to how food is used as a mechanism of resistance among the incarcerated, from transforming food into products of mind alteration, weaponry, and commerce, to over-consumption for comfort, and not eating at all in protest. The final chapters detail these methods of resistance, highlighting the intended ends of innovation, survival, and pleasure respectively.

The author states that these settings of incarceration, referred to as “total institutions” (Goffman, 1961), are thus places where ordinary infractions to human rights are rampant. Like all resources within total institutions, food is vulnerable to manipulation. In a jail or prison setting, food therefore innately becomes both a mechanism of control and resistance. In the former, the type of food, its quality, its quantity, and the symbolic significance of

its presence or absence all contribute to the sociopolitical experience of the incarcerated. The author surmises all this without having lived it, but attempts to do so with all humility, thus viewing food within total institutions as social facts that engender real consequences.

At the heart of this book is a concern that the least socially acceptable among us are also the most vulnerable to the misuses and abuses of power, in even the slightest of expressions. This text is primarily about the precarious situation that those with stained statuses must face when connecting with food inside jails and prisons, with the focus being predominantly in the United States. The main objective of this digest is to open a discussion about the many dimensions of food within sites of incarceration by exposing the persistent culture of mistrust between prisoners and the corporate bodies responsible for their custody and care. Murguía, a professor at Akita International University in Japan, offers us several relevant examples to expound upon in this brief manuscript that do indeed lend themselves to global implications.

I found that the force-feeding chapter was by far the most illuminating as we see reproduced writing from an incarcerated Oscar Wilde in the 1890s at a time when the British House of Lords saw food as forming part of a prisoner's punishment and set prison diets accordingly. Later, these same policies also directly affected the Suffragette movement as imprisoned women employed the use of hunger strikes, which resulted in their mass force-feeding – a practice further detailed in modern times at Guantanamo Bay despite the 1975 decree of the World Medical Association, which prohibits force-feeding when someone is of a rational mind. Moreover, in 2013, the American Medical Association reiterated the WMA Tokyo Declaration in relation to Guantanamo's practices adding that, "every competent patient has the right to refuse medical intervention, including life-sustaining interventions" (Rosenberg, 2013).

Murguía also puts a modest spotlight on the Aramark Corporation, a major American purveyor of institutional food services, who has had employees accused of sexual misconduct, unsanitary conditions, spoiled food, unauthorized menu changes, inadequate meal portions, and administering food that was unfit for human consumption. However, he mitigates these accusations by suggesting that it would be unfair to infer that the corporate body itself engaged in any of this intentionally. Certainly, some personnel may act with malice, but it might be reasonable to assume that, like prisons

themselves, major civil service operations such as Aramark simply make these mistakes by attempting to accomplish too much, while still turning over a large profit margin. This was a rationale lost on one American prisoner who was served Nutraloaf daily for 19 days and lost 14 pounds, experienced vomiting, developed digestive problems including stomach pains, constipation, and painful defecation, along with an anal fissure.

In terms of becoming organized and resisting these conditions, nearly thirty thousand prisoners of the California prison system in July 2013 went on a prearranged hunger strike to call attention to the adverse effects of long-term isolation. The strike lasted sixty days and, although the number of protestors diminished substantially, there remained at least 100 prisoners at the end. The statement that this foray bridged across twenty-four state prisons and at least four out-of-state contract facilities was remarkable, especially since four rival prison gangs that would otherwise be dedicated to taking each other out coordinated it. This event provides evidence that the politicization of food as a method of resistance was a conscious and effective decision on the part of these planners.

In Canada, food in prison has been the source of many disruptions and discontent (see, for example, Brazeau, 2020). In his 46th Annual Report to Parliament, Ivan Zinger (2019), the Correctional Investigator, wrote that prisoners were subject to “inadequate per diem (less than \$6.00 per day per inmate spent on food); inconsistent or substandard meal portion sizes; failure to meet Canada Food Guide requirements; excessive amount of food wastage; (and) failure to consistently follow special diet requirements”. He concludes, “Cost savings and other efficiencies in the food services area are prioritized at the expense of inmate well-being” (Zinger, 2019).

A bright light can be seen in one of the most unlikely of places, San Quentin State Prison, where the T.R.U.S.T. program (Teaching Responsibility Utilizing Sociological Training) allows for convicts to pay for food from local restaurants as a reward for ‘good behaviour’. Despite the definition of good behaviour being out of their control, many captives serving life sentences can raise money to fund their rehabilitation programs, contribute to community organizations, and donate a percentage to a charity of the warden’s choice, while enjoying a taste of freedom.

In conclusion, *Food as a Mechanism of Control and Resistance in Jails and Prisons* shows that the everyday micro-interactions initiated by institutional management and staff toward prisoners do reveal how food

becomes a mechanism of control. The reality of control lies within a debate grounded in the division between retributive versus rehabilitative models of justice. While the reality of resistance lies within a way of establishing one's autonomy, regaining one's dignity, and expressing the qualities that make one human. With these reflections in mind, this book opens new possibilities for the future research of food settings for the incarcerated and the close study of the ways in which these diets of the disrepute serve as a mechanism for control and resistance for those that work, live, and eat within them.

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ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Lucas Ridgeway is a Canadian federal prisoner at Bath Institution. He is the Book Clubs for Inmates Ambassador, Protestant Representative, and Alcoholic Anonymous Chairperson. He produces a weekly radio service called *Spiritual Connection* on 101.3 FM (CJAI FM in Kingston, ON). Podcasts can be downloaded at www.cjai.ca/podcast-main/SpiritualConnection/index.php. He would like to be reached by mail at the following address:

Lucas Ridgeway
P.O. Box 1500
Bath, ON
KOH 1G0