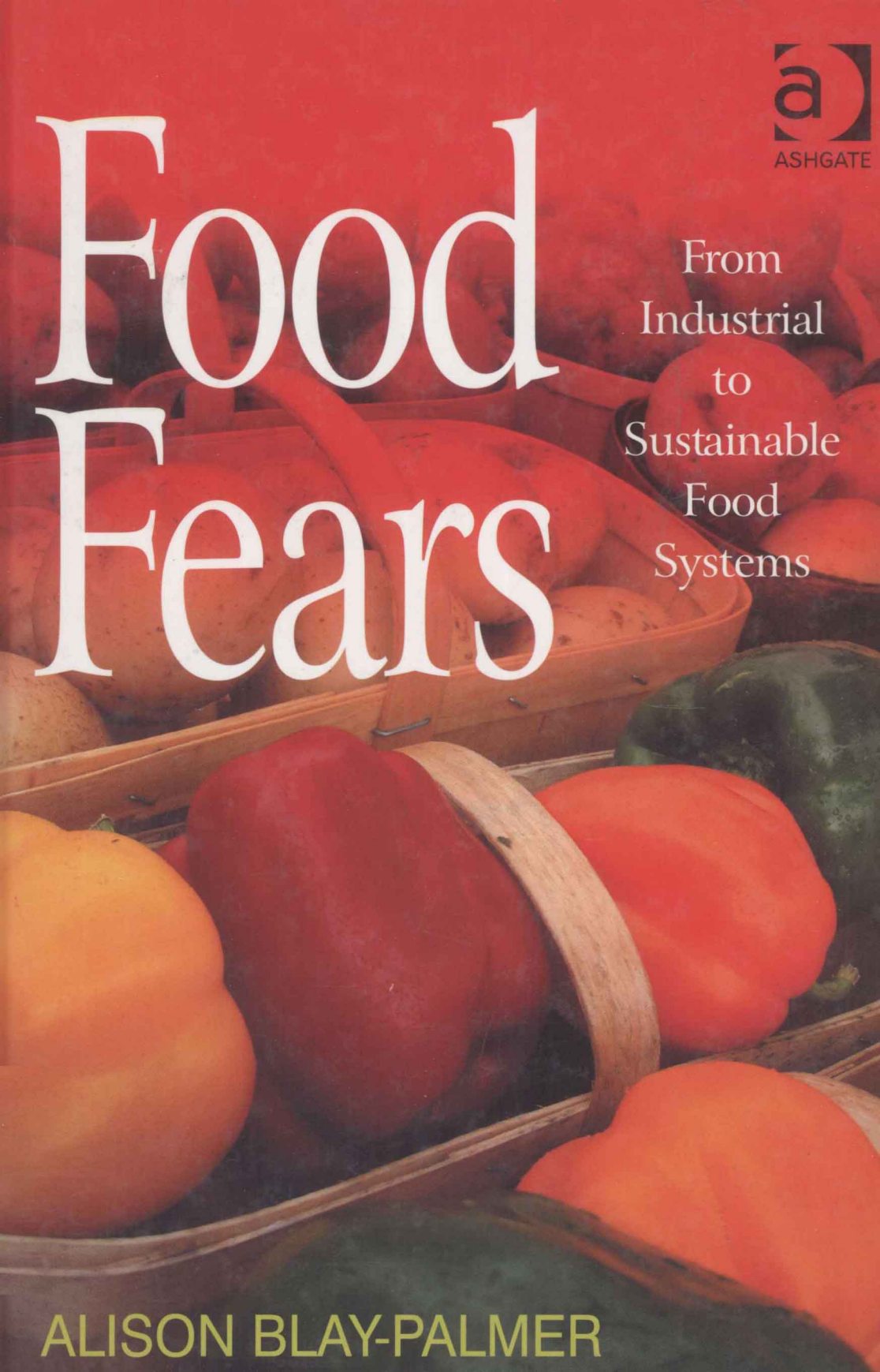
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Food Fears
From Industrial to Sustainable Food Systems
ALISON BLAY-PALMER

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From Industrial to Sustainable Food Systems

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ASHGATE

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FOOD FEARS

To Walt, Jonathan and Christopher with love and gratitude

"Ultimately, what sustainability requires of us is change in global society as a whole…To start the global task to which we are called, we need a specific place to begin, a specific place to stand, a specific place to initiate the small, reformist changes that we can only hope may some day become radically transformative.
We start with food". (Kloppenberg et al. 1996, 39)

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Chapter 1

Food Fear: Making Connections

Alison Blay-Palmer and Betsy Donald

Our mainstream food system is breaking down. Escalating rates of diabetes, cancer and obesity, excessive food miles, farm income crises, and growing food insecurity are just some of the problems identified with the current food system (Beliveau et al. 2006; Kirschenman 2005; Power 2005; Smith and Watkiss 2005; Appleby et al. 2003; Goodman and Watts 1997; Friedmann 1993; Goodman and Redclift 1991). Consumers are increasingly distanced from the physical, social and intellectual origins of their food by the cheap food system that privileges quantity and short-term efficiency over taste, sustenance, quality and the environment. Moreover, as will be argued throughout the book, the industrialization of food has created the conditions for food scares – including, for example, salmonella poisoning, Mad Cow disease, escalating rates of E coli, avian flu and most recently trans global ingredient scares that permeate the food system. But food scares, in conjunction with other social, environmental and diet-related health problems, have encouraged consumers to seek out 'alternative' food choices (Maye et al. 2007; Whatmore and Thorne 1997).

These alternative food choices are defined in many ways, with adjectives such as 'specialty', 'quality' and 'local' used to describe an array of food-supply network choices of specific ethnic, organic, fair-trade or artisan products. What these products seem to have in common is their appeal to quality-seeking consumers of food (Marsden and Smith 2005; Ilbery and Kneafsey 2000; Murdoch et al. 2000). Some of these quality seekers are searching for an 'authentic' product from their homeland whereas others are asking for food grown within a particular local foodshed (Morgan et al. 2006; Ilbery et al. 2005; Watts et al. 2005). Still others simply want products free from pesticides or herbicides, regardless of the source. The universal thread among these consumers, however, is that they are looking for something different from more mainstream agro-industrial producers or retailers. According to Whatmore et al., (2003, 389) not only do these alternative food networks construct a new trust between producer and consumer, but they also "redistribute value through the network against the logic of bulk commodity production". They go on to note that these alternative food networks are nourishing "new market, state and civic practices and visions". In this context, Europe is seen to be miles ahead of North American culture in terms of alternative food appreciation. According to this understanding, food 'alternativeness' has "come to be associated with an intensification of differences between (North) American and (Western) European food cultures and politics" (Whatmore et al. 2003, 389).

But even in North America factors such as Mad Cow disease, GMOs and public health concerns are pushing more and more people into eating foods that have one or more of the characteristics of being tasty, fresh, traceable, chemical free and

locally produced or sourced. Although some of these consumers are motivated by the style or status that comes with consuming specialty food, others are motivated by deeper philosophical concerns. The alternative Italian movement 'Slow Food' has caught on in North America – a blend of politics, social consciousness, taste and sensuality. With 160 *convivia*[1] in the US and over 30 in Canada, Slow Food is seen as an alternative to a rapid-fire, fast-food, North American lifestyle (Slow Food Canada 2007; Slow Food USA 2007). The movement emphasizes saving regional foods and small producers, seeking to revive and celebrate organoleptic pleasures– something seen as missing from North American cultural life. But according to some scholars, North America's 'fear of food' and 'fear of pleasure' are deeply ingrained in North American culture, with some pointing to America's puritan roots as the reason behind the general distaste on this continent for the pleasures of eating and drinking (Levenstein 2003; Tuan 1979).

That our fear of food may in fact be deeply ingrained in North American culture strikes one as interesting – especially as one wonders whether our fear of food could be one reason for the recent adoption, or in some cases co-optation – of 'alternative' food practices by mainstream agro-industrial food players. It is important to acknowledge the need to avoid false dualisms (i.e. good/alternative versus bad/industrial food systems) (e.g. Morgan et al. 2006; Goodman 2004; Smithers et al. 2005) and to recognize the muddied areas that surface when one attempts to delineate one system from the other (e.g. Jackson et al. 2007). The increasing forays into organic and fair trade food by mainstream processors, retailers and food service industries blur the lines between alternative and mainstream, conventional food systems (Allen 2004; Beus and Dunlap 1990). It is clear that on the ground, there are hybrid combinations that obscure the boundaries between the two worlds of food (Morgan et al. 2006).

One explanation for the inability of the alternative food movement to move beyond the margins may be confusion around exactly what it stands for (cf Maye et al. 2007). For some, alternative food has come to mean any type of food that is labelled 'organic', 'local' 'quality' or 'fair trade' (Maye et al. 2007; Ilbery and Maye 2005). This can lead to market confusion as consumers seek out 'alternatives'. In other cases consumers are looking for a quick fix to alleviate their food fears and engage with alternative food on a superficial level. This may result in the cooption of the benefit by dominant agro-food players as consumers lack the information to understand the finer details related to their food purchases. For example, in the fall of 2005, with the support of TransFair USA and Oxfam America, McDonald's launched it's own fair trade coffee in the north eastern US (Chettero 2005). A year later, Wal-Mart introduced processed and fresh organic products, underscoring the contradictory and ambiguous nature of alternative foods (Gogoi 2006).

But while recognizing that there are hybrid combinations that blur the boundaries between the two worlds of food, we acknowledge the existence of two systems (Morgan et al. 2006). As well, we find merit in analytically separating out the two systems as there were and continue to be attempts to move towards more sustainable food provisioning systems and away from more industrial food production regimes. Broadly defined, the latter food system tends to engage with food production as if

1 Slow Food groups that meet regularly to share and learn about food.

food were a commodity like cars or widgets. In the industrial food system (IFS), there has been an emphasis on quantity and large-scale production. Larger farms are favoured as a way to make more money, and monocultures are the dominant production strategy. Chemicals and technology are used as a first line solution when resolving production and other challenges. On the processing, distribution, retail and food services side, the predilection is towards vertical integration in a food system chain controlled by corporations, with ingredients being grown, processed and shipped around the world. Beus and Dunlop (1990) identify conventional agriculture with: centralization; capital, labour and technology dependence; competition; the domination of nature; increasing specialization and narrowing of production resources; and exploitation of resources that privileges short term over long term sustainability. This contrasts with what will be referred to as the alternative food system (AFS). Beus and Dunlop associate alternative agriculture with decentralization and more local production; independence and self-sufficiency; community; harmony with nature situating humans as part of and subject to nature; diversity; and, restraint of resource use with an eye on the long-term consequences of production. A shift in approach is also evident in the delivery and accessibility of food as farmer and consumer relationships are recast. The rise of farmers' markets, direct sell farm stands, community supported agriculture (CSAs) and local organic box delivery services are examples of new forms of interaction. Therefore 'alternative' becomes, in this context, and by contrast more representative of a re-framing of the *entire* food system to "articulate new forms of political association and market governance" (Whatmore et al, 2003, 390) rather than an ad hoc adoption. In an ideal world, these new forms aim to be more environmentally, nutritionally and socially sustainable than what now exists (Maxey 2007; Ilbery and Maye 2005; Raynolds 2004; Allen et al. 2004; Marsden 2003).

The contrasts between the two food systems are particularly interesting when one recognizes the frustration for those working in alternative food movements and the inability to move beyond the 'alternative' status in the direction of a more sustainable, comprehensive food system. This marginalization frustrates those who see the need for a more ecological food production, distribution and consumption approach in light of evidence that suggests a sustainable model can help dissipate many of the externalities of the existing dominant food system (Maxey 2007; Pretty et al. 2005; Allen 2004; Hinrichs 2003). Like Allen (2004), we believe that these constituent-examples of the alternative food movement will remain marginal until we address some of the long-term structural as well as social and cultural norms prevalent in our food system,

> Much work still remains to be done. Now that the ideas and priorities of alternative food movements have taken hold, it is time for the next – even more challenging – step. Alternative agro-food systems must acknowledge and address the deeper structural and cultural patterns that constrain the long-term resolution of social and environmental problems in the agro-food system. (Allen 2004, i)

In particular, it is argued in this book that until we understand what drives people in North America to eat as they do, little progress will be made in moving the alternative food movement forward. To progress, we need a more nuanced understanding of the

structures and processes that link the regulatory and policy environment with food production, processing, marketing, retailing, consumption, the environment and food in the construction of food systems (Morgan et al. 2006; Dupuis and Goodman 2005; Guthman 2004a; Whatmore 2002; Harvey 2000). The goal of this book is to take a step in that direction by: 1) unpacking food systems from the perspective that North Americans must deal with the complex, distanced relationship with their food that has emerged over the last 150 years; 2) acknowledging that the complexity in the food system has created uncertainty and chaos, manifested through, for example the Mad Cow crisis and the potential avian flu pandemic; and 3) recognizing that this in turn has precipitated a fearful relationship between consumers and the industrial food system. By trying to understand the institutional and cultural origins of why this 'fear of food' may be deeply ingrained in North American culture, our relationship with food can be re-framed through a rethinking of a more sustainable food system.

Fear and Food

It is useful at this point to flesh out the term 'fear'. Yi Fu Tuan (1979) divides fear into the two 'strains' of alarm and anxiety,

> Alarm is triggered by an unobtrusive event in the environment, and an animal's instinctive response is to combat it or run. Anxiety on the other hand, is a diffuse sense of dread and presupposes an ability to anticipate. It commonly occurs when an animal is in a strange and disorienting milieu, separated from the supportive objects and figures of its home ground. Anxiety is a presentiment of danger when nothing in the immediate surroundings can be pinpointed as dangerous. The need for decisive action is checked by the lack of any specific, circumventable threat. (Tuan 1979, 5)

In the context of food then, fear can precipitate a 'flee' reaction – for example, the immediate decision to stop buying beef when BSE was first announced – or more subtle and pervasive effects – for example, a distrust of GE food while continuing to eat food that contains GEs. It is also worth considering Boudreau's analysis of fear and its role in the political-social sphere. Using Robin (2004) as a starting point, Boudreau explains that,

> ...fear is a political necessity to maintain a sense of unity and to generate innovative action. Yet, the object of fear is consequently depoliticized: what people are afraid of is not worthy of discussion, as long as fear enables unity. In this view, fear connects people together through their simultaneous perception of threat. (Boudreau 2007)

As Boudreau explains, politically motivated and socially pervasive fear can at once unite *and* desensitize people to a source of fear. As we shall see in later chapters, food fear can be framed through this conflicted construction as it is used both to rally people behind regulations and then more subtly to coalesce consumers into markets for processed food products.

As we investigate the links between food and fear, a spatial perspective helps point to variations or similarities in institutions and modes of regulation. This in turn

provides a pathway out of the complexities created by the IFS. In offering insights into fear-based societal interactions, Lawson (2007) explains,

> ... A broader range of geographic research can move us beyond fear and toward constructive and hopeful interventions in our world...[Geographers can talk about] how our questions, our priorities and our resource allocations might shift if we start from positions of hope rather than positions of dread and anxiety. (Lawson 2007, 335) (cf Harvey 2000)

Considering Fear and Food: Fleeing Versus Wariness

Interest in the role that fear might play in the rise of the alternative food movement (especially the increased North American sales of foods labelled organic) emerged as an unexpected pattern of answers developed during interviews into innovation in the Toronto food and beverage industry. Reinforcing the inclination to explore this avenue was work by Kneafsey et al. 2004. In their research on the (re)connection of consumers and producers through 'alternative' food networks, they too remarked on food fear as a recurrent theme. They observed that,

> Whilst not claiming that anxiety is the *only* driver of food consumption decisions and practices, our research suggests that it is one of the key factors pushing the growth of 'alternative' food networks. We did not set out to ask consumers about their anxieties; rather anxieties emerged as an important feature of consumer responses to contemporary food provisioning and in many cases, were revealed to be a motive for participation in 'alternative' food networks. (Kneafsey et al. 2004, 1)

The comments about fear that emerged in the Toronto research project were an unexpected by-product of original research on the innovative dimensions of food in the North American urban economy (particularly the rise of ethnic, organic and fusion foods). From comments made during this research, consumer fear represented an important motivator for firms when developing alternative food products, processes or designs. Consumers raised the issue of fear as a motivating factor for their alternative food purchases. Fear was also an implicitly recurring theme in policy-reports on consumer-buying preferences that were reviewed.

Take organic food as an example. The most important reasons people consistently give for buying organic are food safety issues related to BSE, Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) and the use of pesticides (DECIMA 2004; Kortbech-Olesen 2004; Environics 2001). This is reflected in consumers' attempts to sort out what they are eating. In a 2004 survey, 80% of US eaters said they strongly support labelling food with GMO content because of concerns about the safety of those foods (Bostrom 2005), while UK consumers cited food safety as the primary reason for buying organic food (Rimal et al. 2005). Consumers are concerned about the safety of conventional food and want to know what they are putting in their bodies (Whatmore 2002; Goodman 1999).

While food fears have precipitated new market opportunities for selling alternative food, they have also laid the foundation for consumer confusion. This confusion arises, in part at least, from points where alternative and industrial food

systems intersect and blur. On the one hand, consumer concerns about food safety have spawned interest in food 'quality', shorter food chains and direct buying-selling relationships (Whatmore et al. 2003; Murdoch et al. 2000). On the other hand, when the food system precipitates a food scare, it seems that conflicting reactions occur in some consumers' minds (Aubrun et al 2005, 32). First food scares may be seen by the consumer as a personal failure and, "interpreted as confirmation that individuals need to make smarter choices, and that individual foods should be avoided" (Aubrun et al. 2005, 32) (cf. Halkier 2004 for research on Denmark). Accordingly, consumers interpret food scare events as their personal responsibility and conclude they need to be making 'smarter choices'. Second, as Aubrun et al. (2005) explain, "'healthy food' and 'healthy eating' are understood in comfortable, little-picture terms – as opposed to having anything to do with systems of production, marketing or cultural patterns" (Aubrun et al. 2005, 32). These 'little picture' terms represent the consumer's deconstruction of food system threats into manageable bits. It seems that since consumers manage one crisis at a time, they fail to be engaged with a food system *qua* system. Instead consumers focus on coping with individual food crises and so do not have the objectivity or the resources to act as agents of change to move the *food system* in new directions. As a result, consumers deal with compartmentalized food scares and miss the chance to change overarching systemic problems.

But in addition to creating food fears, the IFS then taps into those specific fears (i.e. it capitalizes on each compartmentalized food crisis) and offers solutions within the conventional system. Fat-free food products are a good example of this circular process. Fat-free 'healthy' alternative products are created to address consumer fears about life expectancy and weight gain. As we know there are connections between weight and the consumption of foods that are high in fat and sugar – a brainchild of the processed food industry. So in response to a problem created by their own products, the solution that emerges in the IFS is to create other, highly processed food products. In this way, the food products and systems have gradually become more complex and difficult to control over time.

The response by IFS processors to consumer anxieties about their food is not surprising, of course. Indeed, making money out of exploiting people's fears is not new. As food historian Harvey Levenstein (2004, 6) has put it, "when you have a culture in which food is the object of fear and loathing as well as love, there are people who are going to discover innumerable creative and inventive ways of exploiting these fears". Thus this book makes the argument that to move away from a food culture based even partly on fear there needs to be a reorientation away from the current IFS to a more ecological, social and economically sustainable food system. A shift is required to a new food system that is less prone to the creation of unmanageable complexity. It is further argued that this change must be systemic.

In order to understand how this broken food system was created, it is useful to examine possible origins of our deeply ingrained 'fear of food'. First a political economy analysis of the dynamics between different forms of capital, social regulation and agriculture set the conditions for capitalist penetration in food and

agriculture. Second, layered onto the economic consideration is an analysis of the socio-cultural dimensions of our anxious relationship with food.

The Political Economy of Food

In general terms, the framework for reviewing the origins of food fears in the North American food capitalist system has been inspired primarily by Marxist regulation theorists such as Michel Aglietta (1987), Robert Boyer (1990), Richard LeHeron (1993), Harriet Friedmann (1993) and especially the ecologically-spirited Alain Lipietz (1995). Like many critical political economists, these scholars seek to explain how capitalist social relations came to be reproduced across time and space while simultaneously being marked by contradictions that challenged their ongoing reproduction. Neoclassical models take the continuation of capitalism for granted. By contrast, regulationists start with an explicit rejection of market equilibrium as the central organizing force within capitalism, positing instead that social reproduction is the central imperative underlying capitalism. This reproduction of social relations is not smooth, but rather undergoes periods of crisis, during which conditions are such that it is challenging to achieve the reproduction of social relations. Alternatively, there are periods of stability, during which conditions are such that capital is able to accumulate in a relatively stabilized way.

It is suggested in this book that to some extent the capitalist agro-industrialized food system has been able to accumulate and concentrate for many decades. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 show how a number of public and private institutional forms, social practices and norms acted to regulate and stabilize the accumulation of industrial food capital. Like Aglietta (1987) we believe that these *structural forms* are neither automatic nor inevitable, but rather develop during particular periods in capitalist development. According to this view, the current agro-industrial food system is in disequilibrium and therefore we are also in a period of great creativity and experimentation with regard to the formation of new and innovative institutional forms, social practices and norms that may make the system more sustainable. We provide more evidence of those innovations in Chapter 8, but now turn some of the social assumptions that have helped to construct the current IFS in its roughly 200-year history. Particular attention is paid to the role of fear in the creation of this system.

The Human-nature Divide: The Foundation for Food Fears

The human-nature divide was a necessary condition for the accumulation of the existing form of food capitalism. People needed to become distanced consumers of food instead of proximate producers living in balance with nature for the current food system to have taken root and flourished.

Margaret Fitzsimmons (1989) offers insightful commentary on the nature-society divide in general in her seminal paper, 'The matter of nature'. Fitzsimmons traces the divisions between 'urban' and 'rural' lifestyles and the resulting distance of urban dwellers from nature. She links the urban-nature divide to a wider breech

between society and nature that severed the social from the natural or material world of everyday life. This severance led to a distanced relationship with nature, our bodies, and the food that we ingest to nourish our 'selves' (Whatmore 2002; Goodman 1999; Kneen 1993). It has been argued that this division is entrenched in North American and some European cultures through many avenues including Christianity. As Cronon (1996) explains, our perceptions about and relationships to nature are socially constructed and contextualized. For example, the bible directs Noah and his sons – and all of their descendants and followers – to lord over nature. They are counselled after the flood to,

> Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth.
>
> And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every fowl of the air, upon all that moveth upon the earth, and upon all the fishes of the sea; into your hands are they delivered. (Genesis 9:1–9:2)

The application of the covenant between God and Noah that humankind had an obligation to dominate the world and its creatures is a seminal precept in the creation of the nature-society divide. The division precipitated an attitude of supremacy by some Christians over nature. Feelings of separation from nature were reinforced through food taboos as certain foods were deemed off limits for certain religious followers. For example, prohibitions against eating pork are founded in Old Testament requirements to eat cloven foot, ruminant animals (Farb and Armelagos 1980). The foundational principle for humans to dominate nature persisted through the Enlightenment and became entrenched with the rise of modern society (Eder 1996). The attitude of domination facilitated the development of an "efficient relationship to nature" (Eder 1996, 145) and was reinforced during the rise of modernism and positivism,

> Modern Europeans added two components to the Christian recovery project [returning the earth to its original Edenic state] – mechanistic science and laissez-faire capitalism – to create a grand master narrative of Enlightenment. Mechanistic science supplies the instrumental knowledge for reinventing the garden on earth. The Baconian-Cartesian-Newtonian project is premised on the power of technology to subdue and dominate nature, on the certainty of mathematical law, and on the unification of natural laws into a single framework of explanation…science and technology hastened the recovery project by inventing the tools and knowledge that could be used to dominate nature. (Merchant 1996, 136)

The groundbreaking work of contemporary social scientists David Harvey (1989), Yi Fu Tuan (1979) and Klaus Eder (1996) provide historical insights into several salient features with respect to fear and food, the separation of society from nature, and the culture of control of our food that has emerged as a central feature of the contemporary American landscape. This culture has deep historical roots in the positivist-science over nature philosophy that facilitates the ascendancy and facile adoption of technology in North America. Yi-Fu Tuan (1979) provides a historical-cultural context for fear and geography linking fear, landscapes and control as he asks,