

# American Abundance Examined:

## David M. Potter's *People of Plenty* and the Study of Food

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Historian David M. Potter's well-known 1954 study, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character*, is important to revisit for its compelling and still salient insights into U.S. capitalism and consumer culture. Despite its shortcomings, the book contains much that is important and relevant to scholars studying American culture today. For folklorists studying food as a text and as an indicator of the larger culture, as well as those focusing on the production and consumption of food in the United States or internationally, *People of Plenty*, with its focus on the culture of abundance and its far-reaching effects, proves especially useful. In this essay I show how Potter's theory of American abundance as applied to food reveals many important insights, and can provide a useful framework for understanding the relationships between food and society.

In his economic analysis of what used to be unselfconsciously called the "American character," Potter argued that the United States and its citizens have been shaped, blessed, and at times intellectually and socially hindered by inhabiting one of the most resource-rich and economically successful countries in the world. *People of Plenty* was one of the first interdisciplinary cultural studies to connect American abundance to increased mobility, decreased emphasis on community, advertising, individualism, and the distinct nature of American democracy, including the illusion of classlessness. Careful to de-

velop how abundance shapes individuals as well as society, Potter articulated—and saw as related—the enormous impact of abundance in both the public and private spheres. Potter's central thesis is that the United States's long history of abundance—a product of both natural resources and technological innovation—has shaped who we are and how we see the world. For any who might question the prominence of American abundance, Potter describes the country's vast natural resources, its large expanses of seemingly uninhabited land perceived as inexhaustible and available for the taking, impressive industrial and scientific advances, and (at his time) the U.S.'s highest per capita income, caloric consumption, and agricultural output in the world. Noting that the average American consumed 3,186 calories daily, Potter characterizes this as "unquestionably the highest nutritional standard in the world" (83). Potter further describes that while in 1820 Americans were obliged to keep 71.8 percent of the working population engaged in agriculture in order to feed the rest, in 1950 only 11.6 percent of the working population were required to do so—and the percentage is much lower today (89). Although the United States no longer leads the world in per capita income, there is little question that it still is the paragon of material abundance, and for many abroad American abundance is an object of both admiration and disdain.

One example of how abundance has shaped United States culture and society is the character of American democracy. Abundance has given the concept of "democracy" a distinctive meaning which sets it apart from forms of democracy in other countries. According to Potter, abundance "has given a characteristic tone to American equalitarianism [especially compared with that of Europe]." "Essentially, the difference is that Europe has always conceived of redistribution of wealth as necessitating the expropriation of some and the corresponding aggrandizement of others; but America has conceived of it primarily in terms of giving to some without taking from others. . . . The American mind . . . often assumes implicitly that the volume of wealth is dynamic, that much potential wealth still remains to be converted; and that diverse groups—for instance, capital and labor—can

take more wealth out of the environment by working together than they can take out of one another by class warfare" (118). Thus, American democracy is based on the assumption that everyone can reap the material benefits of capitalism through merely making the pie bigger, in part because of the belief in and historical proof of American abundance. There is more than enough for everyone to go around; we do not need to take from the rich to give to the poor; we can "level up," as it were. In fact, many mistakenly equate democracy with capitalism, largely because of this factor of American abundance. Other countries' experiences do not suggest the same equation.

While the world—and the U.S.'s place in it—has changed dramatically since the 1950s, these ideas still hold true to a large extent. Americans may not be so sure that the pie is expanding, but they are still hesitant to "soak the rich" even though they recognize severe economic disparities between rich and poor. (Witness as evidence the ongoing debates in Congress about how to reduce the deficit.) In fact, in support of Potter's thesis, one could argue that Americans' shrinking abundance has deflated somewhat their belief in democracy, for which the current political climate similarly provides evidence. Moreover, Potter argues that when most Americans employ such ideas as "American freedom" and "liberty," they really mean the acquisition and maintenance of material wealth. "We have been historically correct," says Potter, "in supposing that we had a revolutionary message to offer but we have been mistaken in our concept of what that message was. We supposed that our revelation was 'democracy revolutionizing the world,' but in reality it was 'abundance revolutionizing the world'" (134). For proof look at many Americans', and certainly Madison Avenue's, definition of the "American Dream": owning one's own home, two cars in the garage, an annual summer vacation, and so on—not that these things are to be dismissed as unimportant or even unnecessary. While political independence, freedom from political tyranny and religious persecution certainly play a part in immigrants' and native-born citizens' construction of the genius of America (and at some level it is impossible to separate economic from political and physical well-being), America's long-held promise of abundance looms large. The freedoms defined by the Bill of Rights might be mentioned in passing, but by and large the focus is on consumption of material goods equating the

pursuit of happiness.

Consequently, Potter argues, we have failed to export our brand of democracy precisely because it is so closely tied to the condition of abundance; those countries which do not have the same levels of abundance cannot duplicate our terms of democracy. The following lengthy quote explains why:

For a country destined, as ours has been, to play such a role [in world affairs] it was a tragic fallacy that we conceived of democracy as an absolute value, largely ideological in content and equally valid in any environment, instead of recognizing that our own democratic system is one of the major by-products of our abundance, workable primarily because of the measure of our abundance . . . . In our own country the promise of equality meant the right to advance, without discrimination, to easily attainable ends. Hence the principle of equality could be upheld with genuine sincerity . . . . But in countries where even decency, much less comfort, lay beyond the point of attainability for most people—where the number of advantageous positions was negligible—it seemed a kind of deception to offer the individual as good a chance as anyone to compete for nonexistent prizes or to assure him of his freedom to go where he wished. (137)

Further, Potter notes, "It remains painfully true that we have urged other nations to adopt our democracy as their own, while encouraging them to draw upon our abundance in such a way (by the importation of consumer goods) that it remains distinctively our own" (140). So we offer other countries our form of government to emulate, but fail to provide them with the corresponding economic assets. Thus, as with Mexico, for example, we end up still maintaining economic dominance, only a step removed from the former quasi-colonial relationship that existed before.

It is true that Potter, writing out of the context of post-World War II America, with its economic boom, Cold War mentalité, strong emphasis on consensus history, and preoccupation with American exceptionalism, fails to address the complexities of American society, including the real and possibly permanent divisions of race, ethnicity, class, and gender.

Thus a weakness of *People of Plenty* is Potter's failure to consider seriously that many people have been prohibited from full participation in American abundance, although he does mention that African Americans, originally brought to this country as slaves, have been excluded from the "blessings of liberty" (96). Potter insists nevertheless that the promise of this abundance still affects the culture at large and individuals in particular, even those who do not explicitly partake of its riches. And to a large extent I think he is right. A fundamental fact, I would argue, is the United States's extreme wealth compared to most countries in the world, which has made a difference to those who live here, regardless of their actual level of participation in the wealth. This overarching culture of abundance also helps explain low political activism, the lack of a viable socialist movement, and the American myth of classlessness, despite huge class divisions and barriers.

Food is a central element of this abundance, perhaps best illustrated by Thanksgiving. The major secular holiday in the United States, Thanksgiving is a day for Americans to give thanks for the bounties of life, primarily food, and to gorge ourselves with these blessings. Potter uses the example of World War II to illuminate the idea that for many abroad the promise of America was not its abstract ideals of democracy, but its concrete realities, symbolized by, among other items, food. Potter quotes writer Isabel Cary Lundberg to illustrate the idea that every American overseas between 1941 and 1945 was in some respect a revolutionary agent of social change. What was it, she asks, that "the native populations everywhere wanted of the G.I., the Air Force pilot, the gop, and the Seabee? They wanted what the vast majority of the world's population, European, and non-European wants." Lundberg goes on to list such food items as chocolate bars, chewing gum, and white bread. To war-ravaged Europeans these were not only as much-needed supplements to their meager diets, but profound symbols. "Very few Americans," Lundberg muses, "picking and choosing among the piles of white bread in a super-market, have ever appreciated the social standing of white bread elsewhere in the world. To be able to afford white bread is a dream that awaits fulfillment for billions of the world's population. To afford it signifies that one enjoys all the comforts of life" (136). While mindful of the fact that the United States did not invent white

bread nor the Industrial Revolution, Potter argues that the U.S. has played a greater part in displaying the variety and magic of abundance, and has done more, through Hollywood films, to disseminate the belief that ordinary people might attain this abundance.

In addition to Potter's example of World War II, I would like to briefly suggest other food-related topics that when examined through the prism of American abundance can provide further understanding of the place and meaning of food in contemporary culture. First is the abundance of food as a symbol of winning the Cold War and, consequently, the United States's moral superiority. Television news has long used images of bare, empty store shelves and long bread lines to symbolize Communist bankruptcy. Explicitly or implicitly, Americans are to compare these mentally to U.S. grocery stores bulging with food, giving legitimacy to American foreign and domestic policies. Second, American food and beverages are unarguably symbols of American culture and democracy. The 1970s Coca-Cola jingle, "I'd like to buy the world a Coke" was no exaggeration, as this sugar and caffeine-laden, pleasingly refreshing beverage is internationally synonymous with the United States of America. Similarly, apple pie has long been a symbol of abundance to Americans themselves. During World War II the media characterized why U.S. soldiers fought—and why U.S. citizens supported the war—in individualized and materialistic terms which often included apple pie. In great need of exploration is the cultural impact and meanings of fast food eateries' movement into the former Soviet Union, China, and other communist or developing nations. While scholars of foodways can demonstrate the devastating impact on local foodways, cultures, and even health by such American exports, it is too easy to dismiss the phenomenon as without complexity. To a former student of mine from Russia, for example, a McDonald's in Moscow was both a welcome, reliable (though prohibitively expensive) source of food, and a positive symbol of western efficiency and cleanliness.

Food is also employed as a symbol in domestic American politics, an area that also needs more examination. Commonly cited as evidence of the abuse of the welfare system are the poor who buy "need

less luxuries" with their food stamps when they should be buying fifty pound sacks of oatmeal and bulk pasta. Welfare mothers are demonized as using food stamps to buy steak and fresh raspberries instead of peanut butter and bananas. According to some, the poor somehow do not deserve access to the full range of food abundance provides, and are ungrateful and undeserving if they buy anything but the basics. While in reality most poor people do spend their food money on the "basics," it is not surprising that many do not. For many poor people the disparity between what little they have compared to the unescapable abundance that surrounds them in grocery stores and in the media, is too much to bear. It is common for such parents to give in to their children's desires for expensive, processed, and non-nutritious foods, for example, because they do not have the heart or the energy to deny them the foods that appear at every turn in the United States. Thus we need greater cultural understanding of poverty leading to poor nutrition and eating habits in the larger context of American abundance. How can we reconcile abundance and its mythic status with the fact that one-quarter of American children live in official poverty, and thus suffer nutritionally as a result? We could also interpret the current popularity with gourmet and specialty foods as symbols of domestic politics. Gourmet cheeses, pastas, breads, coffees, and beers can be read as symbols of privilege and class division. Expensive, available in limited quantities, and pitched at the privileged, these specialty items connote sophistication and wealth as well as quality.

Additionally, it can be argued that the abundance of food profoundly affects people from the time they are infants, helping to shape dominant strains of individualism highly valued by Americans. The common notion that infants need their own rooms and should not sleep with parents, for example, indicates a level of wealth nonexistent in most countries, and breeds early on a sense of individuality and privateness, a separation from others. Potter provides the example of bottle feeding as such a shaper of American individualism:

Abundance has already revolutionized the typical mode of his nourishment by providing for him to be fed upon cow's milk rather than upon his mother's milk, taken from the bottle rather than from the breast. Abundance contributes vitally to

this transformation, because bottle feeding requires fairly elaborate facilities of refrigeration, heating, sterilization, and temperature control, which only an advanced technology can offer and only an economy of abundance can make widely available. . . . Bottle feeding also must tend to emphasize the separateness of the infant as an individual, and thus it makes, for the first time, a point which the entire culture reiterates constantly throughout the life of the average American. [196]

Formula feeding (now understood to be better than cow's milk for infants) is a prime example of how the United States, in exporting its abundance and way of life, fails to do so completely and fairly. The corporate irresponsibility of pushing infant formulas in developing countries without the necessary technologies required to keep the formula safe and sterile, results not only in death, but contributes to poverty and colonial dependence.

Abundance, of course has dramatically changed our eating habits. We now are a country that eats on the run. The traditional rules of food consumption have broken down, altering the relationship of and interaction with family members, with our food, with ourselves. There is more room for cultural studies that examine the profound paradox of enjoying abundance alongside the highest rates of anorexia nervosa and obesity in the culture at large and among subcultures in particular. Moreover, American abundance actually limits food choice in many ways. Although United States grocery stores are replete with aisles and aisles of foodstuffs, choices of thirty different kinds of potato chips, fifty different kinds of cookies, in reality much of our choice of food is narrowing. The varieties of fresh corn or apples, for example, is limited to two or three kinds in most supermarkets, and again, it is those who are willing to pay more who can find more varieties in specialty markets.

These are but a few of the rich possibilities in cultural food studies for which David Potter's examination of American abundance can help provide a framework. In conclusion, I'd like to remind you of the aphorism, "The destiny of nations depends on the manner wherein they take their food." Applied to the United States, American food culture is a telling reflection of the larger society, a society strongly influenced by the culture of abundance. This abun-

dance of food leads to many paradoxes: we are abundant yet psychologically restricted, deficient in spite of great wealth, individualistic in nature yet susceptible to corporate manipulation, both dazzled and blinded by technology, schizophrenic in our habits and preferences, still beholden to a good T-bone steak. The people of plenty continue to grapple with the simul-

taneous blessings and curses of U.S. economic abundance, perhaps manifested best in the entire supermarket aisles of potato chips and soft drinks while ten percent of Americans pay for groceries with government food stamps.

#### Reference

Potter, David M. Potter. 1954. *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

## COURSE SYLLABI

### A Singable Feast: Food and Song in Traditional Italian Culture

Luisa Del Giudice  
Institute of Italian Culture  
UCLA, 1995

This course will examine Italian traditional culture as expressed through song and foodways from historical, geographic, socio-economic and ethnographic perspectives (as articulated through class, gender, occupation, and ethno-linguistic groupings). Through a variety of oral, material and ritual expressions, we will examine such issues as: penury and dreams of plenty; ritual behavior and celebration; occupational sub-cultures devoted to cultivation and preparation of foods (rice paddy workers [*mondarisi*], fishermen, etc.); regionalism; and foodways as a marker of ethnicity. An integrated understanding of Italian folk culture will be offered through a range of media, including several meals and live musical performances.

#### Required Texts:

- 1) Del Giudice, Luisa, ed. 1995. *Italian Traditional Song*. Los Angeles: Italian Cultural Institute.
- 2) class reader: Westwood Copies, 1001 Gayley Ave.

#### Schedule of Classes and Reading/Listening Assignments:

Class 1 : Introduction to Foodways, Folksong  
A: *Italian Traditional Song*: introduction, Lullabies 1A:1-6

B: reader: "What do Folklorists Study?"

#### Class 2 : Food, Song and Ritual

A: *Italian Traditional Song*: Ritual Songs 2B:5-10

B: reader: 1) de' Medici, Lorenzo, "Dance Song," "Song of the Village Lasses," "Song of the Cicadas," "Song of the Seven Planets," "Triumph of Bacchus and Ariadne;" 2) Sordi, Italo, "Il Carnevale;" 3) Camporesi, Piero, "Bread and Death: Food and Peasant Rituals in Italy"

#### Class 3 : Hunger, Abundance and Gastronomic Utopias

##### DECLARE RESEARCH TOPIC

A: *Italian Traditional Song*: Tavern Songs 2A:5-8

B: reader: 1) Boccaccio, "Calandrino, Bruno e Buffalmacco set off in search of the heliotrope;" 2) Giuannino Il Traneese, *La piacevole historia di Cuccagna*;" 3) Calvino, "Jump into My Sack;" 4) Pellegrino, Angelo M., "Abundance"

#### Class 4 : Concert: Musicantica

Guided ethnomusicological "tour" of the southern Italian regions (including slides and presentations) of Puglia, Calabria, Sicily, and Campania, as well as a demonstration of several folk instruments of Sardinia

#### Class 5 : Video: *Riso amaro (Bitter Rice)*

*Riso amaro (Bitter Rice)*, Giuseppe De Santis, Lux, 1949, 108 minutes.  
cast: Raf Vallone, Silvana Mangano, Vittorio Gassman, Doris Dowling

"Walter (Gassman), a thief, and his girl (Dowling) are obliged to hide in the rice fields of the