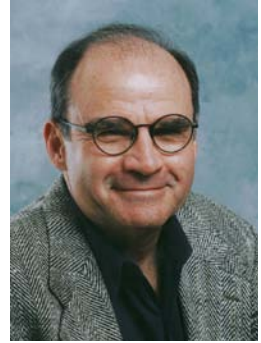# Food and Drink:

The declining importance of cultural context?

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When we pop open a can of Coca Cola or reach into a bag of potato chips, we are most-likely consuming a product available to consumers in many locations across the globe and made of ingredients produced in multiple countries. While food and drink remain an integral part of cultural practices and identities today, very few of the products we purchase at the supermarket or in chain restaurants are actually local. What processes have contributed to the seemingly limitless availability of out-of-season produce, the global spread of name-brand food and drink, and the prominence of low cost 'convenience' foods and fast food restaurants in cities across the globe?

There is no question that national and 'local' social structures and cultures continue to be important throughout the world. Similarly, today's global citizens continue to have agency through which they make an array of choices and, more importantly, construct their social and cultural worlds. In other words, the dialectics between culture and agency (Archer, 1988), and structure and agency (Giddens, 1984) continue to be of great importance. This is true globally, as well as nationally and locally.

While we acknowledge all of that, much of the senior author's (Ritzer, 2013; 2007) work is focused on the idea that these dialectics have been greatly affected by a variety of global forces which have been either set in motion, or greatly amplified, since the end of WW II. In this essay we will focus on how these changes affect food and drink. Among other things, we will argue that those changes have tended to both expand and reduce social and cultural differences in food and drink throughout much of the world. This perspective is in line with Giddens's argument that larger structural and cultural changes are both enabling and constraining. On the one hand, many people around the world now have access to a wider variety of food and drink than they ever had before (Belasco, 2008). For example, products and brands once limited to local markets are available globally, allowing consumers in the global North to eat tomatoes and peaches, grown in warmer climates, year-round. On the other hand, many of the changes associated with globalization detailed in this essay have served to limit, at least in some ways, individual choice in food and drink consumption. The increasing dominance of multi-national corporations in the production and marketing of food and drink products threatens smaller-scale, locally-based products, production and consumption practices in developing countries, changing not only what is available, but how it is consumed (Wilk, 2006). The availability of what we consider today to be the most essential food commodities – coffee and sugar, for example – is directly tied to the political and economic forces associated with global capitalism (Mintz, 1986). More generally, these forces tend to greatly alter, if not undermine, the social, cultural and agential dialectics that existed in the realm of food and drink prior to their ascendancy.