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### **Futurist Book Group Discussion**

### ***Meals to Come: A History of the Future of Food* (California Studies in Food and Culture)**

by Warren Belasco  
University of California Press, 2006

393 pages

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*Synopsis of the July 2007 meeting of the Futurist Book Group (Washington DC Chapter), joined by Tom Key, coordinator, Orange County (California) chapter; summarized and reviewed by Ken Harris*

In at least two respects this book differs from our other readings. First, it is not about the future we face today in 2007. Rather it is about what people over the last two centuries, mostly in the US and UK, have thought the futures they faced would be like with special reference to the future of food. Second, it surveys past views of the future in general and the future of food in particular that were expressed in fiction as well as in non-fiction. (Except for our April 2006 selection, *Future Washington*, a collection of visions of the future of our metropolitan area written by prominent science fiction authors, all our previous selections have been non-fiction books.) The book examines views of the future of food not only in books and articles but also in world's fairs, especially the Chicago World's Fair of 1893, the St. Louis World's Fair of 1904, and the New York World's Fairs of 1939 and 1964-1965. Additional information about world's fairs is available at <http://www.worldsfairphotos.com>.

Any futurists who are not already humble about their visions of what the future will or could be like should read this book because most past visions of the future of food were wrong and some were way off the mark. It seems people envisioning the future of food were particularly unable to rid themselves of short-term biases when visioning the future in fiction or forecasting it in non-fiction. Belasco says that predictions about future food supplies have been influenced by four main factors: (1) sudden inflation in food prices; (2) environmental stresses; (3) scary demographics; and (4) cultural anxieties about sexuality, working class unrest, unruly immigrants, or the ominous "Other." He says, for example, that Malthus' forecasts of future food shortages were influenced by the great increases in population in North America and Britain and that the poor in 19th century Britain were denied food aid lest they be encouraged to reproduce (Meat in the diet was thought to aid sexual vigor!). In addition, he consistently shows

throughout the book that past forecasters failed to foresee the great improvements in agricultural technology that have consistently produced food surpluses rather than food shortages. For example, he says in a segment about forecasts in the 1920's, "Future USDA secretary and US Vice President Henry A. Wallace agreed that even if farmers were 30 percent more efficient in 2025 – a very generous increase by contemporary forecasts – a US population of 200 million would necessarily live 'largely on foods of cereal, vegetable and dairy origin.'" In fact, he shows that dire forecasts of food shortages actually caused gluts of food because they inspired drives to increase agricultural production. For example, he says, "While American consumers' complaints about food inflation led the Nixon administration to impose temporary price controls on beef, the crisis was much worse in poor countries dependent on imports of both grain and the oil needed to grow the Green Revolution's chemical-dependent seeds. This was the context for USDA Secretary Earl Butz's infamous call on American farmers to plant 'from fencerow to fencerow' – an encouragement to overproduce that eventually led to declining prices, Grain Belt depression, and fatter consumers."

Belasco effectively contrasts the views of Malthusians, cornucopians, and egalitarians on the future of food, particularly on the food supply, over the past 200 years. Malthusians have felt that eventually growth in population would lead to food shortages such that people would not have enough to eat or that they would not be able to eat the foods they wished to eat, particularly meat. Cornucopians, on the other hand, have felt that good things would happen to assure adequacy of the food supply even though we might not be able to foresee exactly what they will be, particularly improvements in agricultural technology, and that all would be able to share in the benefits of increased production. Egalitarians took a view in between the two extremes; they felt that adequate increases in food production were possible but were not sure that food would be equitably distributed. Belasco vividly portrays the contrasting views in "Part II: Imagining the Future of Food: Speculative Fiction," which contains surveys of utopian and dystopian fictional portrayals of the future of food.

Surprising to a reader unfamiliar with literature on the future of food are Belasco's discussions throughout the book of the racist, classist, and sexist components of views of the future of food. Throughout the 19th and most of the 20th century, he says that diets containing meat were thought to be superior to vegetarian diets. Diets containing meat were thought to be those of people who had attained higher levels of civilization whereas vegetarian diets were thought to be those of "inferior" races, particularly in Asia. Also meat-containing diets were thought to be diets of the prosperous and vegetarian diets to be diets of the poor. In a view that persists to our own time, although in modified form, men were thought to prefer meat-containing diets and women to prefer vegetarian diets.

The other major contrast in the book is that among the Classical, Modernist and Recombinant views of the future. The Classical view which prevailed primarily in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was that the food supply, at least in North America and Europe, would be adequate because "superior" Western civilizations would conquer and exploit new lands. This view was symbolized in the imposing structures at the Chicago World's Fair of 1893, particularly that of the horticultural building. Two forces discredited this view – World War I, in which millions of citizens of supposedly superior nations were slaughtered, and the end of new lands to conquer and exploit (e.g., the American frontier had closed, so there was no more cheap land.) The modernist view, which prevailed mainly from the 1920's until the early days of the US space program, was that the food supply of the future would be adequate because of technology. Everything would be streamlined as symbolized in the architecture of the buildings at the 1939 New York World's Fair and in design of all sorts of machinery. Diets would consist

of synthetic foods. Whole meals would be encapsulated in pills or people would eat algae. The great increases in agricultural production after World War II as well as people's strong preferences for familiar foods discredited this view. It lasted into the early days of the US space exploration program, but the astronauts' revulsion at the synthetic foods they ate as well as more space in and capacity of space vehicles forced and allowed NASA to provide traditional foods in high-tech form to the astronauts. The Recombinant view, the one prevailing in recent times, is that people want new, but not too new, foods. They like the taste of traditional meats, fruits, and vegetables and want some, but not all, of the food preparation to be done for them.

The group's discussion concluded with speculation about the food shopping experience of future generations. Most thought people of the future would still want to go to grocery stores so that they could see, touch and feel the foods they are buying. However, the food stores of the future would fully exploit information technology, mainly RFID, to assure that the foods consumers want are always in stock and to speed their checkout.

**POINTS FOR THE CLASSROOM** (send comments to [forum@futuretakes.org](mailto:forum@futuretakes.org)):

- *Belasco presents and contrasts three viewpoints on the future of food – the Malthusians, the cornucopians, and the egalitarians. With which of these three viewpoints do you agree, and why? What relevant factors have not been considered by any of these three viewpoints?*
- *Considering the classical, modernist, and recombinant views of the future as applied to the future of food, which view best describes the future of food in the next 15 years in your part of the world and elsewhere? Consider the following factors:*
  - *The possibilities of pressure to obtain increased yield per acre.*
  - *Water, energy, and environmental issues.*
  - *Increased interest in natural foods and vegetarian diets.*
  - *The reluctance of some people to change their food habits.*
  - *Lifestyles that influence food choices – e.g., home-cooked meals, “fast food,” restaurant meals.*
  - *Other factors that you identify.*