Bestor, Theodore C.


Theodore C. Bestor opens his article by painting a scene that represents the globalization of bluefin tuna: there is a tub of the tuna on ice in Bath, Maine, and potential buyers crowd around from New Jersey, New York, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Maine, and Japan. The potential buyers extract samples of the tuna to examine their color, and they also assess the fat content of the precious fish; Japanese buyers then return to their cars to call Japan to get the morning prices from Tokyo’s Tsukiji market – apparently “the fishing industry’s answer to Wall Street” (pp. 13). After the auction bids are settled in a private manner, the bluefin tuna are then placed in their “tuna coffins” to be airfreighted to Tokyo for sale. In this sense, Bestor seems to maintain that sashimi-grade tuna offers new venues for capital to issue on a global scale; the tuna trade and increasing global appetite for sushi features “intense international competition and thorny environmental regulations, centuries-old practices combined with high technology, realignments of labor and capital in response to international regulation, shifting markets, and the diffusion of culinary culture” (pp. 14).

The author is quite quick to correct popular thinking when he maintains that, while North Americans tend to think of cultural influence as flowing from West to East, Japanese culture and materials have undoubtedly permeated the cultural whims of many, if not most, North American citizens. Such a permeation occurred after the 1970s, when Americans, according to Bestor, “rejected red-meat American fare in favor of healthy cuisine like rice, fish, and vegetables. The appeal of the high-concept aesthetics of Japanese design also helped to prepare the world for a sushi fad” (pp. 15). Indeed, sushi seems to be offered at every popular restaurant in an attempt to lure in customers and, consequently, profit.

Even though international environmental campaigns have forced countries like Japan to scale back their distant water fleets and thus made Japan’s turning to foreign suppliers unavoidable, Japanese cultural control of sushi remains, according to Bestor, unquestioned. Nevertheless, the very rapid globalization of the market involving bluefin tuna has awoken many problems of concern to the minds of fishers in terms of their relationships with their customers, governments and their regulations, and staunch environmentalists (among many other apparent hardships). In terms of contact, Bestor refers to Spanish waters to prove his point; while the workers in Spanish waters are mostly Spanish, almost every other aspect of such fishing is part of a global flow of techniques and capital: aquacultural techniques are developed in Australia and vitamin supplements are sent from European pharmaceutical giants (pp. 17). In addition, Japanese technicians and fishery scientists develop target market prices that dictate the livelihood of fishermen in local communities and local economies. Bestor maintains, furthermore, that such competition dictates the welfare of local farmers and fisheries that must compete with giant fishing cartels. While fishers are “forced to struggle with unfamiliar exchange rates for cultural capital that compounds in foreign currency,” they return season after season and remain privy to the whims of Japan (pp. 19). In this sense, Japan certainly seems to assert itself as a superpower in the globalized bluefin tuna industry and thus gives Japan a forceful ruling power in the dictation of the livelihood of many fishers.