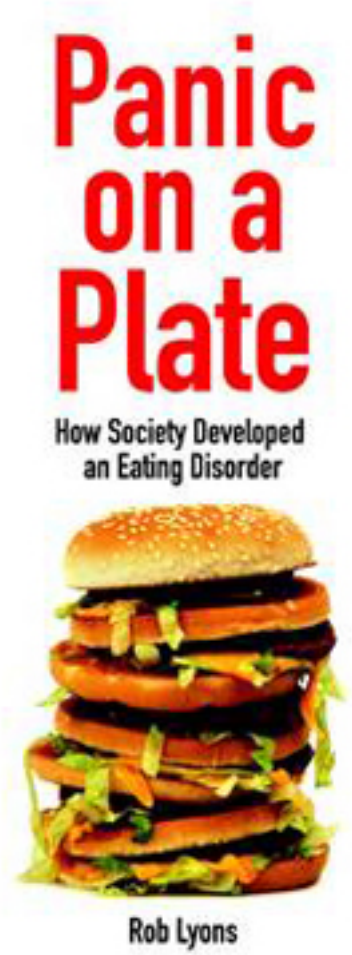

Panic on a Plate

by Rob Lyons (Societas Imprint Academic, 2011)
Reviewed by Richard Crawford February 2012

Rob Lyons tells us all to chillax about food in this short, wide-ranging polemic.

Approaching ***Panic on a Plate***, I was looking forward to a dose of common sense and rational argument. Something along the lines of Ben Goldacre's *Bad*

Science
or Francis Wheen's
How Mumbo-Jumbo Conquered the World
. An antidote to food scares. The reality was more wide-ranging and more thought-provoking, but also less satisfying.

Lyons argues that, over the millennia, the big problem that humanity has had with its food is a lack of it. There was also the fact that it was usually the same boring thing, meal after meal. Now these problems are essentially solved and we are ignoring that achievement and instead making up new problems that have only a thin relationship with reality.

Over 127 short pages, Lyons lists an enormous number of worries we have about our food: processing, additives, a lack of nutrients, the obesity time bomb, crap school meals that cause misbehaviour and under achievement, a vast list of things that women should avoid when pregnant, mad cow disease, genetically modified foods, cholesterol causing heart disease (and death), salt causing high blood pressure (and more death), the need to eat 5 portions of fruit and veg a day, meat causing cancer, food miles, carbon footprints, food waste and pesticide residues. He tackles each one, concluding on every occasion that there is very little to worry about. This is the chief weakness of the book.

Some of Lyons's arguments are very convincing. He quotes the group Consensus Action of Salt and Health "*The evidence that links salt to blood pressure is as strong as that linking cigarette smoking to cancer and heart disease* " and contrasts it to a systematic review published in the British Medical Journal showing that reductions in salt intake give only small changes in blood pressure and mixed results in terms of heart attacks and death. On other occasions he is much less convincing. He rightly points out that "food miles" don't really capture the environmental impact of food, but fails to explain why we shouldn't be concerned about said impact. He offers a long list of the things that pregnant women are advised to avoid, which does

look pretty ridiculous, but offers no analysis of individual worries.

Some of the worries that Lyons dismisses will be worthy of concern, others will not. Although Lyons discusses many food issues individually, his argument is that they all come down to the same thing: society's eating disorder.

It is the nature of Lyons's arguments that leaves the reader most unsatisfied. In 2008, the computer genius Paul Graham wrote the essay *How to Disagree*, in which he enumerated a hierarchy of disagreement from "DH0. Name-calling" up to "DH6. Refuting the central point". Only one step up from name-calling is "DH1. Ad hominem", the category to which we must assign many of Lyons's arguments. While Lyons often examines some of the evidence supporting a particular piece of advice, his main argument will invariably be that governments and experts like telling people what to eat, and that many people like listening to them. In the final chapter, this thesis is expanded upon until we see an iron triangle, akin to the military-industrial complex. A celebrity chef or other campaigner makes a big fuss about nothing, the public demands that *Some thing Must Be Done* and the government then does it. This satisfies the public, but just as importantly, it gives the government a claim to a purpose for its existence. The campaigner gains publicity, power and a sense of achievement. Everyone is happy! Except for the minor detail that the *Something* that was done may have been a complete waste of time and money, as well as giving people needless worries.

I am sure there is something in the notion of a food-campaigner complex, but the difficulty is knowing when this applies. Lyons is convinced that any campaign over food is playing to our lowest instincts. He gets very close to saying that we should ignore the lot, and base our choices purely on aesthetics.

I agree with Lyons that there are a lot of bonkers ideas associated with organic food. However, Lyons makes only a small attempt to assess the claims that organic food is good for you, noting that the residues of pesticides on non-organic food are tiny and that organic food still has residues, they are just from a smaller set of chemicals. Lyons makes no attempt to assess the claim that organic agriculture improves the quality of the soil. Instead he quotes A.A. Gill, lamenting that organic has turned food back into a class issue, where the unthinking chavs eat mass-produced “chemical” food and the snobs eat hideously expensive organic food.

Lyons traces the roots of the organic movement to the 1920s, the Church of England and a bunch of ex-colonial romantics. It is in this that the other great theme of the book comes out. *Panic on a Plate*
is about how food fears are anti-modern. In the modern world we are separated from the source of our food. It is grown far away using technology we don’t understand. We like organic food and local food, because they bring us closer... but Lyons argues that this is irrational and unhelpful and we should embrace the glories of modern food production and distribution.

Of course, in listing all the issues that we have with food, Lyons prompts us to ask why we have so many. On this question he may be right. It may be down to a combination of gullibility, snobbishness and romanticism. This should give us pause for thought when someone tells us to eat more X or less Y. But should you automatically turn to *Panic on a Plate* for advice on the issue at hand? It might tell you something interesting, but I would take it with a pinch of salt.

And you can read Rob Lyon's response by clicking on Panic on a Plate