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► **To cite this version:**

Alan Warde. On the sociology of eating. *Revue d'Etudes en Agriculture et Environnement - Review of agricultural and environmental studies*, 2015, pp.7 - 15. hal-01884914

HAL Id: hal-01884914

<https://hal.science/hal-01884914>

Submitted on 5 Oct 2018

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On the sociology of eating

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Abstract – This paper is a personal reflection upon the development of the sociology of eating over the previous thirty years. It considers eating as a form of cultural consumption and discusses alternative approaches to its analysis. It focuses on sociological explanations of continuity and change, and the role of institutions, routines and practices. It suggests that eating is a compound practice which is weakly regulated and weakly coordinated. The paper concludes with some suggestions about lines of future research in the field and discusses the promise of a new study of eating out.

Keywords: consumption, eating, food, practices, sociology

JEL Classification : Q1, Q19

After thirty years

It is an unexpected honour to be invited to offer these selective reflections on three decades of scholarly work on eating from the point of view of a confessed sociologist. The last thirty years have seen significant advances in social scientific research on food. The sociology of food and eating textbooks of the 1990s (Mennell *et al.*, 1992, for example) were supported by limited social research, presenting very incomplete, if generally accurate, coverage of the processes and distributions which a sociologist might want to know about. The picture has filled out since, as witnessed by compendious volumes like Poulain (2012) and Murcott *et al.* (2013) which record the results of a vast amount of research conducted more recently. The reputation of food studies has also risen in the last decade. Little more than ten years ago Belasco (2002) fairly bemoaned its lowly status in the academic firmament but the visibility of political issues like food security and obesity and heightened interest in the aesthetic aspects of food in social and broadcast media have helped to improve its fortunes.

Only a small proportion of the research recorded by these monumental handbooks are products of “Sociology” in the strict sense. Increasingly blurred boundaries between the interpretive social sciences (Anthropology, Cultural Geography, Sociology, Social History, Social and Cultural Psychology—*i.e.* those which are primarily neither experimental nor formal) make it ever more difficult to attribute texts to specific disciplines. For many purposes this is to be welcomed, as for instance when inter- and multi-disciplinary teams jointly address shared practical or policy problems, where there is frequently considerable room for consensus. However, academic discussion of food has too often been driven by externally identified crisis tendencies which

make it difficult to divorce hegemonic common sense portrayed in popular media from the scientific objectives of long-term programmes of research. Sociology itself has a good record for challenging the orthodoxies of media and policy, through its techniques for deconstructing public messages by analysing their framing and the ways that they conceal private interests. For example, Poulain (2009) and Guthman (2011) clear the way for a thorough social understanding of the rise in obesity by systematically eliminating many common misapprehensions about its nature and genesis. However, absence of guiding theoretical concerns and the rigour associated with using a consistent set of assumptions and concepts allows slippage in the face of political fashions. Progressive programmes of research need disciplinary commitment because disciplines usually tend not to share theory. It is therefore to be regretted that it is in the area of theory that the sub-discipline of the sociology of food has made the least conspicuous progress recently. More generally, it behoves the interpretive social sciences not to capitulate to the health and nutrition paradigm, for its dominance threatens to choke understanding of the wider social context of eating.

Eating as cultural consumption

I have been very interested in eating for half my academic career. This was not because, as Stebbins (2009) might have it, I rendered a leisure activity serious for professional gain, but rather because of a prior research interest in processes of consumption. Most studies of food before the beginning of the 21st century had concentrated on food production, to the neglect of end consumption. However, as consumption became a more prominent sociological field of study eating received greater attention. The most central issue in the sociological tradition, the organisation of meals, was re-visited. Examination of meal patterns and rhythms associated with timing and location, and the investigation of conventions of commensalism countered much publicised common perceptions that domestic and family meals were on the brink of extinction. However, a far greater volume of research sailed under the flag of cultural analysis.

The cultural turn in the humanities and social sciences sought to show how food impacted upon personal and collective identity, in the light of the intensification of media communication, globalisation, and aestheticisation. From this we learned much about the consequences of global consumer culture, about migration and other forms of mobility, and about public ratification and promotion of national cuisines. Wilk's (2006) study of the small Central American state of Belize provides one of the most engaging accounts of how these forces come together as a national cuisine emerges through syncretic and fortuitous processes. Belize since the 16th century was subjected to many different influences, as contact with Europeans was mediated first by pirates, then by slaves and slave owners, subsequently by colonial administrators and most recently by tourists. Each had characteristic

effects on diet, but not ones which would support the common conviction “that colonialization and globalization are forces for homogenization” or of “the domination of local cultures by modernization and globalization” (Wilk, 2006: 10). Tourism, he shows, involves the incorporation of imported foods and tastes alongside an appreciation of the local specialities that international tourists expect to experience as authentic to the locality. This contrasts with more determined and directed attempts by governments, states and commercial intermediaries to fashion a national cuisine for purposes of nation-building or national identity.

Exploration of the cultural aspects of eating has been both productive and interesting. Yet there were limitations, increasingly apparent as the special themes associated with the cultural turn recede. To my mind, three inter-related matters now deserve sustained attention: an unfortunate retreat from macro-sociological inquiry; the theories of action which underpin analytic accounts of consumption; and the manner of dealing with everyday practical conduct.

Eating and change: history and institutions

Studies of eating confront an abiding paradox regarding continuity and change in behaviour. People in general seem very reluctant to alter their eating habits, and indeed, as the failure of weight-loss diets suggests, they find it difficult even when they explicitly want to change. Yet, manifestly, changes in what which is sold and eaten occur frequently and often rapidly over time. The rate of change in manners of eating and the best way to explain them have occasioned vibrant sociological debate and controversy. It seems that every generation thinks that the rate of change is rapid, and often that it is accelerating—a tendency more often deplored than welcomed. Perhaps because change is more likely to cause anxiety it attracts special attention.

When asked about five years ago to compile a short list of key readings to conclude an entry on “eating” for a handbook (Warde, 2012) the substantive research monographs which I selected were exclusively ones dealing with change. One was Rick Wilk’s *Home Cooking in the Global Village*, referred to above. Another was Hasan Diner’s (2001) *Hungering for America*, a study of the long-term adaptation of migrants to the USA. A third was Nicola Humble’s (2005) study of the evolution of British recipe books during the 20th century. A fourth was Carole Counihan’s (2004) *Around the Tuscan Table*, a beautifully, if opportunistically, designed study which combined participant observation and extended interviews with three generations of a Florentine family. Descriptions of daily behaviour, collective involvement in food production, and accounts of how eating had changed through the twentieth century revealed, among other things, change in gender relations within Italian households. All four volumes, despite their diverse *foci*, gave convincing accounts by anchoring food consumption in specific social contexts.

For me, the most memorable and inspiring books of thirty years ago were also accounts of change. The works of Mennell (1985) and Mintz (1985) stand out as fine examples of theoretically ambitious historical sociology and political economy. They continue to set very highest standards for their successors. Both Mennell's application of the configurational sociology of Elias and Mintz's account of the evolution of the sugar trade captured production and consumption in an integrated manner while still keeping the eating of food in focus. Currently, if seeking studies boldly addressing change over time on a large canvass, historians' accounts, for example Capatti and Montanari (2003), have generally proved superior to those of macro-sociology. Historians have consolidated a professional advantage in their ability to craft compelling accounts of changes in styles of living for sections of population out of detailed diverse records of everyday life. Sociologists, by contrast, have given priority to small-scale, usually qualitative studies which seek to identify the personal meanings associated with experiences of consumption.

The most impressive sociology of consumption frequently subordinates activities directly involved in eating to analysis of the operation of other social institutions. The major processes which immediately influence eating patterns (which include shopping, cooking, socialising and tasting) are ones which are not directly a function of food preferences or choices. Much change is a matter of practical and pragmatic responses in reaction to pressures emanating from other daily practices, from the provisioning system, and from cultural dynamics. As Zelizer (2005) observed about the sociology of consumption more generally, knowledge frequently emanates indirectly from investigations of institutions like the family, citizenship (and thus national cuisine), migration, religious observance, inequality and distinction, group membership and belonging, and labour and provisioning. Indeed, there is no shortage of material from which to fashion exogenous explanations of change. For key processes of institutional change visibly affect the behaviour of whole populations: disruption of temporal routines, "supermarketisation", the industrialisation of food production, informalisation of social relationship and manners, intensification of intermediation, commercialisation and commodification, and internationalisation, all predispose individuals to alter their behaviour.

Eating and continuity: habits and routines

Given the forces for change and disruption we might marvel that any vestiges of stability survive. However, even if the best stories belong to the historians, much can be gained from attempts to explain continuity over time. Abbott (2001) asserted that it is inherently easier to explain change than continuity, and I concur. Persuasive accounts of the mechanisms which stem flows, obviate chaos and disorder, or render interpersonal interaction predictable have become less common. Older accounts fell back on concepts like tradition, primary socialisation and national value systems to explain observable and repeated patterns of behaviour. The dominant version still maintains that

tastes learned in early childhood derive from shared collective values about what is good and suitable to eat. Such explanatory strategies are in turn based on assumptions of stable personal preferences and repeated autonomous choices. The underlying theory of action emphasises the learning of values or norms in the parental home which subsequently guide individuals when they make their voluntary decisions about what to eat.

That pattern and order should emerge spontaneously from billion upon billion of free choices determined by autonomous individuals offends my sociological sensibilities. A persistent element of my work has therefore been a minor crusade against the concept of choice, for the field of consumption is particularly prone to account for action in terms of autonomous and deliberate individual decisions. The idea of consumer choice—the idea that aggregate outcomes are simple and direct effects of people making voluntary and deliberate decisions—unhelpfully dominates. Accompanying individualised analysis (individualisation was also a substantive theme of later 20th century social theory) went a sociological-*cum*-methodological proclivity (or deviation) towards emphasising agency and reflexivity.

While sociologists are a very diverse bunch they mostly share in common some lasting disciplinary sense of the central importance of social relations. Distinguishing features include the according of centrality to the interdependence of people in most aspects of life, the role of interpersonal interaction, and the attribution of supreme importance to the social contexts of action. Particular attention is paid to situations which recur sufficiently frequently to reveal patterns characterised by outcomes neither willed nor anticipated by the actors involved. The topics in food studies where sociologists specialise tend therefore to be ones like the meal, the domestic organisation of food preparation, group differences, the unequal division of resources, political mobilisation, and state policy. Why do women still do the majority of cooking and cleaning? Why do the least well off eat unhealthily? How does state policy systematically favour some organisations and groups? In these processes the effective mechanisms which generate observed regularities are mostly not compulsion or coercion, but nor are they the outcomes of the exercise of free will and choice. A thorough understanding of food consumption requires a more nuanced set of concepts, amongst which terms like discretion, selection, routine, norm and convention recommend themselves as means to achieve distance from the idea of free choice.

Some exciting recent innovations in the social and behavioural sciences specifically challenge the dominant models of voluntary action. Shifts in interest in the philosophy of action from the cognitive towards the embodied, from the individual towards the interaction of person and environment, and from decision-making to quasi-automatic and unreflective reaction hold considerable unexploited potential for food studies (*e.g.* Cerulo, 2010; Lakoff and Johnson, 1999; Martin, 2010; Noe, 2009). Extrapolations from cognitive neuroscience employed in behavioural economics and cultural sociology, which suggest that much behaviour is habitual and automatic rather than

subject to deliberation, add something fresh to explanations of orderly eating (Warde and Southerton, 2012). In such a view the cues and promptings of the external environment take precedence in explanation over calculative decision-making in pursuit of the maximisation of pre-established personal preferences. If such accounts sound suspiciously behaviourist, more conducive sociological versions are also available, ones which depend less upon bodily automaticity and emphasise more social context, especially the conventions associated with social occasions and timings. It is no accident that the study of meals uses time-use data extensively to capture the rhythms of eating events and the patterns of companionship at meal occasions.

Of that which one gets used to, one mostly learns to want more. Bourdieu (1979) proposed such a mechanism as a feature of the cultural consumption of the working class, whose members developed a taste for the necessary. Actually, it probably applies rather well to all classes. People learn to like that which is familiar. This is the essence of Bourdieu's controversial concept of *habitus* which purports to account for streams of consistent and predictable action by referring not to habit but to dispositions which are the generating mechanism behind regularities in personal and group behaviour. The new behavioural work promises elaboration on the operations which underpin *habitus*.

Some of these ideas are currently being explored through a theoretical lens which takes social practices to be the fundamental object of social scientific analysis (Schatzki *et al.*, 2001). Shared understandings and common commitments to standards of performance and effective procedures in specific domains of activity facilitate explanation of order and persistence without recourse to authoritative and enforceable regulation. After much consideration about how theories of practice might be fruitfully applied to the activity of eating, I concluded that it should be considered a "compound" practice (Warde, 2013). It has multiple organizational underpinnings and can be viewed as a complex corollary of the intersection of four, relatively autonomous, integrative practices—the supplying of food, cooking, the organisation of meal occasion and aesthetic judgments of taste. The competing injunctions of the four different disciplining practices make the coordination of individual performances and collective institutions difficult. Internal disputation within each of these exacerbates uncertainty about appropriate conduct, making for considerable personal anxiety and mutual misunderstanding. Should cooks always give precedence to the health properties of foodstuffs over the convenience of preparation? Are conventions of commensality at meals sacrosanct, or is it only sensible frequently to eat quickly and alone in order to reserve time for other activities? Such widespread dilemmas find competing justifications and underpin alternative patterns of action. Eating may be understood, therefore, as weakly regulated and weakly coordinated when compared with many other more formalised and more authoritatively directed practices like sitting examinations, playing soccer or driving an automobile. At least after early childhood one is unlikely to be punished for eating wrongly, for eating is governed by convention rather than law.

Prospects

My crystal ball does not divulge how the next 30 years will pan out. The current state of the sociology of eating is much improved when compared with the 1980s. However in more pessimistic moments I fear that it may not live up to its potential. The purely sociological community of scholars devoting attention to food consumption is small and is without dedicated channels of communication. Production still dominates the agenda. Theoretical ambition is limited and data sources less than fit for purpose. I would like to see a wider range of theories deployed in attempts to explain continuity and change in food consumption. In this regard my own wager has been that the different versions of theories of practice will contribute significantly, although they would require a better accommodation with macro-sociology than is currently achieved. That in turn would require more extensive, expansive and ambitious research designs, including ones which escape from the shackles of micro-level investigations of personal meaning and experience which currently predominate. In this regard the more we adopt panel, comparative and ethnographic designs, ones which can say something about the mechanisms at work in determination of patterns of food consumption, and which also look at sequence and configuration (rather than narrowly intention and cause), the better.

It is customary at the end of an essay of this kind to recommend to others types and topics of research which they might pursue, usually in furtherance of what is effectively the author's personally preferred agenda! I have done that in the past and recently have nominated theoretical integration, comparative research designs, and the intersection of provision and consumption as current priorities (Warde, 2012). However, since this is not only a selective but also a somewhat personal essay I would like to identify one key future issue – by way of a preview of my own current project about eating out. Its primary objective is to replicate an earlier study (Warde and Martens, 2000). A survey in three cities in England, and some interviews with ordinary members of the public, was put in the context of some very significant changes in the system of food provisioning, a re-definition of eating as a pleasurable leisure activity, and new patterns of sociability around dining. Going with family and friends to take an extended and often elaborate meal in a restaurant was seen as special and as a significant addition to the repertoire of eating experiences. In the intervening twenty years there have been significant changes in the system of provision, with many more types of commercial outlet available for eating occasions. On average people go out more often and spend a larger proportion of their food budget. What, if any, difference that makes to knowledge, experience, inclination, disposition, and domestic practice is a matter of considerable interest, and one which might address the general issue of continuity and change, even if by means of a restricted and detailed study. The inquiry appeals partly because eating out is not much touched by concerns about health and nutrition. Also it is fundamentally engaged with inequality and distinction. Moreover, it is inextricably tied to the commercial world and processes of intermediation. The ubiquity of the restaurant and the segmented

market which different types serve are consequential for the understanding and appreciation of eating in many other contexts too. The restaurant and the celebrity chef play an increasingly significant role in drawing the contours of all eating events. My hope is that a replication study can deal systematically with issues of continuity and change which, when placed in an institutional context, might contribute to proper and systematic cataloguing of the social mechanisms which configure food consumption.

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