

Introduction to Food: Representations and Meanings

By Wendy Wills, University of Hertfordshire

Introduction

The contributions in this special section draw on papers presented at the 2010 international conference on *Food, Society and Public Health*ⁱ, organised by the British Sociological Association's Sociology of Food study groupⁱⁱ. This was the second conference organised by the group and both events have attracted a multi-disciplinary audience from across the academic, research, policy and practice sectors. A key theme for debate in 2010 was what food *means* and what it *represents* which are central planks within the field of the sociology of food.

Food: representations and meanings

Sociologists have increasingly turned their attention, during the last twenty five years or so, to the meanings and representations of food. Several reasons might lie behind this. One is that classical sociological indicators, most notably social class, began to be seen by the likes of Beck (Beck 1992) and Giddens (Giddens 1991) as hazy and unreliable in terms of being almost automatic predictors of social position. This led the sociologist's eye towards investigating more tacit aspects of everyday behaviour or lifestyle, like food and eating, to provide clues about social systems or relationships. This is related to a general shift in sociological scholarship, from a focus on producer-centred relationships to interest in the construction and shaping of consumer cultures (Warde 1997). These relationships are brought together however, with the rise in globalisation and increased mechanisation of contemporary food systems, which affect production/producers and consumption/consumers alike.

The way that food is produced, sold, prepared and eaten reveals much about people, places and time and the relationships amongst and between them. It also highlights communality and difference and signifies group membership or exclusion, in terms of gender, ethnicity, age or class. So, food matters: in terms of individual and group identity, it helps to express who we are, where we belong and who we are connected to. Whilst anthropologists decided to pursue the idea that food had 'meaning' some time ago (Lévi-Strauss 1969; Douglas 1975), sociologists are in the relatively early days of making sense of food. Interest in the BSA Food Study Group is perhaps one indicator of very recent growth within the area – membership grew three fold, to over three hundred members, in the eight years that I convened the Group, from 2003-2011.

So this special section is timely, given this escalation of interest in the field. It is also timely given contemporary policy and public debates about food. From efforts to understand the role of the food industry and food producers, as well as individuals themselves, in contributing to a global obesity 'problem' through to addressing food security and climate change, not to mention the often neglected areas of taste and desire, food is seen as both a contributor and a solution to many modern ills. The contributions in this special section will not address all of these issues but there are several common threads to emerge from the papers so I will elaborate on these before introducing the papers in more detail.

One of the most striking aspects of the papers presented here is the way that food practices are indicative and reflective of social change. Rising economic affluence in contemporary Western societies has led to changes in employment and work-related culture which has in turn influenced the way that lifestyles, and food practices, have developed (Backett-Milburn et al. 2008). The paper by Perry Share particularly highlights this issue, in relation to the construction industry, and the rise of the 'jumbo breakfast roll' during Ireland's 'Celtic tiger' economy. But perhaps even more striking is the way in which *technology* has shaped and is shaping the meaning of food, reflecting a multiplicity of social change.

Technologies associated with food production have increased the possibilities for mechanising food systems (as Share's paper also illustrates) but this has also led to changes in what is or is not classified as 'food' or an 'appropriate' diet. Functional foods, that is, food created to deliver some kind of additional, non-intrinsic function at the physiological level (Roberfroid 2002), are persuading individuals with concerns about their health and diet to construct new technologies of the self (Niva and Mäkelä 2007). Increased access to monitoring services, like cholesterol testing, and a plethora of readily available health information, on the perceived (or marketed) benefits of probiotics for example, work hand in hand with the development of 'new' foods and diet pathways (e.g. interest in low carbohydrate diets). Which technologies are leading to which change in food practice and *vice versa*, is difficult to determine. Nonetheless the meaning of food and its association with technology is both reflecting and shaping social change which seeks to position 'consumers' as being in control of their dietary health. Two papers in this section explore these topics in some detail, in relation to the reasons individuals buy or consume foods containing phytosterols (Weiner) and discourses relating to the consumption of a low carbohydrate diet (Knight).

This is perhaps connected to a related aspect of social change; cosmopolitanism. As access to 'new' worlds continually open up through foreign travel, television programming, proliferation in online content, increases in the number and breadth of multi-ethnic communities and so on, so individuals take on or experiment with 'new' identities or lifestyles, perhaps at some point reflecting an acceptance of, or openness to, 'otherness' (Skrbis and Woodward 2007). 'Traditional' foods and those we remember eating as children, whilst often still sought after, become subject to shifts in their recipes or ingredients or

become replaced by new, 'exotic' others. Several papers in this special section explore or use cosmopolitanism to consider their empirical findings. These include the papers by Knight; Groszlik; Nettleton and Uprichard; and Meah and Watson. What I find particularly interesting is the way that these papers so clearly illustrate that what Bourdieu called the habitus (Bourdieu 1984), the embedded and grounded distinctions of taste, built up through and by generations of family, friends and kin, can be subtly or explicitly changed and re-moulded by each generation. Meah and Watson's paper, for example, neatly highlights that individuals can be aware of their family's food narrative and can explicitly reject aspects of this in favour of more cosmopolitan food practices. In Meah and Watson's paper this seems particularly pertinent because they draw on two (or more) generations of 'cooks' in a family and present a case study which focuses, unusually, on men in the kitchen. Individuals who explicitly re-present their food practices through the taking up of more cosmopolitan tastes are neatly described by Knight in her paper as 'food adventurers'.

What is also interesting is the way that cosmopolitanism sits, often uncomfortably, alongside notions of nostalgia and tradition in several of the contributions. Relationships between these tropes are not straightforward and often exhibit substantial reflexivity on the part of producers and consumers (Beagan et al. 2010). Groszlik's paper, for example, highlights how a 'traditional' food product, hummus (the origins of which are hotly contested), is subject to 'new' food discourses arising from ethically traded or organic food. The recent turn in Israel towards 'organic hummus' can be perceived as being grounded in principles of sustainability, localism or traditionalism but, equally, this is also an entrepreneurial attempt by producers to develop consumer taste for a niche product in a crowded market. Through playing on discourses of local/traditional the meaning of hummus shifts and individuals who eat the 'new' hummus can feel at once cosmopolitan (for keeping up with organic trends) and responsible (for eating a more sustainable food product).

Nostalgia for food practices of the past is connected with *preservation*; preserving health, life, tradition, knowledge, memories or skills. This, however, is often in relation to the meaning of food at a *conceptual* level. At the discursive level, feelings of nostalgia for food practices are shown in some of the essays in this section to be interwoven with a search for or acknowledgement of new or novel foodways. Christine Knight, for example, highlights how individuals (not always successfully) incorporate a desire to eat fewer carbohydrates with a need to eat in accordance with older traditions. What the contributions perhaps highlight, then, is that the socially constructed nature of food practices means most of us feel nostalgic at the thought of leaving them behind, even when there is a desire to 'move on'. By moving away from food habits of the past perhaps we feel that this is leaving something of our family biography behind too. Nettleton and Uprichard's paper, in using data from the Mass-Observation Archive, distinctly shows that reminiscing about food is intricately connected to recalling the emotions and feelings associated with people and places.

Papers in this special section

So the papers in this special section bring together specific aspects relating to the meanings of food and the way that it is represented, but individually they cover a variety of perspectives, methods and topics. One asset of the BSA Food Study Group and its associated conferences is the way that scholarship is underpinned and driven by sociology whilst allowing individuals scope to bring in arguments from other fields. This, I would argue, promotes the value of sociology to other disciplines whilst encouraging sociologists to consider complementary and occasionally contrasting viewpoints.

The first paper, by Julie van Kemanade, is included for this very reason. It is particularly challenging and provocative as it invites us to conceptualise food as 'death'. Rather than using death as a metaphor, van Kemanade argues that when food is exploited as a commodity it promotes the death of physical resources (soil, water and so on), communities (through the dominance of large-scale food and farming enterprises) and individuals (through food-related illness). It draws on environmental and political discourses and the field of semiotics to offer a theoretical viewpoint and concludes that the way forward is to re-conceptualise food as *life*.

Rafi Groszlik's paper picks up arguments concerned with social justice, ethically produced food and industrialisation in a richly detailed paper which focuses on one food product, organic hummus. Hummus is a regularly consumed food in Israel with restaurants focusing solely on serving it, for eating or 'wiping' with white pita bread. Hummus is seen to represent localness, simplicity and 'rootedness'. Groszlik argues that the move towards organically produced hummus (and its concomitant, wholemeal pita bread) provides 'symbolic cover' because the ethical concepts it purportedly conveys are merely a cover for focusing on the self as a project of consumption, health and identity. Paradoxically, consuming organic hummus takes individuals away from the desired 'authentic' product to one 'devoid of political-historical context'.

This concern for authenticity, and health, is apparent from reading Sarah Nettleton and Emma Uprichard's paper, which uses data deposited with the Mass-Observation Archive. M-O Volunteers are sent 'directives' and asked to write on a variety of topics, in as much or as little detail as they decide appropriate. Nettleton and Uprichard use data from the 1982 Winter Directive, when correspondents were asked to write about their experiences of food and eating and food diaries completed in 1945. The authors highlight the challenges of working with data from the MOA, not least the self-selecting nature of the 'sample' (with a dearth of younger, working class and ethnic minority correspondents) but they skilfully analyse the food narratives to show that these 'slices of life' are just that. By writing about their experiences of food and eating, the respondents reveal the intricacies of daily life in

particular eras, thus highlighting social change, the nature of family and work and the ways in which food practices are both shaped by and help to construct social relationships.

Angela Meah and Matt Watson's paper uses early findings from a qualitative study to take a multi-generational look at domestic kitchen practices. This is set within discourses about the perceived 'de-skilling' of younger generations and those from lower social class groups and the supposed demise of 'common sense' understandings in relation to food hygiene in the kitchen. Like Nettleton and Uprichard's paper, Meah and Watson highlight the complexities associated with family life and the way that 'culinary' competence' means different things, to different people and, importantly, at different points of the life course. Having young or 'fussy' children interrupts culinary competence even for the most determined of 'cooks' and this paper reveals the 'messiness' of life and how food practices have to ebb and flow to fit in with that. It also starkly illustrates that older generations are not always 'saints' when it comes to domestic godliness and it is interesting that Meah and Watson and also Nettleton and Uprichard draw on Nigel Slater's celebrity memoir 'Toast' to highlight that not all mothers from days gone by were baking or preparing 'proper meals'.

Christine Knight in her paper picks up some of these ideas in terms of the 'culinary rupture' that dieters experience when they decide to follow a low-carbohydrate diet. Cutting out an entire food group ruptures what participants in this study considered a 'normal meal', whether that was learning to eat curry without rice, breakfast without bread or accepting life without pasta (difficult for one Italian participant in Knight's study). Knight's discourse analysis of one low-carbohydrate dieting book, the South Beach diet, notes the tensions between the said diet's call to return to less 'Western' diets, meaning less processed food and more 'traditional', 'family' 'meals' and Knight's empirical data which show that the diet actually makes it *more* difficult to eat in this way once carbs are exercised from one's shopping list. The South Beach diet also advocates for a low-carb lifestyle to combat 'modern' diseases like obesity, diabetes and heart disease, despite overwhelmingly failing to show how the favoured eating plan would counteract such morbidity.

The South Beach diet relies on dieters' perceptions of risk – the risk of becoming ill or overweight against the unacknowledged risk of ignoring familial food cultures. The next paper in the section, by Kate Weiner, draws on risk and reflexivity discourses that emerge from interviews with current and former purchasers of foods containing phytosterols (e.g. fat spreads that claim to lower cholesterol). Weiner argues that, whereas health experts and regulatory texts position consumers of such products as rational, risk-aware, health conscious consumers, people who buy or eat these foods construct their practices around their relationships with others; their desire to experiment with food and medicalised consumption and their habitual, non-reflexive routines.

Finally in this special section, Perry Share's paper neatly highlights how some food trends flourish because a number of shifts occur to facilitate something 'new'. Share describes the specific social, cultural and economic phenomena which predicated the rise of the fast food

sandwich which is known in Ireland as the jumbo breakfast roll (JBR). The JBR consists of sausage, bacon, black (blood) pudding, egg plus other ingredients like mushrooms or baked beans – served in a ‘just cooked’ white baguette. This is mainly served from petrol station forecourts and convenience stores. It rose in popularity at the time of the ‘Celtic tiger’ economic boom period, at the start of this Century. This rise in affluence was associated with a proliferation in construction work, particularly for young, male workers. At the height of the boom, one in five of the Irish male workforce worked in construction. With increased numbers of convenience stores and petrol forecourts, readily available technology for finishing off ‘part-baked’ bread and a willing number of hungry workers wanting to eat on the move, it is perhaps not surprising that the JBR became immortalised in popular cultural discourses.

Conclusion

What many of the paper’s in this section illustrate is how new technologies, cosmopolitanism and social change are negotiated by many individuals in order to fit in with their existing food practices, the ones which are deemed important as some level; the ones that people become nostalgic for when they become perceived as forgotten or disappearing. This repositioning creates new logics of practice. What I find surprising is the explicit nature of this repositioning and re-presentation of food; it is rarely a tacit undertaking. The papers show something that Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1984) often failed to account for, that is, how the habitus shifts once it takes account of new principles, new fields. Whilst the contributions in this special section are highly selective – another batch of invited manuscripts could, and undoubtedly would, highlight a different set of meanings in relation to food – nonetheless I hope these papers provide stimulation for those working within the field of the sociology of food and I hope you enjoying reading them.

References

- Backett-Milburn, K., Airey, L., McKie, L. and Hogg, G. (2008). 'Family comes first or open all hours?: How low paid women working in food retailing manage webs of obligation at home and work.' *The Sociological Review* 56(3): 474-496.
- Beagan, B. L., Ristovski-Slijepcevic, S. and Chapman, G. E. (2010). 'People Are Just Becoming More Conscious of How Everything's Connected: Ethical Food Consumption in Two Regions of Canada.' *Sociology* 44(4): 751-769.
- Beck, U. (1992). *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. London, Sage.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. London, Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Douglas, M. (1975). *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology*. London, Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge, London.
- Lévi-Strauss, C. (1969). *Mythologiques, vol. I: The Raw and the Cooked*. London, Cape.

- Niva, M. and Mäkelä, J. (2007). 'Finns and functional foods: socio-demographics, health efforts, notions of technology and the acceptability of health-promoting foods.' *International Journal of Consumer Studies* 31(1): 34-45.
- Roberfroid, M. B. (2002). 'Functional foods: concepts and application to inulin and oligofructose.' *British Journal of Nutrition* 87: S139-S143.
- Skrbis, Z. and Woodward, I. (2007). 'The ambivalence of ordinary cosmopolitanism: Investigating the limits of cosmopolitan openness.' *The Sociological Review* 55(4): 730-747.
- Warde, A. (1997). *Consumption, Food and Taste: Culinary Antinomies and Commodity Culture* London, Sage.

ⁱ For information about the conference see <http://www.britsoc.co.uk/events/food>

ⁱⁱ Visit the Food Study Group's webpage: <http://www.britsoc.co.uk/specialisms/Food.htm>