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## On the engagement with social theory in food studies: cultural symbols and social practices

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### ABSTRACT

This paper is based on a two-part argument. First, food studies should be more engaged in social theory. It is argued that a greater engagement with theoretical debates and developments, as well as clearer theoretical conflicts in the field, would increase both our empirical knowledge of food issues and the understanding of general social-theoretical problems. This will not reduce food to a simple means of “studying something else,” but, on the contrary, will highlight the exceptionality of food issues. Second, such a commitment is exemplified in a particular theoretical direction. It is contended that food studies has been skewed toward research on the communicative aspects of food and eating (identity, cultural symbolism, social movement action, etc.), while increased engagements with contemporary theories of practice would provide the field with a broader diversity where the inconspicuous, ordinary, unreflective, mundane, and (more or less) unnoticed are given as much attention as the conspicuous, special, reflexive, extraordinary, and symbolically loaded.

### KEYWORDS

Food studies; social theory; sociology of food and eating; theories of practice; food consumption; cultural symbols; identity; social practices

## Introduction

As an academic field, food studies has grown rapidly in recent decades, resulting in numerous important and interesting contributions to our understanding of food issues in different cultures and societies (eating habits, domestic and public foodwork, food in the media, cuisines, diet and health discourses, food politics, etc.). Furthermore, the field's development is not only expressed through the continued accumulation of academic publications but also through the research centers, networks, academic conferences, and undergraduate, master's, and doctoral programs that have popped up around the globe. The interested reader can trace the development in several texts published in the last two decades. For example, discussions have focused on *why* to study food (Belasco 2008), *how* to do it (Miller and Deutsch 2009), and how food studies has developed historically (Atkins and Bowler 2001; Albala et al. 2017; Counihan and Van Esterik 2013; Belasco 2002). Moreover, several texts explore the state of the art of food studies (Ferguson 2010; Nestle and McIntosh 2010) and where it might be heading in the future (Hamada et al. 2015; Belasco et al. 2011; Levkoe, Brady, and Anderson 2016). In addition, all of this and more is covered in the massive volume *Routledge International Handbook of Food Studies*, edited by Ken Albala (2013), a book that in itself serves as proof of the field's impressive range and

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progress (see also Winson, Sumner, and Koç 2012; Levkoe, Anderson, and Brady 2016). This paper, however, discusses something else: the specific role of theoretical engagements and directions. The aim is to argue for increased social-theoretical engagements in food studies and to specifically discuss commitments to contemporary theories of practice.

In the following section I discuss the question of social theory in food studies. Based on a critique by Alan Warde (2016), I argue that the field would benefit from a stronger focus on engaging with theory, which means a deeper commitment than using or applying theory or theoretical concepts to interpret and explain food issues. Following this, I suggest a particular theoretical direction, arguing that food studies ought to focus less on the communicative functions of food consumption and more on food consumption as part of the dynamics of social practices. By “communicative functions,” I mean food consumption understood in terms of the appropriation and use of cultural symbols, working as a resource for expressing individuality, group membership, social movement action, and/or group distinctions.

This is in no way an argument that analyses of symbolism and expressivity are redundant. Rather, it is a call for a broader diversity where the inconspicuous, ordinary, unreflective, mundane, and (more or less) unnoticed receive as much attention as the conspicuous, special, reflexive, extraordinary, and symbolically loaded. It calls for asking less about what food issues communicate and more about what food issues constitute and how they are constituted in everyday performances, social conventions, sociomaterial relations, and socially coordinated and embodied activities. This distinction, between the extraordinary, deliberate, and expressive—the communicative—and the everyday, unreflective, and routinized will, from this point on, be the central distinction of the paper.

### **The question of social theory in food studies**

To start with, what is social theory? The term is wide-ranging and covers an extensive span of understandings of human beings and societies. Harrington (2005, 1) has defined it very broadly as “the study of scientific ways of thinking about social life.” These are theories that “encompass ideas about how societies change and develop, about methods of explaining social behaviour, about power and social structure, class, gender and ethnicity, modernity and ‘civilization’, revolutions and utopias, and numerous other concepts and problems in social life” (ibid.). I will argue later that we should use them with the ambition of connecting single empirical contributions to generalized understandings of human activity, since it is through theory that empirical cases make sense. I also argue for explicit theoretical commitments because theoretical debates and mutually respectful conflicts are necessary for new and deepened knowledge in the field to be produced.

As mentioned above, scholars have written a great deal about food studies as a field, and many of them have focused on seminal texts and authors (Atkins and Bowler 2001; Nestle and McIntosh 2010; Counihan and Van Esterik 2013; Hamada et al. 2015). However, these texts and authors tend to be treated more as what to read and who to know about rather than academic traditions in which to partake in dialog. Furthermore, despite social theory’s constant presence in food studies, the theory question as an end in itself remains scarcely illuminated. It might be touched upon when the field is discussed as a whole (e.g., Levkoe, Brady, and Anderson 2016; Fine, Heasman, and Wright 1996), but it is not examined in its own right.

However, one recent discussion of social theory in food studies on which I will base my arguments is found in Alan Warde's *The Practice of Eating* (2016). The book takes eating as the unit of analysis for practice-theoretical development, and one could be tempted to call it a food studies work. It is, after all, a sociological study of a food-related issue (eating). Nevertheless, it is clear from the book that Warde himself does not identify with food studies. The root of this de-identification seems to be the close connection of food studies to the cultural turn in studies on consumption, that is, theories claiming that consumption is driven by the symbolic values of the consumed object through which we express who we are (or want to be), something Warde (1994, 2005, 2014; Warde and Southerton 2012) has been critical of for decades and forcefully challenges in his later work. The argument is a rather simple one: food does indeed have communicative functions, but this is not its main social function. Instead, food is mostly a matter of what he and coauthors have called ordinary (Gronow and Warde 2001) and inconspicuous (Shove and Warde 1997) consumption, something we do day in and day out, usually in a routinized manner, devoid of much mental deliberation. Moreover, the "culturalist" way of understanding consumption identifies the causal chain between the individual's cognition and the "purely" cultural, thus losing sight of the material (Reckwitz 2002a). For example, food as a cultural symbol is exaggerated, while food as an object with material functions (experienced in the mouth, metabolized in the body, growing and being broken down in the soil, etc.) is underestimated. In reality, the two cannot be completely distinguished of course. The everyday usage of a tool, even if it is habituated to the extent that it has become more or less automatic (e.g., the usage of a fork when eating a meal), requires a symbolic meaning as well. Nevertheless, this does not change the fact that certain intellectual traditions orient more toward expressivity and reflection compared with practice and routinization.

In his discussion of food studies and social theory, Warde's verdict is harsh. Food studies, he writes, "shows no signs of reaching, or indeed even of seeking, theoretical or conceptual synthesis" (Warde 2016, 14–15), and while he describes food studies as a scion of the cultural turn, he also argues that:

... if "food studies" have become the focus of scholarship on food consumption, then one would have to point to their very considerable heterogeneity—of discipline, approach and topic—and hence a lack of unified theory or even aspiration towards theory. Published material draws unevenly on a range of theoretical resources to which there seems to be limited commitment, with food studies having shown less theoretical ambition than in the better developed sociology of consumption. (Warde 2016, 15)

The argument here is that the scope of food studies and supposedly uncommitted theoretical engagements have resulted in a lack of shared ambition to develop unified theories. It is an argument that echoes similar contentions made previously by Fine, Heasman, and Wright (1996) about the fragmentation of the field. Both seem to contend that food studies has generated relevant empirical knowledge but in completely different areas, with little exchange or harmony among them. Moreover, they both agree that many of the social scientific inquiries into food have focused on the symbolic meanings attached to food and expressed through consumption of food. In my language, this means food's communicative functions.

### **Theory for what—and how?**

The diversity of empirical directions and disciplinary heterogeneity in food studies is huge. This interdisciplinary nature of the field is often expressed as a strength (Levkoe, Anderson, and Brady 2016; Winson, Sumner, and Koç 2012), and even though this may lead to a beneficial intellectual diversity, it might also, I think, become a barrier to deeper theoretical engagements. For a field to thrive, the differences and conflicts between traditions should be clear. This will not hurt the field; on the contrary, clear theoretical diversities and debates are characteristics of all successful social sciences and humanities fields.

But what, then, is the benefit of “more theory”? The answer is that there is nothing beneficial about theory for theory’s sake. In fact, recent discussion in sociology has turned against what is considered to be a constant re-theorizing of concepts, suggesting instead that an increased focus on methodological and empirical description should be prioritized (Besbris and Khan 2017). I agree. My point, however, in line with scholars cited above, is that this is already a great strength of food studies. I do not propose theory for theory’s sake, or endless re-configurations of theoretical concepts, but an engaged approach where theoretical commitments are taken seriously as the path to clarification of arguments that are transferable to different empirical contexts. Moreover, I am not suggesting that food be reduced to a simple means to theoretical ends, “initiated for reasons related to *other* research agendas” (Belasco 2002, 6, emphasis in the original). I am arguing that the knowledge of food issues would be even more sophisticated with increased theoretical engagement.

My suggestion is to focus on the *commitment* to theory, on the long-term engagements with theoretical debates that push knowledge forward. There are some noteworthy examples of food studies scholars who, in my opinion, have done this in inspiring ways. For example, Johnston and Baumann (2007, 2010) studied the American foodie culture and engaged in discussions of cultural omnivorousness and present-day distinctions, while Cairns and Johnston (2015) investigated everyday food activities as a way of understanding contemporary gender relations in the United States and Canada. Moreover, Julier (2013) explored different forms of commensality and demonstrated that eating together is not only a neutral pursuit of joy and pleasure but also one in which gender and class inequalities are reproduced through implicit rules and expectations.

Studies such as these can provide guidance for future theoretical engagements. Our knowledge of food issues has increased but so has our understanding of theoretical problems. Moreover, I contend that the arguments about food issues become more, not less, sophisticated when engaged in more depth with social theory. Suddenly, they are understood in a wider light and connected to, as well as developing, more generalized understandings of human activity and society. Food is not a means to “something else”; instead, both food *and* “something else” are better understood.

With clearer theoretical debates and conflicts over how to explain food issues, the heterogeneity of food studies could also be turned into a strength. It is, after all, through theory that empirical findings make sense. One way of making sense of food issues, which I will here argue for with a focus on consumption, is for food studies to engage in contemporary theories of practice. I am not suggesting that “this is the way to go” for

each and every food studies scholar, and there is no shortage of critical voices targeting this theoretical tradition (see Rouse 2007). However, to be consistent with my plea to theoretical commitment I too commit to one specific strain of theory and try to argue for its relevance.

## Food consumption and theories of practice

So far, I have used the term “food issues,” by which I refer to a diverse range of phenomena that are in some way related to food and relevant to food studies. One such issue is consumption of food. By “consumption,” I mean a social process of appropriating, using, transforming, and disposing of objects or activities, such as food or foodwork, as well as attaching meanings to them. Food consumption can therefore not be reduced to dietary intake, as it is usually referred to in nutritional sciences. However, nor can it be reduced to a market transaction between economic actors or as an opposite to production. Purchasing a food item, using it or transforming it (in cooking, baking, etc.), eating it, and wasting it are all part of what I hereafter call food consumption.

In the sociological literature on consumption, theories of practice have become increasingly influential during the twenty-first century (Warde, Welch, and Paddock 2017), following in the footsteps of a more general “practice turn” in social theory (Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina, and von Savigny 2001). This was mainly in reaction to the cultural turn, the paradigm in which food studies was born, where much emphasis was put on the communicative functions of consumption, in which the consumer was declared free in expressing her/his individuality while social contrasts were diminishing. This too was a reaction, however, to an overly deterministic and cynical view of consumption as a reflection of capitalist ideology, most notably the critique of the “culture industry” by Horkheimer and Adorno ([1944] 2006), with the consumer being reduced to a dupe (Warde 2015). Theories of practice, then, refer to a set of social theories where social practices—rather than, for example, ideologies, structures, or individual intentions—make up the unit of social analysis. A middle way, if you like, between consumption as ideologically or individually driven and the consumer as dupe or as guided by her/his own quest for expressivity.

Importantly, Evans (2018) recently discussed the contemporary theoretical turns in the sociology of consumption, primarily focusing on its practice-theoretical currents and sustainable consumption, arguing for a return to critique. His example is sustainable consumption, but could easily be transferred to other empirical contexts. The return to critique emphasizes overconsumption and elitism, echoing some of the central tenets of Bourdieu. Inequality and power have tended to be relatively undertheorized in practice-based studies of consumption but, just as with my previous discussion about empirical richness, this too is an area in which food studies has produced a plethora of important contributions (such as the examples I provided above). Hereafter, I will outline some basic commonalities of contemporary practice theories, although the outline is not exhaustive. I should mention that when I say “contemporary” theories of practice, I refer henceforth to what is sometimes called the “second generation” of practice theories that have proved important in sociological research on food consumption.

Reckwitz (2002b) has distinguished between practice as per the Greek term “praxis” and practices as per the German term “praktiken.” Praxis, he writes, “represents merely an

emphatic term to describe the whole of human action (in contrast to ‘theory’ and mere thinking)” while he defines a *praktik*, “in the sense of the theory of social practices,” as:

... a routinized type of behavior which consists of several elements, interconnected to one other: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, “things” and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge. (Reckwitz 2002b, 249)

Two things are clear: (i) a practice is a unit constituted by nonrandom activities and (ii) it consists of connected elements, including embodiment, physical objects, inner emotions, competences of how to do things, and motivations to do them. Thus, it is not a “purely” social unit, but one that incorporates the role of our bodies and our relationships to things.

Practices are commonly analyzed as either entities in themselves or aggregates of performances. This distinction is important, and the “best” way to do it is a subject of dispute that I will not go into here. A practice as an *entity* (hereafter, Practice with a capital P) means that it is treated analytically as something that “exists,” in itself with its internal dynamics and relationships to other Practices, through its shared “life” among practitioners. A practice as a performance, on the other hand, is “the carrying out of practices” that people regularly participate in (Warde 2005, 134). Reckwitz explains it further:

A practice—a way of cooking, of consuming, of working, of investigating, of taking care of oneself or of others, etc.—forms so to speak a “block” whose existence necessarily depends on the existence and specific interconnectedness of these elements, and which cannot be reduced to any one of these single elements. Likewise, a practice represents a pattern which can be filled out by a multitude of single and often unique actions reproducing the practice (a certain way of consuming goods can be filled out by plenty of actual acts of consumption). (Reckwitz 2002b, 249–250)

For a Practice to “survive,” it is dependent on the interconnectedness of the elements involved (and cannot be reduced to any single one) and the constant performance of individuals who do it in different ways. Individual experimentation, resistance, and creativity can change Practices with time. Individuals’ actions are therefore not irrelevant; their agency, their emotions, and their desires are all acknowledged but socially constrained by the internal dynamics and logics of Practices. There are other ways of changing a Practice, namely, through (i) the introduction of new technologies or other material objects (e.g., food industry innovations); (ii) new or lost links with other Practices; or (iii) competition with other Practices. Because no Practice is an island, but rather interconnected with other Practices and in competition over spatial and temporal resources (e.g., car driving can outcompete bicycle riding through the time spent doing it and the widening of roads at the expense of bicycle lanes).

It should be mentioned, however, that not all scholars use the same practice-theoretical terminology. For instance, as shown in the quote above, Reckwitz (2002b, 250) uses the terminology of a “block” whose existence depends on interlinked elements—embodied, cognitive, material, and emotional—and the constant reproduction of performances. Schatzki (1996, 89), on the other hand, describes a Practice as “a temporally unfolding and spatially dispersed nexus of doings and sayings.” These doings and sayings are interlinked “(1) through understandings, for example, of what



to say and do; (2) through explicit rules, principles, precepts and instructions; and (3) through ‘teleoaffective’ structures embracing ends, projects, tasks, purposes, beliefs, emotions, and moods” (Schatzki 1996, 89).

A final important point is also the shared understandings and judgments of Practices. A practitioner can spot a Practice being performed among others (she/he can see that someone is cooking, riding a bicycle, etc.). Again, this is connected to the nonrandom nature of Practices, as characterized by practical understandings and intelligibilities, conventions, material objects, embodied competences, and so forth. According to Schatzki (2002, 77), practical understandings are about “knowing how to X, knowing how to identify X-ings, and knowing how to prompt as well as respond to X-ings” executed through individuals’ practical intelligibility. Our intelligibilities are thus “molded” by the practical understandings, but the latter do not determine or govern our actions (cf. Welch and Warde 2016, 187).

Moreover, not only must practitioners be competent enough to identify a Practice when they see it being performed and to respond in accordance. They can also dispute, it has been suggested, how well it is performed in relation to shared standards of excellence (Warde 2014). Thus, a practitioner knows not only how to go about enacting the Practice, she/he also has some idea about how to do it “properly” or not. Practice theorists explain this in different ways, but the shared point is the existence of collectively coordinated “know-hows” and understandings of how to judge, and perhaps disagree over, good or bad performances.

Cooking is the archetypal food issue for exemplifying a Practice. Many of us do it regularly and routinely, but with great differences in skills and material circumstances (e.g., kitchen equipment, raw ingredients, degrees of able-bodiedness, etc.). My own attempts to prepare a good-enough-to-eat lentil stew would, if the theoretical predictions are correct, be recognized as cooking even by Gordon Ramsay, through the objects I handle, the technologies I use, the way I move, and so forth. He and I are both practitioners of the Practice known as “cooking.” There is a kernel of shared conventions, know-hows, and understandings between the two of us, despite the fact that we have never interacted face to face. When we cook, our end product can be judged, both by the two of us and by other practitioners, according to ideas of what “good” or “bad” cooking entails.

What is more, cooking can outcompete other Practices, both temporally if a practitioner spends increasing amounts of time on it and spatially if she/he, for example, builds a bigger kitchen or plows up parts of the garden to grow food. But cooking is not an island. Rather, it is interlinked, sometimes fragily and sometimes robustly, with other Practices. For instance, cooking is linked to other domestic work Practices (e.g., dishwashing) but also to agricultural food production Practices and supermarket retailing Practices.

Despite the great influence of second-generation practice approaches to consumption, they have not yet had any major impact on food studies. Many studies do indeed cite the work of Giddens and Bourdieu, perhaps the most important sociologists of the “first generation” of practice theories. Nevertheless, in the case of Giddens, this is usually *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (1991). In this book he had moved away from his focus on social practices that he had developed in *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (1984) and concentrated instead on individual self-reflexivity and identity. Thus, food studies research that draws on Giddens tends to focus on food and eating as markers of identity



and as a means of fulfilling late modern (individual) life projects. As for Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* ([1979] 1984) is the most commonly cited book. Here arguments usually center on the distinctive functions of food and eating, how taste in food reproduces social classification, while his practice theorizing from *Outline of a Theory of Practice* ([1972] 1977) and *The Logic of Practice* ([1980] 1992) is less acknowledged. In other words, even when the works of practice theorists have been used, they have (i) primarily been written by the “first-generation” practice theorists and (ii) been most commonly used to study communicative functions and distinctions of food rather than to understand social practices. Moreover, Bourdieu is often applied as a theorist of social inequality. Again, this is a strength in food studies that practice-based studies must not lose sight of. Most Practices might be based on routine and habit, but that does not mean that power, social reproduction, and inequality become irrelevant. Quite the contrary—routinized and taken-for-granted activities are, as Bourdieu argues, based on a practical sense of the game, a game in which the rules are set up by and for the dominant group.

I should mention that we have in recent years indeed seen an increase in second-generation practice-theoretical applications in food studies (e.g., Halkier 2017; Leer and Povlsen 2016; Laakso 2017; Nelson, Beckie, and Krogman 2017). These publications all provide relevant knowledge of how approaching food consumption, or any food issue, from a practice-theoretical perspective inevitably means that different questions are asked than if one assumes the main drivers of people’s food involvement to be cultural symbolism or individuals’ self-reflexive intentions toward group unity or distinction. Their theoretical ambitions are more limited, however, with practice theories being applied to their empirical data rather than being *developed by* their data. It is also too early to say whether their existence mirrors a short-lived theoretical trend or a long-term theoretical commitment among food studies scholars. That being said, the following section will provide some more examples of how practice theories have been and can be engaged with in research on food consumption. I will then discuss some of the implications and my suggestions for food studies.

### ***Practice-theoretical approaches to food consumption***

Before discussing specific studies, three clarifications must be made. First, the distinction between Practices (as entities) and as performances has consequences for empirical research. Methodologically, it is difficult to study performances unless one is conducting some form of ethnographic fieldwork (e.g., Evans 2012a, 2012b), although studies of how people describe their daily performances are also common, such as studies using qualitative interviews of different sorts (e.g., Mylan, Holmes, and Paddock 2016; Halkier et al. 2011; Halkier 2017; Paddock 2017). A skilled qualitative interviewer would however find out important things about understandings that are part of Practices, or how performances are judged. Practices as entities, on the other hand, can, for example, be measured in surveys such as time-use studies (e.g., Cheng et al. 2007; Warde et al. 2007). Time-use surveys also capture how Practices compete with each other, such as how increases in time for one lead to decreases in time for another, or how time devoted to different Practices is socially differentiated between groups.

Second, when scrutinizing literature on practice-theoretical approaches to food consumption, it becomes rather clear that it has tended so far to focus on two particular societal challenges: health and environmental sustainability. Whether explicitly stated or not, the research contains a normative element: long-term ambitions to influence public policy through a critique of orthodox understandings of behavioral change and consumption (Evans, McMeekin, and Southerton 2012; Blue et al. 2016).

Third, and connected to the second point, there is also a clear geographical division of academic labor among scholars who study food from a practice-theoretical perspective. It is primarily a North European perspective, with a particularly strong standing in the United Kingdom, and more engaged with sociology than cultural studies. Simultaneously, many of the influential food studies publications continue to be North American, mainly from the United States, and have largely focused on the communicative aspects of food and eating.

In the following I provide three examples of explicitly practice-theoretical approaches to food issues, and I then discuss how a few food studies publications could be further understood from a practice-theoretical perspective. I define an article as belonging to the field of food studies if the author(s) claim to be engaged in food studies or if it is published in a food studies journal.

I begin with a qualitative study by Halkier and Jensen (2011) based on individual, family, and group interviews. The authors suggested four “ideal-types” of how a group of Pakistani Danes engage with performances of “eating healthy.” The four ideal-types were as follows: “I: *Engaging proactively in healthier food*; II: *Fitting in healthier food*; III: *Doing healthier food ambivalently*; and IV: *Ignoring healthier food as social practicality*” (2011, 476, emphases in the original). What the study reveals is a daily negotiation of how to handle food in constant relation to other Practices (e.g., parenting or hospitality Practices). The main problem for the healthiness of the informants’ diets did not seem to be a shortage of cognitive knowledge of nutrition. The explanations for not eating “healthy enough” were more multifaceted than that, and the authors thus put forward a critique of the “deficit model” of public health communication, one in which “users of informational advice and communication campaigns are seen as passive receivers of knowledge, values, and guidelines” (2011, 471).

Furthermore, a good example of the role of the material is found in a discussion between two participants (fictitiously) named Rushy and Ishiita. The former mentioned how Danish dietitians might recommend “rye bread and dairy products, mayonnaise and tartare sauce and such things,” to which the latter responded: “We can’t really use that for anything” (Halkier and Jensen, 2011, 473). It is the mentioning of *usage* that is important here. The quote does not suggest that Ishiita made a distinction from the symbolically Danish or that the foods mentioned were unsuitable as expressions of Pakistani cuisine. Rather, they were simply not part of her collectively coordinated know-how, her practical understanding, of preparing food. To borrow the terminology of Shove, Pantzar, and Watson (2012), Ishiita’s meanings of cooking were not linked to the materials claimed to be recommended by Danish dietitians.

In another qualitative study, this time with a broader ethnographic approach (interviews, go-alongs, and observations), Evans (2012a) studied household food waste in the everyday lives of a group of Britons. The participants gave many reasons for wasting food, including the purchasing of food that did not suit the preferences of everyone in

the household, a lack of time and energy to cook a dish using what was in the fridge (and thus eating convenience food instead), and technological limitations. There were more examples but, in general, and in line with the principal argument made by Halkier and Jensen (2011), a lack of knowledge or motivations to change did not seem to be the main problem. Based on his findings, Evans then criticizes the notion of a “throwaway society,” which he sees as a moralistic idea about people being callous and careless. Instead, he draws “attention to the social context through reference to discussions of time, tastes, conventions, family relations and domestic divisions of labour” (Evans 2012a, 52), which together result in food being wasted. Neither rationalist assumptions of individuals acting in accordance with intentions changed through information nor culturalist explanations of food consumption being reduced to its communicative functions would account for the findings of these two studies. It is through the social coordination of activities, conventions, shared understandings, and sociomaterial relationships that the practices of everyday life are performed.

Cheng et al. (2007) studied UK time diaries in order to analyze changes in eating between 1975 and 2000. They examined three topics in the social transformation of the Practice: (i) social differentiation, meaning the continuation or erosion of differences in eating based on sociodemographic group divisions; (ii) processes of commodification that discuss how food provision moves from the domestic setting into the marketplace, potentially (according to some) leading to disruptions of social relationships; and (iii) changes in the temporal organization of consumption, such as the time spent eating meals or the frequency of meals eaten together with other people, something that has also been suggested to wear down social relationships. Although the authors find changes in eating out, both in terms of the frequency and the duration of time, eating is suggested to be a Practice that is rather resilient to change. Sociodemographic categories continue to differentiate how eating is performed, although restructured in different ways rather than fragmented (as theories of high modernity or postmodernity might suggest). Furthermore, people, although slightly fewer, still eat at home and they continue to eat together (both at home and when eating out).

The nature of the time-use data limits the interpretation to time and frequencies, thus hiding, for example, the meanings associated with Practices, the processes and diversity of everyday performances, and the human relationship to objects. But they do demonstrate how a Practice can evolve, how its duration and frequency correlate with sociodemographic variables, and which social forces are likely to drive its change. Moreover, and relevant to the argument I am making, findings such as these highlight the inadequacy of some theories that suggest diminishing contrasts of sociodemographic groups due to increased individuality and global mass-commodification (cf. Warde 1997). Food, it seems, is not so much about communication, and food consumption does not appear to be particularly based on the self-reflexive accumulation of symbolic resources. Instead, eating is a universal necessity, a mostly mundane activity of everyday life.

### ***A practice-based (re)interpretation: three examples from food studies***

In this final subsection I will provide three examples of studies (four published articles) that I define as belonging to the field of food studies and that I consider to be focused

on the communicative side of my central distinction. I will discuss and reinterpret them using concepts from contemporary theories of practice. My aim is to put forward two arguments: a practice-theoretical approach could have strengthened the authors' analyses, and the empirical data have the potential to make fruitful practice-theoretical contributions.

In a study of veganism and the quest for authenticity, Greenebaum (2012) argues that “[a] vegan identity needs to be understood as more than a philosophy or way of ‘being.’ It needs to be constructed by what one does: specifically, what one does (and does not) eat, consume and purchase.” Her argument is that ethical vegans represent themselves as authentic while making distinctions from health vegans, demonstrating how “claims of authenticity are managed by constructing an in-group of ‘ethical’ vegans and an out-group of ‘health’ vegans” (ibid.). Greenebaum advances convincing arguments, but engaging with contemporary theories of practice could take them even further. For example, Welch and Warde (2016) have discussed “authenticity” using Schatzki’s concept (2002) of “general understandings,” which, unlike practical understandings, are not Practice specific but exogenous to Practices. They cut across Practices and are usually connected to some form of collective concept such as “the nation,” membership categories like gender, “or diffuse but culturally significant understandings, such as notions of convenience, cosmopolitanism or authenticity” (Welch and Warde 2016, 183). We could, therefore, use Greenebaum’s study to engage in the theoretical discussion of general understandings, showing how a general understanding of authenticity is expressed in ethical veganism and trying to connect it to other performances and Practices, such as how general understandings of authenticity are expressed in clothing, music, or other food-consumption activities. Moreover, veganism is not only a pursuit of expressive identity work but also a bodily engagement with shared values and beliefs. The vegan literally engages in veganism through what she/he does and does not eat or wear. Thinking about veganism as a Practice would thus put more focus on the material objects that are crucial to the performances of veganism.

Moreover, Neuman, Gottzén, and Fjellström (2017a, 2017b) have, for example, demonstrated how ideas about the Swedish development of gender equality and culinary skills are connected to Swedish men’s understandings of food in their everyday lives and how domestic cooking is a means of sociability with other men, women, and children. They argue that this signals transitions in Swedish masculinity, expressed through stories about food and foodwork. However, general understandings would help us conceptualize how ideas about masculinity govern men’s own performances of certain Practices. In other words, we can explain how the change in masculinity from one set of Practices “moves over” into another one, such as how changes in paid work influence general understandings of socially desirable ways of doing masculinity that make their way into the domestic kitchen work (Welch and Warde 2016; Neuman and Fjellström 2014). Although the authors’ gender-theoretical approach recognized the importance of embodiment in the understanding of masculinity, an engagement with contemporary practice theories could also have provided a more material understanding of the relationship that food or cooking utensils have to the enactment of masculinities. At the same time, the data and the theoretical arguments can be used to improve the role of gender and power in contemporary theories of practice. As Watson (2016) has pointed out, practice theories must take power into consideration.

This is rather scarce in the practice-based literature on food consumption but rich in food studies in general. What in the dynamics of Practices causes uneven distributions of status or financial resources? Who is privileged to perform the Practice in creative and norm-breaking ways without the threat of social repercussions? Such questions can and should be asked.

The final example is a study of the production of culinary heritage in the South Carolina Lowcountry (Jones 2017). The study is based on both ethnography and interviews with an artisan mill owner and a chef, thus making it possible to analyze both their performances and their understandings of performances and Practices. The article focuses on the recovering and restoring of heirloom grains, which are considered specific bearers of cultural heritage and authenticity. The authenticity described in the article is based on ideas about history, the respect for earlier generations, and a skepticism toward profit seeking as the main virtues of their entrepreneurship. This is a discourse of authenticity that might well be a general understanding, exogenous to the Practices of the participants' own enterprises. Furthermore, the authenticity lies in the materiality of the grains, how they taste, their physical structure, the soil, and so forth, and not merely in what they communicate. This is an aspect that Jones does indeed acknowledge at times, but it could be even more pronounced. These grains are indeed cultural symbols, but we can also see how their materiality structures the everyday actions of the mill owner and the chef, because these grains have to be nurtured through a set of complex agricultural and culinary activities. The article gives rich descriptions of how understandings are shared and how ideas of authenticity are based on historical legacies and know-hows passed down from generation to generation. In many respects, the article is already a practice-based study, even though Jones does not use any practice theories. All the components are there, however: materiality, conventions, procedures, social coordinations, practical and general understandings, know-hows, competences, and emotions.

These studies by Greenebaum (2012), Neuman, Gottzén, and Fjellström (2017a, 2017b), and Jones (2017) are but three, and my attempt to reinterpret them has focused only on a very limited set of practice-theoretical aspects (general understandings and sociomaterial relations). Nevertheless, it exemplifies how a practice-theoretical approach can move the analysis further while demonstrating the power of food consumption to engage in practice-theoretical developments. Going back to the recently published practice-based studies that I define as belonging to the field of food studies, we can also see, for example, how "locavore" chefs are products of material conditions, acquired skills, and competences as well as individual agency regarding decision-making (Nelson, Beckie, and Krogman 2017). The data from that study could easily have been framed as chefs merely constructing their identity, but the analyses provide a more complex picture. I also think that the study contributes theoretically more than what the authors themselves claim; it does so by focusing on how something that is at first sight spectacular and conspicuous is actually created through everyday routines and constrained by its material conditions. It indicates too that the search for self-identity is not necessarily the driver of activities, but that identity might really be an outcome of the recruitment to a Practice. This logic suggests that through routinized performances intentions and identities are formed over time, not the other way around.

## Concluding discussion

In this paper I have discussed the question of social theory in food studies. First, I have highlighted how this question has been scarcely explored in this field, while a great deal has been written about the history, development, and state of the art of food studies. Based on Alan Warde's critique (2016) of a supposed lack of theoretical ambitions in food studies, I then claimed that food studies should seek deeper engagements with social theories. By being more clearly engaged in social-theoretical debates, our diversities and theoretical conflicts will be more visible and, I contend, our explanations of food issues more sophisticated. Following this, I presented contemporary theories of practice, based on a central distinction between the extraordinary, deliberate, and expressive—the communicative functions that I have argued to lie at the core of food studies—and the everyday, unreflective, and routinized. By engaging with contemporary theories of practice, food consumption would be understood more in terms of everyday doings and social conventions, collectively routinized activities, embodied competences, shared and practical understandings, procedures, and sociomaterial relationships. I am not suggesting this to be the only, or even the “best” way forward; practice theories are and must be subject to criticism just like all theoretical traditions. However, in line with my plea to theoretical commitment, this is what I committed to myself.

As demonstrated in studies such as those by Halkier and Jensen (2011), Evans (2012a, 2012b), and other publications following a similar line of thought (Mylan, Holmes, and Paddock 2016; Halkier et al. 2011; Halkier 2017; Paddock 2015, 2017), theories of practice give us tools not only to understand food consumption intellectually but also to achieve food-related social change (reducing social inequalities in food security or obesity, achieving more environmentally sustainable diets, etc.). They do so by providing us with a paradigm of thinking about social change that radically challenges social scientific (and political) orthodoxy concerning individual behavioral change. It is a radically nonindividualist paradigm of thought in order to achieve social change through practice-based, rather than individual-based, interventions (cf. Spurling et al. 2013). Here, as critics of individualist understandings of “food choice” or identity, transdisciplinary food studies can contribute greatly, not only by *using* theories of practice but also by actively engaging with them and thus developing them further.

In no way do I claim that perspectives focusing on the communicative aspects of food and eating are redundant, but I am suggesting clearer alternatives that dare to give, if not conflicting then at least complementary, explanations of the same phenomena. Moreover, the increased engagement with social theory which I have suggested will not mean that the importance of food issues as targets of analysis in themselves is downplayed and reduced to a means of achieving “something else.” On the contrary, it is about demonstrating the exceptionality of food issues; how they help us to understand societies, cultures, and human activities better. As for theories of practice, I have argued that food issues are exemplary for analyses of, for example, how the social and material organize everyday life, and how performances of food-related Practices can contribute to theoretical discussions of general understandings that cut across Practices.

Moreover, while my examples focus on consumption, practice-based food studies will also need to connect consumption to relations of production (e.g. Bååth 2018). Shove,



Pantzar, and Watson (2012) have argued that Practices must be analyzed as tied to each other in bundles and nexuses. One such nexus could be to follow a certain food product from production to consumption, a classic example being Sidney Mintz's brilliant analysis of sugar in Western history (1986). As such, the researcher would follow "the social life of the thing" (Appadurai 1986) and see how it becomes routinely used, ascribed meaning, how its materiality becomes a nodal point in the organization of everyday life, how competences develop around it, and more. As argued above, referring to Watson (2016), practice-based approaches to food issues must also highlight relations of power. Practices are stratified based on the concentrations of social status, financial resources, and power. Internally, individual participants and groups of participants are also stratified, for example through divisions of labor and status in the Practice of cooking (who performs the daily domestic cooking and who becomes a publicly celebrated chef?).

Food is an important part of the special as well as the mundane, the conspicuous, and the ordinary. It is a comparatively small empirical example, but the little things are, after all, what enables us to answer the big questions; it is through the ordinary that we understand the spectacular. This is the strength of food analysis, and I hope in the future that food studies will become more theoretically engaged and thus more clearly divided into theoretical traditions and approaches. This will be an important advancement in a field that is developing quickly, and with great promise.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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