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**Alan Warde, "The Practice of Eating." Cambridge:  
Polity Press, 2016, 220 pp.**

(doi: 10.2383/85299)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 2, maggio-agosto 2016

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## Book Review

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Since the turn of the century, a considerable body of work has developed in what is now known in English as "food studies." While this body of work is largely interdisciplinary, exhibiting many fruitful overlaps across academic boundaries, disciplines still maintain their own particular trajectories in it, which have developed over time in relation to specific substantive issues. The new book by Alan Warde, professor of sociology at the University of Manchester, tries to articulate a specifically sociological approach to consumption, and particularly eating, by drawing on the most recent developments in practice theory. Forty-four years after the publication of Pierre Bourdieu's *Outline of a Theory of Practice* [1972], it seems that practice-theoretical approaches to social life are still alive and well (Warde is, after all, one of the foremost experts on Bourdieu).

Warde begins his discussion with the "cultural turn" of the 1970s, when consumption came to be seen in sociology as a way of signaling identity through the development of different lifestyles. This new perspective rejected the old criticism of popular culture and the mass media that had characterized traditions like the Frankfurt School, showing instead how ordinary people could appropriate commodities for creative goals. While not denying that consumption may play this role, Warde is critical of this approach because of its emphasis on forms of conspicuous consumption, its downplaying of social structure, and its blindness towards material culture. He further notes that the approach implies a voluntaristic theory of action, with individuals freely making decisions about their purchases, that resembles the model of the sovereign consumer of neoclassical economics. In contrast to this model, theories of practice emphasize routine over novelty, sequence over discrete acts, disposition over decisions, and practical consciousness over reflexivity.

Analyzing eating with the apparatus of practice theory, argues Warde, offers the perfect opportunity to highlight the limitations of the cultural turn and the voluntaristic model. In this sense, changing lens entails appreciating five key points. First, the defining characteristic of consumption should not be purchase, but use, especially the use of things for mundane conduct. Second, decisions can never be considered purely personal, as they result from the affordances of the social and material environments. Third, choices are usually sequential and cumulative, not discrete. Fourth, many commodities are purchased repetitively, and often mindlessly (like groceries). Fifth, consumers tend to embellish the degree of their deliberation.

Warde distinguishes two phases in the development of practice theory. The first one – the 1970s and early 1980s – is the "classic" period, dominated by the works of Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens. This story has been told many times before. The second phase begins with the publication of Theodore Schatzki's *Social Practices* [1996], whose subsequent work contributed to the so-called "practice turn" in contemporary social theory. Schatzki argued that practice theory occupies a space between the two main paradigms of social ontology – individualism and holism – rejecting both the idea

that individual action is the locus of social organization and that the whole of society is a single organism. Neither rational choice nor functional regulation can explain social organization. For Schatzki (and for Warde), practices are the fundamental principle of social life.

Two forms of practice can be identified: practice as entity and practice as performance. The first one represents a temporally unfolding and spatially extended set of links between what people say and do. These links are achieved through three main avenues: mutual understandings (intelligibility), explicit rules, or teleoaffective structures (e.g. projects, purposes, emotions, etc.). Practice as performance refers to the myriad actualizations of practice as entity (or *Practice with a capital "P"*; see also Reckwitz [2002]). Performances always presuppose a Practice. However, a Practice can only ever exist in the shape of actual performances (or practices). This recursive implication represents a clear legacy of the notion of the duality of structure put forward by Giddens in *The Constitution of Society* [1984].

Warde recalls another distinction of Schatzki, that between dispersed and integrative practices. The latter are those usually of interest to sociologists, as they are constitutive of specific realms of social life (e.g. cooking practices, farming practices, industrial practices, etc.). Warde rightly recognizes that all this definitional work might be suited to the philosophy of social science, but not to empirical sciences, which require procedures to identify the unit of analysis to be studied. He thus suggests a number of criteria to do so. First, people share specific words that denote an activity as a Practice. Second, performances of a Practice are recognized as such by members of the same culture. Third, a Practice is social, in the sense that individuals unrelated to each other engage in it across time and space. Fourth, a Practice can be judged to be correct or incorrect by members of the same culture.

Eating proves particularly difficult to analyze as a Practice, however. The reason for this, according to Warde, is that the elements contributing to eating performances derive from many other Practices. When thinking about what to eat, for example, people draw on realms as diverse as nutrition science, cookery etiquette, the food industry and the media. Warde therefore introduces an additional concept, the "compound" practice, to describe eating. He then goes on to explain what he believes are the relevant component elements of the Practice of eating, which he calls the "elementary forms of eating," an ambitious reference to Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* [1912].

Warde's elementary forms are actually indebted to Sahlins, Bourdieu, Ilmonen and Douglas, showing a considerable influence from anthropology. They include three variables: social occasion, food content, and bodily process. According to the author, these represent the three dimension of analysis for a general (sociological) theory of eating.

The family meal has usually been the principal focus of sociological inquiry among the many social occasions when food is consumed. This can be explained by the routinized and collective nature of family meals, whose power to hold society together naturally attracts sociologists. Mealtimes have been studied both as moments of bonding and as loci of inequality. With the advent of neoliberalism in late capitalism, a considerable literature has developed to investigate the alleged decline of the family meal as a result of the process of individualization. Warde argues that this literature is unhelpful, as it views

the other contexts of food ingestion – snacking, eating alone, eating out – as degraded version of the ideal family meal.

Instead, Warde suggests paying attention to events. Social occasions of eating can be classified according to the combination of time, place and companion. Timing is expressed through the naming of particular eating events (breakfast, lunch, dinner) and through their sequencing (having dinner before lunch is not a socially recognized practice). Timing spans the hours of the day and the months of the year (Easter, Christmas). The places where we eat articulate with the timing of certain meals, so that one can only eat in certain places at certain times of the day/year (e.g. on special occasions). Finally, the kind of companion one expects to be with while eating is both determined by, and determinant of, the moments and locations where we practice eating (a meal with colleagues can only take place in certain venues and at certain times).

The second aspect of Warde's elementary forms of eating is the actual food consumed. Different groups of people, across cultures and historical epochs, define different kinds of foods as (in)edible. They often do so on the basis of the social occasion when eating is to be practiced. Specific events require specific foods, often in specific sequence. Here Warde suggests using the term "menu" as a more intuitive way to account for what sociologists usually refer to as "food content" and "meal format." His suggestion is that most everyday meals have a range of structures and contents that can be considered analogous to the menu of a restaurant. People who share the *Practice of eating* in a particular culture or social group are aware of the relevant structures and contents of meals, and are able to draw on them to assemble daily performances of eating. The degree of variety and hybridity that individuals exhibit when assembling a "menu" for lunch or dinner is considerable, and appears to be getting more so as globalization brings into contact previously distant cuisines.

The third and final aspect of the elementary forms of eating is the body. Historically, one of the reasons that sociology has not paid much attention to eating is that Durkheim did not recognize it as a social fact, due to its close association with the body. Another reason is represented by the cultural turn, which tends to view bodies either as reified biological entities or as entirely social constructions. Yet the body has been a topic of interest for practice theory since Bourdieu's study of habitus among the Kabyle of Algeria [1972].

Warde traces the emergence of recent sociological work on the social aspects of sensory experience and the learning process of skilled performers, to argue that the body and the senses play a key role in the existence of Practices, including eating. This is evident, for example, in work on culinary synesthesia and its role in keeping alive historical memory and identity. But also in work that highlights the rise of beliefs that specific foods are required by, or adapted to, specific bodies (from veganism to food allergies, from anorexia to special regimes like the "Paleolithic diet"). Globalization plays a role also in making visible the embodied aspect of eating, as the spread of exotic cuisines forces people to adapt their bodily practices, for example when they have to eat with their fingers or using chopsticks.

When looked at through the lens of practice theory, the elementary forms of eating are found in the constant process of habituation that characterizes daily life. Warde argues that the standard sociological answer to the question "How do people know how

to organize a meal?” has been to say that they have assimilated knowledge, values and norms which are then used as the basis for conscious decisions about what to eat. This line of argument, says Warde, is increasingly hard to maintain. Evidence from what he calls the “new behavioral bent” in the social and cognitive sciences shows that most individual action is governed by an automatic – rather than reflective – brain, which involves little deliberation and rational thought. If this is true, much of what is currently said in sociology about “reflexive consumers” (e.g. of organic, fair trade, etc.) is misplaced.

Warde takes an altogether different route to explain how people are capable of performing eating. He maintains this is due to “context”: “An external, collectively accessible, social and cultural environment wherein the mechanisms steering competent conduct are to be found” [2016, 101].

In his account, the environment is comprised of material objects and their arrangements, media messages, and interaction with other people, all of which influence our behavior in subtle and largely unconscious ways. As long as the cues that come from this environment remain the same, behavior is likely to be repeated. This process is what leads to habituation. Warde defines habit as a more or less self-actuating tendency to repeat a previously acquired form of action, suggesting that its hallmarks are lack of deliberation, automaticity and repetition (Warde is indebted here to an approach that goes as far back as Weber’s *Economy and Society* [1925]). These aspects explain many of the current food-related health problems facing the West, like obesity. The view of the “environment” that Warde puts forward in the book is not entirely dissimilar from that of a “foundational economy” – the infrastructure that supports mundane but essential goods and services, like food provisioning – an idea also emanating from the University of Manchester [see Barbera et al. 2016].

In summary, *The Practice of Eating* is an ambitious contribution to the sociology of food consumption. The book, like all books, is not without its flaws. These mostly pertain to the apodictic use of empirical materials to support the theoretical argument, something Warde is aware of, when he writes: “The evidence I use is [...] little more than a demonstration of the relevance of categories or concepts to the description of unsystematically selected episodes [...] Evidence about contemporary experiences of eating is presented briefly, cursorily and with minimal background” [p. 5].

Notwithstanding these flaws, the book has the considerable merit of bringing issues of food into the sociological mainstream through the adoption of a respected analytical tradition – practice theory – thus creating the possibility for food studies to contribute to the advancement of sociological theory.

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