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► To cite this version:

Lotte Holm. Alan Warde, 2016, The practice of eating, Polity: Cambridge, 220 p.. Review of Agricultural, Food and Environmental Studies, 2016, 97 (4), pp.277-279. 10.1007/s41130-016-0031-4 . hal-03114837

HAL Id: hal-03114837

<https://hal.science/hal-03114837>

Submitted on 19 Jan 2021

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Alan Warde, 2016, *The practice of eating, Polity*

Cambridge, 220 p.

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Published online: 2 December 2016
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Alan Warde is currently a leading sociologist in the field of sociology of consumption and in sociological food research. He has published important books such as “Consumption, food and taste” (1997), “Eating out” with Lydia Martens (2000) and “Trust in Food” with Unni Kjørnes and Mark Harvey (2007). More recently, he has contributed to important theoretical developments in both areas, by bringing in newer practice theoretical perspectives in the field. Practice theories are meso-level theories and they are diverse, but they all contest individualist explanations and share an emphasis on practical activity, on doing over thinking, practical competence over strategic reasoning, mutual intelligibility over personal motivation and body over mind. In his new book, Warde reflects on the one hand on what theories of practice may offer to the study of eating and, on the other hand, what the study of eating may offer to theories of practice.

The ambition is thus double: Firstly, Warde wants to show how theories of practice contribute importantly to the study of eating by providing comprehensive analysis, which goes beyond mainstream social and cultural analysis in the field. Secondly, he wants to demonstrate that there is something special about the practice of eating so that an analytical focus on this can enhance theories of practice. In particular, he suggests it can help develop the theory of practice so that it can grasp highly complex but weakly regulated activities.

In the first part of the book, Warde reviews research on eating, introduces theories of practice and constructs eating

as a scientific object. In the second part, he develops key concepts for the analysis of eating as a practice.

According to Warde, current socio-cultural studies of food consumption lack theoretical ambition when compared to research about the production of food where significant theoretical contributions have created shared understandings of food production as a chain of events involving various actors, institutions, rules and regulations. In contrast, the field of eating has emerged as a multidisciplinary field dominated by societal research agendas directing social science to help solve perceived societal problems such as public health and sustainability of food consumption. Often, food is not studied for its own sake, but because it gives insight into other phenomena such as mental categories, family life, social distinction, identity, etc. This means that while valuable knowledge about different aspects of food consumption and eating has been provided, there are no signs of researchers seeking or reaching theoretical synthesis, similar to what has been provided in the study of food production. Further, the field has not profited from progress made in the sociology of consumption. With this book, Warde hopes to start remedying this, by bringing the themes of food and eating into sociological mainstream with the possibility to influence social theory.

Socio-cultural studies of food and eating have been influenced by general theoretical developments and shifts between approaches which each has their own conceptual foundations and empirical foci: structuralism and its focus on revealing social categories and mental structures of groups and individuals; feminist studies analysing division of labour and the role of meals in household relations; Bourdieu inspired analysis of social distinction and hierarchies in patterns of food consumption; and the ‘Cultural Turn’ highlighting systems of signification and communication and studies of globalization focusing on the flow of things, peoples and ideas. As a consequence, the study of eating came to focus on identity, food

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scares, eating out, consumer movements and migration and less on earlier central topics, such as poverty, food riots, meal structures and class differences. However, Warde claims that more recent trends suggest that material culture and socio-cultural analysis of the body is moving to the front of social science in the field. The 'Practice Turn' announced in 2001 by Schatzki and colleagues has opened new potentials for a more thorough and distinctive sociological analysis of food and eating, and it is within this framework that Warde sets out to develop a sociological theory of eating.

The ambition is to formulate a theory which accounts for the social and collective character of eating, for its patterning across populations and for stability as well as change of such patterns. The aim is to go beyond individualism as satisfactory ways to understand human behaviour. Instead, practices are seen as the fundamental units of social existence and the core concept of social analysis.

From this viewpoint, individuals are carriers of multiple practices, and social institutions are the emergent consequence of multiple performances of practices which objectify in the form of organization, regulations, conventions and rituals. Individuals perform practices in a web of potential courses of conduct, which are offered by elements in the situations they find themselves in. Such performances are based on practical sense, which allows for immediate and automated behaviour rather than on conscious considerations of norms and conventions.

An initial step in Warde's argument is to establish eating as an analytical concept, which opens up for addressing questions valuable for scientific analysis. The ordinary taken for granted definition of eating is "to take food into the body through the mouth", but for a sociological theory, it is necessary to explain the relationship between foods consumed, bodily processes and social arrangements. On the basis of a review of sociological literature about eating, Warde suggests in chapter 4 that eating can be described by reference to three elementary forms: events and occasions, food menus and dishes, and incorporation, i.e. the bodily processes and techniques involved in ingesting foods. This conception of eating is not generated by any particular theory but is to be seen as a framework for description and data collection without any inherent theoretical loading.

Warde then develops key concepts for the analysis of eating as a practice. Theories of practice understand human activity as a recursive process, where the repetition of performances by many different actors establishes a way of doing things: the standards of the practice. While such standards are formed on the basis of numerous performances, intermediation processes which formalize and publicize rules of the practices are important too. Integrated practices have a knowledge base comprising sets of basic and shared understandings; they have purposes or set of goals which are sufficiently clear to form the basis for a set of instructions. Textual media such as

guides, manuals and self-help books are good sources for analysis of the standards of specific practices.

What then can be learned about eating from analysing such texts? Warde shows in chapter 5 that there is no one set of guide books for the practice of eating. In contrast, eating is surrounded by numerous manuals but no single genre of writing deals both with occasion, menus and bodily incorporation. Instead, writings about how to eat is distributed across different domains of practices with each their own purposes and priorities, such as, e.g. gastronomy or nutrition. On this basis, Warde concludes that eating is not an integrated practice but another kind of practice. He coins the concept 'compound practice' to describe eating and other practices, which are subject to the intersecting injunctions of several relative autonomous integrative practices (such as, e.g. promoting dietary health, performing nutrition education, cookery, developing taste, organizing family life). Thus, compared to many integrative practices, eating practices are weakly regulated. Eating is a matter of convention rather than authoritative regulation; it is not formally taught, occurs mostly in private, requires no strict and constant coordination with strangers and is not subject to control by powerful organization or regulatory agencies. From this follows, according to Warde, dietary multiplicity, i.e. a plethora of different ways of eating, and the lack of firm and stable social norms, which Claude Fischler analysed in the 1980's, coining the concept 'Gastro-nomie' (Fischler 1988).

However, most people adopt an orderly and practical mode of going about eating. How is this achieved? Following practice theory, Warde sees this as achieved through the procedural nature of everyday expertise, habituation and routine. When people eat, they do not follow deliberate rules but respond to given situations based on their previous experience by implementing procedures anticipated as being suitable. Disposition and recognition of demands of particular situations thus trigger performance. Learning through experience gives individuals a range of techniques and procedures, which constitute a repertoire of alternative ways to carry out a suitable flow of action, a practical sense which allows them to improvise according to different situations and contexts, and e.g. arrange quick meals in unexpected circumstances, adapt to specific but different rules of etiquette, etc. Thus, most actions are 'automatic', i.e. uncontrolled, fast, effortless, associative, unconscious and skilled and not reflective, self-aware and rule following. This challenges models of human action which foreground individual deliberation, goal orientation and choice. Warde is critical to such models, which tend to overestimate the importance of personal control in everyday life and to neglect the contextual mechanisms, which steer competent conduct.

Warde goes in chapters 6 and 7 more thoroughly into the notion of action by highlighting empirical research about automatic and mindless eating and different conceptualizations of

habit and habituation. He contends that person and environment are more intimately related than often anticipated. Habits are not only personal but depend on external environments, which instigate and accommodate performances of practices. Repetition is central in practice theory, as practices depend on individuals repeating themselves over time and on such conduct being repeated across populations. However, repetitious actions cannot only be explained by reference to habits, they also depend on routines, customs and conventions, concepts which link repetition to time and sequence, to collectivity, to normativity and to triggers in the environment. From repeated exposure and experience of practices, a practical sense arises, which operates through disposition allowing people to adopt actions which are appropriate to the various and very different situations they find themselves in.

Warde summarizes this analysis and how it should direct empirical study in a condensed definition of performances of practices as *“sequences of conduct, invoked practically in relevant situations by skilled agents, instigated on the basis of dispositions, deploying habitualized and routinized procedures, embodied through experience, imitation and repetition, adjusted to environment and situation, effectively deploying objects and tools, collectively sanctioned or approved in light of explicitly evaluated standards shared by others in the same social circle. Thus convincing and concise explanation will focus on dispositions (understanding and norms) command of procedures (primarily embodied and involving use of material prostheses) and the cues to routines and conventions in a public cultural environment which act as trigger and reassurance about how to go on.”* (p. 148).

Obesity is presented as an exemplary case: While large parts of populations in Western societies are engaged in trying to lose weight, failures of weight-loss diets are typical and widespread. This demonstrates that individuals do not have sovereign control over their own destiny. Some researchers highlight lack of competence or willpower among individuals to explain this and others the obesogenic environment. In contrast, a practice theoretical perspective foregrounds the embodied procedures and habits directing movement, flavour appreciation and temporal extension of eating, infrastructural objects and arrangements which the individual may find difficult to influence and which constantly deliver cues for eating, social conventions and norms established in social networks as the relevant issues to focus on in social analysis.

Accounting for change is central to any social theory, and Warde highlights dynamics which are both internal and external to practices. Striving for excellence is an internal dynamic, which changes practices as the result of controversy, competition and pursuit of excellence. Change in the social and material environmental settings to which practices are adapted is an external dynamic. Warde exemplifies change with an analysis of the process through which the British public came to appreciate foreign and ‘ethnic’ cuisine. He shows how developments in the

restaurant trade, the growth of mass tourism and migration and urbanization and the constant cues for the recognition of the multicultural character of contemporary food culture have changed understandings and procedures in everyday eating, now encompassing new elements, tastes and flavours and new eating techniques, such as the use of chopsticks.

“The practice of Eating” is a rich book which draws on a vast amount of theoretical and empirical literature from different disciplines. In his book, Warde offers a learned and thorough discussion of key elements emerging when pursuing the ambition of bringing practice theory and eating together. The book presents a richness of thoughtful reflections of the nature of human action and the links between person and environment. It also brings many, however short and sketchy, examples of empirical analyses of eating. The book highlights thoughtful reflections of how contemporary issues in the world of food and eating should be understood, such as gastro-anomie, meal patterns, obesity, eating out and the rise of ethnic cuisines. It also sets directions for future empirical research. While two of the basic elements in the analytical concept of eating, suggested by Warde, the food and the event, have been widely investigated, the third element, ingestion or incorporation into the body, is much less covered, empirically and theoretically. The book thus points to the need for future research in bodily aspects of eating practices.

The book is not an easy read. The English language is complex, condensed and academic. While the title of the book could indicate otherwise, the book does not present a clear and straight forward presentation of a theory of the practice of eating, which e.g. could introduce students to enter the field of the sociology of food. The book is not pedagogical and the text is perhaps too dense to be understood in the first reading. Further, more could have been done to ensure that the reader can follow arguments more easily. Thus, it is sometimes unclear which are the positions opposed in the critical discussions. These are often implied instead of explicated, and the reader has e.g. to look for an explanation of ‘the portfolio model of action’ which is a theoretical position repeatedly discussed (this reader finally found a definition in a note).

However, for scholars in the fields of sociology of food or in practice theory the book offers thoughtful inspiration for reflection and further empirical study. With this book, Warde both shows how the study of eating enhances theories of practice by offering new conceptualizations and how theories of practice can direct empirical research about eating in a fruitful manner, which underlines the social character of eating. Through this, Warde succeeds in his ambition to heighten the standard and significance of the field of sociology of food consumption.

References

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