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Reframing convenience food**

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► **To cite this version:**

Anne Murcott. Peter Jackson, Helene Brembeck, Jonathan Everts, Maria Fuentes, Bente Halkier, Frej Daniel Hertz, Angela Meah, Valerie Viehoff and Christine Wenzl, 2018, Reframing convenience food: Palgrave Macmillan, 274 p. Review of Agricultural, Food and Environmental Studies, 2019, 100 (1-4), pp.125-127. 10.1007/s41130-018-0083-8 . hal-03114864

HAL Id: hal-03114864

<https://hal.science/hal-03114864>

Submitted on 19 Jan 2021

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Peter Jackson, Helene Brembeck, Jonathan Everts, Maria Fuentes, Bente Halkier, Frej Daniel Hertz, Angela Meah, Valerie Viehoff and Christine Wenzl, 2018, *Reframing convenience food*

Palgrave Macmillan, 274 p

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Received: 22 November 2018 / Accepted: 11 December 2018 / Published online: 16 January 2019
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This book takes up discussions about ‘convenience foods’. It asks about the way they are identified and investigates what they signify to those who buy and eat them. It notes that their commercial success coexists with widespread adverse judgements about the moral character of those who use such foods and about the healthfulness/sustainability of their so doing—describing that combination as a paradox. It argues that these foods need to be viewed in a different light from that which finds their use reprehensible, ignorant or lazy. Reframing it all on the basis of empirical research will, the book proposes, allow a more realistic apprehension of the complexities of their use, evading adverse ‘moralizing’ in the process.

The book is based on research funded under the European FP7 ERA-Net SUSFOOD programme. A qualitative research approach is adopted throughout (deploying logical inference as distinct from statistical inference). The project consists of four case studies in four European nations: the use of commercial baby food in Sweden; the use of supermarket ready-meals described as ‘an iconic example’ (p. 5) in the UK with some comparison with Germany; works canteens in Germany; and, in Denmark, the use of meal-box schemes—which involves the commercial provision of the recipe, the necessary ingredients ready-weighed, requiring only the final stage of actual cooking to prepare a meal at home. Interviews and focus groups appear to be the predominant methods used, augmented with some participant observation and, in the Swedish case, desk-based examination of marketing. The design seeks to maximise the opportunity for comparison. Refreshingly, the project avoids metropolises concentrating instead

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on provincial cities and small towns. The ten chapters include aspects of the histories of convenience foods and enlarge on the implications of time and space. Another chapter adopts the American psychologist Paul Rozin's use of the word 'moralization' to consider the value judgements that are attached to the use of convenience foods. A further chapter works through research participants' thinking about health in convenience eating and, also, about food waste and sustainability. The final chapter summarises major features of the book and presents implications for policy and practice.

Part of the authors' proposals for reframing existing thinking addresses the persistence, often found among policy makers and practitioners, of a deficit approach—i.e. the assumption that (in respect of eating) members of the public fail to follow advice about healthy diets and are especially ignorant about the environmental costs of intensive agri-food production. As they point out, this supports among other things a tendency to regard supposedly deficient knowledge as the only 'barrier' to achieving desired behaviour change and is, in any case, often coupled with 'blam(ing) consumers for issues that are largely beyond their control' (p. 197). The authors do not (but could well) point out that it has repeatedly been shown that when such thinking informs interventions that are aimed at effecting changes in behaviour in officially recommended directions, they rarely work as intended. This last, incidentally, is an observation that, of itself, represents sensible and sufficient grounds for proposing re-thinking and reframing. The authors do however note at the very end of the book that the 'moralization' surrounding the use of convenience food 'is a significant stumbling block in understanding the social dynamics of contemporary food consumption' (p. 235). Far better, they suggest to revise such thinking by replacing a deficit approach with one based on assets; do not look at deficiencies, look for what is reasonable in people's eating arrangements.

Underpinning the whole and adding to the project's intrinsic strengths of cross national comparison are the virtues afforded by its theoretical orientation. Moving the thinking away from the individualism underlying conceptualisations in terms of both 'the consumer' and their 'behaviour', the authors emphasise the social in two, related ways. One is via theories of practice (following Reckwitz and Schatzki)—which has practices replacing the categories of 'the individual' and/or their behaviour as the unit of analysis. In addition, the authors' stress that their concern is not with the 'category *convenience food* but in the multiple ways that different kinds of food are made convenient, through the process of *conveniencization*' (p. 8 original emphasis). Thus, this second highlights social processes taking place over time. In other words, the authors propose replacing the notion of *convenience* used to describe a type of food with the idea of *convenient* food-related activities involved in everything from shopping, storing, preparation, cooking and eating through to disposal and clearing up.

Their theoretical and conceptual orientation allows the authors to develop an interesting, extended variety of ways of re-classifying the types of eating practices that are represented in their four cases. This they do in terms of styles of understanding and the way the arrangement is appreciated, together with considerations of time and place. Thus, the convenience of using a box is located at home, short-circuits the effort of planning and having to shop and still allows the timing to be flexible. Resort to eating in the works canteen admittedly means

foregoing a breadth of choice, but overall reduces the time needed to find a meal, with the work of serving and preparation undertaken by others together with the occasion's affording sociable eating with colleagues. Using a commercially manufactured pouch of organic fruit purée means that excursions from home become feasible even with an infant that needs frequent feeding to a timetable different from everyone else's, planning is made far easier and reduces the work of shopping never mind virtually completely removing the need to cook (as parents well know, many cafés etc. willingly provide hot water which may be all that is required for the preparation of a 9-month-old's meal out). As for serving ready-meals heated in a microwave oven, time is freed from more complicated shopping and cooking; it becomes easier to cater for different preferences among household members; and, overall, time is released for other, highly valued family activities.

Almost all books have limitations. This work suffers from what looks like haste. Two difficulties diminish its utility. First, there are surprising, major omissions in its recourse to the literature which risk skewing the histories and also elements of the analysis. The second concerns the writing. The whole needed that much more care in the final editing. Coordinating so many authors yet still ensuring individual voices come through is obviously important. But it does not preclude everyone contributing to sorting out unhelpful repetition, internal contradictions and recurrent oddities in grammar and syntax.

These difficulties do not detract from the book's being a good instance of a distinctive and important genre. For it strategically brings 'pure' social scientific theorising to bear on the way people disapprove of convenience foods as unhealthy, unsustainable and ill-advised with a view to reframing conventional views that permit replacing the negative—disapproval and 'moralising'—with the positive—informed understanding. Thus, invaluable, as the nine authors of this book write in their Preface, the work 'challenges received wisdom, taken-for-granted ideas and common sense assumptions' (p. v). Typically such assumptions prevail amongst those beyond the academy (e.g. policy makers, nutritionists, food safety experts, NGOS, public health practitioners) as well as beginning students and in disciplines other than those of the authors—the nine here are mostly human geographers and sociologists. Adopting such a focus represents a promising bridge between university-based pure research and the non-academic world, opening up the thinking; shifting the terms of debate; and, with luck, altering whatever policy efforts are made to effect change toward a more productive, realistic (and cost-effective) direction. This is to be applauded for it retains intellectual integrity while providing relevant evidence that supports educating non-academic attitudes about the matter, especially among those who are spending public funds.

So, located in this middle, strategic position, the study thus stands as an example of an orientation that other researchers would do well to emulate. The book will also be informative for policy makers and practitioners, and educative for students, enabling them to see the argument for reframing common sense assumptions—including some with which they themselves might have started their undergraduate studies.

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