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## Looking at Food Practices and Taste Across the Class Divide

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### Abstract

This editorial introduces a Special Issue on food practices and social inequality by outlining a dichotomous tendency in policy-related, academic and populist accounts of the relationship between food and class. The Special Issue aims to move our understanding beyond this dichotomous divide, which privileges either middle-class discerning taste or working-class necessity in understandings of the determinants of food practices. The papers call attention to the diverse, complex forms of critical creativity and cultural capital employed by individuals, families and communities across the spectrum of social stratification, in their attempts to acquire and prepare food that is both healthy and desirable. The papers report on research carried out in the United States, Canada, Mexico and Denmark, and cover diverse contexts, from the intense insecurity of food deserts to the relative security of social democratic states. Through quantitative and qualitative cross-class comparisons, and ethnographic accounts of low-income experiences and practices, the papers examine the ways in which food practices and preferences are inflected by social class (alone, and in combination with gender, ethnicity and urban/rural location). Thus, the Special Issue offers a debunking of the figure of the uncritical, uncultured low-income consumer. Calling for the development of a more nuanced, dynamic account of the tastes and cultural competences of socially-disadvantaged groups, the editorial concludes by underlining the simultaneous need for structural critiques of the gross inequalities in the degrees of freedom with which different individuals and groups engage in food practices.

### Keywords

Food practices; Food deserts; Low-income and working class; Social Class; Taste

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Sociological and historical scholars have long noted the complex interrelationship between food practices and social class. Research has demonstrated how social class (in combination with gender, race/ethnicity and age, among other factors) acts as a structural determinant shaping access to food, and especially to food that is healthy, appealing and desired. Class-related impediments to the ease and stability of such access include economically constrained food budgets, and disadvantaged residential locations that lack adequate public transportation and/or food supply systems. As a result, experiences of food insecurity become more likely for working-class and low-income families (e.g. Beagan et al 2010; Gross and Rosenberger 2010; Hamelin et al 2002; Lopez-Class and Hosler 2010). However, the

significance of class cannot be reduced to measures of economic capital or cost-benefit calculations. In contrast, social class is also understood as primary to the cultural context shaping food practices and preferences. The embodied collective habitus of social class gives rise to preferences, rituals and routines that bind food practices to identities, both individual and collective (Bourdieu 1984; Johnston et al 2011; Johnston et al 2012; Mennell 1985). Class thus shapes food practices through access to resources—not simply the resources of money and time to shop, prepare and eat in certain ways, but also the tastes or dispositions to do so in particular ways.

Nevertheless, these categories of classed resources—money and time; taste—tend to be treated separately, with the former often assumed to be a condition for the exercise of the latter. That is, there is a dichotomous tendency in policy and populist accounts related to food and class. On the one hand, when class-as-structure poses the least constraints, privilege is given to class-as-culture. Consider the media representations of middle class foodies (c.f. Johnston and Baumann 2010): with money and time as relatively secure resources, food practices are understood as expressions of omnivorous, cosmopolitan tastes and the quest for distinction and authenticity. On the other hand, when class-as-structure poses the most constraints (i.e. for the working class and poor), class-as-culture is given short shrift or, as Skeggs (2004) suggests, is constructed largely as lack. The tastes of the poor are framed as uncritical or vulgar, their practices overdetermined by insecure access to money and time. On this side of the divide, the celebrations of middle class foodies are replaced by moral panics about overweight individuals using social assistance benefits to stock cupboards full of junk food (e.g. Waterlow 2014).

The objective of the Special Issue is to offer a critical riposte to this dichotomous divide, by exploring the classed cultures of food practices across the spectrum of social stratification.<sup>i</sup> Eschewing assumptions about the tastes (or lack thereof) of low-income consumers, the papers share an attentiveness to the situatedness and complexity of food practices and preferences. As a collection, the papers leverage quantitative approaches to debunk taken-for-granted assumptions, and qualitative approaches to reveal the diverse and nuanced individual and collective negotiations of institutional, spatial and cultural impediments to achieving desired food outcomes. In doing so, the Special Issue contributes to an emerging body of research that foregrounds low-income consumers' creativity, criticality and taste (e.g. Alkon et al 2013; Bowen et al 2014; McClintock 2011).

Setting the scene for the Special Issue, Leonard Nevarez, Kathleen Tobin and Eve Waltermaurer map out four causal theories of food insecurity and the interventions associated with each. Of the four, their focus is the micro-level idealist position. Such a perspective underpins much policy and food justice activism, and proceeds from three assumptions regarding the nature and implications of stratified food consciousness: economically disadvantaged groups think differently about food (i.e. they have unhealthy or 'bad' tastes); their ideas about food lead to behaviour that compounds food insecurity (i.e. they prefer cheaper, more filling foods that tend to be less nutritious); and that what is required are educational remedies that teach poorer households to stretch their food budgets in healthier ways. Nevarez, Tobin and Waltermaurer subject these assumptions to investigation through a community food assessment survey of households in Poughkeepsie, New York, a city in which approximately a quarter of households are food insecure. Through

questions related to food acquisition, they probe stated preferences regarding store choice (e.g. stores that sell healthy foods) and food item choice (e.g. foods that stay fresh longer, are easier to prepare, are organic). Comparing responses from food secure and food insecure households, they do not find evidence to support the notion of stratified food consciousness. Particularly interesting is the lack of statistically significant difference between food secure and food insecure households with regard to preferences for stores selling healthy foods, and for organic foods. As they suggest with regard to their findings, food-insecure households are no more or less likely to express desires to 'do the right thing.'

The three papers that follow adopt a comparative, qualitative approach to explore continuities and differences across class groups. In doing so, the authors highlight the fallacy of the typical divide that privileges either middle class discerning taste or working class necessity as the determinants of food practices. Brenda Beagan, Gwen Chapman and Elaine Power draw from an interview-based study of low- and high-income Canadian households from seven different locations. Focusing on respondents' accounts of food practices and priorities and employing a Bourdieusian lens, they attempt to disentangle the possession of cultural capital (such as knowledge about healthy or ethical eating) from its exercise (e.g. healthy or ethical food practices). Their findings underscore the situated meanings and diversity of the forms of cultural capital that shape food practices. For example, while high- and low-income consumers might frequent multiple stores as a shopping practice, it is with different goals in mind (the pursuit of variety, or hunt for bargains). Strikingly, ideas of healthy and ethical eating appear to be widely shared across the class divide—echoing the findings from the preceding paper's comparison of healthy shopping preferences expressed by food secure and food insecure households in Poughkeepsie. The authors raise the provocative possibility that healthy and ethical eating may be losing their capacity to signal class distinction. While familiarity does not equate with cultural competence, there has clearly been an impact of the public discourse regarding healthy and ethical eating on the everyday food consciousness of respondents. Yet, evidence suggests that educational initiatives have both succeeded in disseminating ideas about healthy and ethical eating, and failed to accomplish intended ends (i.e. for the low income families, price usually trumped other preferences). As in the preceding paper, this emphasizes the inadequacy of the micro-level idealist position, but also raises the question of the ideological implications of a Bourdieusian taste of necessity to make contexts and choices appear as taken-for-granted dimension of everyday life. In contemporary contexts in which educational systems successfully transmit cultural capital in the form of norms regarding healthy and ethical food choices, does the taste for necessity still function as a mechanism of social reproduction?

Annemette Nielsen and Lotte Holm examine experiences of food budget constraints within a social context—the Danish welfare system—that ostensibly makes food access universally secure. They consider the food practices of low-, middle- and high-income Danish households that have had to reduce food spending in the previous year. Their findings—in keeping with those from the preceding Canadian study—suggest how the experience of restrictions to freedom of choice is inflected by class. Nielsen and Holm draw on Bauman's metaphors of the tourist and the vagabond as characterizations of the relative freedom with which individuals operate within the structural conditions of 'liquid' modernity (e.g. Bauman 1997). In analyzing their interview data, they discern two 'paths' through which restricted food budgets are experienced. On the one hand, a 'touristic' experience of food budget

management is relatively secure, involving creativity and control, and feelings of personal satisfaction in negotiating the constraints placed upon choice. On the other, a 'vagabondic' experience of the same constraints is more insecure, entailing feelings of uncertainty, compromise and a loss of pleasure. Nielsen and Holm find no direct correlation between economic resources and the relative security with which everyday food practices are performed and experienced: tourist/vagabond does not neatly align with middle class/working class. Rather, the likelihood of a more secure, touristic experience appears to be linked to the structural parameters of security, such as access to unemployment benefits and state-financed education.

Susan Bridle-Fitzpatrick provides a further comparative study of how class and taste shape food practices. Drawing on interviews, participant observation, and photo elicitation and card sorting exercises, she presents a rich, ethnographic account of differences between low-, middle- and high-income households in urban Mexico. The dietary surveys give a fascinating glimpse into how food operates as a medium for the reproduction of class and ethnic habitus. The tortilla, for example, demonstrates the intertwined continuities and differences of class groups: they are regularly consumed by all of the respondent families, but in markedly different numbers and at different times and intervals. Similarly to findings from Beagan, Chapman and Power, and Chen below, the interview data indicate a general dissemination of ideas about healthy eating, suggesting continuity across class groups. Nevertheless, the accuracy of these ideas was uneven, as was their translation into practices and aspirations. This is vividly illustrated in relation to fruits and vegetables, which are universally understood as 'healthy' but deemed less desirable by the lower-income respondents. With a focus on distinguishing between food practices, preferences and aspirations, Bridle-Fitzpatrick explores the relative overlap of foods perceived as healthy, with those most liked and those most often consumed. Middle class families have the greatest agreement between most-liked and most-eaten, suggestive of Bourdieu's taste of luxury (1984), which rests on freedom from economic necessity. Low-income families have the greatest overlap between least-liked and most often consumed foods, and least overlap between most-liked and most often consumed foods. Bridle-Fitzpatrick's data suggest multiple tensions between preferences and practices. For her low-income respondents, boredom and overfamiliarity may prevent a virtue being made of what is possible (as is the case with beans), whereas lack of familiarity may prevent what is deemed healthy from also being considered desirable, as in the case of fresh fruit and raw vegetables.

The final three papers share a focus on the United States, using qualitative methods to examine low-income consumers' food practices. Wesley Dean, Joseph Sharkey and Cassandra Johnson focus on the food acquisition experiences of rural Texans. As they note, food insecurity is a widely-distributed social problem, but the structural conditions of rural food environments pose specific types of hardships, enabling and constraining agency in particular ways. In this, their approach is informed by structuration theory (Giddens 1984). Through focus groups with white non-Hispanic, African American and Mexican-origin Texans, they explore how coping strategies and resources are adapted to work within the possibilities of structure, and the extent to which creative agency can transform structural conditions. Of note is the diversity and inventiveness of food acquisition strategies and resources deployed by respondents, many of which resonate with findings across the other papers in the Special Issue. These include cooperative approaches among families and

friends, laborious collection of vouchers and coupons, detailed knowledge of the retail environment and bargain hunting, and complex logistical strategies related to transportation. In addition, and highlighting the specifically rural setting of their study, Dean, Sharkey and Johnson's respondents also accomplish food acquisition through foraging and hunting: strategies made possible through the possession of specialized forms of knowledge and material resources (which would be immediately recognizable as forms of legitimate cultural capital if the practitioners were foodies).

Wei-ting Chen's paper examines the food provisioning practices of low-income mothers in Boston, Chicago, San Antonio and Baltimore. Drawing on interviews and field observations, Chen focuses on how the mothers approach family food provisioning, which is located at the intersection of expert advice about healthy eating, cultural norms related to being a good mother, and structural constraints associated with food assistance programs and food budgets. Her findings underline the deeply social meanings of food and food practices. The mothers demonstrate knowledge of the 'eating right' discourse, which manifests in nutritional monitoring of their children's diets and distancing from 'junk' food when describing provisioning practices. Yet, the categorization of foods reflects the specificities of context: through a number of poignant vignettes, Chen illustrates how unhealthy food is reframed as acceptable when economic constraints are intensified, or as a 'treat' that allows the mothers to show care and provide an experience of a 'normal,' food-secure childhood.

Finally, Rosalie Rodriguez and Kamini Maraj Grahame return the focus to a rural context. Combining questionnaire and interview data from low-income individuals in rural Pennsylvania, they employ an ecological perspective to grasp the micro, meso and macro level systems and factors shaping food deserts and how the poor interact with and within them. Participant-defined barriers to food access include cost, transportation, access to social services, and education and information, which the authors discuss in relation to individual and family, community and government level dynamics. To Nevarez, Tobin and Waltermaurer's critical debunking of the uncritical, uncultured low income consumer, which underpins much policy and activism, Rodriguez and Grahame supply a fitting bookend to the Special Issue. Their article provides a consolidation of conceptualizations of food deserts and highlights—through their open-ended approach to how individuals actually experience such settings—that policy approaches must take into account the diversity of factors (micro, meso, macro) if they hope to ameliorate the 'wicked problems' of food deserts (Brinkley 2013).

In closing, recall the dichotomous divide with which I began. This collection of papers offers a compelling antidote to the lack of attention and credence afforded to the informed creativity and cultural capital of low-income consumers' food practices. The authors identify a multiplicity of strategies by which individuals, families and communities respond to constraints on food access, from the use of flyers and vouchers to find bargains, to trip-chaining and carpooling to source from multiple stores, to knowledge of discounting practices in the local retail environment and cooking practices to stretch foods. These findings confirm those of previous studies regarding the particular challenges facing low-income food consumers (e.g. Gross and Rosenberger 2010; Runnels et al 2011). What is distinctive, however, is that the Special Issue authors have foregrounded considerations of taste, preference and desire. As such, these strategies are understood not as inevitable (and

thus uncritical) coping strategies of the economically disadvantaged, but as distinctive forms of cultural competence and expertise. While comparisons might be drawn with middle class practices (such as the love of finding a bargain, the quest for authenticity in foraging, or the use of multiple stores to satisfy household wants and needs), the authors do not treat these forms of cultural capital as a sign of bad culture or bad taste (Skeggs 2004: 91), but as legitimate and productive resources.

Rather than reducing working class taste to simply liking what is affordable and readily accessible, the Special Issue papers thus suggest a revisiting of Bourdieu's (1984) conceptualization of working class habitus and taste, and the notion of a 'taste of necessity.' There is a need to develop a more nuanced, dynamic account of the tastes of low-income and economically marginal groups. In part, this is a call to move away from assumptions that working class tastes are (only) functional, in terms of privileging the instrumental satisfaction of wants, and the ideological reproduction of social systems. It is an invitation to consider the radical, transformative possibilities of taste and aesthetics (Tanke 2011). Nevertheless, the forms of cultural competence and expertise that are in evidence in the papers in the Special Issue emerge from conditions of existence that require critique and demand structural change (Guthman 2007). To understand them as affirmative forms of culture and taste must not be decoupled from the recognition and critique of—and search for alternatives to—the gross inequalities in individuals' and groups' material life chances and relative capacities to engage in food practices in ways and means of their choosing.

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