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David Evans

Food Waste: Home Consumption, Material Culture and Everyday Life

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Clearing away the detritus of my Christmas dinner, I took great pains to ensure that any leftovers were put to one side, placed in Tupperware pots and stored in my fridge or freezer for later consumption. Yet, the old vegetables ended up in the food waste bin after a few days and my husband refused to eat the soup made from the surplus. In a thoroughly engaging read, *Food Waste: Home Consumption, Material Culture and Everyday Life* offers theoretical and empirical insights into ‘the processes through which stuff that is ‘food’ becomes stuff that is waste’ (p. 11). Based on ethnographic research conducted over an eight-month period with residents of two ‘ordinary’ streets in Manchester, Evans goes ‘behind closed doors’ to challenge those dominant discourses that persistently blame the consumer and individual choice/profligacy for the large volumes of food waste generated within society. Instead, he deploys a practice-based approach to highlight how a range of inter-related factors – including cultural expectations surrounding the preparation of ‘proper food’, systems of food provisioning that only make food available in certain quantities, changes in working practices and infrastructural and technological innovation – together help to explain why people routinely purchase more food than they immediately require.

Social science has been slow to pay attention to disposal (with consumption taking centre stage) and therefore Evans’ book contributes to the burgeoning ‘waste studies’ literature (Gregson et al, 2007; O’Brien, 2008), breaking new ground with its focus on food waste. The key strength of Evans’ book is his exploration of the way his respondents negotiate the normative expectations surrounding how they ought to cook (healthy, fresh food, from scratch, with lots of ingredients), with the ‘twin moralities of thrift and hygiene’ (p.49). The imperative for freshness and variety guided households’ provisioning, yet food emerges as ‘a particular genre of material culture’, whose properties of rapid decay or spoilage mean that it frequently slips from the category of surplus to excess (p.66). This slippage is facilitated by the Tupperware containers, tin-foil and fridges marketed as objects of food preservation that conversely

‘operate as coffins of decay’ (p.69). Consumers manage their anxieties surrounding excess through a strategy of ‘forgetting’ placing it into, what Evans terms, ‘the gap’, and from here anxieties around hygiene and health, in parallel with the aforementioned normative ideal to cook fresh, will often result in its disposal via the bin (just like my leftover Christmas dinner).

Evans book provides a refreshingly non-judgemental exploration of the practices that lead consumers to waste food, contrasting starkly with those rational models of ‘the consumer’ that promote more information as the key tool for behavioural change. It is in response to this fixation with the individual consumer that Evans locates his study at the ‘end of pipe’ (p.13). Whilst I am sympathetic to this position, I did feel that the study could have engaged more with the wider political and cultural economy of waste, for example; how do the systems for managing waste, including their public/private provision, shape and interact with people’s everyday handling of food waste? Do his findings hold true in a different system of provision, such as Taiwan, where cooking from scratch is less common or culturally valued (Glucksmann, 2014)? And how do the interactions and interdependencies between the political economy of waste, cultural conventions around food preparation and its consumption, as well as people’s everyday reflections and moralities shape the dynamics of food wasting practices? Without addressing such questions, there is a danger of rehearsing the familiar, and as Evans agrees, problematic narrative that places the individual consumer at the heart of interventions to promote social change.

Such criticisms should not detract from what is a highly accessible, thought-provoking and concise work, that offers a conceptual framework that will no doubt organize and position future studies of household food waste. At just over 100 pages long, this book packs a lot in and is sure to become essential reading for academics, students and policy makers alike.

References

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