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## Evans D., 2014, *Food Waste: Home Consumption, Material Culture and Everyday Life*, London: Bloomsbury, 119 p

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*Food waste* is a short, lively, and very stimulating book. The author sets out to investigate “how and why households end up wasting food that they have purchased for consumption” (p. xi), claiming that he “do[es] not accept explanations (worse still, assumptions) that reduce the problem to a matter of individual consumer behaviour and/or an anomalously profligate culture” (p. xv). With this as his goal, he bases his research on the most recent theoretical advances regarding waste, consumption practices and material culture in social sciences.

In chapters 1 and 2, the author presents his theoretical framework. After summarising how food waste has been envisaged in policies and research into waste reduction, he presents radically different views on waste, consumer behaviour and the dynamics of food waste generation. Firstly, waste is approached using analyses of the social life of things developed by Appadurai (1986): it is not an intrinsic characteristic of things, but rather a status that some social actions attribute to things in specific situations, over what can be considered as the biography of things. Secondly, he rejects “the assumption that ‘consumer behaviour’ is something that can be rationally guided and that interventions will unproblematically produce the desired outcome” (p. 17). On the contrary, referring to the theories of practice, he conceives of waste as “embedded within prevailing organisation of practices which in turn relate to the collective development of what people take to be ‘normal’ ways of life” (p. 19). In other words, food waste cannot be understood without situating it within the practices, meanings and infrastructures of food provisioning, food preparation, household temporal and collective organisation and waste

management. Lastly, taking stock of methodological and theoretical developments in studies of material culture and everyday life, he conducts ethnographic fieldwork so as to “focus on the very literal movements of food—following it from the supermarket, to the home, to the saucepan, back to the fridge and eventually, to the bin [—and] on the ways in which food moves between categories and evaluations—from raw ingredients, to a cooked meal, to leftovers, to ‘past its best’ and eventually, to waste” (p. 23). He spent 8 months “hanging out” and “going along” (p. 23) with his respondents, following them during grocery shopping, talking with them while they were rummaging and reordering their fridge, chatting during daily activities such as cooking or cleaning. His study included 30 households living in two streets in Manchester. He chose these streets for their heterogeneity in terms of residents’ socioeconomic status and housing status. He adds that this book will not address the differentiations of food waste practices, but instead aims at an overall anthropological picture of the process of food waste.

Based on these theoretical and methodological considerations, he describes his research as trying to understand how things move from the category of “food” purchased to be eaten to the category of “waste”. His research led him to add intermediate categories. The remainder of the book is organised around these categories that mark the process of “food” becoming “waste”.

Chapters 3 and 4 demonstrate that households regularly purchase more food than they can eat between two shopping trips for a variety of reasons that have nothing to do with lack of skill, planning or concern. On the contrary, “grocery shopping needs to be understood in relation to household routines, shared understandings and definitions of proper food, and the ways in which supermarkets make food available. Furthermore, it is the intersection of these factors that begins to explain how and why households purchase more food than

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is required” (p. 37). For example, he shows that households have contradictory yet totally justified concerns with regard to food such as treating their relatives, serving healthy foods, varying the menus, maintaining hygiene and managing time. He also highlights the anxieties that arise from this *surplus* food: anxieties about not wasting food as well as about health and hygiene. The study participants, he points out, seldom conceived of surplus food as an environmental issue, but rather as “a material reminder that something has gone wrong (or at least not according to plan) *vis-à-vis* the efficient management of household resources” (p. 49).

In chapter 5, Evans introduces the notion of a “gap in disposal”. He borrows this concept from research on how people dispose of *surplus* objects (e.g. clothes or shoes): the research highlights the fact that disposing of *surplus* things covers a wide array of practices (gifts, second-hand sales, re-using, recycling and of course discarding). Moreover, this is a process that takes some time, so that the value of the *surplus* thing can be settled. Meanwhile, people often store the things in different places, usually out of sight (box under the bed, garage, etc.). Similarly, Evans claims, food that enters the “surplus” category (typically after food preparation or after a meal) is placed in specific places (e.g., in plastic boxes, in the fridge). At the same time, it enters the “gap in disposal” where its value is not fixed: it is not yet waste, but is no longer needed. Evans illustrates with detailed examples how food-stuffs that are *surplus* are further moved around: a study participant has some parsley remaining after cooking a dish that did not require the whole packet (*surplus*). She stores it in the fridge, the next day she places in an airtight container, a few days later she considers giving it to a client who wants to try the same recipe, but dismisses the idea as “odd”. The parsley stays one more week in the fridge and the participant esteems that it is too old and decides to “let it go” (p. 57). In other cases, *surplus* food came out of the “gap” to become food again and was eaten.

In chapter 6, Evans adds another stage between the “gap in disposal” and “waste”: that of “excess”. The distinction between *surplus* and excess is borrowed from Bataille (1985) and Gregson (2007). The value of *surplus* is still ambivalent, since it is not needed but may be used. Excess things are perceived as without value or “worn out”. Getting rid of them appears to be the best course of conduct. Getting rid of food consists, most of the time, in putting it in the bin, which usually leads to the waste stream. At first, I was not convinced by this notion of “excess” food: why use another concept when the category of “non-food” (not edible) was already used in the book and was apparently very close in meaning and probably clearer to many readers? If I understand correctly, this distinction is crucial to Evans’ argument. It allows him to link his analysis of food waste to a more general analysis of the process of how we dispose of things: “excess” is the general category of the things we no longer want, those in which we

perceive no value. In the case of food, this means that food has become “non-food” in our eyes. When food is rotten or mouldy *etc.*, its “non-food status” is obvious, but this more general framework allows Evans to discuss this evidence. At the empirical level, he describes other situations in which food becomes excess without being altered. For example, a participant returns from shopping with a head of broccoli, opens the fridge and throws away the half-head of broccoli that was already there: the arrival of the new broccoli causes the existing one to move to the “excess” category. On the other hand, some participants scratched the mould from a block of cheese and ate the untouched parts: biological alteration does not automatically turn food into non-food. At the theoretical level, he proposes to see food itself “as a relevant actant in shaping its own passage to becoming waste” (p. 67): “the generation of food waste cannot be understood solely as a consequence of human activity insofar as all manner of biota and microbes play an active role in facilitating the slip from *surplus* to excess, from food to non-food”. In other words, both human activity and biological alterations contribute to turning food into something we want to get rid of. The next chapters examine precisely how we get rid of food, and the consequences for the foods.

In almost all cases, food that households have come to consider as excess is thrown in the bin and then joins the waste stream. However, on some occasions this is not what happens. Chapters 7 and 8 examine all the different ways the study participants disposed of the food they saw as excess, asking why so much food ends up in the waste stream rather than the other options. Evans shows that while public waste management functions well, recycling bins have not yet become embedded in British households’ routine and materiality. He highlights food’s “potential to stand for something else: bad household management, material representation of domestic relationships and identities” (p. 78). Thus, offering food is fraught with anxieties about what this gift could reveal about the household (social *status*, tastes, etc.). These anxieties hinder gifts of food, whether leftovers or good, untouched food. Lastly, composting reveals other instabilities and inconsistencies: it is not impossible to make compost out of food waste in a British city, but like the other alternatives to the bin, it lacks the degree of institutionalisation, normativity and material organisation that would make it stable and accessible to most households. Evans concludes that “bins and associated waste management systems are very good at getting rid of *surplus* and excess matter” (p. 69), whereas none of the alternative options “operate consistently to effectively dispose of *surplus* and excess, less still to disrupt the transformation of ‘food’ into ‘waste’” (p. 75).

In his conclusion, Evans summarises his theoretical framework, makes some remarks about anxiety and provides some perspectives on food waste reduction policies. He stresses that ‘waste’ is not something to be disposed of; it is a consequence

of how something is disposed of” through “a number of movements and steps that need to be understood” (p. 90). The figures in the conclusion show that he has extended and complexified the route from “food” to “waste” by adding intermediate steps: from food to *surplus* and back, from *surplus* to the “gap in disposal”, from there to “excess”, then to “bin” and only then, if not recycled, to “waste”. Evans returns to his first question—why do people waste food? He underlines that “when households put food in the bin, it has very little to do with their attitudes and orientations towards waste or the environment” (p. 95). Instead, he gives two reasons. Firstly, people purchase more food than they need because their food practices pursue a variety of contradictory goals such as hygiene, healthiness, variety, care for the family, compatibility with household schedules, *etc.* Secondly, binning *surplus* or excess food has become the normal thing to do in the UK, partly because waste management systems in the UK function incomparably better than alternative ways of disposing of this *surplus*, and partly because these alternatives (re-using, giving, composting) conflict with shared understandings about food and waste. Evans then turns to the consequences of his analysis for waste reduction policies. Improving food waste recycling might divert from designing more ambitious policies to counter the tendency to overprovision food. He calls for ambitious, long-term and comprehensive programmes that would address the various dimensions of food waste, from retail infrastructures and packaging to shared understandings of proper food or the temporal and spatial organisation of work and eating.

After reading this book, one can no longer cling to the idea that food waste is due to people being irrational, disorganised, unskilled or profligate in their food practices. The strength of this book lies in its empirical and theoretical choices, but there are also some drawbacks. Firstly, the theories of practice allow Evans to move away from the study of food waste *by* households to food waste *in* households, showing how it is determined by the material characteristics and institutional settings that extend far beyond the home, from the retail sector to leisure practices and shared understandings of caring for the family. They are also inspirational when Evans takes up the

challenge of opening up perspectives for waste reduction policies. The drawback, however, is that the question of who in the household does what in the food waste process is totally sidestepped. Typically, Evans deliberately avoids discussing gender and food waste. Secondly, situating food waste in the broader anthropological research on things and waste connects food waste to more general processes of getting rid of things in Western societies. Thus, the specificity of food as compared to other things: the fact that it is organic and susceptible to rapid decay, is located in the process of waste. Evans sees it not as an objective reason for getting rid of things, but as an “actant” that plays a role in the process—turning edible *surplus* into something non-edible that we can legitimately put to the bin. However, perhaps because I am a sociologist rather than an anthropologist, I was not totally convinced that the notions of excess and the “gap in disposal” apply to all cases of household food waste in the Western context. Explaining this complex theoretical framework in more depth would have made the book a little longer, but it might have erased my doubts. Last but not least, the ethnographic methodology used in the book is very rich. From this point of view, food waste is an excellent example of recent research practices in the field of consumption and everyday lives. I would have welcomed a little more information on the households’ and neighbourhood’s social and material characteristics. This would have helped non-British scholars to compare their current or future research results with Evans’ conclusions—having read this book, one is eager to explore how different national contexts shape households’ food waste.

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