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Jackson P., 2015, *Anxious Appetites: Food and Consumer Culture*

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Although the intensification of agriculture and the perceived distance between producers and consumers give rise to many anxieties, the requirement to eat cannot be dispensed with and the vast majority of consumers have to rely on ‘modern’ modes of food provisioning. In *Anxious Appetites*, Peter Jackson argues that it is the routinised nature of practices which enables consumers not to panic on a daily basis when they eat what they eat and while the media report on avian influenza, BSE, melamine in infant formulas, horsemeat in lasagne, or pork residues in halal meat.

To underpin his point, Jackson draws on a diverse range of social scientific research areas and yet maintains a consistent theoretical thread throughout the book. While his training in human geography and social anthropology explains both his attentiveness for the spatio-temporal dimensions of social processes and his reliance on ethnographic methodologies, he adopts a practice theoretical approach from sociology to examine the relation between anxieties and everyday routines in the context of food. At the heart of his book is an agenda of ‘following the tracks and traces of contemporary food anxieties’ (p. 42). His perspective presents an alternative to policy perspectives that position consumer’s anxieties as something to be dissolved at the individual level, for example, by teaching them how to behave in accordance with expert advice on food safety and how to cook ‘properly’ rather than relying on convenience food or raising awareness about how they can make healthier or more sustainable food ‘choices’. Rather than treating anxiety as an ‘internal condition of human beings’ (p. 42) and therefore ‘probing the causes of individual pathologies’ (p. 38), Jackson seeks (and asks policy makers to follow suit) ‘to understand *changing patterns of anxiety within society and space*’ (ibid., italics original) on a collective level.

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Before he gets at this, chapter 2 provides a critique of survey data which may indeed provide insights on an aggregate, collective level. Yet, from Jackson's perspective, they cannot sufficiently account for the relation between consumer's anxieties and social practices. Eurobarometer surveys, based on samples of thousands of citizens from most EU member states, report high levels of consumer anxiety about food safety, quality, and security. Interestingly, these survey results are discrepant with the relatively low levels of anxiety that Jackson and his colleagues have observed in their own investigations based on ethnographic interviews and observations of people's everyday food practices. With this paradox in mind, Jackson challenges the epistemological presumption that survey data, using closed rather than open questions, could reflect consumer's anxieties without shaping the answers. Rather than measuring *actual* levels of anxiety, Jackson suggest, by a way of rejoinder, that they might 'be interpreted to [merely] reflect variations in *public discourse* about food across Europe' (p.31, italics original)—his own intent rather lies in understanding consumer behaviour *in practice*.

In a need of an explanation why his research participants expressed lower degrees of anxiety about food, chapter 3 is dedicated to the outline of a theory that regards anxiety as a social condition in which incidents or 'scandals' are seen to disrupt people's everyday lives until new routines and conventions are firmly established that enable people to go on with their lives on lower levels of anxiety. In the subsequent chapters, this framework is applied to a range of cases with the aim to follow and analyse people's food anxieties 'in terms of their life-cycle, social context, and political geographies' (p. 48). Jackson makes very clear that anxiety is not necessarily a societal curse to get rid of because it can also be seen as an essentially human condition that we need to relate our daily doings and sayings creatively to the world. While there is little doubt that anxiety disrupts everyday life, for him, reverting to Kierkegaard and Heidegger, the crucial question is whether consumers try to maintain their daily routines or do they allow their anxiety to be constructive, to educate them by opening up new possibilities and alternatives to become routinised?

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 are about the effects of an intensified agriculture and long supply chains on the occurrence of food anxieties. Distanced from production, many consumers have become increasingly squeamish about touching raw meat which, in analytic terms, shows that notions of proximity, distance, connection, and disconnection can be helpful tools to examine anxieties (this terminology is explored more detailed in Jackson et al. 2009). Although the fraudulent contamination of burgers, lasagne, and other ready-made meals with horsemeat in 2013 was not a direct threat to people's lives, it resulted in a disruption of consumer's trust in food suppliers, raised questions about (too) long and obscure supply chains, and exposed the pitfalls of the UK Government's tendency to allow supermarkets to regulate themselves. In another geographical location, the lax standards of regulation led to the death and injury of babies as well as the execution of managers held liable for the contamination of infant formulas with melamine in China in 2008. While both cases, horsemeat and infant formulas, might be interpreted as caused by profit-driven individuals, Jackson illustrates the complex social environment of these incidents, e.g. the labour market pressing mothers not to breastfeed, as well as the discourses of science, medicalization, and nature which dairy companies use to promote their infant formulas.

In chapter 7, the example of celebrity chef Jamie Oliver illustrates how a well-meant attempt to contain the rise of 'convenience' food resulted in shame and anger among

the residents of Rotherham whom the media associated stereotypically with poverty and ‘bad eating habits’. The case demonstrates interdependencies between food-related anxieties and anxieties about gender and class. Chapters 8 and 9 of all the chapters provide the most demonstrative application of the theoretical considerations outlined in chapter 3. Interviews and observations in households raise a couple of anxieties, for example about cooking hygiene and use-by dates, buttressing Jackson’s thesis that consumers are confronted with conflicting practical and ethical demands which ‘are negotiated into practice to the point where consumers are able to carry on their mundane activities’ (p. 186). Challenging the generalised assumptions that younger generations are increasingly careless, having deficits in skills of food preparation, and being thoughtless or unembarrassed to waste food, he argues that complex social issues, including a range of everyday practices, lead, often against individuals’ genuine intention, to consumers falling back to ‘convenience food’ or food being wasted. In the conclusion (chapter 10), Jackson puts his theoretical approach and the variety of ethnographic evidence presented in the book in relation to broader considerations about political economies, moral economies, and responsibility. For a better understanding of the social (rather than individual) forces that shape consumer’s food practices and anxieties, Jackson suggests further investigations considering both ethnographic observations of consumer practices and ‘critical analysis of reported behaviour from aggregate sources’ (p. 194).

Jackson’s scrutiny and enthusiasm for epistemological and methodological considerations throughout the book, the different geographical contexts (EU, UK, China), and the variety of anxieties (from deadly threats to mere aversions) addressed in his work, might—hopefully—encourage more academics to explore the multiple social dimensions of food and anxiety. *Anxious Appetites* is a book that brings together empirical evidence from several social scientific research projects conducted by the author and his colleagues in the course of about a decade.

For identifying and evaluating Jackson’s aim and perseverance, it is quite illustrative to have a look at the headings of both his first and last chapter; he starts with ‘The roots of contemporary food anxieties’ and ends with ‘The routes of contemporary food anxieties’. While, intuitively, it may appear as a social scientific preference to empirically examine the roots of the phenomenon, from Jackson’s practice theoretical research lens, it is precisely by observing the *routes* of contemporary anxieties and their embeddedness in daily practices that reveals something about their *roots*—the journey is the reward. Jackson sets out to follow anxieties’ tracks and traces taking the sociological literature on consumption and theories of practice (Warde 2005) as a basis, and although he does not explicitly cite this strand of literature, he also appears to merge it creatively with the follow-the-thing-approaches known from human geographers (e.g. Cook 2004). Following horsemeat and melamine in infant formulas into people’s homes, he provides a vivid alternative to surveys measuring anxiety with questionnaires. How often as a participant in a survey did I find myself dissatisfied with the rigid options confining my answer to some default account of a question I was genuinely excited about? Indeed, I would have liked a patient ethnographer allowing me to explore the problem in an adequate degree of complexity. *Anxious Appetites* does a good job in illustrating why social scientific researchers as well as policy makers should better rely on a variety of approaches, if they seek valid and just judgments on something as complex as a society which is continuously performing life (and death).

On the downside, this book also demonstrates how difficult it is to produce a clear-cut position—contributing to policies, for example—when the scale ranges from the micro-level (somebody using gloves to cut raw chicken) to macro-perspectives (labour market forces pressuring mothers to use infant formulas rather than breastfeeding). The book's most obvious statement, which is that one should look at the social conditions rather than individuals, is plausible, but also slightly vague.

Jackson claims that his participant's 'experience can be used to *challenge generalized claims* about the intergenerational transmission of cooking skills which position an earlier generation as universally superior to the current generation' (p. 153, italics mine). As much as I endorse challenging generalised claims, I think that more attention should be paid to which *specific* generalised claims are worth challenging. Even after reading this book and agreeing with Jackson that things are more complicated in practice, I still think it valid to regard the average contemporary diet in the oh-so-developed world as overly geared to 'convenience' which, indeed, is in most cases equivalent to eating unhealthy food. Addressing this issue, Jackson mentions the apparent contradiction that we live in an age of high levels of reported anxiety, although some scholars or experts claim that today's food would be safer than ever (p. 183); he also cites the UK Food Standards Agency stating that only 500 people die each year of food-borne illnesses, whereas traffic accidents led to over 1750 deaths (p. 194). If this, for some, is an argument for declaring a golden era of food safety, I wonder why Jackson misses out the chance to dismantle by social scientific means the narrow definition of 'food safety' which obscures the fact that millions of citizens in the UK live with (and die from) type-2 diabetes which is connected to a high intake of the basic ingredients of what is *generally* known as 'convenience food'—sugar, white flour, and animal protein. Diabetes, I would argue, is not acknowledged as a 'food-borne illness' in food safety discourses only because one does not die of it instantly.

Overall, I enjoyed reading *Anxious Appetites*, and its value and distinctiveness lie in staying authentic and close to the anxieties reported by consumers themselves (or deduced from participant observation). But precisely the focus on consumer's self-reported anxieties raises follow-up questions that remain absent or are very latently expressed in the ethnographic as well as the survey data. What about the phenomena consumers, producers, and policy makers are not or hardly anxious about, while social or natural scientific evidence suggests that they should better be? Personally, and as a researcher, I am not so much afraid of chicken because of salmonella or anything that fits into the narrow, individualised framing of food safety; I am anxious about chicken because—socially—it is not safe to trigger climate change and to use land, water, and pesticides excessively. If Kierkegaard 'saw anxiety as a spur to creativity' (p. 42), should not academics be more self-confident that they can actually help to negotiate anxieties into improved practices? The relatively short section where Jackson writes about the locus of responsibility (p. 192–194) creates an appetite for more. Borrowing from his theory and giving it a decidedly normative touch, I think that academics should dare to disrupt more vigorously the everyday practices of policy makers, producers, and consumers by bringing up persistently the *absent* anxieties that nonetheless matter (in the sense of physical matter) for the conditions of their social and environmental existence, and which should matter (in the sense of meaning) pending the establishment of new and, for a change, sustainable everyday practices.

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