

Towards a historical sociology of associations and dissociations between food, food events and alcoholic drinks: A reply to Warde et al.

Nordic Studies on Alcohol and Drugs

2023, Vol. 40(3) 319–322

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DOI: 10.1177/14550725231165646

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Abstract

This commentary reflects on the strengths of the paper by Warde et al. entitled “Situated drinking: the association between eating and alcohol consumption in Great Britain”. It suggests that practice-theoretical approaches towards studying contemporary connections between foods, food events and alcoholic drinks provides an excellent basis for overcoming the analytical limits of fields such as food studies, drinks studies, alcohol studies and related areas. This is especially so if Warde et al.’s quantitative methodology were to be yoked to two further sources of inspiration, namely Mary Douglas’s structuralist analysis of food combinations within food events and Stephen Mennell’s utilisation of the concepts and concerns of Norbert Elias to produce a systematic historical sociology of food. An extended inter-paradigmatic approach to the study of how alcoholic drinks relate to foods and eating practices emerges as a result.

Keywords

alcohol, drinks, food, sociology, Great Britain, social theory, historical sociology

Warde et al.’s (2023) highly detailed and informative paper both indicates and rectifies a series of interlocking and long-standing problems in the academic division of labour. These challenges result from how over decades specialisms have been institutionalised in the university sector

Submitted 2 February 2023; accepted 9 March 2023

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across high-income countries generally, including the UK, the national focus of the paper.

In the first instance, the sociology of food, which has been developing in the UK and other countries since the late 1970s, rarely deals with drinks, alcoholic or non-alcoholic, in any systematic manner. Instead, that field tends to understand the term “food” in a way that associates it mostly with solid comestibles and not with beverages. Meanwhile, the interdisciplinary field of drinks studies by and large only concentrates on beverages, especially alcoholic ones, and gives very little attention to the foods that beverages may be consumed alongside or in relation to. In a third field, alcohol studies, the alcoholic component of alcoholic drinks is, naturally enough, focused on highlighting the personal and societal problems associated with (over-)consumption of alcoholic drinks, and underplaying other facets of the drinking of alcohol, notably its aesthetic and socially productive qualities. At the same time, the sociology of culture tends to regard foods and drinks as indices of wider sociological factors, such as class stratification being expressed in, and reproduced through, the consumption of eatable and drinkable things.

Considering all these particular analytical foci together, a remarkable fact emerges: a lot of important phenomena to do with food and drinks fall through the gaps between scholarly fields. Moreover, the multiple relationships between comestibles and beverages, especially but not only alcoholic ones, are too often ignored. Each side of the equation is too often operationalised in abstract and self-enclosed manners that cannot grasp the multiple empirical connections and relations between drinks, foods and food events that exist in particular social contexts, with such contexts being shaped by manifold social factors such as class, gender, age, ethnicity and so on.

The paper by Warde et al. therefore fills an important series of absences in terms of how we may understand how food situations and drinking activities intersect with each other. The use of practice-theoretical terms to

understand such matters is advantageous in at least two major ways.

First, it allows for a focus on mundane situations, uncovering through numerical means how otherwise unremarked scenarios – home dinners, pub visits, outings to restaurants – are patterned in terms of how food shapes drinking, and how in turn that such patterns themselves vary with and are shaped by a range of social factors.

Second, and perhaps more foundationally, the spirit of the work reported is such that it seems to derive more from the concerns of practice theory, and less from the usual concerns of the scholarly fields indicated above. Practice theory is about modelling empirical actions as these exist in everyday life, and so it is not driven by the strong assumptions as to what is or is not relevant to the analysis that are constitutive of the fields indicated above. The productivity of a practice theory approach to understanding hitherto understudied connections, whether between food events and drinks, or between any other sorts of events and goods, has thereby been amply demonstrated. The paper raises issues as to what other specific phenomena concerning alcoholic drinks that practice-theoretical orientations could productively be applied to.

A practice theory analysis of particular types of alcohols – such as wine, beer or spirits – would be a valuable way of extending the analytical purchase of drinks and alcohol studies in the future. For example, in a recent attempt to set out the analytical parameters of a sociology of wine (Inglis, 2021), I now come to realise that I underplayed the role that practice theory could play in creating a systematically sociological appreciation of that particular kind of alcohol, considered in its multiple dimensions, especially with regard to its aesthetic elements and its capacities to create positive forms of convivial sociality, in addition to its more negative tendencies towards stimulating dysfunctional forms of drunkenness, which is the major role it plays as far as mainstream alcohol studies is concerned. This

potential application of practice theory makes me wonder how one might come to better understand the various inter-relations that wine enjoys with different types and social scenarios of food, both today and in the past. How and for which reasons wine seems to some people either completely indissociable from certain sorts of dining events, or conversely a total irrelevance to such events, is a particularly interesting question to pursue, both in contemporary societies and historically.

I do not need to repeat the nature of the empirical findings that the paper set out. Instead, I will comment on the general theme of understanding connections and interplays that it emphasises. Two suggestions come to my mind as to how further analysis could be done on the food / food events / (alcoholic) drinks interface.

First, the paper cites some classic work by Mary Douglas (1972, also Douglas & Nicod, 1974), a theoretical anthropologist who was highly attuned to both the symbolism attached to food stuffs and to the “constructive” affordances – rather than simply destructive ones – of the consumption of alcoholic drinks. It is a little too easy to dismiss Douglas’s structuralist form of analysis as being wholly outdated. A recent re-reading of that work revealed to me a deeply insightful account of how particular meal scenarios – occurring at specific times of day, as enacted in particular class-based contexts – always involve complex and subtle conjunctions of specific types of food, prepared in certain sorts of ways, together with certain sorts of drinks. Douglas’s writing on such matters affords a still viable way of looking at food, food events and drinks connections in qualitative and analytical detail, which could be made to run in parallel to and complement the numerical methodology deployed by Warde et al. Moreover, Warde et al. also gesture towards comparing what Douglas found about food events/drinks connections in early 1970s Britain with what scholars of such matters can find today. This is a valuable exercise in itself,

and the specific changes as well as continuities that could be found as a result of such a comparison would be of interest to scholars beyond those studying such issues in the UK.

Second, the issue of how and why food/drinks interfaces change over time, especially over longer periods of time, points towards how practice-theoretical analyses of such matters might inform, and in turn be informed by, historical sociology in general, and existing approaches to food phenomena in that field. A classic work in that area is Stephen Mennell’s (1995) *All Manners of Food*. It draws upon Norbert Elias’s historical sociology of changing social figurations (Gabriel & Mennell, 2011). Elias’s general sociology of figurations exists in the background of the historical development of practice theory and may itself be regarded as an early form of practice theory. It is certainly relatively compatible with the kind of practice theory that Warde et al. utilise. Both approaches are concerned with connecting rather than disconnecting phenomena, and in comprehending how empirical forms of conjunction of phenomena work.

Elias’s approach, which Mennell develops for foodstuffs (but less so for drinks), is particularly strong in demonstrating the long-term genesis of associations and dis-associations, both between different sorts of persons, and between types of persons and types of things, including foodstuffs and by implication food events. Mennell can show, for example, in the paradigmatic cases of England and France, the rising and falling social status of offal over time, it oftentimes being strongly associated with lower class food preparation, but at other times becoming a part of higher class fine dining. Within such an analysis, there is space for extending the study of foods, food events and (alcoholic) drinks connections, and the associations and dis-associations of particular constellations of such things with specific groups of people and sociological variables. An Eliasian approach would augment practice theory by locating the latter’s insights into

contemporary practices within the long-term history of particular nations, not only their specific food histories, but also their social history in the broadest sense.

One might therefore imagine an Eliasian historical sociology of British food practices underpinning in very productive ways the sorts of analyses of the present-day offered by Warde et al. Meanwhile, the latter sort of approach could be projected back in time, to consider historical data in such a way that brought out food, food events and drinks inter-connections in ways that Eliasian sociology has not yet created. A two-way rapprochement between the two modes of analysis would be an inter-paradigmatic exercise that would pick up phenomena that would otherwise be underplayed or missed by the modes of investigation that are typical of the more established scholarly fields noted above.

How certain drinks came to be associated with certain sorts of meals and other sorts of social events, and how other drinks came to be banished from scenarios they were once strongly bound up with – and may even have played a central role in constituting – is an important matter for further sociological investigation. For example, how and why did the sherry party – a type of event quite common across wide sectors of the British middle classes until the 1980s, involving certain customary sorts of snack foods – meet its relative demise from the 1980s onwards, existing now only in very specific pockets of society?

The findings of such studies would be of interest in the scholarly fields alluded to above, while the methodologies created and deployed in them could be put to work by other sorts of specialists beyond sociologists, especially if qualitative and quantitative data could be creatively combined. In the meantime, various types of scholars would be grateful to Warde et al. for extending how studies of food, drinks, alcohol and related matters are usually done. They have developed a particularly open-minded and analytically supple way of approaching these issues.

So, if there was a celebratory event held by grateful specialists to celebrate Warde et al.'s innovative endeavours, presumably the latter would have some pithy remarks to make about which sorts of foods would be socially expected to be served at that event together with the conventionally selected wines, the modish beers and the overpriced mineral waters.


Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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