
COMMENTARY

In Search of Ethnological Research on Sustainable Foodways

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All research fields have a prehistory, and the theme of this special issue is no exception to that rule. When I was invited to offer a commentary based on my comments in the ‘Baking the rules’ session at the SIEF congress in 2021, I realised that there was a need to put the comments in context. They were based on both research and applied work within the field of food ethnology, in which I have been working since I first started my PhD project in the first months of the new millennium. In this introductory commentary, I provide a personal background to the theme of the issue, and I have also taken the opportunity to include a wish list for future research in the field.

The early years

Food and meal research in Nordic ethnology has experienced its ups and downs. In the 1970s, and even into the 1980s, it was a well-trodden field of research, at a time when other cultural science disciplines did not think that food was a field worthy of academic attention. The first wave of ethnological food research focused on food as substance and its material forms and (pre-industrial) agriculture. Although research on food and food-related artefacts had been an integral part of ethnology since the beginning of the 1900s, it experienced a renaissance in the 1970s and 1980s. Similar to how earlier ethnologists mapped buildings, customs and traditions, researchers in the 1970s and 1980s mapped food as a form of cultural expression (see Bringéus & Wiegelmann 1972). Where did the food and meal habits originate, how did they spread, from whom and to whom? While the mapping focus in ethnological research was largely abandoned in other fields of ethnology, it survived for a long time in ethnological food research (Bringéus 2000).

The social context, the meal, became more prominent over time. Günther Wiegelmann, a German professor in folklore and editor of *Ethnologia Europaea* from 1971–1983, believed that the meal was a unique field in European ethnology, an interesting point of focus that no one else was interested in or could study as well as ethnologists (Wiegelmann 1971). It is most likely still difficult to find fields where time, space and social environment interact as clearly as in food culture research, especially with respect to the meal itself.

Food research and cultural theory

When I began my doctoral studies in 2000, ethnological food research was in a period of decline. It was considered traditional and lacking a theoretical edge. In retrospect, I find this opinion by the renowned professors of the day somewhat strange considering how many cultural theorists have focused on food and meals as an important source of inspiration. Mary Douglas, Margaret Mead, Marcel Mauss, Erwin Goffmann and Pierre Bourdieu are just a few examples. Even the notion that traditional mapping research does not lead to any ground-breaking theoretical concepts can be challenged.

A good example of a theoretical framework that emerged from the mapping tradition is the term foodways. The interest in the geographic spread of certain foodstuffs provoked a more general interest in the transformation of food in different spatial, social and historical contexts. In the search for patterns in what, how and why we eat, under what circumstances and how the patterns change, the term foodways became established already in projects conducted during the New Deal in the US (Anderson 1972). Foodways as a conceptual model for food research considers the interrelated system of food shared by members of a particular society and includes all stages of food preparation and consumption. The idea of foodways also points to how food travels between geographical spaces, connects past and present, and is related to other cultural configurations. From the beginning, the term has been used in contexts where the research was not only intended to document and analyse but also to change food habits. The application of foodways research, which began in the 1930s, expanded to include wartime committees, where both Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead had important roles, to attempts to improve the dietary patterns of workers and immigrants in Western Europe from the 1960s onwards. Attempts have been made to replace foodways with similar terms, namely foodscape or food system. They all have their pros and cons, but it is fascinating to see how foodways still can inspire new generations of scholars to move from a study of specific details relating to food to a study of the processes, networks and interactions related to food, drink and their consumption (Jönsson 2013).

A revitalised field

After completing my PhD in 2005, I was kindly but firmly advised by my mentor against continuing in the field of food research if I had any ambitions of remaining in academia. An attempt to arrange a food panel at the 2006 Nordic Ethnology Conference in Stockholm underscored that argument. It was a session with some nice papers and presentations, but no one except those who had written a paper for the session attended. But then something happened.

After many years of food hype with celebrity chefs on TV and a gastronomic revolution in both the restaurant sector and the domestic kitchen, academic interest in food and meals in the cultural sciences was rekindled. When, six years later, we again organised a food panel at the Nordic Ethnology Conference, it was suddenly among the most well-attended sessions. Both we as the organisers of the session and the conference organisers were surprised; the room was too small to host the attendants in a fire-safe manner. Since then, the positive development has continued.

For a period, researchers focused strongly on consumption and identity as well as on the role of food in constructing place-bound communities and conflicts (Brembeck 2007; Lindqvist & Österlund-Pötzsch 2018; Tellström 2006). As food producers returned to supposedly authentic foods and cooking methods, and as the EU introduced country of origin labelling schemes, ethnologists followed suit, problematising and deconstructing notions of tradition, origin and authenticity (Linde-Laursen 2012; May 2013; Jönsson 2020). In recent years, issues of power, resistance and sustainability have come into focus as well. A new generation of ethnologists wants to study the shortcomings of current food systems (see Marshall 2016; Raippalinnä 2022; and not least the articles in this issue). There are many examples of in-depth ethnographies on so-called alternative food networks, both consumer and producer organisations and those that seek to unite producers and consumers in the pursuit of common goals (e.g. Grasseni 2013, 2018; Gruvaeus & Dahlin 2021; Petursson 2022). In the new era of food research, researchers seemingly feel less anxious about working with actors outside universities. Applied ethnology has grown in recent years, with food as one of the important fields. Applications of ethnological food research can be seen in many different contexts, from participation in innovation projects in collaboration with industry to food activism in NGOs.

As evident in this issue, one current trend is a move from a focus on food consumption to other parts of the food chain. Most notably, researchers are now focusing on agriculture and waste practices, but also all intermediary phases — processing, packaging, labelling, distribution, retail — have become topics of study from various cultural perspectives. Foodways research is no doubt vital, and just as the concept indicates, it includes both the entirety of the food chain and how food moves between and interacts with different geographical and cultural spaces.

Interdisciplinarity and ethnological food research

Many food researchers from the cultural sciences collaborate with researchers in a diverse array of interdisciplinary fields: public health, sensory studies,

economics and geography, to name a few. When thinking about sustainable foodways, certainly room exists for even more interdisciplinary collaborations, not least with researchers in disciplines dealing with long-term sustainability topics, such as ecologists and biologists. One important future contribution will be to unveil the class-based, culturally defined ways of dealing with sustainability. Much can be learned from the experiences of interdisciplinary projects on diet and health. Climate, just as public health, is a field where it is difficult to define where science ends and morality begins. The alienating recommendations for dietary habits that middle-class scholars and public health professionals have tried to impose on working-class people and immigrants for decades share some striking similarities with contemporary recommendations about lifestyle changes to become more climate friendly.

Current sustainability initiatives often seek to implement urban, middle-class conceptions of sustainable food choices in their projects, while ignoring the perspectives of the people that the projects are supposed to be working with (immigrants, people in rural areas, farmers, and so forth). The pitfall of ignoring the perspectives of marginalised groups is prevalent both in top-down (UN, governmental, regional) and bottom-up (NGOs, activist) initiatives. Food culture researchers may have an important role to play as intermediaries between different interpretations and practices related to sustainable living and eating, thereby counteracting, or at least illuminating, the unequal distribution of power and injustices produced both in the current food system and in attempts to change it.

Another important point of focus in interdisciplinary settings is the dialogue between past and present, which is at the core of ethnology. Much of the research done in disciplines working with food lacks an historical perspective, which often leads to conclusions that consumers are poorly educated about diets, nutrition and sustainability impacts and that proper information and gentle nudging will prompt them to change their dietary habits if they are just provided with correct and accessible information. The historical processes that have shaped the symbolic qualities of food and meals are too often neglected. If acknowledged, researchers often view such 'cultural' values and processes as problems that are difficult or even impossible to change precisely because they are related to 'culture'. Here, we must also take on the role of emphasising that culture is not static, but in a constant state of transition. Culture and heritage are not only or primarily about preservation; they are also potential change agents (Hafstein 2012). Culture as offering a potential way to make sustainable transformations is a topic that ethnologists can bring into interdisciplinary settings. This is not to claim that heritage is inevitably good from a sustainability viewpoint. Culturally embedded habits promoting sustainable

transformations do not exist everywhere or at the same time and should be topic for empirical critical research. Here, I want to highlight that ethnology is grounded in an empirical research tradition. Unlike other disciplines in the social sciences and humanities, which may downplay empirical research and engage in the subtleties of current popular theories about culture and society, ethnology offers a grounded empirical approach that I have found capable of building trust in interdisciplinary settings. The scientific approach of ethnologists and engineers is not as different as we might have thought before engaging in interdisciplinary projects.

Farmers, activists and academic hooliganism

As mentioned, an increasingly diverse range of items are the object of study in ethnological food research. But blind spots still exist, which may derive from the background and cultural settings of the researchers. While plenty of ethnographic studies have been done on organic, biodynamic, urban and regenerative farming practices, much less research has been done on what is commonly referred to as 'conventional' farming. It is difficult to foresee a future without farming or farmers, so I think much can be gained by including mainstream farmers as a study field in ethnological food research. It may well be that many ethnologists are critical of the current agro-industrial complex and present good arguments from that standpoint. But it would be unfair to deny the knowledge about matters of sustainability and circular and regenerative practices possessed by farmers on family-owned farms, those who have cultivated the soil and the landscape for generations.

My relation to farming and farmers was the starting point for my reflections at the closing session of the SIEF conference in 2021, 'Baking the rules', where I related my journey from first obtaining some funding to develop a culinary tourism project in 2006. In one of the first meetings, I met a woman specialised in growing asparagus, but also in welcoming guests to her farm and organising small events. Her view of academics from the city was, to put it gently, not overwhelmingly positive. The idea that such a person knew anything about the hard everyday practices of dealing with either farming or culinary tourism was almost ridiculous to her. It made me realise, the hard way, that I had to reconsider both my skills and my way of communicating with people outside the university. My idea that I could maintain the academic position of providing different perspectives and knowledge proved naïve, and thus my initial efforts at promoting the development of culinary tourism failed. Critical thinking is not the only ingredient necessary for building a successful culinary tourism project. But I gradually learned, and finally even gained respect from the asparagus farmer. For several years, in parallel to securing

short-term positions at the university, I worked with applied projects in the food sector. It sparked not least reflections about ethics in relation to applied ethnological food research (Jönsson 2012).

The 'Baking the rules' session invited thoughts on the entanglement of (or conflicts between) academic research and activism in the field of food research. Food is indeed a vibrant field for activism, often connected to such fields as urban agriculture research, climate research, organic food research and animal rights research. While I am not totally indifferent to these types of activism, as we definitely need a more sustainable food system than the one we currently have, I feel more attached to farmers and small-scale producers than to urban, middle-class activists engaged in urban farming and arranging fossil-free meals. Perhaps it is a typical example of the 'going native' phenomenon, given the fact that my years working with applied food projects affected me on many levels. As a result, I decided to join the Farmers' Association (they welcome members who are not active farmers) a few years ago.

This decision is related to food activism in at least two ways. First, I see my applied projects in the food sector as a certain type of activism, as each has sought to promoting small-scale, traditional and local food. Second, many of the projects have involved farmers, and some of them have dealt with products like cheeses, sausages and other traditional animal-based food. Some 40% of the farmers specialised in animal husbandry in Sweden have experienced threats from activists, especially animal-rights activists, in recent years (Cecato et al. 2022). The Farmers' Association is something of a red flag to the activists. It makes me question whether I am in some sort of anti-activist activist position today?

As Eeva Berglund remarks in her commentary, there can and should be room for many types of activism in food research, since power, subordination and liberation can take many forms. I would like to propose that the lines of conflict may not be so much between researchers that arrive at different conclusions regarding which changes to the food system that should be applied, but between researchers that strive for action-based on research and those who want to remain within the semi-closed environments at universities.

To be clear, I do not mean that ethnologists should stay away from any attempts at having an impact on more sustainable lifestyles, leaving that work for the activists. Even as an anti-activist activist, I have found a sense of community with activists that I do not have with those of my research colleagues in academia, who are solely engaged in constructivist theories.

A lesson from the postmodern research turn in the 1990s is that deconstruction may be an interesting intellectual exercise without leading to anything other than a sense of cultural relativism, where all practices can be for-

given in the name of culture and academics can safely remain in their comfort zone at seminars. As important as it is to deconstruct and criticise the hidden values and norms behind interventions in the name of climate and sustainability, we should not stop there. Can you imagine any other field where deconstruction without reconstruction would be considered a legitimate contribution to society? I doubt it; such persons would be labelled hooligans. I have come to the conclusion that *academic hooliganism* is no better than other forms of hooliganism. We should continue to deconstruct and criticise but also do our best to come up with better solutions and calls for action than the ones we merely seek to deconstruct and criticise. As cultural researchers firmly grounded in an empirical research tradition, we also share joint responsibility to ground our calls for action in empirical research and to do so not only from ideological or theoretical standpoints.

A wish list for future research

The format of a commentary provides us with the privilege of not only commenting on the routes to this special issue, but also looking ahead to future ethnological research on sustainable foodways. As stated above, I would like to see more ethnographies on contemporary farming and farmers. One starting point for such studies may be to return to some of the writings in the life-mode analysis tradition, where self-employed family farmers were one of the groups originally defined as a specific life mode. The main features of life modes are still relevant, and it is interesting to see how writings from the 1980s still acknowledged farmers as an influential group within society.

Life-mode analysis was an attempt to understand not only different conditions informing work and life choices, but also a way to approach social tensions and unequal development. Danish ethnologist Thomas Højrup's work on 'The forgotten people' (*Det glemte folk*, Højrup 1988) is of interest here. Focusing on a life mode that differed from that of the dominant groups in society, he criticised scholars for neglecting the perspectives and the inherited skills and knowledge possessed by the group. It was also difficult for the members of such a forgotten group of people to make their arguments heard since they lacked the cultural codes to communicate with the dominant groups. While those defined as the 'forgotten people' may well have had plenty of knowledge and a desire to transform their marginalised communities into thriving and sustainable communities, they were excluded and forced to comply with top-down 'development' initiatives, which often posed a threat to both the wealth and attractive lifestyle of the community. Thomas Højrup was not thinking of farmers when he wrote about the forgotten people, but I think his analysis shows some clear parallels with how contemporary farmers are treated in

both academia and politics. Their perspectives and knowledge are neglected in discussions about society in general and climate transition in particular. I believe that the search for sustainable foodways may benefit from including ethnographies of farmers dealing with hi-tec appliances, precision farming and the day trading of cereals, to name just a few of the practices in the hidden and forgotten life of contemporary farmers. Such a focus will not only help researchers update their definition of the life mode of family farmers; it may also offer some food for thought on sustainable (and unsustainable) practices that will affect the food system of tomorrow.

Another field for future research is sustainable foodways and emotions. The emotional aspects of food are now finally a respected topic in ethnology, a turn that we can see also in the nice compilation of articles in this special issue. Food and mood are connected, as Icelandic ethnologist Jon Thor Petursson points out in his doctoral thesis (Petursson 2019). There are many different types of emotions connected to food. Senses of fear and distrust are unavoidable when examining contemporary foodways. Yet still, we should not forget the positive aspects of food and meals. Food is a problem in many contexts (not least in families), but it is also a source of joy, happiness and comfort. I would love to see more detailed ethnographies about the joy of eating, the sense of satisfaction after finishing a plate of food and the comfort of commensality.

Such research can also be an antidote to some of the actions proposed by advocates of food fears. As a supposed expert in the field, I am often approached by journalists when they want to write pieces on people's anxieties, fear and disgust for certain types of food. Eating insects as a way to save the planet and narrow-minded consumers rejecting insects based on emotions have been a topic of many recent articles, and I am asked how consumers can be educated to stop having such a negative emotional reaction to the idea of eating insects. Consumer fears of novel technologies, such as genetically modified organisms (GMOs), is another topic where supposedly irrational consumers counteract new and more climate-friendly food solutions. Advocates for novel technologies and disruptive innovations in the food sector seem to forget that there are plenty of paths to sustainable foodways. Hi-tec solutions and new protein sources, such as insects, may be one path, but there are many others as well. Meat consumption was much lower in the rural areas studied by earlier generations of ethnologists compared to consumption levels in contemporary urban settings. Sustainable future foodways can thus be inspired by traditional food habits without giving up the sense of belonging to previous generations.

I see great potential in returning to the early years of ethnological food research, but with new questions. How sustainable were people's diets? How was a place-based circular economy created in rural villages, not only through

farming and cooking, but also through the rituals, traditions and proverbs communicated during the meals? Previous research contained certain biases that should be critically examined. Undoubtedly, studies have focused more on wedding cakes, cheeses and other sorts of food connected to festivities than on the dull food and meals eaten on an everyday basis or in harsh times. A sad but telling example is a book that I inherited from a retired colleague, Kerstin Kuoljok Eidlitz's doctoral thesis on food and emergency food in the circumpolar area (Eidlitz 1969). No one had bothered to even cut open the pages in the book during the almost 50 years that had passed since she had written it. After taking some time to open the book and read it, I found it to be one of the most thought-provoking and relevant research studies done on sustainable foodways in Nordic ethnology. The history of emergency food is a neglected, yet highly relevant topic when discussing how the current food system can be more resilient. The study of emergency food and resilient practices in both the past and present is the final field that I would put on my wish list for future ethnological food studies, but I am convinced that many more paths deserve to be trodden in the future.

Concluding remarks

In this commentary, I have offered some personal reflections on the roots of ethnological research on sustainable foodways and potential routes for the future. Together with the articles and commentaries in this issue, it can hopefully inspire discussions about the content, ambitions and applications of such research. After more than twenty years of conducting research and development projects in the field, I am delighted to see the growing interest, and not least the restlessness, in the search for transformations of both foodways research and the food system in general. While there still may be more studies to conduct on how food can make us feel safe and comfortable, I nevertheless feel comfortable in seeing that the study of foodways is a vibrant and dynamic field in Nordic ethnology.

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