



## From Organisational Field to Fork: An explorative essay on the social organisation of eating (meat)

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# **From Organisational Field to Fork: An explorative essay on the social organisation of eating (meat)**

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This is work in progress – please treat accordingly

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## **1. Introduction**

The aim of our essay is to begin developing a concept of organisational fields which places consumption – *and practices* – centre stage. We argue that this move will exploit an untapped opportunity, bringing conceptual resources from the literature on organisational fields (Beckert, 2010; DiMaggio and Powel, 1983; Fligstein, 2001; Wooton and Hoffman, 2008) to bear on issues of sustainable consumption, in particular revealing some of the mechanisms by which practices change.

This ambition is guided by an attempt to understand a particular empirical phenomenon, briefly explained in order to ground the quest of the paper: A gradual but substantial shift in the types of meat purchased is underway in the UK. This shift, which began in the 70s and picked up pace in the 90s entails a rise in sales of processed meat and poultry (particularly chicken breast), and a decline and recent resurgence in red meat (e.g. beef) and a decline in the variety of meat cuts. These trends have implications for the environmental sustainability of food production, as meat production entails considerable environmental burden. Even a cursory consideration of what is driving these trends highlights a variety of possible explanations which span the domains of 'production' and 'consumption'. The working hypothesis, and a rationale for the paper is that the motors of these dynamics might be explored by examining the relationship between these two domains. More specifically, the dynamics in the industries which produce, process and sell meat products, and the (changing) ways in which meat is incorporated into the daily lives of the UK population.

## **2. (Meat) Consumption as an outcome of practice**

Over the past decade there has been a shift in focus within the sociology of consumption from individual consumers to the cultural, economic and material structuring of consumption (e.g. Cohen and Murphy, 2001; Gronow and Warde, 2001, Shove and Spurling, 2013). Central within these debates has been the uptake and development of the 'practice turn' (Schatzki et al, 2001), and the idea that people consume objects, resources and services not for their own sake but in the course of accomplishing social practices (Warde, 2005). This theoretical framing has proved particularly fruitful for understanding and researching the inconspicuous processes via which environmentally significant resources are consumed. A growing number of authors have argued that theories of practice have a great deal to offer to understandings of the social, institutional and infrastructural conditions of less resource intensive ways of life (Southerton et al., 2004; Warde, 2005; Shove et al, 2012; Shove and Spurling, 2013).

In setting this scene we are focussing on the uptake of practice theoretical approaches to sustainable consumption. Conceptually and methodologically such work is ultimately concerned with why we consume environmentally significant objects, resources or services as much as we do in the way that we do (Shove and Warde, 1999). In this context taking social practices as the unit of analysis has been realised by bounding the everyday practices within which such consumption occurs, examples include bathing, keeping warm/cool, and driving (Spurling and McMeekin, 2015; Shove et al, 2015). This is the approach that we take in this essay. We are concerned with understanding

recent, environmentally significant trends in meat consumption, trends that we conceptualise as the outcome of changes in the practice of eating.

How to conceptualise eating as a practice is a topic of recent debate (Warde, 2013). Reckwitz definition provides a useful starting point:

... a routinized type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, 'things' and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge (Reckwitz, 2002:249).

In setting out this definition, Reckwitz explicates the concept of integrative practices (Schatzki, 1996; Reckwitz, xxxx), we might think of these as major activities of daily life, performed often, involving understandings, procedures, knowledge, skills, specialised equipment and other materials (e.g. chicken-breast or beef-joint). This contrasts with dispersed practices (Schatzki, 1996). According to Schatzki these include describing, explaining and imagining. They are always part of integrative practices, but cross-cut them. They involve knowing how to do something within the context of an integrative practice.

In working through the question 'Is eating a practice?', Warde discusses these concepts of integrative and dispersed practices (Schatzki, 1996) concluding that eating doesn't neatly fit into either. Viewing eating as an integrative practice is problematic. For example, in contemporary Britain there is not a shared understanding of eating well, and there is wide variation in where and how eating is done. Likewise, viewing eating as a dispersed practice also proves inadequate. It would involve viewing eating as always being a part of another practice such as medicine or nutrition, etiquette or cookery, making an analysis of eating – a major activity of daily life - subservient to these other practices, and confining it to a single teleoaffective structure<sup>i</sup>.

To overcome these difficulties Warde sets out the concept of eating as a compound practice. He suggests:

*"Eating, as Britons currently know it, presupposes the intersection of at least four integrative practices: the supplying of food, cooking, the organization of meal occasions, and aesthetic judgments of taste. These are formalised in terms of nutrition, cooking, etiquette and gastronomy"* (2013:xx).

To put it simply, eating has at least four organisational underpinnings, whose relative weighting varies across multiple practices of eating<sup>ii</sup>.

To an extent we draw on both Reckwitz and Warde's definitions in this essay. The former is useful as it enables us to talk about specific instances of eating in daily life, and to identify some of the materials, skills, knowledges and meanings that particular performances enact. However, to analyse how these performances are organised, we turn to Warde's 'compound practice', for two reasons. First, it is a conceptualisation which privileges an analysis of the social organization of practices, and offers a schema capable of connecting specific performances of eating to a discussion of their social organisation. This directly reflects the aim of our essay, which is to develop a concept of organisational fields (Wooton and Hoffman, 2008) which places consumption – and practices – centre stage.

Second, understanding the variety of recent trends in meat consumption as an outcome of practice requires a conceptual frame capable of explaining *multiple eating practices*. The graph below illustrates the variety across different types of meat sales, highlighting the dramatic rise in poultry sales (dominated by mass produced chicken breast), the decline and recent resurgence in beef and veal. Data from other sources indicate increasing volumes of processed meat, such as ready meals, are being sold in the UK.

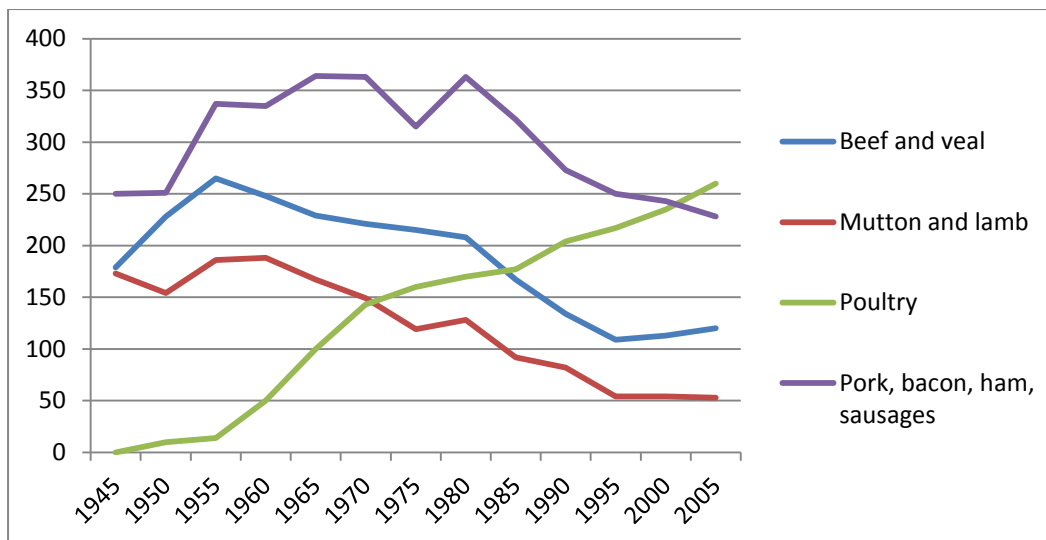


Figure 1 UK Meat Sales 1945-2008: Data from British Heart Foundation Coronary Heart Disease Report 2008

Rather than attempting to explain such shifts as changes in a practice of eating, we speculate that there are *multiple practices of eating* through which these different kinds of meat are being consumed. In essence, we argue that to understand these trends, more attention should be paid to their social and economic organisation and that the concept of practice-based organisational fields offers a way of doing just that.

### 3. Organisational fields: What are they, how are they used and where is consumption?

The “organisational field” is a central construct of neo-institutional theory (Scott, 1991). It is conceived of as the domain where an organisation’s form and actions, such as a supermarket’s supply chain management structures/strategies, are structured by the inter-organisational relationships within which it is embedded (e.g. with suppliers, competitors, regulators, professional bodies). Scott (1995) defines the organisational field as

*“a community of organisations that partakes of a common meaning system and whose participants interact more frequently and fatefully with one another than with actors outside the field”* (Scott 1995:56).

In an overview of the literature on organisational fields Wooten and Hoffman (2008) distinguish moves in the history of field research which began by considering fields as mapping on to industrial sectors, or around particular dominant technologies, initially often with a geographical focus. Later incarnations have explored fields as forming around particular “issues” or problems. Figure 2 below illustrates how alternative conceptions of organisational fields have implications for the observation of empirical phenomenon. In the example of meat production the two types of organisational fields highlight the interactions of different actors reproducing and sustained by different logics.

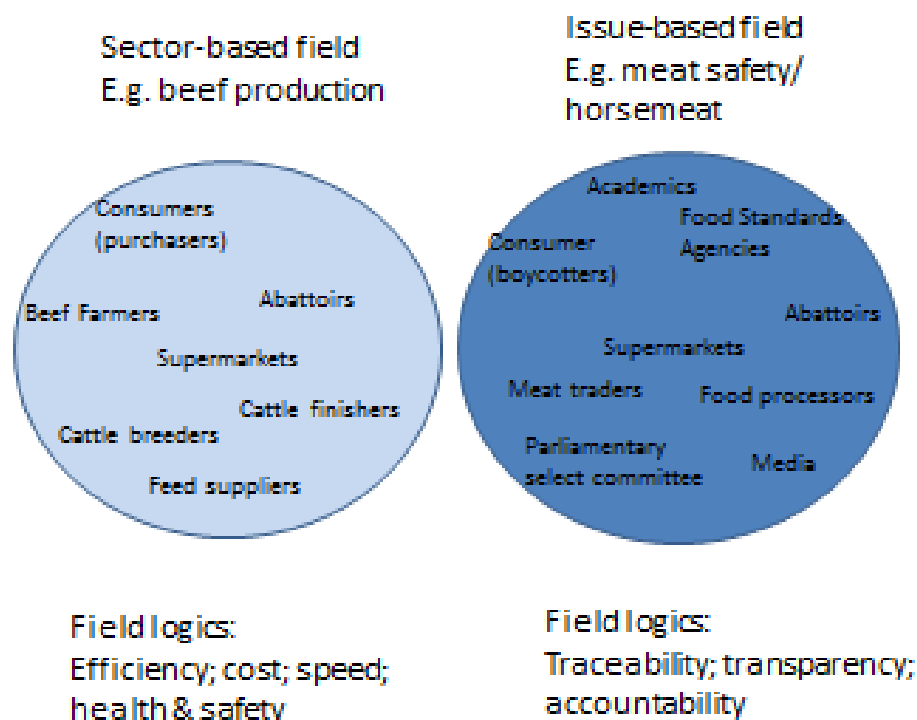


Figure 2: Differences in sector-based and issue-based organisational fields: Examples from meat production

The concept of the field is used to explain how “institutional pressures” come to act upon organisations, often producing similar structures, such as job roles (e.g. supermarket buyers) or incentive schemes within organisations (e.g. financial rewards for meeting targets) while generating variety across contexts, for example across different sectors (e.g. retail, museums, radio-broadcasting etc.). According to DiMaggio (1990), the concept of the field can be used to explain “patterns of inter-organisational competition, influence, coordination and flows of innovation because it defines the boundaries within which these processes operate” (DiMaggio 1990: 267).

Early studies emphasised stability and similarity between organisations as evidence of institutional pressures at work within organisational fields, as opposed to resulting from economic efficiency. More recently, attention has been paid to conflict and how change in organisational fields (and the underpinning cognitive, normative and regulative institutions) occurs. Various explanations for field level change have been put forward including competing institutional logics (Haverman and Rao, 1997), changing or competing goals of organisations (Christensen and Molin 1995) and disruptive events (Hoffman 1999). Attention has also been given to processes of “institutional entrepreneurship”, in order to highlight the work done by organisations to create and build legitimacy for new norms. In the case of the latter, work on field level dynamics, emphasises that although some organisations do have more power to influence than others, legitimising new problem framings or way of working is never simply the achievement of one organisation (Fligstein 1990, Beckert 1999).

Although explicitly concerned with the dynamics shaping ‘field outcomes’ such as which products or production practices are legitimate for firms to engage in, studies of organisational fields do not include consumption in their conceptual frame. Although consumers are present in some accounts, their role is usually one of responding (or not) to change by producers. For example in DiMaggio’s

classic study of the emergence of the American Art Museums sector, the processes of field configuring (and outcomes in terms of the form and purpose of art museums), plays out in interactions between the funding bodies, universities, and professional librarians. 'Art consumers' are only present to have their needs interpreted. A similar role for final consumption can be observed across field studies which take a sector or a technology as the focal point for field formation. Consumers are present as buyers of products, and their influence aggregated into "the market" which organisations must interpret. In addition, the understanding of the making of markets by firms as they watch, interpret and respond to each other (e.g. Fligstein 1990; White XXXX), leaves the activities of final consumers almost inconsequential in shaping what is legitimate for organisations to do.

More recent work has focussed on the fields emerging around particular *issues* (e.g. climate change), rather than around particular technologies or sectors. Although it is not made explicit this move entails an adjustment in the conception of the production-consumption relationship, and the role of consumers more generally. When examining how organisations interact around particular problems, different organisations and new goals become important (e.g. NGOs in raising awareness among consumers), often with the result of emphasising conflict (as opposed to consensus) as well as variety and contestation over cognitive framings, compared to earlier emphasis on shared meaning systems (e.g. Hoffman, Levy). In such accounts consumers are offered additional representation in the form of "consumer groups" (which present themselves as representing consumer interests), as well as in "civil society" whatever that may mean. Despite this degree of rebalancing which might include actors beyond those directly involved in "production", depending on if /how they get involved with a particular debate, issue-based fields still offer little scope for taking account of consumption as it takes place in everyday life, or of consumers not represented by strategically mobilising groups (e.g. pressure groups).

Therefore, a focus on sectors/ technologies or alternatively on issues mean that the organisational field as a unit of study tends to have its boundaries drawn at the edges of production. Where consumption features at all, it is crudely represented as markets (in fields emerging around sectors/technologies) or as civil society (in fields around issues). We believe there is much more to be said on this, especially if our focus is to understand the dynamic relationship between production and (sustainable) consumption.

#### **4. Theories of practice, organisational fields and sustainable consumption**

In this section we note three points of connection between the literature on organisational fields and theories of practice. We draw out these theoretical synergies to add further weight to our argument that bringing certain aspects of these literatures into dialogue is a fruitful thing to do.

Firstly, these literatures have a shared interest in the relationship between structure and agency in understandings of human action. Warde and Welch (2014) note the influence of Giddens (1984) theory of structuration and his shift to social practices in sustainable consumption, exemplified in the often cited quotation:

"...the basic domain of study in the social sciences, according to the theory of structuration, is neither the experience of the individual actor, nor the existence of any form of social totality, but social practices ordered across space and time" (Giddens, 1984:2).

Organisational field research shares this concern, particularly visible in work emphasising the *mutually configuring* relation of firm and field (Scott, 1994). In this conceptualisation, the production and reproduction of structure is made in day-to-day action, whilst at the same time “the source of action [is] exogenous to the actor” (Wooten and Hoffman, 2008:X).

Secondly, given these shared concerns with the recursive relation of human action and structure, the two traditions have developed similar critiques. In particular, both have taken issue with models of rational choice (e.g. Shove et al, 2012:2-3; DiMaggio, 1988). For example DiMaggio (1988) notes that central to new institutional theory (of which organisational fields form an important part) is the “...critique of atomistic, utilitarian, rational-choice models where actors preferences and interests are treated as exogenous to the larger cultural order” (1988:XX). Likewise, within sustainable consumption the tradition “...in which action is, in essence, explained by the pursuit of individual interests” is rejected (Shove et al, 2012:2-3; Spurling et al, 2013) and ‘the consumer’ is decentralised as “...the key focal points become the organization of the practice and the moments of consumption enjoined” (Warde, 2005: 146 in Warde and Welch, 2014).

Finally, in both sustainable consumption and organisational fields, history matters. As Giddens notes “History... is the temporality of human practices, fashioning and fashioned by structural properties, within which diverse forms of power are incorporated” (Giddens, 1984:220). Current configurations (of environmentally significant consumption, and of organisational fields) are historically contingent rather than inevitable. As such, their current form is conceptualised as a particular moment within a set of broader dynamics and continual (re) production. Both stasis and change – or (re)production - are made in actions, and because of this explanations of present configurations are partially located within the folds of time.

Although these synergies exist, the particular questions that organisational fields have tried to answer have not yet extended to the challenge of sustainable consumption, or the organisation of social practices as part of which consumption happens. Our move in the remainder of this essay is to place practices centre stage to the conceptualisation of the organisational field – and to explore what this might look like.

## **5. Conceptualising a practice-based organisational field: A worked example of meat production and consumption**

We begin from the observation that meat is incorporated into the practice of eating in a variety of ways. This observation requires that organisational fields of meat production are understood as intersecting with dynamics of consumption in multiple ways. Different types of meat appear more or less strongly associated with different performances of eating. For example frozen lasagne; ‘slow-reared’ beef joint; mass produced chicken breast, are each incorporated into daily life differently (frozen lasagne at a social occasion would appear odd to most people). We contend that the performances within which meat eating occurs, such as feeding yourself after working late, sharing a meal with friends or preparing tea for your family, exist as distinctive configurations of knowledges, skills, social meanings, specialised equipment and so on.

However, making this observation does not, in itself, tell us much about how (meat) eating is organised, or about the relationship between the dynamics of production and different kinds of consumption. Warde’s idea of a compound practice (2013), helps us to take the analysis a step further. We suggest that these different varieties of performance (re) produce specific intersections of eating’s constituent practices, their respective teleoaffective structures and standards of competence. In our worked example (Table 1) we use four constituent practices: nutrition,

gastronomy, cooking and caring for the family (adapted from Warde 2013)<sup>1</sup>. The weighting, and degree of coordination between these constituent practices is different in each case. Eating out with friends is more likely a practice of gastronomy than of nutrition. Eating a family meal is more likely to (re)produce nutrition and care and so on. It is these constituent practices, and their coordination, which provide the a key to delinating the practice-based organisation field with relevance for how meat is produced.

ENACTMENT OF EATING as a.....	COMPOUND PRACTICE part of an.....	ORGANISATIONAL FIELD
<p><b>Social understandings</b> Convenience, healthy (lean, rather than packed with nutrition), affordable</p> <p><b>Where and when</b> Family meal at home</p> <p><b>Specialised equipment</b> Fridge/freezer, oven and hob</p> <p><b>Knowledges</b> cooking, catering and caring for family, domestic budgeting, health</p>	<p>Gastronomy</p> <p>Nutrition</p> <p>Cooking</p> <p>Caring</p> <p>Lower coordination of the compound practice (?)</p>	<p><b>Field actors / logics</b> Supermarkets, food processors: Efficiency/ Value for money; health&amp;safety</p> <p>National curriculum/ School education as: “Food technology” (rather than cookery)</p> <p>Health professionals; dietitians; lifestyle magazines: health as input-output</p> <p><b>Meat framed</b> as protein&amp;fat; meal staple; commodity</p>
<p><b>Social understandings</b> Quality, luxury, health (health as natural goodness, rather than a concern with leanness),</p> <p><b>Where and when</b> Restaurants Celebrations, social occasions, with friends or extended family</p> <p><b>Specialised equipment</b> Cookery books; advanced food preparation technologies</p> <p><b>Knowledges</b> Cookery techniques; food ingredients; food provenance; geographical traditions</p>	<p>Gastronomy</p> <p>Nutrition</p> <p>Cooking</p> <p>Caring</p> <p>Higher coordination of the compound practice (?)</p>	<p><b>Field actors / logics</b> Supermarkets have less influence</p> <p>Local producers, shorter supply chains, intermediaries (e.g. local markets): Ethical, local, authenticity</p> <p>Restaurants, Restaurant critics; Elite cookery schools; Recipe book publishers; TV producers (e.g. Come-dine-with-me): Enjoyment; Experience; Quality; Craft</p> <p><b>Meat framed</b> as ingredient (or meal centrepiece); animal product with provenance</p>

Table 1: A Practice-Based Organisational Field: Key actors, logics and framings

<sup>1</sup> Warde (2013) describes eating as a compound practice drawing from four (out of possibly more) integrative practices including: Nutrition; Gastronomy; Cooking; Etiquette



In our example above we suggest that eating out with friends is more likely to (re)produce gastronomy than nutrition. The organisational field with influence over 'gastonomy' (restaurants, elite cookery schools, recipe book publishers), will mobilise different understandings of 'good meat' (eg wild caught, seasonal, traditionally produced) compared to the field of nutrition (health professionals, government diet recommendations), which emphasise fat, nutrient content etc. Within the organisational fields different logics will guide the action and interactions between organisations, reproducing the legitimacy of particular modes of cultivation and provision of meat, and expectations of meat as part of diet. Different debates/battles will take place across different fields - how much red meat should be eaten? How should red meat be cooked? How should red meat be produced? Which type of red meat is best? The co-existing logics sustain and legitimise particular interactions between those who produce, provide and eat meat. A practice-based organisational field recognises that consumption intersects with multiple organisational fields and logics. Perhaps also highlighting the importance of inter-field dynamics in governing processes of sustainable consumption and production.

A final hypothesis is that the practice-based field is characterised by different relations between 'production' and 'consumption' across the multiple constituent practices. These sustain different extents of mutual shaping/influence. For example the proliferation of mass produced chicken breast, the techniques of 'tumbling' to increase water content and volume of meat, and global trade in chicken parts, can be more effectively explained as driven by dynamics within the organisational field than by dynamics of everyday life. The rise of 'slow-reared' beef might be a different story. We hypothesise that some of this variation might be explained by the degree/strength of coordination across the practice of eating, making it more or less responsive to (and governed by) the fields of production.

## **6. Conclusion**

The aim of the essay was to begin developing a concept of organisational fields which places consumption - and practices - centre stage. As such the piece is more of a contribution to the ideas of organisational fields than theories of practice. The literature on organisational fields represents a rich set of resources for understanding how inter-organisational competition, influence and coordinate production. However, to date the organisational field concept has not adequately taken account of consumption. Understanding trends in the resource intensity of meat cannot be explained by focusing on production alone, and equally important are the changing ways that meat is incorporated into daily life. Our concept of practice-based organisational field incorporates consumption by delineating the field and its constituent actors and guiding logics according to the practices within which meat consumption takes place. This opens up opportunities for thinking about the role of business, vested interests and the power of large corporations in influencing how patterns of consumption change. We suggest that how the practice is socially organized and the strength/degree of coordination is especially relevant when considering the extent/scope of influence (or not) of the dynamics of the organizational field on consumption. We propose that the approach will enable novel explanations for the variation observed in the pace and directionality of change across different types of meat consumption.

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<sup>i</sup> Brief def of teleoaffective structure to go here.

<sup>ii</sup> Warde highlights differences in the coordination of these organising structures in France and Britain. Whereas we are interested in how they vary within one country.