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Reframing Convenience Food by Peter Jackson, Helene Brembeck, Jonathan Everts, Maria Fuentes, Bente Halkier, Daniel Hertz Frej, Angela Meah, Valerie Viehoff and Christine Wenzl (2018)

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Book review :

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Since the middle of the 20th century, European countries have witnessed the development of a range of ready-to-cook, ready-to-heat and ready-to-eat products. These products are supposed to save time and effort in preparing meals. They are deemed to lighten the daily burden of women and facilitate the reconciliation of domestic and professional activities. On the other hand, the quality of their nutritional content is frequently questioned, because of the potential negative effects of certain additives, preservatives or process. In addition, they are considered as the exact opposite of a certain ideal of homemade cooking, and in this sense, they have a negative moral value.

The authors of this collective work intend to break with both an irenic vision more or less directly inspired by the marketing of these products and with an equally excessive blaming of these products and their consumers. Theoretically the book follows Reckwitz (2002) and Schatzki (1996) for a general definition of social practices, and Warde (2005) for its application to the analysis of consumption and more specifically to food (Warde 2016). The authors emphasize practices rather than individuals as the key element of their empirical investigations, as to shift the gaze from consumers to consumption as an activity inscribed in material and symbolic contexts. Such a move affords to consider food as "a process rather than a stable entity" (p. 7). Four case studies from a European research project provide the empirical basis for the book: ready meals, baby food, workplace canteens and meal-box schemes. Instead of defining convenience food as a range of products, the authors decided to focus on the contexts of meals or cooking, which make the use of a product or a service perceived and defined as convenient, allowing to save time at different stages of food consumption: menu design, supply, culinary preparation, meal taking.

The book starts with a historical chapter tracing the evolution of processed food products since the second half of the twentieth century. Technological innovation in the field of household appliances and the spread of kitchen appliances (freezers, electric cookers, then microwave ovens) are important relays because they allow the use of industrial food products. On the consumer side, the rise of women's work, reducing the time available for household tasks, made these products more attractive (with the crucial role of advertising in making these products the allies of the modern woman). Women participation rates to the labour force differ between the different countries observed. A comparison allows the authors to show that there is no mechanical link between salaried women activity, household electrical equipment and consumption of convenience food, but rather locally differentiated ways of introducing these products into the diet.

The historical chapter is followed by a theoretical chapter, which proposes the notion of *conveniencization*. The analysis of literature emphasises the lack of a consensual definition of convenience food. Drawing on practice theory, the authors propose to focus more on what is considered convenient in the different activities of sourcing, cooking, consumption or disposal, rather than attempting to define the category by listing the types of food products concerned. They insist on

the processual dimension that leads a food item or a consumption situation to be considered as convenient.

The next chapter looks at how convenience food has become part of contemporary diets, integrated into shopping and cooking routines. Analysing baby food in Sweden, the authors show the complex interplay of marketing arguments and some validations by medical authorities (in return for regulations). The process of conveniencization is accompanied by standardisation work that relies in part on the transfer of skills and legitimacy to shape infant feeding to the industries.

The issue of time saving associated with the use of processed food appears to be central to their growing success. Accordingly, the following chapter looks at the timeframes involved, using ready meals in the UK and Germany as the main example. Different time scales are analysed. Generational and life-cycle dimensions are reflected more in differences between types of products and practices than between more or less intense recourse to convenience food. In the shorter term, the authors consider how the rhythms of daily life affect the use of processed products. Often storable with relatively long shelf lives, and requiring little time for preparation, these products allow for a more flexible articulation between procurement, cooking and eating practices, which facilitates the management of constrained schedules.

The following chapter on space shows that the delegation of food preparation activities (including canteens) leads to an increasing dispersion of space. Meals or ready-to-eat products, which are not prepared at home but can be eaten there, contribute to a dissociation of the places of preparation and consumption; collective catering presents an original configuration, where convenience relies in the contexts in which the meals are taken. Whether in the canteen or at home, the material arrangement and equipment of the preparation and consumption areas have a role to play in making meals convenient.

The next chapter on moral issues, takes up a recurring question in the debate on the industrialisation of food. Processed products are frequently considered bad for health and the environment, and their consumers are blamed for irresponsibility or ignorance. This opposes home cooking from scratch, charged with a positive value, on the one hand, and recourse to suspicious but convenient industrial preparations on the other. Highlighting the contexts of use and the meaning given to such products as ready meals or baby food is a way of getting away from this binary opposition.

Continuing in this vein, the following chapter takes up the frequently advanced association between the development of processed products, the decline in culinary skills and the deterioration in the nutritional quality of food. Based on the observation that this association is not really supported, the authors re-problematise the link between culinary skills and convenience food. This chapter is mainly based on data from the Danish study on meal-box schemes. These boxes appear as convenient as they save time on activities upstream of cooking (menu planning, making lists, assessing quantities needed, shopping, validating the nutritional and environmental requirements) and reduce the associated mental workload, while still allowing to offer the family a 'home-cooked' meal.

Starting from the injunction to develop healthier and more sustainable food practices, the last chapter shows that it is rarely out of negligence of health or environmental issues that consumers adopt processed products or frequent canteens. The restitution of practical logics and consumption contexts shows, on the contrary, subtle arbitrations between different products or product ranges. The challenge in terms of consumer government would therefore be to make healthier and more sustainable practices convenient by building on consumers' achievements and constraints. The authors thus argue for an asset-based approach that breaks with the current logic of blaming consumers. The

explanation of this approach, which inspires the whole project and is implicitly present throughout the book, comes in the very last chapter, but would have been welcomed at the very beginning.

The most original contribution of this dense and rich book is probably the choice of case studies, which reflects the authors' initial intention to break down the convenience food category. Indeed, the cases are not all based on products (baby food or ready meals), but also on services, whether in the case of canteens or meal-box schemes. The analyses clearly confirm, through the dissociation of the different stages of planning, supply, cooking or storage, the extent to which the comparison between these different case studies is relevant. This book therefore also shows, more generally, how conceptual innovation cannot be conceived without the implementation of original empirical devices.

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