



Measurability, austerity and edibility: Introducing waste into food regime theory[☆]



Hugh Campbell^{a,*}, David Evans^b, Anne Murcott^c

^a Centre for Sustainability (CSAFE), University of Otago, New Zealand

^b Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Sheffield, United Kingdom

^c SOAS, University of London, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

Food waste has emerged as an increasing focus of scholarship in both sociology and geography. This article examines the contemporary upsurge of interest in food waste primarily using the lens of food regime theory. Food regime periodization is used to examine three eras: 1) the most recent emergence of counter-regime activities in food waste politics, 2) much earlier, pre-WWII and wartime waste management, and 3) post-WWII erasure of food waste as a *cultural* concern. Based on these three, the argument proposes that food regime periodization is able to provide some structural shape to wider shifts in the cultural positioning of food waste but does not provide a satisfactory account of contemporary politics around waste. Drawing on material from the mid-20th century transition in waste culture, three dynamics are identified: measurability, austerity and edibility which both help situate contemporary waste politics within a longer historical framework and also challenge the food regime framework to broaden its focus to include the power of waste to contest the ontological politics of regimes.

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1. Introduction: the idea of waste ‘transitions’ in food history

We are, as we write, in the middle of an upsurge of interest and action around food waste which has gathered momentum since the first edited collection on the sociology of food waste was published in 2013 (Evans et al., 2013). Examples of its growing profile in the intervening period include the 2013 World Environment Day being themed around a campaign on food waste, Pope Francis declaring

that wasting food is like stealing from the poor¹ in the same year, France in 2016 banning large supermarkets from wasting unsold food, with the promise that Italy would soon follow,² and the launch of the first global standard for measuring and reporting food waste (UNEP, 2016). So food waste is now even more visible than it was in 2013.

Our subject matter in this article is the degree to which food waste has gone through historical periods of relative visibility and invisibility in cultural and political worlds. Framed within food regime theory, such an inquiry forms the backdrop to current questions – posed in particular by campaigners and policy makers – as to how to translate the new visibility of food waste into political action. It is also aimed at providing some preliminary insight into both the scope and scale of historical ‘waste transitions’ and their relevance to a food regime-based account of food history.

The paper builds its argument from, initially, the body of research and wider popular and policy discussion which suggests a *new* visibility of food waste as both a subject of scholarship as well as in its role as a novel focus for policy and for public discussion. This claim – that we are currently in a period where waste is much more ‘visible’ and where the claim is that food is being wasted on an unprecedented scale – is both simple and has a *prima facie* plausibility. None the less, it raises some interesting questions

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* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: hugh.campbell@otago.ac.nz (H. Campbell).

¹ www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/the-pope/10101375/Pope-Francis-says-wasting-food-is-like-stealing-from-the-poor.html.

² www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3433142/France-country-world-BAN-supermarkets-throwing-away-unsold-food-force-donate-charities.html. www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/italy-food-waste-law-supermarkets-a6931681.html.

about the way the scope and significance of the current waste 'transition' may be understood. In this paper, we build on previous collaboration by the three authors (Evans et al., 2013) in order to compare the current moment with two prior epochs of food in modernity. Aligning our investigation with the periodization of food history characteristic of classical food regime theory, we sketch the broad profile of the period from the Victorian food world in England stretching through into the pre-WWII years of Depression and dearth (theoretically demarcated in Food Regime Theory as the 'First Food Regime'). We do so in order to clearly situate food waste in this period and the subsequent decades of crisis and uncertainty as both a subject of daily practical concern for households as well as a focus for moral and political concern more generally. Using evidence from cookery books and household manuals, we demonstrate the 'visibility' of food waste as a matter of concern and place these alongside the kinds of expert discourse that emerged around the food supply crisis of WWII. Then, and in stark contrast to the prior epoch, we examine the period after WWII which reveals a very different character: food waste is arguably less visible and the wider political and cultural tropes of the Second Food Regime seem to erase food waste from popular discourse.

While food regime theory provides an entry-point for assembling the multiple dynamics that characterise particular moments in food history, we seek to move beyond a simple regime approach by more explicitly examining those practices and political areas that the epochal food regimes (and thus food regime theory itself) have tended to obscure. The intention is to assemble an approach to understanding historical waste transitions that is both grounded in historical sources while also acknowledging wider structural and cultural transitions in the global food economy.

We conclude by arguing that the relative visibility and invisibility of food waste during different epochs of modern food history provides important insights into the current moment of food waste politics and popular concern. It allows us to situate the current waste transition as part of a longer dynamic in which the visibility and invisibility of food waste becomes both a signifier of wider transitions in the character and influence of food relations in modernity as well as demonstrating the character of particular sites of political action and potential change.

2. A theoretical context to waste transitions: food regime theory

The study of large historical transitions in food systems has been strongly influenced by the body of work known as Food Regime Theory (Friedmann and McMichael, 1989; Friedmann, 1993; McMichael, 1993; Pritchard, 1996). While this theoretical framework provides a rather broad-brush approach to food history, it nevertheless provides a starting point which enables an immediate engagement with epochs and transitions in global-scale food relations.³ It is notable from the outset that neither the original body of food regime work in the 80s/90s nor more recent contributions to the genre have made any attempt to incorporate food waste into their theorisation of food systems – a lacuna that this article will

³ Food Regime Theory has broad scope, although its application tends towards regime relations that stem from major transitions in Western industrial countries. This is both a strength and a weakness: by refraining from a totalising ambition to explain all global food relations, Food Regime Theory provides more manageable lines of enquiry through large food transitions, but does have the weakness of obscuring or ignoring other regimes and global sites of action. By using this framework to enable us to access broad transitions, we acknowledge that these are a Western-centric account that is more focused on production–consumption relations rather than the production/harvest/storage focus of waste studies in Developing contexts.

attempt to demonstrate has left the food regime narrative resting on a set of rather narrow bases.⁴ The closest related work is that of Zsuzsa Gille who creates an entirely parallel (and compelling) narrative of historical 'waste regimes' without seeking to apply them to the more orthodox framing of food regimes (Gille, 2010, 2013).

Within Agri-Food Studies, some scholars in the late-80s/early 90s used the idea of the 'food regime' as a mechanism for explaining a dramatic set of changes that took place in the agricultural systems of those countries emerging from colonial empires into configuration as capitalist nation/states (Friedmann and McMichael, 1989). While arguments within the food regime tradition vary, a key point of agreement is that something significant changed in the way international and national food relationships were configured both in the mid-1800s and then in the period after World War II.

Fundamental to Food Regime Theory is the understanding that the rise and fall of Empires as the key mode of global government reconfigured global food relations in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Friedmann and McMichael (1989) characterised the global-scale set of food relationships that emerged after the food shortages that afflicted the 1840s as the 'First Food Regime' (later also naming this the Imperial Food Regime). After around 50–60 years of stable growth in the First Food Regime, a period of crisis emerged in which world wars and global depression overturned many of the certainties and securities of imperial food trading. Friedmann and McMichael (1989) argued that this set of mid-20th century transitions occurred across so many areas of the food system simultaneously (and strongly influencing each other) that they collectively comprise a shift in the whole food regime from the First (Imperial) Food Regime to the Second (Aid/Surplus) Food Regime. Within each regime of relations, up to six key relationships – political/governance arrangements, labour relations, commodity complexes, trading patterns, farming systems, and consumer cultures – interlinked in a mutually reinforcing way during periods of stability or became disrupted or destabilised during periods of disintegration, crisis and transition. The transition in the mid-20th Century was so profound as to be characterised as a fundamental regime-shift linking all these key relationships.

The strongest contribution of Food Regime Theory is that it disrupts any sense in which global food relations either follow some kind of linear, structural elaboration of global capitalism, or, alternately, have no wider pattern at all through the 20th Century (Campbell and Dixon, 2009). What this approach allows is a theoretical focus both on periods of stability in global-scale food relations as well as the crisis period *between* regimes which exhibit dynamics of transition. While the generally agreed upon canon of Food Regime Theory sees two periods of regime transition happening during the mid-19th and mid-20th Centuries, theorists in this genre have also tried to adopt the approach to understand more contemporary 21st Century food relations (Araghi, 2003; Pritchard, 2009; Burch and Lawrence, 2009; Dixon, 2009; Schermer, 2015). What is notable is the concern that the original food regime accounts are too structural and deterministic (Le Heron and Lewis, 2009), or left either the more material/ecological realm relatively unconsidered (Le Heron and Roche, 1996) or underplayed the role of culture (Campbell, 2009) as elements of the regime of relationships.

In opening up ecological and cultural dynamics, some of the new theorisations have moved towards the terrain of food sustainability and ecological dynamics. Of interest for the argument in this article

⁴ There is a passing mention of food waste in Sage's (2013) linkage of food regimes to energy regimes.

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