

Book Review: Food Waste: Home Consumption, Material Culture and Everyday Life by David Evans

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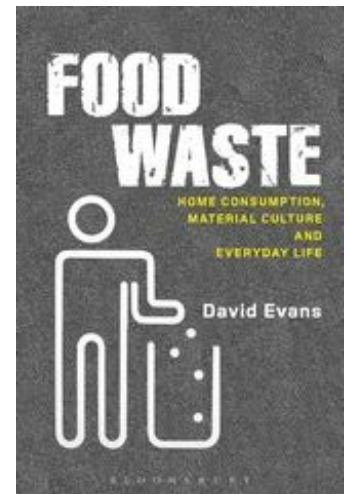
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Using ethnographic material to explore global issues, **Food Waste** seeks to unearth the processes that lie behind the volume of food currently wasted by households and consumers. This is a useful and accessible primer for students, writes **Susannah Crockford**.

Food Waste: Home Consumption, Material Culture and Everyday Life. David Evans. Bloomsbury. 2014.

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David Evans raises a topic of significance to issues of global environmental sustainability in his first monograph. The inefficiency of the food system is shocking, to the extent that “globally one third of food produced for consumption is wasted – or otherwise lost – each year” according to the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (p.7). This amounts to 1.3 billion tons annually and raises the spectre of masses of food going to waste while people go hungry. Evans presents a view of this “scandal” (p.10) from the bottom up by focusing on how individual households convert food into waste.



This is a sociological contribution to the ongoing debate about the food system, rather than an activist perspective. The data is derived from an eight-month ethnographic study of households on two streets located in south Manchester. Evans is well placed to make this contribution, as a lecturer in sociology and a Sustainable Consumption Research Institute Fellow at the University of Manchester, who has published numerous peer-reviewed articles and contributions to edited volumes on related issues of sustainability and consumption.

Evans produces careful ethnographic research that seeks to understand rather than condemn individual consumer behaviour. His aim is to examine the social factors in waste production, centering on the research question of how and why do households produce food waste? The evidence from the study suggests that it is created not through irresponsibility, but from households trying to follow a healthy diet despite disparate tastes in the family and the varying demands of daily life.

The key themes that run through this argument are how waste processes are embedded in the “dynamics of everyday life”, a focus on the home as where consumption and waste production occur, and that food is “a specific genre of material culture” (p.11). These themes are linked to wider academic debates surrounding sustainability and materiality through an able use of the relevant literature. Evans adopts a processual, practice-based approach where waste is presented as a process rather than a quality inherent in certain objects.

The process through which food becomes waste is identified in chapter 3, “Contextualizing Household Food Consumption”. In this chapter, Evans relates how households habitually buy more food than they use, some of which becomes surplus and then waste. Evans’ argument is that they are not being irresponsible but rather follow an ethic of “proper” eating: home-cooked meals, using fresh, healthy ingredients, made from scratch, combining a variety of flavours, colours, and textures. Trying and often failing to follow this normative ideal leads consumers into behaviour such as buying fruit because it is healthy then not eating it all because they sometimes prefer “something sweet” like cake as a snack, as a result some of the fruit goes to waste (p.32). Supermarkets often sell produce in larger quantities than consumers require, which means the excess is wasted.



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In trying to eat well according to the cultural ideal, households are almost inevitably producing waste. Evans claims that there is no single answer for this “routine over provisioning” (p.33), as it is caused by the intersection of routines, the “proper” food ideal, and supermarket standards of packaging of food. This summation falls flat; despite a perceptive analysis, Evans fails to sharpen his critique of the excesses of consumer culture where individual desire is given primacy and purposefully cultivated by those that seek to profit from supplying those desires.

In chapter 4, “Anxiety, Routine and Over-provisioning”, Evans asks why not use the rest of that cauliflower or remember what is in your fridge already before you go shopping. His answer is that it is often not that simple, and points to the impact of family dynamics, particularly children who will not eat certain things or will not eat the same meal twice. He presents cases where households do plan their weekly shopping to only buy what they require, but then life throws them curveballs which interfere with that planning, so pork chops normally eaten are left to waste because the family goes out for pizza one night. Households have to manage the everyday demands of life: what they want, what their children want, what is available in the fridge, and what is going on that day. In the course of this continual balancing act, when the routine is disrupted, waste results. His respondents feel guilty about the wasted food, but in Evans’ analysis, it is not their fault. They were simply knocked off balance.

In this chapter, Evans’ argument is a good riposte to the Taylolean assumptions of policy makers that everything in the household can be made more efficient if only people were not so irresponsible. Instead, Evans shifts the onus from individuals on to the social context in which their behaviour is embedded. However, the social context that is presented is neutered, depoliticised, and lacking a critical awareness of the influence of consumer capitalism. He does not connect normative standards of food to flows of capital in the food industry, nor does he sufficiently highlight the gendered nature of household management although it is present in the data.

Food Waste examines how food is turned into waste. The answer seems to be, simply, that food is wasted when people do not want to eat it anymore. We do not learn much about the lives of his informants; it would have been useful to have more socio-economic data to flesh out the argument, for example on their employment or income. This could have contributed to an answer to why some households tried harder than others to prepare “proper” food, and whether class is a factor in how much waste is produced. The tight focus on the issue is succinct but by limiting the data to only what respondents do with their food the nuance of the analysis is reduced. However, the text is easy to understand and provides data relevant to an important socio-economic issue. The audience is social scientists and students; it would be a useful primer text for the latter, although the former may find the analysis lacking.

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anthropology of food, specifically issues of waste in the US food system and religious responses to industrial agriculture.

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