

]hw[Food Waste

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Abstract

Food waste is more than just an unwarranted economic and environmental problem. Food waste provides information on societal values, norms, and beliefs through the classification of what is and what is not considered food waste. This entry discusses the evolution of the “hidden” practice of food waste, and how different conceptions and theories of food waste have emerged over the last 50 years.

Keywords: environmental sociology; food; inequality; resources; taste

]fo[A third of total global food production never reaches a human stomach (Institution of Mechanical Engineers, 2013). This is the highest level of food wastage in human history (Blenckner, 2008), and is understood to be an unwarranted economic and environmental burden on the planet which must be combatted to avert environmental and food security crises such as climate change. In order to make food waste a more visible problem, the European Parliament (2012) proclaimed 2014 to be the European Year against Food Waste.

Food wastage itself is typically a hidden practice (Hawkins, 2006), and a symptomatic result of a “throwaway society” (Lucas, 2002) with a stable food supply creating a new paradigm of food consumption where food is ever present, undervalued, and disposable (Jones, 2006; Thompson, 1979).

At a straightforward technical level, food waste can be defined as a waste type produced as a result of the lack of consumption of food. This waste is composed of food (both edible and inedible organic matter) in the form of uneaten food such as scraps, food lost via preparation, and food that is no longer fit to be consumed and is regarded as inedible.

Yet the term “food waste” is a living concept, with varied conceptualizations occurring in academic and professional literature, the most widely used being “solid waste” (Rathje and Murphy 1992), “biodegradable waste” (Chandon and Wansink, 2002), and “organic waste” (McDonough, 2002). These conceptualizations conceal the scale of wastage via their homogenization of food with other types of waste while concurrently not acknowledging that food is a part of this waste type. There are also nontechnical terms for food waste that provide emotional baggage while highlighting the inedible nature of food waste. Mary Douglas (1966) and Gay Hawkins (2006) both note this emotive separation of food and food waste, with

Douglas describing waste as “matter out of place.” This use of emotional terms is common in participant interviews, with discussions around food waste and disposal practices having the potential to become emotionally charged (Metcalf *et al.*, 2013; Mavrakis, 2012a, 2012b).

The ability to recognize and define objects as food waste is culturally and socially constructed; there are numerous societal complexities that pertain to how consumers view waste and what they understand it to be (Evans, 2011). In short, understanding waste is a subjective practice (Hawkins, 2006) best summed up by the old idiom “One man’s trash is another man’s treasure” (Thompson, 1979).

A long-standing theory regarding the transformation process from food to waste is found in Thompson’s *Rubbish Theory* (1979), which posits that objects become waste when their perceived durability or utility has been exhausted and is no longer valued by its owner. This transformation into waste occurs over no set time period and can be evidenced by a change of form and the act of disposal of the object.

Physical investigation (auditing) of the food that is physically thrown away is a useful avenue of archaeological (social) research, with the presence (or absence) of food in the waste stream providing unspoken information to the intrepid researcher. Rathje and Murphy’s (1992) pioneered this methodology, which can be summarized by modifying Brillat-Savarin’s (2009) aphorism “Tell me what you throw away, and I will tell you what you are.”

Finally, the current state of the world food supply is leading to a reclassification of food waste. The global population has access to a greater abundance and variety of food and cuisines than ever before, yet food prices are rising and there are international food shortages. One in eight people now suffer from hunger or malnutrition while, at the same time, one in eight are also obese or overweight (Millstone and Lang, 2003; FAO, 2009).

As a result of this paradoxical situation, there is currently debate about expanding the definition of food waste to account for food that is consumed above and beyond what is required to stay healthy, that is approximately 2,000–3,000 calories per day (Michaelowa and Dransfeld, 2008; FAO, 2013). This potential conceptualization of gluttony and overabundance as new forms of food wastage is moving food waste from an environmental and economic predicament to a discourse on food access equality. It remains to be seen if this will become a new area of food waste research.

SEE ALSO: Consumption, Food and Cultural; Environment, Sociology of the; Inequality, Wealth; Taste, Sociology of

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