**Go Home Jamie: reframing consumer choice**

**Peter Jackson**

Department of Geography, University of Sheffield, Sheffield S10 2TN, UK

**Abstract:**

Drawing on a British case study involving celebrity chef Jamie Oliver and his 2008 TV series *Jamie’s Ministry of Food*, this paper challenges the recent framing of ‘consumer choice’ in media representations and government rhetoric. It shows how these framings are part of a new cultural politics of food associated with the current ‘age of austerity’. An alternative framing is proposed, based on an ethnographic understanding of the intimate geographies of everyday consumer practice.

**Keywords:** consumer choice, Jamie’s Ministry of Food, domestic practice

Author accepted manuscript

Published in *Social and Cultural Geography* 17(6), 2016: 753-757

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2015.1124912>

**Introduction**

Developing arguments originally set out in *Maps of Meaning* (Jackson, 1989), this provocation challenges current framings of ‘consumer choice’ where individuals and families (and working-class mothers in particular) are held to account for the consequences of their dietary decisions; where a deficit model is applied to debates about cooking skills and parenting practices; and where media celebrities like Jamie Oliver take it upon themselves to ‘teach a town to cook’. It is argued that these positions are ideological in character, invoking moralised judgements about contemporary consumer practice and raising questions about what Massey (2004) refers to as ‘geographies of responsibility’. Starting with an analysis of the ideological ‘maps’ that underpinned a key moment in *Jamie’s Ministry of Food* (broadcast in 2008), the paper explores the way these ideologies have informed a new cultural politics of food, associated with the current ‘age of austerity’. The paper also draws out the spatialities of these issues in terms of the way they (re)constitute the domestic sphere of everyday food consumption as a specific site of struggle.[[1]](#endnote-1)

***Jamie’s Ministry of Food***

*Jamie’s Ministry of Food* was a TV series and public health campaign developed by British celebrity chef, Jamie Oliver. It followed the success of his previous work on school meals (*Jamie’s School Dinners*, 2005) and has been followed by numerous other initiatives, such as *Jamie’s Sugar Rush* (broadcast in September 2015). *Jamie’s Ministry of Food* was filmed in Rotherham, an industrial town in South Yorkshire where Jamie Oliver established a physical ‘Ministry of Food’ in a vacant shop, offering free 10-week training courses that claim to have taught 10,000 people to cook (<http://www.jamieoliver.com/jamies-ministry-of-food/news.php?title=ministry-of-food-rotherham-bbc-news-story_1>, accessed 18 September 2014). The decision to film in Rotherham was prompted by a previous incident in the town where changes in school meal provision at Rawmarsh Comprehensive School led a group of mothers to deliver take-away food to their children, passing it through the school railings. The incident led to a classic ‘moral panic’ (Fox and Smith 2011) attracting international media coverage as the celebrity chef took the moral high ground to denounce the Rawmarsh mothers for selling junk food to their children (‘Sinner ladies sell junk food to kids’, *The Sun* 16 September 2006). When Jamie Oliver returned to Rotherham to film *Jamie’s Ministry of Food* he faced a mixed local reception, including some organised resistance. My title is taken from one such group whose website used the slogan ‘Jamie Go Home’ (http://jamiegohome.wordpress.com).

Drawing on the iconography of the original (1940s) Ministry of Food, Jamie Oliver used the series to argue that Britain should return to the war-time values of self-sufficiency, culinary simplicity and thrift. The ostensible aim of *Jamie’s Ministry of Food* was to explore the causes of the current obesity ‘epidemic’, to reverse the alleged decline of family meals and to address the supposed lack of cooking skills among contemporary consumers. The series also invoked a range of other highly moralized discourses including those associated with ‘feeding the family’; the vexed relationship between morality and social class; notions of respectability and ‘good taste’; place-based (regional) identities; and the widespread nostalgia for a previous Golden Age of ‘make do and mend’ signalled by the continued cultural resonance of the original Ministry of Food and the collective memory of war-time rationing. One scene from the series has become iconic, focusing on working-class mothers and their alleged deficit of cooking and parenting skills, representing a wider moralization of food.[[2]](#endnote-2)

The scene features Jamie Oliver visiting a young woman called Natasha at her home in Rawmarsh, the site of the ‘sinner ladies’ incident described above.[[3]](#endnote-3) A male voice-over introduces Natasha, telling viewers that ‘She’s just picked up her fourth take-away of the week and it’s only Tuesday’. Natasha’s children are shown eating kebabs on the floor as Jamie Oliver tours her kitchen and marvels at her expensive stove (‘You’ve got an eight-burner cooker, mate, but you never cook!’). Natasha then shows Jamie Oliver her refrigerator with two drawers full of sweets, asking her daughter about her favourite drink (‘Dr Pepper, we love it, don’t we’). Natasha tells Jamie Oliver that she lives off state benefits of £80 a week, most of which is spent on take-away food. She says she is worried about her children ‘being obesed’ and concludes that she just wants to learn how to cook and be healthy.[[4]](#endnote-4)

As we have argued elsewhere (Jackson et al., 2013), the scene (and the reaction it evoked) can be interpreted as evidence of the way social anxieties about food and diet (cooking skills, childhood obesity) spill over into a range of other concerns (about regional stereotypes, social class and gender), forming part of a much longer history of ‘responsibilizing’ consumers (as documented by Draper & Green, 2002). Such anxieties are easily appropriated by those who seek to attribute blame for people’s poor dietary choices and for the adverse health consequences that follow from them. There are, however, other ways of framing these issues, taking an assets-based rather than a deficit approach. Instead of focusing on an apparent lack of parenting or cooking skills, for example, one can examine the stocks of knowledge that people use to justify their actions and make sense of their circumstances, probing the circumstances that constrain people’s choices.. Such an approach leads to very different conclusions about the nature of ‘consumer choice’. Similar arguments have been made about the causes of domestic food waste, for example, demonstrating how it arises as an unintended consequence of everyday routines and domestic practices rather than from consumers’ profligate attitude to food (for detailed evidence, see Evans, 2014).

**Reframing ‘consumer choice’**

As detailed elsewhere (Jackson and the CONANX group, 2013), words like ‘convenience’ and ‘choice’ are often used as explanatory terms in understanding consumer behaviour but they are ideological in the way they reflect particular positions and serve specific interests. While agri-food systems are increasingly globalized in nature, with power overwhelmingly concentrated in corporate hands (Bryant et al., 2013), government rhetoric has increasingly adopted the language of individual choice when discussing contemporary consumer affairs. In the field of public health, for example, successive governments have emphasised the negative consequences of poor dietary choice, placing responsibility on individuals to adopt healthier lifestyles based on sound scientific evidence. The notion of ‘informed choice’ has featured in numerous government reports since the 2004 *Choosing Health* White Paper which insisted that everyone now has the opportunity ‘to make their own individual informed healthy choices’ (DoH, 2004, p.19). Such formulations rely on naïve assumptions about the relationship between knowledge and behaviour, ignoring the economic and social forces that limit the way choices are expressed in practice.[[5]](#endnote-5)

There is a growing body of evidence to refute these framings of consumer choice (reviewed in Jackson, 2015), identifying what might loosely be called ‘good’ reasons for consumers’ apparently ‘bad’ behaviour. For example, families may consume ‘unhealthy’ food because it is a cheaper source of calories than alternative foods that they know are considered healthier. They may do this to save time or money or because they fear that these healthier foods will be wasted if their children refuse to eat them. In such cases, consumer education (including the provision of nutritional advice) is unlikely to change people’s dietary practices, and false assumptions can easily follow concerning the locus of responsibility. It is here that Massey’s work has much to offer, distinguishing between events for which it is possible to attribute personal responsibility and circumstances where collective responsibility can be identified without apportioning individual blame (Massey, 2004).[[6]](#endnote-6)

**The cultural politics of food in an ‘age of austerity’**

It is no coincidence that Jamie Oliver took the war-time Ministry of Food as the model for his recent culinary experiment in Rotherham. For *Jamie’s Ministry of Food* can be located within a wider cultural politics of food where war-time rationing, the values of thrift and the virtues of recycling (‘make do and mend’) have become the subject of nostalgic longing. That such values are readily commodifiable has been described as a form of ‘austerity chic’, expressed in food, fashion and interior design, for example (Bramall, 2013). Significantly, Bramalll argues, the cultural politics of austerity chime with the notions of personal and political responsibility that David Cameron and others have advocated as a response to alleged fiscal irresponsibility that he identifies as having caused the current economic crisis. While Jamie Oliver does not celebrate austerity, his individualization of responsibility in the figure of Natasha and her children represents exactly the ‘terrain of struggle’ whose cultural politics Bramall seeks to describe and which are parodied in arts projects such as *The Ministry of Trying to Do Something About It* that provides one of her examples.

It is, moreover, highly significant that these struggles are being fought in the domestic sphere of individual families and households, and in relation to questions of food and eating, rather than seeking to trace the wider socio-economic and political forces that shape the intimate geographies of people’s everyday lives. Food and eating are often represented as a purely domestic concern, focused on the gendered politics of ‘feeding the family’. But, as Belasco argues, in *Appetite for Change*, food has a strong ‘edible dynamic’ binding present and past, individual and society, private household and world economy, palate and power’ (2007, p.5). While consumers sometimes struggle to make these connections, this provocation seeks to trace the cultural resonance of shows like *Jamie’s Ministry of Food*; to identify the ideological maps that underpin their popularity and commercial success; to understand the conditions that generate them (including the contemporary politics of austerity); and to chart their (domestic and wider) spatialities in order to identify more progressive ways of addressing these issues.[[7]](#endnote-7) One suggestion, advanced here and developed in Jackson (2015), is to seek alternatives to the deficit models that inform individualized notions of ‘consumer choice’ through ethnographically-informed research on consumer practice as well as through critical analysis of contemporary media sources. This provocation represents just one example of how we might go about mapping the geographies of responsibility that centre on the domestic sphere of everyday food consumption – but there are many other areas whose cultural politics remain to be explored.[[8]](#endnote-8)

**References**

Belasco, W.J. (2007). *Appetite for change*. Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press (second edn).

Bramall, R. (2013). *The cultural politics of austerity*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Bryant, A., Bush, L. and Wilk, R. (2013). The history of globalization and the food supply. In A. Murcott, W. Belasco & P. Jackson (Eds.), *The handbook of food research* (pp.34-49). London: Bloomsbury.

DoH (2004). *Choosing health*. London: HMSO.

Draper, A. and Green, J. (2002). Food safety and consumers: constructions of choice and risk, *Social Policy and Administration,* *36,* 610-625.

Evans, D. (2011). Blaming the consumer - once again: the social and material contexts of everyday food waste practices in some English households, *Critical Public Health,* *21,* 429-440.

Evans, D. (2014). *Food waste:* *home consumption, material culture and everyday life.* London: Bloomsbury.

Fox, R., and Smith, G. (2011). Sinner ladies and the gospel of good taste: geographies of food, class and care, *Health and Place*, 17, 403-412.

Hollows, J. and Jones, S. (2010). ‘At least he’s doing something’: moral entrepreneurship and individual responsibility in *Jamie’s Ministry of Food,* *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 13, 307-322.

Jackson, P. (1989). *Maps of meaning*. London: Unwin Hyman.

Jackson, P. (2015). *Anxious appetites*. London: Bloomsbury.

Jackson, P. and the CONANX group (2013). *Food Words.* London: Bloomsbury.

Jackson, P., Watson, M. and Piper, N. (2013). Locating anxiety in the social: the cultural mediation of food fears, *European Journal of Cultural Studies,* 16,24-42.

Massey, D. (2004). Geographies of responsibility, *Geografiska Annaler*, *Series B,* *86,* 5-18.

Meah, A. (2014). Still blaming the consumer? Geographies of responsibility in domestic food safety practices, *Critical Public Health,* *24,* 88-103.

Rich, E. (2011). ‘I see her being obesed!’: public pedagogy, reality media and the obesity crisis, *Health,* *15,* 3-21.

Which? and Government Office of Science (2015). *Food System Challenges*, available from: <http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/assets/Uploads/Which-GOS-Food-Report-FINAL.pdf> (accessed 4 September 2015).

Wilson, D. and Keil, R. (2008). The real creative class, *Social and Cultural Geography,* *9,* 841-847.

**Notes**

1. This paper draws on research by my former PhD student, Nick Piper, and was funded by the European Research Council. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Hollows and Jones (2010) refer to Jamie Oliver as a ‘moral entrepreneur’. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The scene can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x44WuD_qWsU> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Rich (2011) draws attention to the phrasing of ‘being obesed’ with its implication of passivity and a lack of agency. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Compare Wilson and Keil’s (2008) excoriating critique of the ‘creative class’ concept which they describe as class-based and mystificatory, arguing that the real creative class in contemporary urban economies is the poor whose deft resourcefulness is systematically ignored by neoliberal city planners and politicians. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. See Evans (2011) and Meah (2014) for some applications of these ideas in the fields of environmental politics and food safety. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. The argument that consumers struggle to understand the ramification of contemporary agri-food systems is support by the findings of a recent report by Which? (the Consumers’ Association) and the Government Office of Science. Based on a series of public dialogues, the report found that UK consumers were generally aware of the health consequences of their dietary choices (including rising obesity rates) but that they ‘were shocked to hear about the impact of food production on climate change, the environment and water shortages’ (2015, p.3). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. We are, for example, currently exploring the ‘domestic nexus’ of food, energy and water security in a series of workshops, funded by ESRC’s Nexus Network programme (<http://www.thenexusnetwork.org/networking-grants-announced/>, accessed 7 September 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)