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(doi: 10.2383/38264)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 2, maggio-agosto 2012

Ente di afferenza:

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Democracy vs. Distinction in Omnivorous Food Culture

Clarifications, Elaborations, and a Response to Therese Andrews

by Shyon Baumann *and* Josée Johnston

doi: 10.2383/38264

In a scholarly environment where more is written than anyone can hope to read, we appreciate having attention brought to our ideas and arguments. We are likewise happy to have the opportunity to clarify those ideas and arguments, and even to make some new claims that we did not have the opportunity to make within the scope of our original article. In this response, we address the critiques raised by Andrews, which are sometimes, in our view, critiques of the literature on omnivorousness on which we rely. We identify four core questions that are raised by her critique, and in answering these questions, we hope to clarify and further support our initial arguments. More ambitiously, our hope is that this kind of academic dialogue can help push forward scholarly research on culture, omnivorousness, and inequality.

Question #1: What do we mean by democracy vs. distinction?

We are pleased that Andrews takes no issue with what we see as the primary contribution of our article [Johnston and Baumann 2007], which is to identify what we call “the logic of omnivorousness” – a logic that we more fully substantiate and elaborate as being essential to “foodie” culture in our follow-up book project, *Foodies* [Johnston and Baumann 2010]. In American gourmet food discourse, or the world of foodies, we find that frames of *authenticity* and *exoticism* valorize particular foods as “worthy.” We speculate that the frames we find for omnivorous food consumption

may be adapted to characterize omnivorous consumption more broadly, and we hope that future research will test this speculation.

We also claim, and here Andrews does take issue, that the logic of omnivorousness embodies a tension between democracy and distinction. Let us be clear what we mean. On the one hand, omnivorous food choices are inclusive, multicultural, and broad; in other words, they are more democratic than the traditional culinary hierarchy where only French food was highly valorized and legitimated, and where knowledge of elite cuisine was relatively restricted [see Mennell 1996, 266]. In the culinary context of omnivorousness, taco trucks, hamburgers, doughnuts, and Korean kim chi can all be venerated as delicious choices worth seeking out, cooking, photographing, blogging about, and reading about in *The New York Times* food and dining pages. Studying this discourse and later speaking with foodies [Johnston and Baumann 2010], we saw that omnivorous food culture does indeed showcase a broadening of food interest and knowledge beyond a handful of food snobs, as well as an opening to ethno-cultural cuisines beyond high-end French fare. But “democratization” is only one half of the tension we document in gourmet food culture. The culinary discourse and subsequent interviews with foodies we studied suggested that omnivorous food choices require large volumes of cultural and economic capital to be practiced fully and extensively. Frequenting a taco truck may be a relatively affordable venture, but considerable economic and cultural capital is required to know about, and confidently enjoy the *range* of omnivorous food options – which include low-end fare like tacos, but also the food of celebrated chef-artists (e.g., Thomas Keller), costly cooking gear (e.g., Wolf ranges), and expensive (albeit casual) restaurant experiences.

In the end, we find that the democratic elements of omnivorous cuisine are overtly emphasized in the discourse, while elements of foodie distinction are subtle, and covert. For example, food writers’ celebrate the accessibility and deliciousness of street food, but frequently assume that readers have the transnational mobility required to collect and enjoy the finest specimens of global cuisine. We argue that the covert aspects of distinction are powerful precisely because they are covert, and gourmet food discourse, and by extension omnivorous cultural consumption more broadly, represents a form of cultural capital implicated in the reproduction of class inequality. This is an argument that we further develop with respect to the implicit and explicit political dimensions of American gourmet food culture in this journal [Johnston and Baumann 2009]. We argue that in addition to explicit discussions of political issues such as the environment and fair trade, gourmet food culture manifests an implicit politics of class inequality where the potential to view inequality as a social problem is dissolved. We therefore identify gourmet food eaters as omnivores with

class privilege that is, in part, naturalized by their engagement with, and contributions to this food culture (for more on how this works, see Question #3).

The concept of “democracy vs. distinction” is about identifying both poles of this tension, and also about studying, and elaborating on the tension itself. In Andrews’ critique of our work, only the “distinction” half of this tension is noted, which leads to the erroneous suggestion that we see omnivorous food culture only as a tool of class domination. Interestingly, in other academic contexts, our work has been read as unduly focused on the democratic nature of the discourse, particularly among politicized graduate students who question exactly how “democratic” omnivorous food culture is when an upscale hamburger costs upwards of \$35 dollars, and might be sold in a gentrified diner that once served the needs of working class patrons.¹ To be clear, we are arguing that omnivorous (food) culture is characterized by elements of exclusion *and* inclusiveness, and that both elements need to be simultaneously considered in omnivorous research projects. This is not to say that these elements are equal, or cancel each other out. We believe that the ideological implications of this tension need to be interrogated through further research efforts, particularly in light of contemporary neoliberal conditions of socio-economic inequality (see Question #4).

Question #2. Who are the omnivores?

Andrews critiques our argument through claiming that we argue that “only people with high status” have the knowledge and tastes to eat according to the omnivorous logic we identify. Furthermore, Andrews claims that our data, being based on “lifestyle” magazines such as *Bon Appétit*, are not really representative of “legitimate” tastes, in the Bourdieusian sense (although the import of this criticism seems to counteract the prior criticism). Finally, in her own research, Andrews finds “a heterogeneous taste profile,” which stands in contrast to a “vertically ranked taste dichotomy” based on a “traditional elite-mass-model of taste or consumption” that Andrews claims we argue for. The implication of the existence of taste heterogeneity instead of a dichotomy is that the link between taste and class is mostly dissolved, or at least too complicated to make any claims about the elite status of omnivores.

Although our main argument is about what omnivorousness looks like and how it manifests in a culinary context, it is a fair question to ask who we think practices omnivorousness. Our answer must necessarily rely on other work on omnivorousness in the American context; this is a question that cannot be fully addressed by

¹ Thank-you to our University of Toronto graduate students (especially Zachary Hyde) for forthright, critical, and insightful questions in this regard.

the qualitative research we employed and requires survey data. That body of work, (e.g., Peterson and Rossman [2008]), shows unequivocally that omnivorous cultural consumption is stratified primarily by education, and secondarily by income or by occupation. (We leave aside the complications of the findings regarding differences between highbrow and lowbrow omnivores vs. univores.) That work also shows that such categories are representations of relationships between variables whose correlations are never 1.0. In other words, in cultural consumption research, as in sociology generally, we cannot say “only” people with high education (or whatever we are measuring) do anything. This particular question and relationship requires us to think probabilistically. We cannot find a claim in our article that only people of high status eat in ways prescribed by the discourse we examine, and Andrews does not cite a specific page for her criticism. We would claim that, as per the prior research on omnivorousness, and as per the information we have about gourmet food eaters, people with relatively high amounts of cultural and economic capital predominantly engage with the discourse we examine. We do not dispute the existence of non-elite gourmet food eaters, or foodies.² Nevertheless, our overall argument about gourmet food as cultural capital does not rely on total social closure around tastes. Like Bourdieu and others who study taste and education or income, we are content to rely on reasonably strong relationships, which the prior research on omnivorousness has clearly established.

Likewise, we do not assert that gourmet food eaters are the most elite Americans. We are not troubled by Andrews’s critique that our data represent the tastes of the petit-bourgeoisie rather than the dominant fractions of the dominant class. We argue that omnivorous culinary consumption functions as cultural capital in the contemporary American context. It need not be the stratifying taste *par excellence* to do so. Unlike Bourdieu’s specialization in the distinctions between the fractions of the dominant classes, we do not focus on those distinctions, not only because we do not have the data to do so, but also because those distinctions are less salient in the contemporary American context [Lamont 1992]. It is useful to explicitly recognize just where the bar for cultural/culinary capital is in the contemporary United States. Learning a gourmet food recipe from a magazine such as *Bon Appétit* might have been déclassé for intellectual elites in 1960s France, but it is a perfectly respectable, and, in fact, relatively *rare*, cultural practice in the United States today, as time spent cooking has declined with women’s participation in the labour market [Schor 1992,

² In the research we conducted for *Foodies* [Johnston and Baumann 2010] and in subsequent research projects, we have spoken with and encountered foodies who possess a range of economic and cultural capital; although significantly, we have yet to encounter anybody with a deficit of both.

90-99]. Moreover, one implication of Andrews's argument that our data do not represent elite tastes and hence do not represent cultural capital, is that the frames we identify are "baseline" culinary tastes in the United States. This idea is contradicted by epidemiological studies of Americans' eating practices that show a link between social class and poor nutrition [Darmon and Drewnowski 2008], a situation often linked to, industrially produced food eaten in chain-restaurants serving precisely the inauthentic and non-exotic food that gourmet food discourse devalues.

Finally, we must address the question of a taste dichotomy (elite vs. mass) and its opposition to a profile of taste heterogeneity among consumers. Frankly, we are surprised to see the suggestion made that we might think in such simplistic terms, and cannot find a suggestion of a simple elite vs. mass taste dichotomy in our article. To clarify, we see tastes and cultural practices and objects as recipients of *relative* degrees of cultural legitimation. Think of Bourdieu's schematic where he places genres and works along multiple continua within a field. Within the culinary field, some foods are more legitimated than others, but certainly not in a simple, dichotomized way; we believe it is important to see *relative* degrees of culinary legitimacy rather than making "hard and fast categorical distinctions" [Johnston and Baumann 2010, 99-98]. A range of options for omnivorous legitimacy is available. The pursuit of the best food trucks may be practiced distinctly, and by different groups of people, from dining at a French restaurant, and these two food experiences may require and express different levels of cultural capital. However, they both engage with cultural capital in a way that is distinct from the un-reflexive, and un-ironic consumption of mass-marketed chain-food, or fast-food.³

Question #3. How does cultural capital work?

Andrews makes a series of criticisms about our assumptions about how cultural capital works. To reiterate, our main contribution is to describe how omnivorous

³ The consumption of fast-food is a complex issue, since although it is linked with class stratification [e.g., Johnston, Rodney and Szabo 2012], and almost all of our foodie interviewees said that they despised chain restaurants like the Olive Garden or Red Lobster [Johnston and Baumann 2010]. At the same time, some foodies clearly enjoy and eat junk-food or fast-food as part of their omnivorous repertoire – often as a way of distinguishing themselves as not being food snobs [Johnston and Baumann 2010, 229]. What distinguishes fast-food, or chain-food consumption as an acceptable practice is that it is a) often done reflexively, and with a sense of irony that approximates Bourdieu's "aesthetic disposition", and b) it is often part of a larger culinary repertoire that includes engagement with more authentic and/or exotic fare. An anecdotal example: an enthusiastic foodie friend was recently engaging in a fish sandwich quest that brought her to some of the city's most revered eateries, but also included a trip to sample the McDonald's filet 'o fish.

food choices are discursively constituted, rather than to examine how food tastes and practices produce social exclusion or inclusion. We do not have the data to make claims about how cultural capital works on a micro-sociological scale, and so we rely on prior work on cultural capital, both Bourdieu and the literature on omnivorousness, to explain the significance of our findings. However, we are eager to take this opportunity to elaborate on how we think cultural capital works in the culinary field.

Among the criticisms that Andrews makes are that we suggest a “one-to-one relationship” between what food writers write and the culinary tastes and practices of American elites. The implication of this criticism is that we understand cultural capital as emerging from the efforts of food writers, and that we have no data on how food writing is received or its place in the field. Andrews also critiques us for not explaining how food tastes work to “legitimate domination,” especially because, in her view, culinary tastes and practices are visible within narrow social circles and within face-to-face interactions. Most engagingly, Andrews questions where we stand regarding the deployment of culinary tastes as a conscious status display strategy. At one point in our article, we use the phrasing of consumers “wishing” to signal distinction, which creates confusion over how we see cultural capital working. Andrews effectively asks, if it is a conscious status enhancement strategy, then how does it work in everyday settings? Finally, Andrews claims that we “explicitly support the view that cultural taste is learned in childhood” even though our data cannot speak to this issue.

Regarding a one-to-one relationship between what writers write and what gourmet eaters think and do, again, we cannot find such a claim in our article, and we would encourage probabilistic thinking about such relationships at any rate. Having said that, we ourselves were curious about the relationship between published gourmet food discourse and the tastes and eating practices of the people who read this discourse. In our 2010 book *Foodies*, we report data from interviews with 30 self-identified foodies. We were surprised at the high degree of correspondence between the frames we found in the published discourse and the frames we found in the foodies’ discourse, with one point of departure being the foodies’ heavier and more explicit emphasis on the role of ethnicity in evaluating the authenticity of ethno-cultural cuisines (i.e., they were more likely to explicitly state that they believed an ‘ethnic’ restaurant was good if it was run by, and frequented by, people of that ethno-cultural grouping). Although we cannot arbitrate between whether food writers shape or mirror the tastes of gourmet food eaters (we would speculate that they do some of both), we can say that the data we collected as we continued our research provides a reassuring answer to Andrews’s concern on this point.

The next critiques about the visibility of food tastes and practices, how they legitimate class domination, and how consciously and strategically they are deployed

by members of the dominant class, are interrelated and complicated. We are happy to have the chance to clarify our thinking on this point, especially since Andrews's depiction of our argument about food and cultural capital resembles the Dr. Seuss story "The Sneetches," where Sneetches with stars on their chest haughtily self-segregate from those without stars. While we like the moral of Dr. Seuss' story, the social world is rarely so simple.

The focus on the visibility of cultural practices as a way to understand the role of culture in class domination has been an unfortunate development in some of the literature that applies Bourdieu's theory to American cultural consumption. However, we do not believe that seeing what certain individuals are eating is the main way that culinary tastes reproduce inequality or class differences. Instead, we concur with Holt's understanding of how tastes function in class reproduction. Holt clearly is sympathetic to a Bourdieusian understanding of taste as oppositional to a Simmelian one. He writes, "Rather than emulation, the social reproductive mechanisms in (Bourdieu's Theory of Tastes) parallel Gramsci's conception of hegemony" [Holt 1997, 95]. In this view, which we share, tastes naturalize inequality because they are taken-for-granted and automatic, and, crucially, because through them people understand how they are similar to some people and different from others. The omnivorous culinary tastes we identify – valuing authenticity and exoticism in food – are understood as a common sense way to evaluate food. These common sense frames legitimate, 'good' taste as universal, rather than situate these tastes as particular, contextual, and frequently privileged. This is the way in which omnivorous tastes are most implicated in class reproduction: by reinforcing social boundaries, and normalizing consumption habits that often require considerable economic and cultural capital to fully execute. While these processes are cognitive, psychological, emotional, and not always deliberately elitist or visually discernable, we would also dispute Andrews's assertion that culinary tastes are not socially visible. Eating is one of our most social cultural activities, engaged in daily. Opportunities for seeing others' tastes in food abound, especially in a North American context where continuous snacking and public eating is the norm.⁴

Andrews is right to point out that we are not entirely consistent regarding how consciously or strategically culinary tastes are used in class reproduction. Our inconsistency is reflective of a larger debate in the literature regarding the relationship

⁴ One anecdotal piece of evidence on that front: at the undergraduate campus where we teach, students have told us that it is much "cooler" to carry around a Starbucks coffee container than a Tim Horton's cup (a low-end fast-food chain), and even that students who have finished their drink will continue to carry around their Starbucks container because of the image it conveys. Sometimes, a diluted version of the Dr. Seuss story about *The Sneetches* is socially visible.

between culture and action (viz., Vaisey [2009]), specifically on the balance between action as directed by automatic, habitual cognition vs. by discursive, conscious cognition. In addition, this same tension has fuelled discussion aiming to clarify how well the concept of the habitus manages to incorporate both structure and agency into an explanation for action. Where do we actually stand? Given that we see tastes functioning as a form of hegemony, we see tastes and the behaviours they engender as clearly flowing from unconscious cognition [e.g., Johnston and Cappelliez 2012]. However, Bourdieu allows for agency with the concept of habitus, and Swidler [1986] sees culture as a toolkit, which actors deploy in creative ways. Similarly, we see people as sometimes self-conscious about their tastes, and we also see evidence for the ways that culinary choices form a kind of cultural repertoire [e.g., Johnston, Szabo, and Rodney 2011]. Relatedly, the tension between democratic and distinctive aspects of gourmet food discourse might create opportunities for shifts in the balance between an automatic vs. conscious expression of taste. A long-standing socialization for culinary authenticity might subconsciously steer an eater away from a mass-market chain-restaurant, and towards a locally-owned neighbourhood bistro. However, we can also see how a conscious desire to make connections to other cultures might encourage an eater to select an “ethnic” restaurant, or how a conscious commitment to sustainability may catalyze a switch from regular coffee to shade-grown coffee. Both choices potentially bring more conscious deliberation into the realm of food decisions in ways that should not be ignored or underestimated, even as we critically evaluate the broader implications of individual food preferences.⁵

Although Andrews claims that we explicitly endorse the theory that cultural tastes are learned only in childhood, in reviewing our article we do not find that endorsement. Nor is that what we think today. In fact, as we mention in the article, we think that eaters can gain cultural capital from reading gourmet discourse (magazines, restaurant reviews, blogs, cookbooks), and we think that gourmet food writers can influence audience’s tastes to some degree. Most importantly, we are relying on prior literature on class and culture, namely the entire literature on omnivorousness, which surveys adults about their tastes and practices and finds correlations between class and taste patterns. The argument that adult tastes function as cultural capital does not need to specify exactly when those tastes are ingrained. For the record, we do agree with Bourdieu that tastes are more natural and automatic when learned in childhood.

⁵ See Johnston and Baumann [2010, 100-104] for a review of the risks of Othering in “ethnic” culinary adventuring; on the corporate cooptation of locavorism see Johnston, Biro and McKendrick [2009].

But as we discuss above, tastes can vary in how automatic or consciously they are held and expressed.

Question #4. What do our data allow us to say, and what should we not say?

This last question is implicit in Andrews's critique and underlies most of what she writes about our article. Andrews does not see our claims as warranted by our data, specifically about the way that tastes reproduce inequality and among whom. Because we have data on gourmet discourse, rather than on consumers themselves, Andrews is reluctant to accept our claims that gourmet food works as cultural capital to reproduce class inequality in the United States.

We have some sympathy for this criticism, but we also have two responses that justify our ability to make the claims we make. The first response is that in our article we relied on prior work that demonstrates precisely what Andrews is looking for, namely, a link between omnivorous taste preferences and class stratification. Prior survey data on taste preferences as well as on networks has already established a connection between omnivorousness, cultural consumption and high status [e.g., Alderson, Junisbai, and Heacock 2007; Peterson 2005; Erikson 1996], even though we think more work is needed to elaborate the micro-sociological processes and boundary work linking cultural consumption and social class.

The second response is that our paper was the first study to spell out the logic of omnivorousness, and the particular logic had implications for social inequality that we wanted to render explicit. Indeed, we deliberately interpreted our data, rather than read them at face value alone, in order to make claims about their significance. In contrast to survey data that examines patterns in tastes and cultural practices, our goal was to study the discourse through which boundaries are made and aesthetic choices are legitimated. The discourse relies on particular frames and ideologies to evaluate food. These frames and ideologies were revealing: they extolled democracy and related values (e.g., individuality, meritocracy), while downplaying, or minimizing the ways that omnivorous, high-status eating was culturally or economically inaccessible, and the class divide separating the cosmopolitan omnivore from the 'authentic' local offering a specific delicacy. The implications for inequality seemed significant, especially given that omnivorous cultural consumption was co-occurring with increases in class inequality in the United States and globally. In the back of our minds, we saw the logic of omnivorousness as a way to sociologically make sense of why inequality is not considered a pressing social problem, especially in the years

preceding the current financial crisis. It seemed plausible, and continues to feel plausible, that the sharp edges of cultural and economic inequality can be dulled by the feeling that one is not a snob, or an elitist, but simply a food lover who enjoys humble, simple authentic foods, and casual dining experiences. We stand by this interpretation, given the corroborating studies that preceded and followed ours [e.g., Kendall 2005; Stuber 2006; Warde, Wright, and Gayo-Cal 2008], and given the fit we found with the changes in the larger cultural and social structural environment in which the culinary field is embedded.

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Democracy vs. Distinction in Omnivorous Food Culture

Clarifications, Elaborations, and a Response to Therese Andrews

Abstract: This article adds to current sociological debates on cultural taste and social distinction. I particularly discuss the use of cultural capital as an analytical tool for capturing and explaining aspects of distinction within contemporary gourmet food culture, and explore the possibility of whether a different conceptualization of social distinction is more fruitful for understanding some of the patterns that are uncovered. I argue, more generally, that all social gaps in cultural taste cannot be taken as indicators of unequal distribution of power in society, as some Bourdieu-inspired scholars, tend to do.

Keywords: Social distinction, gourmet food culture, cultural capital, fashion, Pierre Bourdieu, Georg Simmel.

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Josée Johnston is Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Toronto. Her work focuses on the sociological study of food, and investigates questions at the intersection of culture, politics, and the environment.