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How to cite

Surian A. (2012). Unlearning food predictability. [Italian Sociological Review, 2 (2), 116-123]
Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.13136/isr.v2i2.36>

[DOI: 10.13136/isr.v2i2.36]

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3. Article accepted for publication (*data*)

April 2012

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Unlearning food predictability

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1. Disciplinary approaches to food studies

Social studies investigating food and eating issues date back a long time and have a specific tradition within the anthropological literature. To mention only two examples: Garrick Mallery's paper, "Maimers and meals" (1888), appeared in Volume 1, No. 3, of the *American Anthropologist*; William Robertson Smith's *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (1889) contains an important chapter on food. According to Mintz and Du Bois (2002) the study of food and eating has been important in order to improve scientific understanding of significant broad societal processes such as political-economic value-creation, symbolic value-creation, and the social construction of memory.

While the anthropological literature provides valuable accounts of the human diversity when it comes to food, socio-economic studies are highlighting the selective enhancement of the efficiency and predictability dimensions of modern approaches to industrial food, its commodification and distribution: "*Fast-food restaurant rank very high in the dimension of predictability. In order to help ensure consistency, the fast-food restaurant offers only a limited menu. Predictable end products are made possible by the use of similar raw materials, technologies, and preparation and serving techniques. Not only the food is predictable; the physical structures, the logo, the 'ambience', and even the personnel are as well*" (Ritzer, 2008).

Food production and consumption has been affected and it has affected the globalization of the economic relations (Gallino, 2009) that took place in the past five decades, raising issues of economic, social and environmental justice: "*Who grows food—and how much; who eats it—and at what cost—are questions that will determine social and political relationships not only inside the boundaries of individual nations but also between countries at the international level*" (George, 1979: 4). Consumer choices concerning eating and food might have a tremendous impact upon local, national and international policies. Worldwide, food demand is shifting from basic commodities (i.e. cereals and rice) to products with a higher value added, (i.e. meat, fish, fruit, vegetables, fats and oils). The increase in the demand for dairy and meat is leading to a surge in the demand for and prices of cereals, as well as in the demand for land. Meat production is particularly demanding in terms of energy, cereal and water. Today, nearly half of the world's cereals are being used for animal feed. Results from the International Model for Policy Analysis of Agricultural Commodities and Trade (IMPACT)¹ illustrate the potential beneficial worldwide effect of diets in high-income countries that would shift away from meat- and cerealfeed- intensive goods - thereby relieving pressures on targeted markets - but shifting toward other goods as substitutes, which introduces price pressure elsewhere. On the whole, the benefits of releasing grains from livestock production systems by reducing the demand for meat would have a much greater effect on decreasing malnutrition than increasing the consumption of healthy foods like nutrientladen pulses, fruits, and vegetables might have.

¹ IMPACT is a partial equilibrium agricultural model for crop and livestock commodities; it was developed by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) to project global food supply, food demand, and food security to the year 2020 and beyond.

Sociological studies have often included issues of food and eating within broader social frameworks although more recently scholars and international reviews have come to devote a specific focus to food and social issues. Recent examples include McMillan and Coveney (2010), and the 2010 Special Issue of the Journal of Sociology on the Sociology of Food and Eating introduced and edited by Ward, Coveney, and Henderson (2010).

Ward, Coveney, and Henderson (2010) identify globalization as a factor in rising food costs and food insecurity. “*Growing demand fuelled by rising populations (Stoeckel, 2008) and increased consumer expectations and consumer demands (ODI, 2008); alongside diminishing food supplies attributed to poor harvests in export countries (ODI, 2008), increasing farming production costs (Stoeckel, 2008) and the use of crops to produce biofuels (Dornboech and Steenblik, 2007) have all contributed to rising food costs. Food cost plays a significant role in mediating food choice, particularly among low income people (Harrison et al., 2007), who often have to cut back on food spending to allow for other essentials such as housing and utilities (Dowler, 2008), contributing in turn, to poorer health*”.

Ward, Coveney, and Henderson (2010) also highlight how the “risk” category is far from neutral and policies in which public authorities invest in the health and well-being of children to meet the responsibilities of future citizenship fall in the category that Giddens calls the “*colonization of the future*” (1991: 111) as they are led by ideologies of motherhood which promote selfless and labour-intensive mothering.

The 2010 Special Issue of the Journal of Sociology on the Sociology of Food and Eating also devotes special attention to ethical consumption. The ethical consumption of food often centres on localism, as a means of promoting environmental sustainability and social justice through reducing “food miles” and by creating alternate food networks (DuPuis and Goodman, 2005). Thus it provides significant ground for the construction of identity through food choice with that choice providing a mark of membership of cultural groups as well as a key factor influencing the establishment and the development of social relations (Fischler, 1988, Secondulfo, 2012).

2. Food sociological theories and local models

An interesting opportunity to explore social behaviours in relation to food and eating is provided by the book (*CiboGlocale. I consumi alimentari dei Veneti tra incertezze e senso di comunità - Glocal Food. Veneto population's food consumption between uncertainties and sense of community*) recently edited by Scanagatta (2011)² on the basis of a research implemented in the Veneto Region where his research group administered 799 questionnaires taking into account population differences according to age, gender, residence place. The study is concerned with the effects of societal changes on eating patterns and vice-versa (although it does not address issues related to GMO and it does not address immigrant patterns of consumption). Authors such as Wilk (2002) argue that in examining consumption choices one must consider consumption as identity and explore cultural systems of meaning and value, a perspective that seems very present in the Scanagatta (2011) study. Sponsored by the Regional Authority, it focuses on eating and identities

² The book is opened by a chapter by Silvio Scanagatta addressing development benchmarking as reflected into food and community issues (*Cibo e comunità come sviluppo*, 9:26). The actual study is structured into seven chapters and grouped into three sections. The first section addresses issues of citizenship. It includes a chapter by Francesca Setiffi concerning citizenship and identity (*Una, nessuna, due identità. Identità italiana e veneta nelle scelte di consumo*, 27:40) and a chapter by Francesca Guarino focusing on buy-boycott attitudes (*Dal mercato al territorio, le tattiche alimentari del cittadino veneto*, 41:58). The second chapter is concerned with food and eating choices in relation to crises issues. It is opened by a chapter by Scanagatta addressing risk and aspiration issues (*Il Veneto tra comunità rischio e futuro*, 59:74) followed by a chapter by Paolo Angelini on different typologies of more or less autonomous behaviours when it comes to eating and food preferences (*Scegliere sicurezza. Influenze sociali e controllo personale*, 75:102). The last chapter focuses on food in the everyday life. It presents three chapters with profiles concerning generational issues (Chiara Pattaro, *La questione generazionale*, 103:118), gender issues (Barbara Segatto, *Gli uomini, le donne e il cibo*, 119:130), social issues and consumerism (Giulia Golo, *Consumare socialità*, 131:142).

and how imagined and actual food preferences and cuisines provide added concreteness to ideas of local and / or national identities. Various scholars are introducing and using food preferences and eating in the humanities and social sciences as key features in the creation and reproduction of local, regional, national and supra-national cultures and identities (Counihan and van Esterik, 1997; Wilson, 2006; McMillan and Coveney, 2010). As Wilson (2006:15) observes, *“the importance of drinking and eating to identity matters is apparent in all places and walks of life, regardless of whether one chooses to see identity as a set of relatively fixed personal and social attributes, largely immutable over time and space, or sees it as behavioural and symbolic responses to multiple social stimuli, wherein aspects of status, role and social meanings combine to create and constrain complex and always changing notions of self and notions of identification with larger and wider social entities. Food and drink are building blocks in the construction of all social identities”*. Scanagatta (2011) research project was implemented ten years after the crises that has affected Italian food expenditures between 2001 and 2002, as families began to modify their shopping behaviors as a consequence of the significant increase of food prices as well as of changing perception in relation to inflation due to the introduction of the Euro as national currency. Authors such as La Cecla (1998) have shown in accurate ways how food and eating practice are dynamic in nature and cannot be captured fully not even in cookbooks. Recent studies have already casted their interpretation concerning the role of food and eating behaviours as a dynamic factor that contributes to the evolution of Italian identities: *“Italians will react to the risks imposed on food and foodways by EU regulation, industrialization, modernization, globalization, McDonaldization, and Europeanization, in part by (re)constructing and asserting a nationalist agenda that is often couched in terms of gastronomic superiority. Consumer awareness and protection will define this agenda either through government policy or the creation of special interest groups based at the national or regional level designed to defend groups of people from the risks imposed by any or all of the aforementioned processes. As a result, the consumption of food will be transformed to a selective consumerism, where purchases will require an element of caveat emptor, with preference given to local and certified foods”* (Castellanos and Bergstresser, 2006:197).

Scanagatta (2011) study duly takes into account recent surveys such as Ismea (2007) that show how recent crises led to a different approach to shopping that opened the way to enhanced attention for issues of health and locality in orienting consumers' food choices. Ogden (1998) and more recently Aiello (2011) have outlined how people are increasingly perceiving health as a result of individual choices rather than the result of external variables beyond their control. This is raising consumers' awareness about the importance of diet for their health. Such an awareness is reflected in significant statistical studies on the general state of health and on the consumption patterns of various populations. These studies are showing how certain foods (or specific food components) seem to have a direct impact on the incidence of certain diseases (A.C. Nielsen, 2008; European Food Information Council, 2005; ISMEA, 2007).

The Veneto Region is particularly interesting as a study conducted by the Regional Authority (Regione Veneto, 2008) shows that this is the main Italian Northern Region in terms of percentage of agricultural enterprises, the fourth within the Italian ranking, following the Southern regions Puglia, Sicily and Campania who are the main traditional food providers. It is also the Region that while on the one hand has widely implemented an industrial agricultural model on the other hand it has devoted to organic farming 2% of the Regional agricultural land. Most important, Veneto organic farming is highly specialized and it includes topo producers in relation to wine (especially around Verona) and in other specific sectors (Bustaffa, 2007).

Along with the implementation of a dominant industrial agricultural model, modern families, especially in the USA and in European countries, have adopted food consumption patterns as induced by dominant media and advertising strategies, privileging industrial products (Ritzer, 2008). A remarkable feature of Scanagatta (2011) study is the ability to show and to explain how Veneto families are not giving up their role of autonomous actors in choosing the food and consumption strategy that best suit them, despite being among the wealthiest and most productive within Italy. So while a number of features of the Veneto development model are clearly oriented

towards a technological and industrial modernity, the choices of a significant portion of Veneto families are still oriented towards local, traditional and even organic food products (Scanagatta, 2011:64). This does not mean that certain daily behaviours are not heavily influenced by modernity. Scanagatta (2001:62) provides the reader with a striking tension between two physical spaces, that reflect the new sociological trends in relation to food: on one hand there is the widespread behaviour of eating lunch where one works or in the neighbourhood of the job place; on the other hand there is the passion for the “traditional”, “local” and “authentic” sites where to eat together with family and friends at special occasions. In both cases these behaviours are taking place outside the home place although in different ways they both point at home and family cooking as the ideal condition for eating.

This does not mean that home cooking is able to close the gap between what one wishes to eat and what one is actually eating. This is an interesting feature of the study, identifying “good” (fish, fruit and vegetables) and “bad” (bread, cheese, meat, pasta, rice) food on the basis of the judgments and wishes expressed by the interviewed people. This food classification and the partial inability to actually choose for the better food is linked to two main features. On one hand the study records significant differences between what the Veneto people are saying about their daily food practice and their abstract idea of modernity that induces them to declare a significant distance between such practice and what they “know” preferable food should be (Scanagatta, 2011:59). On the other hand, it appears quite evident that “good” food are often more expensive, they require longer preparation and cooking time, and they are less present among those targeted by industrial production (Scanagatta, 2011:61).

Based on the responses to the 2011 questionnaire, in general Veneto people seem to take a distance from modern marketing narratives as produced by major corporations and advertising enterprises. Predominantly a rural society until a few decades ago, they tend to listen and to rely upon local contacts and suggestions, especially with the local retailers and to invest time into qualitative relations (Scanagatta, 2011:45). This has led the research group to devote specific attention to citizenship features of food behaviours. Here the study shows some limit of the survey instrument as the main focus of active citizenship seems to be buy-boycott (Gesualdi, 2002) behaviours (4 out of 10 people declare themselves “sensible” to the ideas and practice of buy-boycott), while no attention is given to the various forms of cooperative purchasing and support to organic farming as territorial conservative practice.

Food cooperative purchasing with a local focus is particularly developed in Italy, including an effective national network, over 1000 Solidarity Purchasing Groups (Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale, GAS) and initial attempts to give birth to Solidarity Economy Districts (Distretti di economia solidale) that involve both consumer and producer organisations. It is not by chance that the third International Conference on Degrowth for Ecological Sustainability and Social Equity took place in Venice (September 2012) both supported by and with a significant part of the programme devoted to Solidarity Purchasing Groups who are defined in the conference programme as organisations promoting “experiences of responsible and sustainable economics, in order to think of new ways of engaging in politics from below and of new models of economic organization, people-centered and in relationship with the territory”. Within this perspective the consumption of local food should be seen as a way to forge bonds between consumers and local growers and serve a community building function (Seyfang, 2003; Dilley, 2009). The Padova Solidarity Purchasing Groups seems worth specific attention as each of three of its twelve groups count about 4-500 networked families. In one case the Solidarity Purchasing Group is exclusively buying organic food and this has increased the ability by the organic farming local cooperatives to involve consumers in their territorial conservative practice. Clarke et al. (2007, quoted in Dilley, 2009:17) suggest that ethical consumerism represents a political phenomenon. They observe that ethical consumerism is a means of extending existing concerns into new fields of practice and are related to new forms of public action over a range of contentious issues. This may represent a primary mode of political engagement, distinct from classical political modes of engagement - collective mobilisation, lobbying and claims making. They argue that ethical consumption does not necessarily require a

full overhaul of one's identity as an ethical consumer. Members of the same Padova groups are promoting or participating in significant local initiatives concerning two further related issues that are given marginal attention in the Scanagatta (2011) study: the re-use of the significant amount of wasted food and food insecurity, including the provision of food to the poorest sectors of the population, with one organization alone (Beati Costruttori di Pace) catering today over 10.000 people in Padova, an initiative that is encouraging the involvement of committed young people.

Veneto young people seem to recognise themselves in the local as well as in the national identity. When it comes to food choices they tend to rely on the National / Italian origin of the product (72,6% considers this "safe") rather than the Regional origin of food product (only 61,8% considers it "safe") or, even less, the "high quality" of products (57,3%). It does not go unnoticed that while traditional and home cooking is considered particularly important and even a key feature of quality food, only 43,9% of young people consider home cooked food as safe food and a way to prevent health risks that are connected to food. The overall population shows some more trust into home cooked food 47,2% (Scanagatta, 2011:34).

When it comes to local identities, 65,2% of those who consider themselves as having a "strong" Veneto identity say that they would spend more in order to buy products of Veneto origin. This is a significant percentage when compared with the overall population where only 50% would do so. The interesting data identified by the Scanagatta (2011) study is that also 63,9% of those who consider themselves as having a "strong" Italian identity say that they would spend more in order to buy products of Veneto origin. In other words, it seems that it is not necessarily the "local" but rather the "strong" identity feeling the key factor in encouraging people in finding in to local food product a quality element worth an additional investment.

Scanagatta (2011:37) defines the tendency to buy food products of Veneto origin as a way to meet the "nature oriented" food production. It spells out such "nature oriented" productive approach as including two different food typologies: shopping food and speciality food. Surprisingly, the study defines organic food as a food that does not represent territorial identity. It claims that choices favouring organic food must be considered as part of a deterritorialised worldview that generally privileges the respect for the natural environment (Scanagatta, 2011:37).

These labels seem to have been applied too quickly by the study for at least two reasons. In the first place the Veneto, as some other Italian regions, has a tradition of over thirty years of organic farming and this has led to a diversified production and retailing organic food market. Moreover, the Veneto region witnesses the active work of organic food producers such as El Tamiso who have a long tradition of claiming a political and operational role in safeguarding and protecting the local natural environment and in doing so have established producers-consumers bonds that are privileging consumers involvement in and knowledge of local organic forms of production.

As recommended by international networks such as URGENCI, the role and the consumers perception of organic farming should not be treated as a minor issue within the regional and the national framework as organic farming production has increased its annual output between 2003 and 2008 by 4,4% when compared to the overall Italian agricultural production and this increase was 9% in 2010 according to Ismea-ACNielsen data quoted in the study itself (Scanagatta, 2011:37).

Organic food brings back a question about the perception of and actual affordability of food product, as 51,7% of the interviewed people says that they are not able to buy it because of its more expensive pricing. This makes it less relevant for people over 75 years of age while it is being privileged by people between 30 and 49 years of age regardless of their education (Scanagatta, 2011:52). When it comes to risk perception, the "organic" buyers are identified by the study as having a deeper degree of trust in their choices concerning food buying – a factor leading them to a self-assuring feeling concerning food risks – while those who are making "local" or "branded" choices are viewing risks connected to buying food with increased apprehension.

3. Food ambiguous identities

As previously noted, Scanagatta (2011) study shows that key eating behaviours are taking place outside the home place although in different ways they point at home and family cooking as the ideal condition for eating. As La Cecla (1998:103) noted observing the changing Italian eating behaviours: “*One goes to McDonald’s to infringe upon the dietary rule, then one goes home to feel reassured*”. At times, such behaviours can be tricky to read through the responses provided to structured questionnaires. As claimed by the gendered and identity discourse by Castellanos and Bergstresser (2006:193): “*Italians identify that a proper meal is one that is prepared at home by a woman with a large investment of time and effort, yet this is rendered difficult by the impositions of the modern (and potentially ‘European’) cultures that are dominating Italy. Furthermore, there are the ‘temptations’ of industrial and fast foods to lure traditional Italians away from their preferred ways of eating. While many Italians may claim they eat fast food only because they do not have time at lunch to eat a proper meal, an informant who opened an extremely successful fast food establishment in Bergamo recounted that the busiest times are in the evening when people are out with their friends. As he stated, ‘People like fast food even though they will later deny it’ (Interview, 14 May 2002)*”.

Castellanos and Bergstresser’s (2006) interviews and participant observations help to contextualize issues that are further explored in their complexity in the Scanagatta (2001) study by highlighting the gap between desired and actual food preferences and eating behaviours. Based on data collected in Bergamo (Italy) through analysis of newspapers and television programmes, interviews, and participant observation their respective dissertations between 2000 and 2002, Castellanos and Bergstresser (2006:197) observe that first and foremost Italians connect food and eating with the locality and that from an Italian perspective EU regulations “*pose a risk to identity in Italy because they threaten the two principal components of this identity: local and cosmopolitan. Risks to local identity are presented by the changing of what people eat, how they eat, and how they perceive food. The risks to cosmopolitan identity come through the realization of the negative aspects of modernization – Europe is not the utopia many Italians thought it would be. These risks have concurrently led to the emergence of a new form of nationalism. This is occurring through the amalgamation of traditions that need to be protected*”.

What both Castellanos and Bergstresser (2006) and Scanagatta (2011) studies are neglecting is the indirect influence of social institutions such as educational institutions onto the socialization and eating habits. The low percentage (43,9%) of young people who consider home cooked food as safe food as well as the low percentage shown by the overall population (47,2%, Scanagatta, 2011:34) suggests a careful exploration of the impact of formal education norms onto pupils (and families) risk perception: the fact that schools are preventing pupils from sharing home baked cakes and home cooked food when they celebrate birthdays at school on the ground that such food is not safe might be an indication of the role of other public agents in shaping food and eating perceptions and behaviours. While Scanagatta (2011) study is a welcome opportunity to explore ways to unlearn the efficiency and predictability mechanisms at works within the food production and distribution material and cultural chain, there is still considerable room for the sociological eye in screening and in de-constructing the role of other social agents in resisting or reproducing such efficiency and predictability mechanisms.

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