

# The Sociomateriality of Cooking. The Practice Turn in Contemporary Food Studies

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## Abstract

The paper presents the so-called “practice turn in contemporary theory” and its possible and profitable sociological application to the field of food studies. Starting from the epistemological perspective that sees the concept of practice as the ongoing arrangement resulting from the social organization between different elements, I present a brief critical review of the research works about food culture that has drawn on a practice-based approach, in order to show how it affords to move from a “sociology of food” to a “sociology of food social practices.” Then, I discuss one particular approach offered by theories of practice, based on the category of “sociomateriality”. Finally, I briefly introduce, by way of example, the empirical analysis of the practice of professional cooking to show the potentiality of this approach. In conclusion, I will discuss the strengths and the vulnerabilities related to the analysis of food social practices, focusing in particular on the issue of symbolic power.


**Keywords:** Practice Theory; Sociology of Food; Culinary Culture; Sociomateriality; Habitus; Ethnography; Symbolic Power.

*I think it is a sad reflection on our civilisation  
that while we can and do measure the  
temperature in the atmosphere of Venus,  
we do not know what goes on inside our soufflés*  
– Nicholas Kurti

## 1 Introduction

Good to eat or good to think? Most of the sociological and anthropological thinking about food and food culture has been involved with the relationship between the material and the symbolic dimension of food, as exemplified neatly in the two famous works by Marvin Harris (1985) and Claude Lévi-Strauss

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(1964). In fact, such a strong opposition between the materiality of foodstuff and the symbolic meanings of nutrition leads not by chance to the definition of a “Sociology of food *and* eating” (Murcott, 1982; Germov & Williams, 1999; Poulain, 2005). Furthermore, focusing on food choice and how this “is neither random nor haphazard, but exhibits patterns and regularities” (Murcott, 1982, p. 203) another fracture has been drawn in the field of food studies (Abala, 2013) between sociology of food consumption and sociology of food production (Goodman & DuPuis, 2002).

Of course, of the actual panorama of food studies is far more complex than this rapid sketch could track down and sure many attempts, from different disciplines, have been made recently (Abbots & Lavis, 2013; Cappellini et al., 2016; Steel & Zin, 2017) in order to overcome some of the previous dichotomies. However, in what follows, without claiming to be exhaustive, I will try to show how recent approaches based on theories of practice (Hui et al., 2017), despite internal differences and disagreements (Nicolini, 2012; Jonas et al., 2017), could fruitfully participate in such a debate.

Especially, there are two specific issues that practice-based approaches seem particularly appropriate to tackle: the view of social order as “arrangements” (Schatzki, 2001) and the agentic role of materiality (Pickering, 2001).

Instead of seeking “patterns and regularities” (Murcott, 1982, p. 203) that shape food choices or systems of food production, practice scholars share a different conception that not only reveals the inadequacy of the widespread equation of order with regularity but also “building upon the complex and variable connections that exist among things [such an approach] construes order as *arrangements*” (Schatzki, 2001, p. 51).

An arrangement is a layout of entities in which they relate and take up places with respect to one another. On the basis of this intuitive conception, *social* order can be defined as arrangements of people and the organisms, artifacts, and things through which they coexist. [...] They thereby take up positions with regard to one another that combine aspects of these four dimensions. As elements of the arrangement, these entities also possess identities (who someone is) or meanings (what something is) (*ibidem*).

Practice is thus considered “a mode of ordering rather than an ordered product, an epistemology rather than an empirical phenomenon” (Gherardi, 2017, p. 39). Hence, such a point of view allows challenging traditional classifications about *what* is material and *who* is human, since such a dynamic outcome (Strangers & Maller, 2019) emerges precisely from a specific arrangement enacted through practice.

Accordingly, drawing on this epistemological perspective, I will start showing how it affords to move from a “sociology of food *and* eating” to a “sociology of food social practices”. First, I concisely survey some of the classic sociological works on food and nutrition and then presenting a brief critical review of the research works that have drawn on a practice-based approach. Then, I will discuss one particular approach offered by theories of practices, based on the category of “sociomateriality” (Orlikowski, 2007; Gherardi, 2017). Finally, I will briefly introduce, by way of example, the empirical analysis of the practice of professional cooking in order to discuss the potential of this type of method. In conclusion, I will deal with the strengths and the vulnerabilities related to the analysis of food social practices, focusing in particular on the issue of symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1998).

## 2 Sociology of Food (Social Practices)

As suggested by Barry Smart (1994), worlds of food are often thought of as suitable metaphors of particular aspects of social life, or as useful heuristic opportunities to explore other issues and other aspects of culture. While there are several examples of such an attitude,<sup>1</sup> the notion of *food social space* by Jean-Pierre Poulain (2005), instead, established an autonomous theoretical framework capable of sociologically framing food as a structuring dimension of the social organization of human groups. Of course, the idea of an autonomous social space in which specific dimensions of human action take place is not quite new in sociology: it is, in fact, the very same process described by the classics of this discipline as

1. To name but a few, one can find the issue of individualization (Beardsworth & Keil, 1997); the issue of the agri-food industrialization (Howard, 2016) or the issue of health (Caplan, 1997).

secularization of social life (Durkheim, 1894; Weber, 1922). According to these theories, the process of modernization is characterized precisely by the creation of specialized sub-sectors, each of which must then come to terms with the wider social space, understood as non-specialized.<sup>2</sup>

Poulain identifies, therefore, a *food social space* defined by two fundamental constraints that set the relationship between humans and food. On the one hand, there is a “biological” limit relative to the biochemical mechanisms underlying the nutrition and the consequent digestive and metabolic possibilities of humankind. On the other hand, an “ecological” constraint obliges every human group to come to terms with the availability of nutritional resources of every specific “ecological niche” in which it is established.

While these two limitations mark the boundaries of a specifically *food social space*, yet there remain very high degrees of freedom to the human presence inside such a social space that must be organized with the complicity of social factors (Poulain, 2005). Hence, investigating the social organization of such freedom to inhabit the *food social space* constitutes the main purpose of a sociology of food.

In fact, if we read in this way two seminal researches in the field of sociology of food such as those by Ritzer (1996) and Fischler (1990) it is easy to detect two separate positions in their focusing, respectively, on productive and consumer activity. Also, it is apparent what it is actually a rather widespread tendency in food literature, to contrast the intrusion of economic power of institutional actors — like the big fast-food multinationals (Ritzer, 1996) — to the symbolic dimension of culture understood as the exclusive prerogative of the consumer subjective action (Fischler, 1990). This kind of bifocal attention — namely a dualism — has soon led to separate two different research streams within the food studies. We can thus easily find, in such a literature, a sociology of taste and nutrition (*sociology of food*) opposed to a rural sociology (or *agri-food theory*). While the former pays attention to the reflective skills of the consumer, the second focuses instead on the technological and economic dynamics leading agricultural and industrial development of food (Goodman & DuPuis, 2002).

However, several scholars have been dedicated to attempting to overcome such a dualism and breaking the border between food production and consumption (Morgan et al., 2006). Particularly, there have been three different efforts to analyze the *food social space*: the first, from the point of view of an economic sociology it is based on the concept of System of Provision (Fine et al., 1996); the second, based on a sociology of science, draws on Actor-Network Theory (Goodman, 2001); the third, on the basis of a sociology of morality, it is mostly grounded on Theory of Conventions (Morgan et al., 2006). In spite of evident differences, though, some elements covertly unite them. Two characteristics, in particular, while already emerging in the two classic approaches by Ritzer (1996) and Fischler (1990), they return in all the three previous debates as fundamental issues<sup>3</sup> and they are still present in many recent works (Abbots & Lavis, 2013; Howard, 2016; Neswald, 2017).

- The intersection between “human” and “non-human” elements, that is the reciprocal position assumed by human action and materiality, and the consequent valorization attributed to the two dimensions in different contexts.
- The governance of these different resources, that is the power relations that rule, in fact, the criteria for integration of elements.

Hence, the series of contributions that are grouped under the name of “theories of practice” (Schatzki et al., 2001; Reckwitz, 2002; Hui et al., 2017) seem to be able to satisfy both these issues in a very promising way. Ultimately, with the term practice we refer to:

[...] a routinized type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one other: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, “things” and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 249).

2. Among the most interesting insights of this type of dynamics there are the so-called “field theory” developed by Pierre Bourdieu (1992), then employed by Ferguson (2004) for her analysis of the emergence of French cuisine and the approach proposed by Howard Becker (1982) in terms of “worlds of art”, then employed by Fine in his ethnography of kitchen culture (1996).

3. Since there is not space here to show examples of these recurrent themes in literature, see Domaneschi (2018b) for a more complete and contextualized treatment of such an issue.

Accordingly, the classical concept of social order is here converted as the organized outcome of a plurality of elements that participate in the definition of the practice (Schatzki et al., 2001), and the attention moves, therefore, from the subject behaviour to the organized combination assumed, from time to time, by the elements through which the activity is arranged (Hui et al., 2017).

In fact, this kind of practice-based research on food is quite pervasive, especially in the realm of sustainable practice (Spaargaren et al., 2012; Crivits & Paredis, 2013; Evans et al., 2017), but it has been applied also for studying fair trade goods (Wheeler, 2012) and novel foods (House, 2019), as well as veganism (Twine, 2017) and vegetarianism (Plessz & Gojard, 2014) and finally consumption of Real Ale beer (Thurnell-Read, 2016). In all these cases, practice-based approaches proved more and more their ability to grasp points of view which remain otherwise obscure to other approaches to food culture, both methodologically (Halkier & Jensen, 2011) and theoretically (Domaneschi, 2012). This capacity of grasping different views, for example, emerge particularly in diverse work on eating practices (Cappellini et al., 2016; Devaney & Davies, 2016; Warde, 2016). Mainly, the work by Warde (2016) identifies eating — and not either the eater or the meal — as the central unit of analysis, therefore practices are viewed as a meso-level social construct, interconnected to broader structures and individual behaviour. In this way, he makes clear how practice theories effectively decentres the commonplace notion that individual deliberation and consumer choice constitute the basis of the food world.

Furthermore, according with the central notion of arrangements determined through practice, there will be some elements and some links between them which, for a given practice, will be more relevant than others in order to constitute it as such. Some of these elements and the links between them, in fact, will be more often used than others, since they are indispensable for the accomplishment of the practice itself. This is a crucial point, in fact it means that it is not only relevant to isolate the organizational elements that build the practice, but also that we need to track down the *different forms of agency* that can be found within such arrangement.

A fundamental concept of the practice-oriented approach is therefore that of *distributed agency* (Sahakian & Whilite, 2014), which bring the issue of power into the practice approach (Watson, 2017). This concept in fact, focuses on how the agent is never completely the subject of his activity, since he is just one element between many others who perform the arrangement that emerges as a practice. Social agents rather participate in a nexus of relations hierarchized according to specific geometries of power. Accordingly, the aim is to grasp the emergence of a practice “without succumbing to old habits of either attributing deterministic power to practices over the activities of participants or presupposing fully formed actors who are ready for action.” (Alkemeyer & Buschmann, 2017, p. 9).

In other words, when theories of practice raise the question of the diverse agentic roles of materiality, they also bring the issue of challenging classifications between what is human and what in non-human (Riskin, 2016) and, finally, the problem of their dynamic entanglements (Maller & Strenger, 2019).

### 3 The Matter of Agency: A Sociomaterial Approach to Food Practice

Drawing on the concept of practice seen as a mode of ordering, rather than an ordered product (Hui et al., 2017), then, means drawing on the idea of *arrangements* of different elements and, consequently, investigating the *distributed agency* that address such a specific organization. Hence, I will now focus on the arrangement between human and non-human elements, in the particular case of *food social space* (Poulain, 2005), examining the dynamic classification of such elements (Maller & Strengers, 2019)

In fact, in the case of food studies, material arrangements (Schatzki, 2010) are surprisingly ignored, if we consider how the classical sociological models of food consumption (Beardsworth & Kell, 1997; Lupton, 1996; Murcott, 2019) more than often “disregards the effectivity of not only animal bodies, but also the ‘bodies’ of vegetables, minerals, and pharmaceutical, bacterial or viral agents.” (Bennett, 2007, p. 133). In fact, even when materiality is at the core of the analysis (Douglas, 1972; Cook & Crang, 1996; de Solier, 2013), nonhuman matter is presented as purely the setting for the play of human action. Yet, according to a practice-based approach, the materiality of foodstuff is endowed with agentic capacity not restricted to the human actor (Yotova, 2013). As some food scholars have recently suggested, along a so called “visceral approach” (Bennet, 2010; Longhurst, 2009; Abbots, 2017) “this material agency would include the negative power to resist or obstruct human projects, but it would also entail the active

power to exert forces and create effects.” (Bennett, 2007, p. 133). In order not to privileging meaning over matter, agency is considered as a force distributed across multidirectional flows, overlapping eaters, foodstuff and knowledge about food (Abbots, 2017). Hence, here food is seen as “an active inducer-producer of salient, public effects, rather than a passive resource at the disposal of consumers.” (Bennett, 2007, p. 134).

In the case of fat, for instance, we need to bear in mind not only larger humans and their economic-cultural prostheses (agribusiness, snack food vending machines, serving sizes, microwave ovens, bariatric surgery) but also the strivings and trajectories of the fats themselves, as they vie with — or more indirectly, weaken or strengthen — human wills, practices, habits and ideas (Bennett, 2007, p. 138).

In this line, food allows to exemplify the process of becoming over being, since within these arrangements between eaters, foodstuff and meanings, “particular elements can be so contingently well-positioned that they can significantly alter the direction or function of the assemblage” (*ibidem*).

Moreover, another relevant group of material elements can alter the direction of food practice: not only foodstuff per se, but also the technological equipment available in order to eat or to cook foodstuff (Wilson, 2012). Practice-based approaches, indeed, clearly stress the impact of the changing role of freezer (Shove & Southerton, 2000) or cooking robots (Truninger, 2011) on domestic practices of cooking and eating. On the whole, the broad process of rationalization of cooking and the kitchen (van Otterloo, 2000; Denis, 2016) exemplify neatly how materiality channels an agentic capacity not restricted to the human actor but strongly intertwined with it.

Therefore, according to this particular vein within practice-based approaches, the issue is not whether or not materiality matters; rather, it is “whether materiality merely mediates human activities — as in human-centred theories — or is constitutive of practice, as in post-human practice theories. (Gherardi, 2017, pp. 38–39). The opportunity that such a re-turn to practice theory offers to food studies is then to move beyond problematic dualisms (Schatzki, 2001) between voluntarism and determinism, agency and structure, and, not lastly, the dualism between the social and the material, the human and the nonhuman. The latter, in fact, may be overcome drawing on the concept of sociomateriality (Orlikowski, 2007; Gherardi, 2017).

While a humanist approach to practice assumes the centrality of humans as sites of embodied understandings and then proceeds to analysis of humans and their practices, a posthumanist approach instead interrogates how all the elements within a practice hold together and acquire agency in being entangled. In the latter case, “sociomateriality” may be considered an attribute of any practice, and “sociomaterial” an adjective that stresses how a practice is constituted by matter and culture (Gherardi, 2017, pp. 49–50).

Sociomateriality, for example, becomes a relevant attribute in food social practices if we look at how foodstuff is mobilised through the agro-food network to end up in a consumer’s body (Goodman, 2001; Roe, 2006). In fact, “the term ‘food’ is used to convey the ‘thing’ caught up in the process of being eaten by a consumer. Foodstuff is what this material is before it becomes engaged in the actual process of eating.” (Roe, 2006, p. 112). Instead of examining the status of a subject who consume or embody any food (Lupton, 1996; Baumann et al., 2017), the sociomaterial attribute of food consumption practices deals with the intimate material connections between “bodies that eat” and the “bodies that are eaten” (Roe, 2006). For example, understanding the eating of a potato as a practice arising out of a material relationship formed between the nonhuman potato and the embodied human consumer “offers the potential to attend seriously to the ‘continuities and discontinuities’ [...] in consumption practices” (2006, p. 117). This is exactly what it means looking not much at the patterns and regularities of human choice and rather exploring the particular practical arrangements emerging through consumption activity.

Of course, different approaches like new materialism (Kissman & van Loon, 2019) or Science and Technology Studies (Latour, 2005) especially in the light of affordance theory (Hutchby, 2001) have already focused on material entities as “resources that enable and constrain characteristics of a practice” (Jacobsen & Hansen, 2019, p. 6). However, such accounts, although explicitly focusing on the materials of practice, they seem to crucially underestimate the sociologically critical question of symbolic power,

without which “it becomes difficult to understand why people engage in different practices and why people perform differently within the same practice.” (Jacobsen & Hansen, 2019, p. 9).

Thus, the concept of habitus (Bourdieu, 1998) becomes here particularly apt to solve such an issue, especially when considered as the principle of action only — and exclusively — when it is activated by objective possibilities. As stated by Bourdieu, after all, habitus works only within the dialectic relationship between two states of the social: between history in (human) bodies and history in (non-human) things, or, more precisely, between “the history objectified in the form of structure [...] and the history incarnated in the form of habitus, a complicity which is the basis of the quasi-magical participation between these two realizations of history” (Bourdieu, 1998, pp. 150–151).

This case, could be interpreted in the sense of the proposition of Gilbert Ryle, quoted by Bourdieu, according to which:

[...] just as we should not say that a window broke because a stone hit it, but that it broke because it was breakable, one should not say that a historical event determined a behaviour but that it had this determining effect because a habitus capable of being affected by that event conferred that power upon it (1998, p. 149).

However, in order to take seriously and thoroughly Bourdieu’s intuition of the encounter of two stories, the second part need to be articulated more than usual Bourdieusian account seem to do (Domaneschi, 2018a). That is, we need to investigate arrangements generated by the encounter between the social history embodied in one body (systems of dispositions) and the social history fixed in places and objects (systems of material entities) (Jacobsen & Hansen, 2019). The practical outcome is thus produced by the encounter between a specific set of material elements and a set of habituses that could be invested — in different degrees — from such a new combination of objects.

Finally, the dynamic distribution of agency between different human and non-human elements — or, what is likely the same, the cultural classification that separate the two states of the social (Maller & Strengers, 2019) — becomes the main focus of the empirical analysis.

## 4 When Things Become Food: The Practice of Cooking

I will deal now with the cooking practice of manipulation and transformation of food inside restaurant kitchens, in order to show how different elements — both human and non-human — interweave and work together making up a particular version of “regional cuisine,” understood as an *ongoing sociomaterial accomplishment*.

The practice of cooking has been in fact a relevant object of investigation by practice scholars, sometimes focusing on the role of time on domestic practices (Hand & Shove, 2004; Plessz & Etile, 2018) or particularly exploring the use of visual methodologies (Willis et al., 2015; Martens & Scott, 2016; Torkkeli et al., 2018). Others have concentrated on professional cooking practices (Domaneschi, 2012; Stierand, 2014; Nelson et al., 2017).

In order to show the prospect of a sociomaterial approach to professional cooking practice, I now discuss some findings from an ethnography I carried out (Domaneschi, 2018b). I have selected a population of commercial cooks within an Italian regional context and, in particular, the city of Genoa, which is an urban centre situated in the North-West of Italy. Drawing on Fine’s ethnography of restaurant cooks (1996), focusing on “second tier” commercial cooks inside a particular urban area allows me to investigate how they build common agreements on the concept of “good food” and its relationship with regional cuisine. For that reason, the ethnographic research presented is the result of several observations and interviews sessions on the Genoese area during the last ten years. I spent time in 14 Genoese restaurants located between the city, the coast and the hinterland and interviewed cooks and other parts of the kitchen staff. I looked for differentiation in the biographical trajectories of the commercial cooks as well as in the plurality of economic and organizational environments, in order to have a range of situations able to respect the plurality of the urban context.

During my field inside diverse kitchens, I could attend to quite a bunch of unforeseen events, mostly in the evening, when the place was almost full, especially due to particular customer requests, or to faults

in some kitchen technology or even to errors by waiters. In all of these circumstances — less rare than one might think — a particular work of “adjustment” was required to correct the unexpected.

*Evening.* F. allowed me to stay in the kitchen during the service, to observe her and her sous chef. At mid-service, a table command arrives asking for a plate with more than half of the ingredients to be replaced, most of which I had never even heard. After a look between her and the waiter, F. confirms that almost all the ingredients are missing. F. and his sous chef look at each other and without even say a word immediately begin to prepare the dish, while F. says to communicate to the customer that everything is fine. From that moment, the two cooks move quickly and coordinated, each carrying a piece of the preparation, until the plate is closed and released. Before I can ask them anything, F. tells me: “Can you guess how many times it happens? When I saw J. [the waiter] with the command, I already understood [...] having to improvise for these here [the customers] is regular [...] we just made a soup that is better than he asked, but he will not even sense the difference (field note, restaurateur chef 6, female, seaside).

At first glance, then, such a practical “improvisation” could easily be interpreted as a feature of the chef habitus (Gomez, 2003), that is a body technique coming from a long process of embodiment.<sup>4</sup> Similarly to the case of the boxer (Wacquant, 2004), also for the cooks a sort of “practical anticipation” is here activated on the background of the tradition embodied by the cook. As she belongs to a particular *food social space*, therefore, “regulated improvisations” become possible.

However, what it is less evident in the previous account, yet crucial for the accomplishment of the task at the stake — that is cooking a requested recipe without the required ingredients — it is the role of the soup, meaning its agency. Only the particular attuning between the embodied skill played by the cook *and* the affordance guaranteed by the ingredients allows to come to terms with the customer request.

From the point of view of a practice based-approach, it is just such a specific arrangement of elements *in the same activity* which becomes the research focus. Relevant questions become, then, how such an organization of practice become possible? How does it work and with what effects? How is it recurrently performed?

For example, the very same practice of improvisation, could be performed in a slightly different way, when it is experienced as a joyful dimension that constitutes an integral and almost habitual part of the creation of the menu, often explicitly linked to the musical idea to synthesize the whole creative process:

[...] the various [...] ingredients are like musical instruments and the various cooking techniques are [...] well... let's say, the notes are the ingredients, the cooking techniques are the instruments, and then your knowledge is the skills of the musician [...] and at some point you learn how to reproduce as all composers do [...] [...] who are trying to reproduce a piece and do it well [...] and this is the basis [...] but then the best part comes when you start to improvise[...] and something is good, something is bad, you do experiment [...] and you keep learning[...] [...] I promise... for me the kitchen must be a game [...] and when you have good products that are like beautiful colors [...] then have fun and something good definitely comes out [...] (interview, cook restaurateur 2, male, city center).

These two extracts, thus, while dealing with the practice of professional cooking as a form of improvisation, they bring to light two different performances of the same practice. The point here is that such an improvisation, at least in the case of cooking, is a form of practical anticipation not just since it is already written in the body of the cook in the form of habitus yet only *together* with the affordance of the raw materials. Instead of seeking *a priori* relationships among self-contained entities — either the subject's body or the materiality of ingredients, “bodies who eat” and “bodies who are eaten” — relations exist in and through enactment. They are in fact located in action and performed in practice (Schatzki, 2001).

4. Yet, some other scholars might focus, for example, on the boundary work which separate chefs from customers (Hendley, 2016).

Two different examples may bring some light to this point. The first concerns the question of “prehension”, meaning the technique of grasping something, which indicates those movements that the body act in advance of sensory data, like when we grasp a glass and the hand will assume a rounded shape, before it actually touches the surface (Sennett, 2008, p. 151). Again, it looks like an essential example of practical anticipation.

*Lunch.* S. is showing to his sous chef how to serve an anchovy pie with steamed vegetables. I watch her while, with only one hand, she arranges the pie slices on the plate using a silicone spatula, until forming a vertical composition, while, at the same time, with the other hand she garnishes it with a sauce and finally adding some aromatic plants as decoration. She performs the two gestures at different speeds but always with methodical precision. When his sous chef tries to repeat these gestures he fails several times. S. shows him the sequence again and says to him: “See? It depends on how you grasp the spatula, you have to be light to be quick [...]” and then she adds smiling “look... *these vegetables can feel you* [...] they are not made of plastic[...] ok?... they are still alive [...] they can feel it as you pick them up [...] and you have to listen to them [...] and feel them in return... understand?” (field note, restaurateur cook 4, female, riviera).

Still, it would sound straightforward to find an elementary case of body technique and then to rely on embodiment as the main source of explanation. Though, at least a second element is taking part within the action described, that is the vegetables who are, according to the chef, in fact *alive* and they contribute to orient the practice together with the human body. In other words, the previous field note shows how different habituses could be able to interact differently with the same material entities of practice, not only because of different embodied skills but also because of their relation with the specific affordance of materials. Actually, it is the vegetables that lead the practice, becoming not by chance an almost incarnated social agent, to be listened to — both kinaesthetically and emotionally — and to be cognitively understood, while the chef body requires the ability to submit as much as possible to the characteristics of the object, to pull out as much as possible from the object itself.

Ethnographic observation helps here to better explain the particular relationship between the cook’s embodied competences and the material equipment inside the kitchen. Of course, the relationship with the material dimension is not at all something peculiar to the cooks belonging to the Italian gastronomic field.<sup>5</sup> However, within the professional cooks I studied there can be found a specific practical orientation towards the technical apparatus of food processing.

*Evening.* I am in the kitchen together with chef R. and his sous chef A., right after the end of the service. We are drinking wine and, we chat in relax. As we speak, I take a siphon in my hand and begin to play with it, watching it from different angles. R. looks at me then turns to A. and says: “I hate that crap [...] every time I have to use it [...] it’s stronger than me [...] it bothers me [...]” I smile and wait to hear A.’s answer. He looks first at R., then looks back at me and at the end he says: “I do not like it either, look [...] doping food it’s definitely not my idea of cooking, whether with air or anything [...] It’s like cheating[...] you know [...] but if you think about it, it’s the same thing with fire or water [...] in the end we have to make something with these ingredients [...] I mean[...] at the end of the day... you only have to be able to control these elements... [...] that’s basically cooking, right? [...] to control the elements that transform foodstuff [...] to transform them [...] but without making them lose their identity [...] that’s it[...]” (field note, chef-restaurateur 7, male, hinterland).

This relation between human control over non-human technology and its effects on the raw materials concerns the combination between the ergonomic peculiarities of the tool and the competence embodied in the cook. Such a particular arrangement allows to multiply the perceived quality of food: acquiring this self-control, in fact, is interpreted in the sense of decreasing rather than increasing the human pressure exerted by the instrument over the foodstuff, keeping intact its specific non-human

5. A similar logic, for example, is at the base of classical French gastronomy, in which the division into separate areas of cooking is associated with the different knives necessary for that specific activity (Wilson, 2012).



qualities, and then multiplying — through a skilled handicraft artifice — the perception of naturalness of the raw material.

Again, it becomes clear the relationship through which different habituses could be able to interact with different material entities within the practice. To demonstrate the specificity of such a practical knowledge, not by chance, Bourdieu appropriates Heidegger's famous example of practical dealings with a hammer. The agent's relation to the world is "a relation of knowledge: the habitus suited to the hammer [...] is the one that is capable of hammering; the habitus is what responds appropriately to the solicitations of a social object." (2015, p. 243). Such a bodily *hexis*, in Bourdieu's words (1998) is often the result of a sort of addiction to the instrument, that is the outcome of indulging in the aims that are inscribed in the device as a tacit instruction for use; ultimately, it is the result of having been used, if not exploited, by the instrument.

Likewise, all the references I listened from the cooks I interviewed and observed in terms of "respect" of the raw materials, the need for a "gentle" cooking technique or "delicate" cuts and, above all, the construction of practical techniques such as the releasing knife, account for a particular structuring of the elements of the practice that aims to reinforce this type of "artificiality" capable of producing its opposite: namely, "natural" ingredients.

Another example, in this line, concerns the role of "callus", understood as "localized tactility" and capable of an "intelligent" competence in the assessment of materiality (Sennett, 2008). While the thickening of the skin at one single point of the hand is supposed to make the skin numb and working as a disadvantage in the practical activity, we know that in fact the opposite is true: protecting the nerve endings of the hand, the callus makes the act of examining less hesitant. As Sennett eloquently proves by illustrating the case of medieval goldsmiths, "the callus performs by the hand the same function performed by the zoom for the photo camera" (2008, p. 151).

Often, I could observe chefs, both at the time of choosing the raw materials and at the time of the tasting phase during the preparations, use this embodied zoom in order to feel and interpret the affordance of foodstuff.

*Evening.* We are halfway through the service. An order comes in the kitchen from the table of what the water calls the "gastronomic critics." M. smiles, puts a pan on the fires and he starts to select artichokes and mushrooms. While holding the artichokes in his hands, still to be cleaned, it seems that he makes a strange massage to them, at the end of which some are selected and others are put back into place. At the end of that operation, I ask him the meaning of that operation and if he does not hurt himself with the thorns of the artichokes. M. smiles, turns the palm of my hand towards me, shows me the calluses on the lower part of the palm and on the fingertips and tells me: "See these? They are my secret weapon [...] [smiling] with these I can touch hot objects, crush the thorns, actually they are kind of my super powers [...] in fact it's only thanks to them that I can feel if the artichokes are as they are supposed to be, I mean... if the consistency is beautifully firm, if the tips are well closed, and if the stem is long and turgid with dark leaves [...] with these super powers in my hands... *I can actually listen to what the ingredients have to say* (field note, restaurateur cook 8, bad, city centre).

Finally, this symbolic power of recognizing what is and what is not "quality food" is inscribed in the bodies of the social agents and in their judgment schemes, as much as it is inscribed in the tools and materials that contribute to make this practice, which provides, in turn, the potential triggers for different components of the habitus. In short, this symbolic power is a property of the practice itself (Watson, 2017).

What we use to label "Italian regional cuisine", accordingly, is the ongoing practical accomplishment generated by these arrangements of organized elements (Byrkjeflot et al., 2013). Particularly, in the analysis presented here about the sociomaterial organization *within* a specific cooking practice, it is the arrangement of the social location taken by some subjects (professional cooks of a contemporary Italian urban context) towards a whole series of foodstuff and technologies (raw materials related to the territory in which they operate, culinary tools and procedures derived from family experience).

## 5 Conclusions: From Embodiment to Entanglement

Since the far-seeing paper by Murcott (1982) about the relevance of a cultural analysis of food, a considerable body of work has developed in what is now known in English as “food studies” (Abala, 2013). Yet, what Murcott indicated back then seems to be still on nowadays. In fact, the sociologist highlighted how “elaboration of the cultural significance of food and eating focuses on social values, meanings and beliefs rather than on dietary requirements and nutritional values” (Murcott, 1982, p. 203). Besides, she suggested that such an approach “starts by appreciating that peoples’ food choice is neither random nor haphazard, but exhibits patterns and regularities” (Murcott, 1982, p. 203). Remarkably, this separation between social values, meaning and beliefs, on the one side, and dietary requirement and nutritional values, on the other side, persists quite strongly in the present literature (Murcott, 2019; Neswald et al., 2017). As it is for the second claim about the definition of social order *qua* a set of “patterns and regularities”.

On this basis, the practice-based approach I have tried to illustrate here, aims exactly to break with these two presuppositions: it is set on a conception of order *qua* arrangements of elements instead of regularities (Schatzki et al., 2001), and it is equipped to overcome the dualism between the social (values and meanings) and the material (foodstuff and technology) (Warnier, 2001).

According to the sociomaterial approach I tried to illustrate, there is the need to stress the empirical and theoretical relevance of the material element and its ability to actively contribute to the assemblage of a social practice and not only as a mere complement awaiting a social agent who can give life to it. Such a claim means that the social practice, once seen as *the ordering of the relationship* between the subject and the object, it becomes the unit of analysis (Hui et al., 2017). A promising theoretical path in order to follow this view, could be taking seriously the Bourdieusian intuition about the encounter between the social history embodied in one human body and the social history objectified into things (Bourdieu, 1998). Thus, for example, in order to call in question how things become food (Roe, 2006) during the cooking practice, one should not ask what body techniques make a tool or a raw material more or less “alive”. Yet, the issue becomes what practice emerges from the active integration between the particular affordance given by a set of ingredients and a particular set of habituses available in that occasion.

This is a crucial point. In fact, rather than relying on substances of various kinds (ingredients, knife, chef identities, etc.) as fundamental participants of any activity, where relationships only supplement or modify them, a sociomaterial approach to food practice should establish its work in the understanding that the *food social space* is *constituted* by relations. Qualities, values and meanings do not belong to something inherent or “inside” a substance but instead depend on how, when and where they are related to each other’s. Here, in fact, we specifically make a turn to practice. Instead of seeking *a priori* relationships among self-contained entities, we regard relations as existing in and through enactment. They are organized and performed in practice (Schatzki et al., 2001).

This does not mean, as has been suggested, that the world is made anew moment-by-moment through some process of extreme emergence but rather that structure is enacted through recurrent practices and stability is an ongoing accomplishment. [...] Practices always have the potential to perform something different. [...] In other words, reality is the entanglement of matter and meaning produced *in practice* within specific phenomena. [...] Entanglement calls into question the idea of pre-existing categories such as “subject” and “object”, “human” and “nonhuman”, and “matter” and “meaning”, seeing these instead as enacted in practice. (Scott & Orlikowski, 2014, pp. 881–882)

Hence, a sociomaterial approach to food practice invites to move from embodiment to dynamic entanglements of humans and non-humans (Maller & Strengers, 2019) as different way to investigate the production of social order within *food social space* (Poulain, 2005). In fact, this opens up the issue of the boundary work, challenging traditional classification of what is considered as material and what is categorized as human body, or, which is the same, the issue of symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1998).

That is why I tried to illustrate the potentiality of a combination between the concepts of habitus — as a detachable capsule from Bourdieu’s theory, for the purposes of a dispositional theory of action (Wacquant, 2014) — and the more recent practice-based approaches (Hui et al., 2017) as a path to understand how human and non-human elements begin to take each an active part in the “distributed agency”

of every social practice. On the one hand, acknowledging the role of materiality on the work of habitus would allow to investigate “the contradictions, the failures, the sudden and abrupt reorganizations of given subjectivities-cum-materiality” (Warnier, 2001, pp. 21–22). On the other hand, investigating such dynamic relationships permits to “challenge traditional classification of ‘materials’, ‘objects’ or ‘material arrangements’ in theories of social practice” (Maller & Strengers, 2019, p. 5). In fact, while in most praxiological approach the ‘carriers’ of practices remain unquestionably human (Shove et al., 2012), I tried to show how such symbolic power could shifts dynamically from human bodies who eat to non-human bodies that are eaten.

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