

STUDYING FOOD AND EATERS

A cocktail of perspectives and methods

Olivier Lepiller, Tristan Fournier, Nicolas Bricas,
Muriel Figuié, eds



Chapter 10

‘Follow-the-thing’: tracing food products to chronicle their sociospatial biography

MICHAËL BRUCKERT^a

^a Cirad, UMR Innovation, Ha Noi, Vietnam; Innovation, Université Montpellier, Cirad, INRAE, Montpellier SupAgro, Montpellier, France.

This chapter presents the ‘follow-the-thing’ methodology that was developed by human geography to investigate food products and practices. The aim is to trace the spatial trajectories of food products for the purpose of recounting their sociospatial biographies. This approach highlights the actors involved in the food circulation process and characterises their different roles. It also explores eaters’ geographical imaginations, their representations regarding the origin of foods, and the impact of this knowledge on their relationship with these foods.

Human geography was for a long time mainly focused on food through production, agricultural landscape and *terroir* studies. It was not until the second half of the 20th century that the discipline shifted its attention more to the issue of food practices. In France, Max Sorre began conducting research on food diets in the 1950s, while Frederick Simoons in the United States studied food proscriptions in the 1960s. Through this geocultural approach, food practices are mapped and factors explaining them are identified. However, geographers have been slow to develop a robust methodology for studying food behaviour. In France, cultural geography researchers began focusing studies on gastronomy and ‘food cultures’ (Fumey, 2010) from the 1990s onwards. Meanwhile, daily food consumption became a subject of investigation for geographers in the English-speaking research community, particularly under the influence of a ‘cultural turn’ that gave primacy to representations and meanings in social science investigations. Paradoxically, this so-called cultural approach has been developing with a much more political and social leaning in the English-speaking academic world than it has in France, where it has a more patrimonial bent.

In the 1980s, under the influence of this cultural turn, research on geographies of consumption developed in the English-speaking world (and mainly in Great Britain) which sought to broaden the economic geography research field beyond the production sphere. Geographers began proposing ways of studying the spatial nature of food consumption within this context. These approaches no longer consider space solely as a neutral physical medium where supply chains governed by political and economic constraints expand, but also as a material and ideal resource for eaters and other food system actors.

A first approach developed by David Bell and Gill Valentine is more specifically concerned about the geographical aspects of food consumption. In their book *Consuming geographies* (1997), these two British geographers proposed a multi-scalar interpretation of consumption. They took scales ranging from the body, the home, the community, the city, the nation and the world into account, as well as the multiple linkages between these scales, to focus on the spatial configurations and social itineraries that are established through food uses.

►► The follow-the-thing approach

A second approach proposed in the early 2000s focuses more on food than on eaters. This methodology involves following food along its spatial pathway, accompanying it as it moves through space and portraying the geobiographical features of the target foods. It has been theorized under the follow-the-thing banner and thereafter was applied to studies on non-food items. The designers of this approach were highly inspired by the seminal book: *The social life of things*, edited by Arjun Appadurai in 1986. In his introductory chapter (Appadurai, 1986), the anthropologist drew on the work of Karl Marx (commodity fetishism theory), Georg Simmel (the theory of value), Jean Baudrillard (on objects and consumption as a system of signs) or Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood (on commodities and consumption) to develop a theory on commodity circulation in society. For Appadurai, commodities have no meaning in themselves—humans attribute specific meanings to them via their transactions. As “things-in-motion” can “illuminate their human and social context” (Appadurai, 1986, p. 5), Appadurai proposes as a methodology of enquiry to “follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories” (*ibid*).

In the 1990s, the British geographer Ian Cook sought to balance Appadurai's approach with a more conventional commodity chain approach commonly used in geographical research. He and his colleague Phil Crang jointly proposed to focus on the sociospatial ‘lives’ of food or, more specifically, to gain insight into how global flows and networks of food, people and culinary knowledge work in specific places and situations (Cook and Crang, 1996). Cook and colleagues then proposed to develop a “biographical and geographical understanding of food” (Cook et al., 1998, p. 162). Documenting the lives of food highlights the dialectical relationship between food and space, i.e. our food choices are affected by practices remotely located from our direct experience and, in turn, these choices have effects on places beyond the domestic sphere of consumption. In an explicit reference to Appadurai, Peter Jackson proposed to “trace the social geography of things” (Jackson, 1999, p. 104), including food. Similarly, Paul Robbins argued that “social, political and cultural processes invest objects with meanings [...] as exchange moves them into and out of various socially and politically defined situations” (Robbins, 1999, p. 401).

Note that this approach had already been implemented to some extent in Sydney Mintz's major book, *Sweetness and Power* (Mintz, 1985). In his study of the history of sugar, the anthropologist considered that production and consumption are closely linked, and that transformations in the use of this product have led to changes in the meanings attached to it. Nevertheless, in his book, the author played the part of a historian and ‘followed’ sugar virtually, via archives and secondary sources.

The follow-the-thing methodology had not yet theorized in the late 1990s. Although it was being used by some geographers, it was not until the 2000s that Cook published articles on the methodology itself, i.e. first on its implementation (Cook, 2004) and then on its theorization (Cook et al., 2006).

► First sketches and implementation

In his 2004 article entitled 'Follow the Thing: Papaya', Cook openly drew on the Marxist approach to geography (developed by David Harvey, etc.), which suggests to "de-fetishize commodities" (Cook, 2004, p. 642). When products arrive on the consumer's plate, they are accompanied by meanings that mask the real socioeconomic conditions that governed their production. The values attached to food are posited as natural by the eaters, whereas they are shaped by humans through their work: social relations of production are concealed in eaters' relationship to their food. Cook sought to unveil this fetish by following the route of papayas produced in Jamaica and shipped to British supermarkets. He interviewed growers, foremen, buyers, packers, importers and eaters to document a sociospatial biography of papayas. He supplemented this biography with considerations on the political economy of papaya, its history, global trajectories (routes), consumption patterns and fetishization through advertising.

Cook's article is overtly innovative—the tone is non-academic and the narrative breaks the linearity of the supply chain, while offering a collection of vignettes rather than a methodical argument. By exposing how papaya supply chain actors are connected to global trade through an "entangled range of economic, political, social, cultural, agricultural and other processes" (Cook, 2004, p. 642), the article also aimed to raise moral and ethical questions about the connection between producers and consumers.

► A more systematic theorization

In 2006, in an article entitled 'Geographies of Food: Following', Cook elaborated on the theoretical underpinning of this approach. By "following foods and telling stories with them" (Cook et al., 2006, p. 657), he argues, researchers can illuminate actors' practices in the food system, the ways in which different meanings are attributed to a given food product by different actors and in different places within that system, and the relationships between these practices and meanings. The values attributed to food thus have "spatial dynamics" (Coles, 2013, p. 259).

This methodology is a response to a question that was very common in the English-speaking human geography research community at the time, i.e. how could economic and cultural dimensions be combined in the analysis? The starting assumption was that the economic and cultural aspects are mutually reinforcing—economic practices, categories and values are informed by specific cultural representations and meanings and, conversely, cultural representations are affected by economic practices and values (Freidberg, 2004, p. 9).

Broadly speaking, the follow-the-thing approach combines a political economy approach, which describes the social relations of production and the extraction of surplus value along the supply chain, with a cultural and post-structuralist approach. By the latter approach, the practices and narratives of social actors (especially consumers) are neither pre-established by socially constituted structures nor directly

determined by the production organization, i.e. they are always subject to the interpretation, negotiation and experience of individual actors. More specifically, Cook tried to reconcile two approaches—a Marxist approach and actor-network theory (ANT). Under the former approach, it is classically considered that production produces “not only the object of consumption but also the mode of consumption” (Marx, 1971). The latter, which was very much in vogue in English-speaking geography research world at the time, rejects the dualism between ‘nature’ and ‘society’ and focuses on studying the ways human and non-human entities are assembled in networks (Latour, 1996). In so doing, it aims to confer some form of agency on the objects studied, e.g. for papaya fruit and trees, Cook pointed out (Cook et al., 2006, p. 650) the ability of the flower to change sex, the secretion of enzymes, the fruit’s tendency to quickly degrade, etc. Furthermore, actor-network theory is concerned about non-human intermediaries (contracts, regulations, conventions, etc.) that link actors and allow one actor to act remotely on another.

Cook further noted that there are also ethical and political challenges inherent to the follow-the-thing approach—it should highlight the different forms of economic exploitation in food systems while enabling the researcher to contemplate the conditions needed for the potential emergence of alternative food networks that would reconnect the different actors and overcome the fragmentation of geographical knowledge. In this methodological reformulation, and in response to certain criticism, Cook specified that rather than attempting to unveil the commodity fetishism that masks relations of production in a more or less epiphanic way to gain access to the ‘thing’, the latter should instead should be grasped, confronted, and explained. The challenge is then to offer alternative narratives to the official ones that highlight certain places and practices (e.g. a green pasture where cattle graze), while deliberately masking others (e.g. slaughterhouse).

Moreover, Cook states (Cook et al., 2006, p. 660) that the follow-the-thing approach should not only lead to greater knowledge, but also to greater empathy and understanding for those whose lives are connected to the food we buy and eat. He concludes his article by calling for the emergence of radical post-disciplinary food studies.

This methodology has given rise to a website⁴⁹ that is run by Ian Cook and his students. The aim of this portal, which lists works (student dissertations, documentaries, research articles, books, etc.) that implement this approach in a more or less acknowledged manner, is clearly ethical and educational. The goal is to reveal the hidden ingredients of everyday consumer products and expose their production conditions.

►► At the nexus between food, place and eaters

Food is pivotal to this approach, yet it does not overlook the eaters. The act of consuming is considered from the viewpoint of the consumed product, whose meanings are built and negotiated throughout the food system. These meanings are not natural or intrinsic attributes that are materially set by the production process, nor are they the outcome of an all-encompassing external culture applied to the products. Conversely, meanings are produced in different places in relation to each other, and they circulate through

49. <http://www.followthethings.com/> (queried on 2 June 2022).

various processes and practices. By bridging materialism⁵⁰ and culturalism⁵¹, this approach explores eaters' geographical imaginations, their representations regarding food origins, and the impact of this knowledge on their relationship with these foods. By this methodology, researchers may adopt a dialectical approach to the material and semiotic relationships and transactions that link the different components of food systems (production, processing, distribution, consumption, regulation, etc.).

This methodology also highlights the power and domination relationships that govern the attribution of meanings. Extensive supply networks offer more opportunities for negotiation and contention with regard to these meanings. In particular, this approach can shed light on sudden changes in meanings that can occur when food exchanges hands, or more generally on the different meanings that producers, processors, distributors and eaters attribute to the same product.

Launched by geographers, the follow-the-thing approach also focuses on links between places, eaters' bodies and food. Places are not only connected in a linear way through food. The geographer Benjamin Coles claimed that food always contains a part of the place where it was produced and where it is consumed—places are “embedded” and “embodied” in the very substance of food (Coles, 2013, p. 256). These places are defined and produced by an interaction between material, social and discursive factors, but also by interconnections between different places. When ingesting a foodstuff, one also ingests a part of these places, in both a material and a discursive sense, i.e. eating a product means eating its geography—defined as an “assemblage of places” (Coles, 2013, p. 257). The follow-the-thing approach thus allows us to examine how different places are embodied in food, and materially and symbolically ingested by eaters. The 'embodied geographies of coffee' presented by Coles, and clearly based on the follow-the-thing method, are illuminating in this respect.

This methodology has two dimensions: an ontological dimension—by asserting that foods take on their meaning in relation to the interrelated places to which they are attached; and an epistemological dimension—by considering that eaters' relationships to these foods can be illuminated by following these foods through space and by investigating these multiple places.

» A multi-site ethnography

The methodology has not been outlined in detail in the literature. A multi-site ethnography survey protocol is primarily implemented, thereby making it a distinctly qualitative approach. Cook considers that the multi-site character is appropriate for assessing the globalization of food systems, but also that only participant observation can clearly shed light on the lives of producers, processors, intermediaries and eaters. However, he goes further, calling on investigators to be highly reflexive in their practices: in a form of autoethnographic narrative (Cook et al., 2006, p. 660), the emotions aroused by making discoveries, as well as the ways they alter the investigator's own knowledge and beliefs, must be exposed. Cook provides little detail about the actual enquiry methodology. The different authors who have implemented this method

50. An epistemological approach that is primarily focused on the material aspect of the objects studied.

51. An epistemological approach that focuses on the objects studied primarily through the symbols and discourses associated with them.

favour qualitative and participatory approaches, i.e. giving precedence to interviewees' life stories. Regarding eaters, the main questions concern their geographical imaginations, their knowledge on the origins and production methods of food that is being followed, and the influence of this knowledge on their consumption patterns. Obviously, field ethnography studies must be complemented by documentary research on the material characteristics of the foods studied, the structuring of supply networks and their historical development, the legislative texts and other regulations governing their exchange and use, the media or advertising discourses regarding them, any social debates on the subject, etc. Firsthand and secondary sources complement each other.

► Limitations and cautionary points

This methodology—as it focuses on specific food products and their sociospatial trajectories—does not allow us to account for the entire range of eaters' practices. It mostly sheds light on the relationship to a specific food that has been followed, but not on an eater's diet or on the meaning that he/she gives to his/her food overall.

Moreover, the use of the Marxist notion of 'commodity fetishism' has been considered too simplistic by some authors. Firstly, the fetish attached to a commodity is not the product of an intention to mask its reality, but rather the inevitable outcome of the commodity exchange system (Goss, 2004). For Marxists, it is illusory to think that we can get rid of the fetish by highlighting it, i.e. for them only the abolition of the capitalist mode of production could overcome this fetishism. Secondly, the belief that revealing the food production conditions would be enough to change consumers' buying behaviour is considered as a moralizing, elitist approach, or even as a legitimization of a neoliberal market economy in which the consumer would be acting rationally if he/she were to be correctly informed.

The multi-site ethnography strategy upon which the follow-the-thing approach is based calls for detailed explanation. Authors who implement the follow-the-thing approach mainly refer to the seminal article by Marcus (1995), who in the 1990s considered that multi-site ethnography is an appropriate interdisciplinary method to take the linkages between the local and the global in social practices into account. More recently, the sociologist Jean-Pierre Hassoun proposed the 'circulating observation' approach (Hassoun, 2020, p. 130) to better take into account the circulation of objects, people and representations between the different places studied.

Finally, the follow-the-thing approach may seem a little outdated in the 2020s. The approach emerged at a time when many food systems were still in the process of being globalized, but is no longer really tailored for today's highly diversified supply networks—it is difficult to adapt it to compound and ultra-processed foods, or to foods whose spatial trajectories are highly complex, changeable, fragmented, or punctuated by disruptions (Hulme, 2017). Moreover, it no longer seems innovative, since there have been many television documentaries and press articles showcasing the behind-the-scenes aspects of globalization, digital applications providing information on food items or fairtrade product packaging displaying the faces of supposedly happy emancipated producers. Nevertheless, this sharp rise in information communicated by agrifood companies could be considered as a new product fetishization regime, so the follow-the-thing approach could then help to reveal the shadowy areas of this supposedly illuminating communication.

► Ethical and deontological aspects

This approach does not involve any particular ethical issues, apart from those usually raised by ethnographic research. Yet caution is needed with regard to personal information gathered during interviews with the various actors (producers, consumers, etc.), as well as confidential information (related to industrial secrecy, etc.) that might be transmitted, as is sometimes the case in food system studies. Like any human science research process, it is subject to the legislation that prevails in the area where the surveys are conducted and with regard to the data processed (e.g. the General Data Protection Regulation [GDPR] in the European Union).

► A multidisciplinary positioning

Geography further enhances its systemic and multidisciplinary aspects when developing the follow-the-thing approach for food studies. This approach moves away from a linear conception of a supply chain or commodity chain for which consumption is only the endpoint. It does not detach eaters from the system in which food is produced, processed and transported, but in a more discursive mode it allows for the circulation of food-related information, narratives and meanings.

The approach thus strives to overcome the production vs consumption opposition in food studies, but also the dichotomy between the material and discursive fields, i.e. between practices and meanings. It is a holistic methodology based on a fundamentally relational ontology. The different food system components must be studied together, and material dimensions cannot be separated from semiotic dimensions. More broadly, this approach seems appropriate for gaining insight into changes taking place in food systems. It allows researchers to take into account ecological processes, material infrastructures, economic networks, political actors and symbolic devices that jointly help to define and regulate the presence, circulation, visibility, status and multiple properties attributed to different foods.

Obviously, this approach is not purely geographical. Reducing food practices to a simple question of location would be a form of spatial reductionism, thereby denying the substance of social practices. Hence, the method requires other social science tools, particularly the socioethnological approach. The latter is the only way to account for the practices observed and discourses heard, and to interpret food practices as genuine social facts underpinned by their own rationales. Thus, this method is not very technical and remains broad in its definition—it can be used by anyone with general social science knowledge. As such, it is fundamentally multidisciplinary.

► An illustration: a sociospatial biography of meat in India

Implementation of the methodology mainly consists of documenting the practices and representations of the actors at different places in the food system, while focusing particularly on changes that affect the meanings attributed to specific food products when they are exchanged and circulated through space. This is the method I applied in a doctoral research project focused on practices and meanings relating to meat in Tamil Nadu state (South India)—the results of which were subsequently published in a book (Bruckert, 2018).

This research aimed to shed light on reconfigurations of the symbolic values and legal status of different meats—chicken, beef, goat meat and sheep meat—in a context of globalization, urbanization, the rise of Hindu nationalism and the growing awareness of ecological and health issues. My main aim was to highlight specific ‘meat circuits’, with their distinct sociotechnical configurations, and to assess the ways meanings attributed to meat are shaped, contested and reconfigured along these circuits. The initial hypothesis was that the meanings eaters attribute to different meats are not only shaped in the consumption space, but also along the supply circuits. Many actors shape the meanings of meat, including people who raise, trade, and slaughter the animals, cut up the carcasses, sell the meat and serve it in restaurants, as well as people who issue regulations, produce expertise, circulate information or are part of religious, environmental and animal protection groups. These meanings may be connected with or disconnected from the eaters’ expectations and imaginaries. Throughout the circuits, eaters’ demands induce particular ways of working in the supply chains and, in return, the constraints and choices of the supply chain actors shape specific consumption practices.

In this research, the method used was directly inspired by the follow-the-thing approach. The first step was to question the different trajectories of meat in the social space: where is meat located? Where does it go? Where does it not go? What are the practices and meanings relating to meat in each of the places in these circuits and how do they vary? Through multi-site ethnography, I studied practices and discourses along the circuits. The study sites were selected along a rural to urban transect so as to investigate the different steps along the circuits in more or less urbanized settings. The field study lasted about a year and involved several month-long stays. My starting point was to study of urban butcherries because they were relatively easy to access, but also because butchers are actually mediators: butcherries are key hubs where production and consumption meet, where eaters, retailers and legislators negotiate the meanings attributed to meat. From the butcher's shops, my path led me up the chain to periurban slaughterhouses, and then down the chain to the restaurant owners and eaters. I conducted semi-structured interviews with more than 80 eaters with different profiles in terms of gender, age, religion, caste, social class and location. The eaters were questioned about their diet, meat consumption, procurement practices, the influence of the location (home or away from home) on meat consumption, as well as their representations about meat and knowledge of procurement channels. I then went back to the starting point of the chain and studied farmers’ work in the light of the last stage of life of their livestock animals, i.e. meat production. From there, I followed the animals to the livestock markets and along the roads leading to the slaughterhouses and butcherries. I also interviewed experts, researchers, veterinarians, politicians, professional representatives and other activists. I constantly went back and forth between the different locations to get a better picture of the connections and circulations between these different spaces. The main limitation of this approach was that it could isolate meat from other food products and overlook the fact that supply chains and food behaviours are part of a consistent whole. I therefore had to ask the eaters about their diets in a broader way, i.e. beyond the meat issue.

Observations and interviews carried out while following the different meats shed light on the actors’ practices and the rationale underlying these practices. I questioned farmers, butchers, slaughterers, traders and restaurant owners about their practices and eaters’

practices. This method helped identify, in professional practices, what was related to technical or economic constraints and what was related to cultural practices and moral values. For example, from an anthropology of technology perspective, the study of meat cutting in butcher's shops—whether the butcher removes fat and skin or not, whether he/she breaks the bones, how he/she cuts up the carcass, etc.—shed light on certain practices and representations of consumers. The blood drainage operation during slaughter was analysed, depending on the actors, in terms of whether it was in mandatory compliance with religious prescriptions, to guarantee food safety or simply to enhance the palatability of the meat. Similarly, I questioned the preference expressed by some eaters for beef or bubaline meat with regard to the economic, agronomic or legal constraints on the rearing and slaughter of large ruminants. In this case, it appeared that religious conceptions, rather than material or economic ones, determined the symbolic value and legal status of meat and animals. The spatial distinction observed in the slaughterhouses between an area dedicated to cattle slaughter and an area dedicated to sheep and goat slaughter was even more illuminating. This separation could be understood as meeting a need for technical and economic specialization of activities, but it appeared mainly to be a material and spatial reflection of a partitioning and hierarchization between two types of meat whose status was generally considered unequal.

I conducted an in-depth study on the situation regarding chicken. Eaters were questioned about their perception of chicken meat and the risks associated with its consumption, about the trust-building process—based on the visibility of farming and slaughtering activities, certifications, industrial standards—and about their knowledge of production conditions, etc. I followed the chickens from the rearing sheds through the wholesale markets to the supermarket refrigerators. I conducted interviews with the owner of an integrated poultry company, with seasonal workers on the farms, artisanal butchers, wholesalers, supermarket managers and high-end shopkeepers. Communication materials circulated by the poultry industry and press articles related to chicken were analysed. This methodology enabled me to draw up a sociospatial biography of chicken in Tamil Nadu state and to document the way in which the transformation of animal rearing and meat processing affected (or not) eaters' representations and practices. The findings highlighted the deanimalization process that impacted the entire broiler supply chain: the living nature of chickens was stifled by the intensification of farming practices, while industrial slaughter and the sale of cut and frozen meat tended to mask the animal origin of this meat. This deanimalization was found to make chicken meat more acceptable to many Hindus, contributed to the increase in its consumption, but it also generated a sense of loss among eaters, a form of nostalgia for the firm, tasty and fortifying meat of local free-range chickens (Bruckert, 2021).

Beyond the distinction between different types of meat, the implementation of the follow-the-thing approach allowed me to establish a typology between three types of meat circuits under specific rationales: a vernacular circuit, an artisanal circuit and a mass circuit. For each of these circuits, I identified specific characteristics: spatial extension, division of labour, rearing methods, legitimization of the killing, carcass sharing rationales, culinary uses and ways of consuming and classifying meat. I also documented more general aspects such as the relationship to the animals' life that these circuits reflected and perpetuated, eaters' knowledge regarding these circuits, their regime of visibility and their politicization by Hindu nationalism proponents (Table 10.1).

Table 10.1. Sociospatial configurations of different meat circuits in India (from Bruckert, 2018, 331-333).

		Vernacular circuit	Artisanal circuit	Mass circuit
General	Iconic animals	Billy goat, rooster	Small ruminant, chicken	Broiler chicken
	Relationship to animals' life	Continuity, proximity, singularization	Discontinuity, commodification	Discontinuity, reification, fetishism?
	Control of the circuit	Social/family group	Traders, wholesalers	Industries
	Eaters' knowledge on the circuit	Very good	Good to average	Low
	Origins of the representations linked to the circuit	Experience, direct knowledge	Stories, memories, circulations	Industrial system, media, political field
	Politization	Low	Strong	Strong
	Location and visibility	Local visibility	Distancing	Invisibilization and banalization
Supply network	Spatial extension	Small	Medium to long	Medium to very long
	Technical model	Domestic and extensive	Extensive and intensive	Intensive and industrialized
	Division of labour	Low	Medium	High
Livestock farming	Animal owners	Households	Farmers	Private companies
	Farming pattern	Diversified, extensive	Specialized, semi-extensive, intensive	Professionalized, intensive
	Work relations	Kinship	Caste, lineage	Paid labour
Slaughter	Slaughter legitimization	Sacrifice, ritual	Ritual (halal)	Hygiene, halal?
	Usage of blood	Offering to deities	Drainage	Use as by-product
	Killing	Exposed	Distanced	Hidden
	Beef	'Fallen' animals	Cull animals	Fattened buffaloes?
Cutting and distribution	Logic of sharing	Social, gift	Economic	Economic
	Carcass cutting, meat characteristics	Carcass split, bones broken, fresh meat	Carcass split, meat pieces, fresh meat	Deboned meat pieces, ready-to-cook, ready-to-eat, refrigerated and frozen meat
Consumption	Modes of consumption	Sacrifice, ceremonial	Ceremonial, banalized	Banalized
	Culinary uses	Stew	Stew, fried, pilaf	Various recipes, distant repertoires
	Places of consumption	Home, external rural places	Home, restaurant	Home, restaurant

		Vernacular circuit	Artisanal circuit	Mass circuit
Consumption	Frequency of consumption	Monthly	Weekly	Daily?
	Consumption rationales	Religious, social (caste), nutrition (power)	Social (caste and class), nutrition (strength), taste	Social (class), hygiene, nutrition (muscle), taste
	Consumption restrictions	Cultural, religious, economic	Cultural, religious, economic, medical	Medical, ethical, political, environmental?
	Meat classification	Pure/impure; hot/cold	Pure/impure; hot/cold; fat/lean; cheap/expensive	Fat/lean; red/white?
	Identification of animals in meat	Sought, promoted	Ambivalent	Stifled, flesh dressed up as mere proteins
	Offal	Promoted	Socially differentiated	Depreciated

► A method for all situations?

The follow-the-thing method is very broadly defined, so it can be adapted to many field situations. Obviously, the first challenge is to choose the places where the interviews and observations will be conducted. It may be challenging to access places that are the most suitable for shedding light on the practices and meanings related to certain foods. A site may be physically inaccessible due to its remoteness, for example, or its access may be prohibited. The research must be prepared to forego visiting certain sites, while still seeking information from secondary sources. In the case of the Indian fieldwork described above, access to the municipal slaughterhouses was negotiated several times with the local authorities. Doors were finally opened to me provided that I would not take photographs. However, I was unable to monitor poultry processing plants. Poultry farms could be visited thanks to contacts among the local population.

The pathways of some foods were sometimes too complex to be able to undertake research in all the places. I then had to select those that I assumed would contribute more than others to determining the final meanings attributed to the foods studied. Thus, in line with the limitations outlined above, a researcher would not study vegetables sold in a short supply chain in the same way as a bottle of soda would be studied.

In any case, investigators applying this methodology must be open to a form of serendipity, i.e. he/she must be guided by the people he/she meets. These people may attract attention or give access to places that had not previously been considered worthy of interest. All places should not be given the same importance. For both epistemological and practical reasons, some contexts could be investigated in greater depth, which is thereby in line with long-term ethnographic research. Other places could then be visited secondarily, with the study finding complementing and illuminating data collected in the main place of investigation. In my work on meat in India, slaughterhouses and butcheries were the main places of investigation, as it appeared that they were the venues of the main conflicts over the status attributed to the different meats.

Rearing practices were studied more secondarily, and always in connection with the meanings attributed to the different meats.

It is not surprising, however, that a method that focuses on the impacts of the socio-spatial context on food is in turn shaped by the different investigation contexts.

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