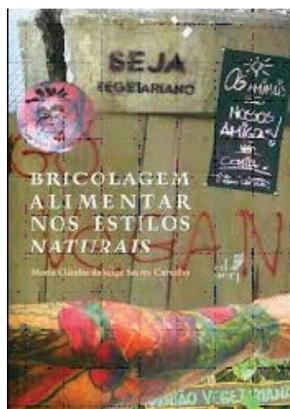


## How to eat what (one eats)



### BRICOLAGEM ALIMENTAR NOS ESTILOS NATURAIS

Maria Cláudia da Veiga Soares Carvalho. Rio de Janeiro: UERJ Editor, 2013. 162 pages.  
ISBN: 978-85-7511-294-6

Thiago Perez Jorge<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, Programa de Pós-Graduação em História. Florianópolis-SC, Brasil.

Correspondence  
Thiago Perez Jorge  
E-mail: [thijorge@gmail.com](mailto:thijorge@gmail.com)

In a hypothetical situation, a nutritionist with its white coat, heads to the corridor of a basic health unit and calls out loud (or the sound level you wish) the next patient. This one enters the office, sits, or maybe weight and height collection procedures are carried out before that, whatever. What interests us is that at some point of the conversation between the professional and the patient, the last one will be asked about what he eats. From that moment on, it is predictable. The professional questioning, as much as possible, about all the patient usually eats. What he ate from the time he opened his eyes until the moment before going to sleep. And from the patient's side he will answer to all (or almost all), according to the qualified Nutritionist, who in his eagerness to cure, prevent diseases and promote health, uses his strategies to extract the truth from that person. **An** acknowledgment relationship in the case the nutritionist conducts it with docility, a certain empathy, or perhaps if the inquiry mode of extracting the facts is explicitly more violent, i.e., when the response elements are apparent, become obvious in subliminal symbols of questions. As a force that moves from the one that occupies a privileged place of distinction towards the subject, who may resist, accommodate, but who will always play the game in which

he becomes the object. Now, when asking “*What did you eat for breakfast?*” already transmits itself elements of a framework that both the professional and the patient, understand, even unconsciously, leading to practical actions.

**However**, this hypothetical situation that could occur in more complex health facilities such as hospitals or even in commercial or institutional meals distribution sectors, as part of a scientific research, does not match to reality. By the way, what is real if “cultures are always changing” in such a way that “the flow is such that one can never dive twice in the same culture”, which leads Sahlins<sup>1</sup> to the revelation that “reality is a beautiful place to visit (philosophically) but no one ever lived there.”

Although anecdotal in this hypothetical situation, the playfulness aims to discuss limits and possibilities for the food, nutrition and health fields, which although plural, is structured in the field of the biomedical model order. Something Nunes<sup>2</sup> already pointed out regarding the primacy of this rationality guided by the universality and positivism, i.e., guided in its practices: a) To combat diseases by treatment and prevention; b) Act upon the diseases biological definition; c) Optimism facing the diseases successful eradication; d) To teach a biomedical knowledge oriented from biological assumptions of Natural Science. Said this way, aligned to biomedicine, the food, nutrition and health field does not show contradictions. Is that so? Daily, problems involving food - among hunger, abundance and eating disorders - themes from family conversations and other sociability, to several expressions of the cultural industry, as weekly magazines and television programs, do not allow such chimera to take place. But then, how to deal with the food contemporary issues? Would it be somewhat tautological to claim that phenomena involving food are complex? Then *what is eating? Where to start from?* Maybe it's time to broaden the debate, displacing the old, infamous question *what one eats to how to eat what*. A successful break in Maria Claudia Soares da Veiga Carvalho thesis,<sup>3</sup> presented at the Post-graduation Program in Public Health of Rio de Janeiro State University (UERJ), in the form of a book: *Food do it yourself in natural styles* by UERJ editor, in 2013.<sup>4</sup>

Carvalho follows Madel Therezinha Light, guiding the thesis and who prefaced his book. In fact the author has incorporated social science contributions, reflecting issues involving the feeding field. However, this is not the originality of this work. According to Luz<sup>5</sup> consolidated experiences exist as in the case of socio-anthropological researches at the Federal University of Bahia (UFBA). Argument partly reinforced by Vasconcelos,<sup>6</sup> who in a recent analysis on dissertations and theses, with qualitative and mixed approaches, produced by graduate programs in nutrition in the country from 2003 to 2012, pointed out the Federal University of Bahia program, plus UERJ and the Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFSC), as the highlights in the type of qualitative and mixed approach.

Partially, because the results influenced both the selection criteria: 7 of the total of 22 graduate programs on the Capes Nutrition Area were analyzed in May 2013; as to the fact that among these 7, only three programs have provided the dissertations and theses full text of qualitative and mixed approaches.<sup>6</sup> The demonstration that the 962 dissertations and theses set defended during the analyzed period from the 7 initially selected programs, 92.5% were based on a quantitative approach; in 5.4% a qualitative approach was used; and only in 1.9% the so-called combined approach was used, involving both procedures.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, a wide path expanding the dialogue with the humanities and social sciences is necessary. Here lies a fruitfulness of Carvalho search experience.

A warning: although it is a pleasant and easy reading for those who have dedicated themselves to a denaturalization of technical and scientific procedures of knowledge that traditionally involve the food, nutrition and health field, I shall carry out a dialogue between the publications, thesis<sup>3</sup> and book<sup>4</sup> to better situate some constructions of the latter one.

It is important to realize an experience that can unblock looks. The author assumes that she was initially imbued with a “sanitary centric mistake” for ethnographic practice, i.e., tendentiously there was an “interventionist quirk” that guided her “interest to prepare an interpretative analysis” (p.18)<sup>4</sup> “a typical claim of health care” (p.10).<sup>3</sup> However, with the ethnographic work practical experience, any idea of intervention became impossible, this look that takes food as a standardization tool and life medicalization, “twisting the meanings of things, subtly interfered in the interpretation of concepts, senses and meanings” (p.18).<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, the ethnographic text was being built, aiming to “interpret” in a “defined social space, the symbolic universe, concepts, senses and meanings, underlying the contemporary eating style called natural and its variations” (p.10)<sup>3</sup> next to a “carioca middle class,” process from which “looking and seeing is also doing: building meanings to organize what you see” (p.18).<sup>4</sup>

In the literature review on “vegetarianism”, Azevedo<sup>7</sup> notices that this cultural practice “is growing and gaining adherents worldwide”, in US, Europe and Brazil. However, he signals the need of coherence in the surveyed profile, once this feeding concept is plural, depends on the country, the diners group, the quality and origin of food (p.280).<sup>7</sup> Therefore, he quotes a foreign author whose reference dates of the same year as Carvalho thesis. Fraser “proposes to seek a more refined dietary categorical than ‘vegetarians and non-vegetarians’, since diets can be much more diverse and different than the ‘no meat’ factor requires from them” (p.280).<sup>7</sup> Azevedo wouldn’t need to go that far. Carvalho contributes to the theme showing symbolic constructions focusing on practices, which by being dynamic do not allow any attempts, frustrated beforehand, to grasp an ultimate reality.

He conducts fieldwork to understand natural food styles as a “provisional arrangement that generates meanings and individual collective identities” not fixed and much less universal, which led the author to the non need to “assign a false value” to whom considers himself a vegetarian and eats “fish or grilled chicken breast” for a “vegetarian pattern” was not set off, i.e., “identification with vegetarianism was built in practice, according to what subjects considered to be vegetarian” (p.19).<sup>4</sup>

Here comes an important concept, appropriate and developed by Levi-Strauss (1908-2009), handicraft, worked out in his work *Wild Thought*.<sup>8</sup> The Franco-Belgian anthropologist and philosopher with his work makes use of a well used irony to designate the untamed thought, which acts as an handicraft, the one who works with his hands, indirect means compared to the artist. An handicraft who is not defined by design but by instrumentality, for elements are collected or maintained in accordance with the principle that they may always be useful, does not need the equipment and the knowledge of all the corpus elements (p.32).<sup>8</sup> It is the “contingent result” of the presented circumstances “to renew and enrich the stock or to save it, with residues of previous constructions and destructions” (p.38).<sup>8</sup> A *wild thought* that is defined by a “symbolic ambition” by a ‘scrupulous attention entirely devoted to concrete” to observe, experiment, classify and investigate (p.246),<sup>8</sup> finally, it is a sensitive logic of the “thought in a wild state, different from the domesticated or cultivated thinking aiming to earn an income” (p.245).<sup>8</sup> With Lévi-Strauss we learned that science, religion, art and magic are a real axis of the human knowledge. This is one of the jumps of Carvalho’s work that did not worry with “an impression of reality as it is, naturalized”, rigid, but as “a social construction of reality”, done on the move through a “food do it yourself”.<sup>4</sup> Such concept underlying the analysis of natural, better developed in the book *food do it yourself* chapter (p.65-87),<sup>4</sup> rests on Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005) and Canevacci shoulders (1942-). Therefore, food DIY is a “continuous redefinition that assigns meanings to food in the social imaginary, making symbolic arrangements to reach a consensus, which with precarious balance, orders and reorders the experience,” after all “people taste and consume food along with a symbolic consensus and collective imagination” (p.71).<sup>4</sup>

Let’s go back to the starting anecdote. If eating was a unique attribute of biological needs and did not involve symbolic and situational components, then issues such as *what you eat* would be reasonable for a general understanding of this practice. However, there are instrumentality principles of this symbolic-material act that Carvalho tried to understand. Beyond the look that overwhelms, makes one person subject to something, the objectification process that turns *me on this* in order to reify classifications, taxonomies and hierarchies. This is one of the winnings of this work. To search understanding through the interpretation of “lifestyles” the “organization mode of meanings that consolidates

everyday disputes, dictated by desire and culture of imagination”, in a way that “it is not ‘what you eat’, but ‘how to eat what’ (p.32).<sup>4</sup>

To look beyond the conventional “food surveys” of the food and nutrition field that “take less objectivity than expected”, a vision somewhat “innocent”, which “reduces the complexity of life in causality” (p.33).<sup>4</sup> These traditional instruments (24h recall, food record, food frequency), while important in the quantitative research when the intention is to identify food consumed in a given locality, built at biomedical mode, do not allow a “sensitivity focused on impressions” in order to understand feeding practices below the food reduction to a numeric data (p.23).<sup>3</sup> The construction of taste is not limited to the sovereignty of the body biological dimension (p.38).<sup>3</sup>

In this sense Carvalho goes on searching the senses meaning of being vegetarian. A taste interpretative search, built in practice and objectified in a defined context and dated that is updated in practice, since “memory is procedural and reaffirmed throughout the process” (p.36).<sup>4</sup> Therefore, in *Dialogues between natural, vegan and living* (89-103),<sup>4</sup> and *Senses and meanings of natural* (p.105-129) chapters,<sup>4</sup> Carvalho along with Pierre Bourdieu’s contributions (1930-2002), one of the most read thinkers in the anthropology and sociology fields, presents his interpretation of natural styles. That is the overcoming of vegetarian classification by *what you eat* only: meat.

Nurtured by the author’s appropriation of this philosopher, which I think is the basis by which Carvalho reflectivity expands, is where this work originality appears, through its interpretation of natural *modus operandi*, by which the instrumentality of feeding habits are updated.

Operationalized instrumentality through two important “bourdieutians” concepts: *habitus* and field. The first one appears in the mid-1960s, “Cabile house,” picked-up years later in 1972, in “Sketch of a theory of practice” and shows how Bourdieu addresses the problem of culture studying, whether “leaning on a corpus” this “collection of harvested achievements in different contexts” and “combined under a objectified form” through “tales, sayings, rites, but also objects of culture material” to be “understood on the field by contact with a single informant that unveils it in a dialogue situation, not only with his words but also in his actions and even gestures” (p.156-157).<sup>9</sup>

*Habitus* is a concept seeking to operationalise culture through an epistemological position that, unlike an approach that postulate “the existence of a reality independently of our representations, “intends “to deploy the world from the way it appears to a being living in it, not only by observing means but also with all its corporeality” (p.157).<sup>9</sup> In this germinal work the thinker develops a fundamental question: “to restore to objects its

sense, according to the use made of them, since this sense is the social existence mode of these objects, throughout the relationship actors have with them, which means, in Pierre Bourdieu's language, through practice" (p.158-159).<sup>9</sup> Therefore, practice "is the dialectical relationship product between a situation and a *habitus*", which can only be explained if placed relating "the objective structure that defines the *habitus* production of social conditions (which engendered these practices) with this *habitus* exercise conditions, that is, with the situation that except radical transformation, represents a particular state of that structure" (p.65).<sup>10</sup>

From this perspective, eating habits as the *habitus* contact area with the contingency of the situation should not be confused with "feeding behavior" since this one "might be possible", and the other one emerges as "acquired disposition for action", which beyond a biomedical look, "informs intrinsic issues of a 'way of being' with depth and density" (p.40-41).<sup>3</sup> *Habitus* is operationalized in conjunction with the "field" notion, whose nature is not constant and corresponds to a set of interests and forces, rebuilt at all times, in which "the game rules are themselves brought into play" (p. 29).<sup>10</sup> Therefore, to understand the feeding field one has to know the rules and laws that go through it, because feeding is not a monolithic field, rules and laws of advertisements, the media, the food industry, the knowledge derived from scientific fields, acting on it. Plus health, body notions, environmental and town nature, also compete in the *habitus* production and reproduction, affecting eating habits. It is here that *how you eat what you eat* is interpreted.

Something that Carvalho (p.43)<sup>3</sup> demonstrates in his interpretation that "naturalists' *habitus* may represent a resistance force to the field forces, where *fast-food* feeding practices prevail". Moreover, "lifestyles are the organized products of *habitus*, which according to his provisions, become significant and qualifiers as distinct or vulgar."<sup>3</sup>

The natural style in general encompasses the *vegan* and living styles, for its meaning universe "brings together a wider range of possibilities due to its flexibility in that game rules" (p.89).<sup>4</sup> However lifestyles approach and deviate. The "*vegan* style" approaches the natural style for its similar opposition to the fast-food style, but also distances itself from this same style through its "investment in an eating refinement," reproducing a "elitist and intellectualized *habitus*, conferring to it a social distinction", a *vegan* style that "articulates faith and science" (p.92).<sup>4</sup> On the other hand the "living" or "raw food" marked by "mythical narratives about prolonging life and living with no diseases" (p.95)<sup>4</sup> is linked to *vegan* by the plant origin feeding intake only, blending itself with science, however, if *vegan habitus* guide practical arrangements of a "philosophy of life" (p.96),<sup>4</sup> the living *habitus* characterizes in its practices the simulation of "a natural environment, with no stove, away from the conventional kitchen" and is focused in "a therapeutic" cure (p.99).<sup>4</sup> These three

styles - living, natural and vegan are close by the following: the clothing associated with country life; feminine aesthetic without makeup, skin with no tan, hair without aging undisguised; and concerning the ways of eating, there is no loud talking in restaurants, denoting “emotions control” in this distinct civilization, which associates meat consumption with a “negative civility” of “of nature aggression and depredation”; which also “reinforces the willingness to sustainability”, since “banquets are uncommon” and there is a rational and fair use of food resources as in the “practice of full utilization of food” in both styles (p.100-103).<sup>4</sup> Finally, there are counterculture aspects in natural styles, impregnated by the idea of “freedom of expression: change and be what you want to be, being already having freedom; choosing what is unconventional is already, somewhat, a way of being free and natural” (p.127).<sup>4</sup> Confrontation with rules and laws of the neoliberal system. A freedom concept traditionally linked to the middle class historic consolidation, the same one that integrates the informants’ group of Cavalho research.

With this work a path, a crack opens up against the nuisance the initial hypothetical situation presented. This is not throwing out the baby with its water. In the more immediate issues, specifically about treatment and cure, the knowledge accumulated in the food and nutrition fields is fundamental. However, it is not enough to understand *practices* and *lifestyles*. And this, without discussing here the educational role in health or education and health. This review intent was simpler.

To rely on references and findings, used by Carvalho, in order to point out the possibility of “entering social sciences in the nutrition field” (p.16).<sup>3</sup> It is not the only one ever done, in fact, Carvalho makes an interesting art state - dissertations, theses and collections - oriented to the dialogue of food and nutrition field with the social sciences and humanities area (p.26-32).<sup>3</sup> But the road is just beginning.

Vasconcelos observed that most of the “practitioners of this ]nutrition[ science” is affiliated “to the dominant paradigm”, biological and positivist, and reflects that the “marginal” and “emerging” position of the qualitative researches, given the primacy “interest” in quantitative researches, can be explained among the multiple factors by the availability of financial and material resources, the visibility of the scientific production and the accumulation of scientific capital of those involved (p.343-345).<sup>6</sup> We will go back to the initial anecdote for the last time.

Distinction positions - white coat, technical and scientific terms, legitimate knowledge - are disseminated by the society. Types of domination that tend to stay and update in the symbolic games producing it. The question is not what role one wants to play, but become aware of the practices and arrangements for action. If it makes sense to argue that feeding is constituted as a symbolic way transcending quantitative issues, which passes through a

kind of “intrinsic language of senses, taste and distinction exchange” (p.133),<sup>4</sup> then, it is urgent to understand that there are different logics and interests: they may play “from the most perverse appropriation of a symbol at its own advantage to the most genuine expression of a social survival strategy in social inequality” (p.136).<sup>4</sup> For that reason it is worth reading it!

## References

1. Sahlins M. Esperando Foucault, ainda. São Paulo: Cosacnaify; 2004, page 9.
2. Nunes ED. As ciências sociais e saúde na América Latina: tendências e perspectivas. Washington: Opas; 1985.
3. Carvalho MCVS. Estilos naturais: uma bricolagem alimentar no Brasil urbano [tese]. Rio de Janeiro: Universidade Estadual do Rio de Janeiro; 2009.
4. Carvalho MCVS. Bricolagem alimentar nos estilos naturais. Rio de Janeiro: Ed. UERJ; 2013. Page 162.
5. Luz MT. Prefácio. Carvalho MCVS. Bricolagem alimentar nos estilos naturais. Rio de Janeiro: Ed. UERJ; 2013. Page 10.
6. Vasconcelos FAG. A pesquisa qualitativa nos programas de pós-graduação em nutrição no Brasil: análise das dissertações e teses. Demetra 2013; 8 (Supl. 1):329-348.
7. Azevedo E. Vegetarianismo. Demetra 2013; 8 (Supl. 1):277.
8. Lévi-Strauss C. O pensamento selvagem. 8ª ed. Campinas, SP: Papyrus; 2008.
9. Boltanski L. Usos fracos e usos intensos do habitus. Encrevé P, Lagrave RM, organizadores. Trabalhar com Bourdieu. Rio de Janeiro: Bertrand Brasil; 2005. Pages 156-157.
10. Bourdieu P. Esboço de uma teoria de prática. In: Ortiz R. Pierre Bourdieu. São Paulo: Ática; 1983. Page 65.

Received in: May 31, 2014

Revised in: July 28, 2014

Accepted: August 29, 2014