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Food from a Sociological Perspective

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to examine, from a sociological point of view, the roles, functions, attributes, meanings and practices connected to the concept of food.

Food is the symbol of socio-cultural realities, the product cyclically adapted to environmental, structural and cultural changes in which it is inserted. Now more than ever, the variegated and complex universe of food makes up a privileged observatory for the understanding of the marked transformation taking place in post-modern societies.

The modern press, television, and publishing industries continuously grind out questions regarding food, both as to diet and health, as well as to recipes and *loisir*. Food is ever-present in conversation, in opinions, in education, in daily life. For this reason, it can be considered a means of communication through which the social agent expresses himself and his own view of the world.

Feasting, enjoyment, pleasure, sociality, worry, excess, waste: when the meaning of food goes beyond edible.

Keywords: Food, Social dimension, Culture.

1. Beyond edibility

Eating is one of the great problems/themes of our times and the uses correlated to it demonstrate that they evolve, adapt to necessities, integrate

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innovation in certain cases, and translate social dynamics. Food is the symbol of socio-cultural realities, the product cyclically adapted to environmental, structural and cultural changes in which it is inserted.

The aim of this article is to examine, from a sociological point of view, the roles, functions, attributes, meanings and practices connected to the concept of food.

For quite a long time, sociology has hesitated, compared to disciplines such as history and anthropology, to consider food as a litmus test to capture social changes, giving up interpreting the kitchen as a privileged location for the construction, reproduction and modification of one's own identity. Therefore, it is not possible to speak about an actual sociological production on the tops of eating/diet; in fact, the area of study has often been approached in what could be called an "instrumental" manner for the relevance which it could have in terms of other themes and fields of research.

There are, however, literary references since the second half of the 1900s (Levi-Strauss,1966; Barthes, 1964; Douglas, 1966; Bourdieu,1979; Goody,1982; Harris,1985; Appadurai,1986; Fischler,1988)which demonstrate that eating habits, no longer considered a simple response to biological needs, represent the result of cultural responses to natural needs, a sort of point of convergence between a natural-biological dimension and a dimension of a social and cultural nature.

Now more than ever, the variegated and complex universe of food makes up a privileged observatory for the understanding of the marked transformation taking place in post-modern societies.

Food consumption greatly contributes to marking identity and social distinctions, structural and symbolic conditions, cultural taxonomies and developments in hybridization amongst different cultures. Through food, socio-cultural meaning and logic is expressed, and that which is considered food is, in turn, the result of a classifying process carried out through meanings and logic which it mirrors (Sassatelli, 2004).

Human beings are symbolic and social eaters who create metaphors and live in a weaving of meanings, and one of the distinguishing factors which exists between these and other living being is the particular connection which they establish with their own food: man, in fact, differently from other animals, does not simply nourish himself, but he eats, and in eating he does not simply consume foods, but he establishes a relationship with food which distinctly symbolic.

Nourishing oneself is "behavior which signals other behavior: physical activity, sport, effort, free time, celebration, each of these situations has its own expression through food; one could say that this sort of polysemy of food characterizes modernity" (Barthes, 1998:33).Food, therefore, takes on

multiple meanings: food, entertainment, culture, participation, *joie de vivre*, pleasure and worry, the defense of tradition and the desire to experiment are intertwined; it is subject to a continuous process of adaptation, due to structural, environmental and cultural phenomena.

The modern press, television, and publishing industries continuously grind out questions regarding food, both as to diet and health, as well as to recipes and *loisir*. Food is ever-present in conversation, in opinions, in education, in daily life. For this reason, it can be considered a means of communication through which the social agent expresses himself and his own view of the world.

The value of food is, then, above all socio-cultural and food consumption “implicates social agents who have to assign a sense of reality, culturally structure the interpretation of self in the work which surrounds them” (Neresini, Rettore 2008:11).

Feasting, enjoyment, pleasure, sociality, worry, excess, waste: when the meaning of food goes beyond edible.

2. Symbolic and cultural meaning

Food, besides being sustenance, is, above all, culture. Human beings are endowed with a cultural filter which redeems the act of eating as a simple response to physical mechanisms, re-elaborating a physiological need in a symbolic, cultural and social act.

Said aspect has been documented for centuries through written sources and complete repertoires of ethnographic evidence¹. From these it is possible to infer how, for man in every historical epoch and geographical context, food were never simple raw materials, used to satisfy the physiological need to survive, but products strongly invested with social, religious, communicative, and, not least, identity-making significance. Food, no matter what the raw material it is composed of, “hypersignifies” itself as the assumptor of a

¹ For more information, please see: Brears P. (1993), *A taste of history, 10.000 years of food in Britain*, London, Britain Museum Press; Capatti A., Montanari M. (1999), *La cucina italiana. Storia di una cultura*, Roma-Bari, Laterza; Ferrières M. (2004), *Storia delle paure alimentari, dal Medioevo all'alba del XX secolo*, Roma, Editori Riuniti; Mennel S. (1985), *All manners of food: eating and taste in England and France from the middle ages to present*, New York, Basil Blackwell; Montanari M (1993), *La fame e l'abbondanza. Storia dell'alimentazione in Europa*, Roma-Bari, Laterza; Sutton D. (2001), *Remembrance of Repasts: an anthropology of food and memory*, Oxford, Berg.

signifying-communicative dimension of which each person makes more or less use in his daily behavior.

Elias (1988) wrote that much time was needed, at least several centuries, for man to discover the civility of good manners and the use of the fork. Based on the principle of the incorporation that man is what he eats (Fischler, 1988), it is possible to affirm that through food, and man is integrated into a culture. In such a way, food falls within a system of communications, images, a protocol of uses and behavior, but above all it tends to lose its material characteristics and be transformed into a situation (Barthes, 1964).

Lévi-Strauss (1966) shows us how eating habits regulate our relationship with the world, as if cooking was an originary hieroglyphic in which the transformation of natural elementary data into common habits and customs are seen; behind these daily acts, specific cultural messages are hidden. An anthropologist is directed towards the interpretation of the symbolic role of food as a bridge between nature and culture and underlines that there is “*the existence of an isomorphism between two oppositions; that of nature and culture and that of continuous and discrete quantities [...] within culture, singing or chanting differs from the spoken language as culture differs from nature*” (Lévi-Strauss, 1966: 50). Treating eating practices as a language made up by minimal units of analysis which are structured as binary oppositions, he pointed out the formula according to which raw is to cooked as nature is to culture; cooking food means transforming nature into culture.

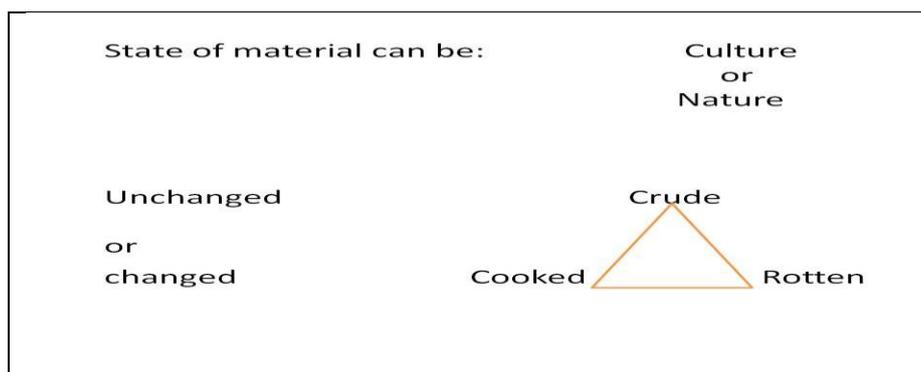
In a short story about Bororo myths, it is noted how the culinary art hold an essential place in the indigenous philosophy “*While the state of nature still prevailed, humans –earth-dwellers– practiced hunting but knew nothing of agriculture: they fed on meat which, according to several versions, was consumed raw, and on rotten vegetable matter: decayed wood and mushrooms. On the other hand, the celestial gods are vegetarian, but their maize is not cultivated, it grows spontaneously and in unlimited quantities, [...] in the natural order of staple foods, this maize is comparable to meat, staple food for man in the state of nature*” (Lévi-Strauss, 1966:224). In the various mythological short stories, the same pertinent opposition of a culinary nature prevails upon the author, between cooked and raw food. That is, cooked food is a cultural transformation of cooked food, a way to modify and define nature (Fig. 1).

Through the study of various cultural subsystems, in food it is possible to gather the information on the social system in its entirety. Eating together, for example, assigns a collective value to the extent of the meal, a symbolic representation which reinforces bonds, allows for comparison and creates relationality.

In essence, the French scholar, as to the dietary prescriptions, asserts that “in order to taste good” food must be previously presented as “*good to think*

about” to imagine, to daydream about, and food “*an activity in which society unconsciously translates its own structure*” (Lévi-Strauss, 1966: 140).

Figure 1: Culinary triangle of Lévi-Strauss (1966).



Taking in the legacy of said studies, Mary Douglas, in her essay on food as a system of communication, claims that this is mainly a way to express and create social relationships, and not only a way to satisfy the physical and natural needs of the body. Through distinctions which arise between what an individual eats and what he avoids, “*the subject raises barriers between human and inhuman, which imply a principle of order of great importance: eating right means cultivating a regular relationship with cultural and social order*” (Douglas, 1984:10).

Douglas also asserts that the social reality is made up of moments of interaction, amongst which there is also the practice of eating, in which there is a sharing of meanings upon which a certain social system is based and underlines how the meal can be compared to a language for three different reasons: it distinguishes order from chaos, it economizes expressive media allowing only a limited number of dietary structures, and imposes a hierarchy of the structural repetitions (Degli Esposti, 2004).

Society is understood as a system of communication which transmits messages and meaning which, so that they can determine social interaction, are intermediated by rituals which serve to give the world meaning and order, to construct a universe of common meanings. Consequentially, there is a connection between dietary behavior and social behavior, between the structure of the mean and the social relationships between the people who eat them; therefore, food is a way to express and create relationships, “*the rules which hedge off and order one kind of social interaction are reflected in the rules which control the internal ordering of the meal itself*” (Douglas, 1984: 171).

The author and her French colleague share the idea that each type of society must have common meanings which make communication and understanding amongst individuals possible.

Food rituals can be read as a code whose matrix is the culture which they belong to, and at the same time, through their material representation, they allow to make cultural categories public, allowing subjects to access and exchange information which the system of communication of food transmits.

The symbolic values of food are put before the circulation of messages which are anchored in society and encode ideas, habits and behavior: food makes up/constitutes the nexus between different ethnic components, cultures, environments and socio-economic structures.

As Montanari underlines, food is shown as a “*decisive element in human identity and as one of the most effective instruments with which to communicate it*” (2005:VII). Cultural subsystems, amongst which food, are indispensable for the constitution and the stabilization of social life.

These contribute to socialization as they supply channels through which individuals can interact with each other: they offer, that is, the possibility to understand the symbolic environment in which one lives, making it familiar to all individuals, sharing the same horizon of meaning, coming to a common perception of that which is real.

The cultural subsystems reveal themselves as indispensable for the production and the distribution of the collective conscious: they transmit meanings which carry the information necessary for the establishment of the social system in its entirety. Offering the individual a model in order to classify that which is real, they allow for the universe which surrounds it to attribute a certain cultural and social meaning. We can define actual “*semantic sedimentations which participate in the selection of the infinite possibilities as to how to behave*” (Paltrinieri, 1998: 153).

Food from this perspective is one of the ways in which man organizes his own cosmos, imposing order upon chaos and reducing the complexity of that which is possible. An actual intersection between the biological and cultural dimension.

3. The social dimension and eating habits

Food has functions which are strictly social and, amongst all of them, food consumption presents an essential particularity: they are physically and literally integrated. Food, additionally, is laden with meaning, and this allows them to produce effects which are symbolic and real, individual and social. In choosing a daily diet, a strong component connected to symbology, social conventions,

memory and loved ones. The same words “*compagnia*” “*compainon*” “*compagnie*” derive from the Latin word which means “*he who eats together with others*” (Di Nallo, 1986:35). Therefore, eating together does not only mean nourishment, but communication, togetherness and symbolically re-propose the cornerstones of one’s society.

Food is closely tied to the division of time: nowadays, it can almost only exist as a physiological necessity, comfortably regulated by the restaurant industry and by other modern industrial products, or as a fully recognized form of entertainment. Eating no longer structures time, it is time that structures eating.

Being table companions, “eating all together” represents a sort of internal communication in families, and, as highlighted by Chombart de Lauwe (1956), a communal character is attributed to the meal eaten amongst family members – object of study of an empirical investigation on food consumption behavior in working-class families outside Italy – which represents a privileged moment for social exchanges (Mafessoli, 1988) and cultural learning.

The study of eating and the organization of means has highlighted the central role it has in the life of working-class families, commensality, the moment in which the cohesion of the working-class family is shown and, at the same time, the internal hierarchy between men and women, parents and children, is expressed. The male occupies the seat of honour at the family table and is at the center of the conversation; the family group, in this manner, expresses their own gratitude “*in this form of household living, in a certain family model, a function of equilibrium is established, corresponding to a specific culture*” (de Lauwe, 1956: 218).

Weber (1922) had already made commensality one of the pivotal principles of his theory regarding differences in class. Class is part of the cultural sphere and can be defined as a group of people who share the same lifestyle and a strong sense of belonging which implies a limitation in social relationships. This limitation is expressed, above all, through commensality, that is, one is united with and sits at the table with people of the same class to share a specific socio-economic and cultural condition.

Food, in itself, contains aspects which range from natural to cultural, from the individual to the whole society: therefore, the different ways with which man has changed the stimulus as to nourishment can only make up a privileged place from which to observe social practices (Musarò, Paltrinieri, 2011), representing a way to express and create social relations and to emphasize, strengthen, create or abolish them.

Social roles are also recognized at the table; Le Goff (1987) eating is the first occasion in which the dominating classes in society can manifest their

superiority through luxurious food. Flaunting food is a class-related behavior and, therefore, a sort of social obligation.

If eating is to be seen as a viaticum of social belonging, eating practices represent daily rituals which allow or impede individuals to be part of a collectivity. Food consumption holds a fundamental role in the creation of the community, in that it is able to create symbolic borders and differences, indispensable for structuring the social space. It is possible to underline belonging and adhesion in terms of values in a social group when he who eats absorbs, and is absorbed, in a complex cultural system: through food, one is incorporated in a collective order and as Secondulfo writes, in the preparation, distribution and consumption of food, it is possible to trace "*the communal, fusion, participatory side of intimate relationality; a social and symbolic metaphor of acting a unit*" (2004: 50).

Sharing food can make up a moment of that form of sociability often glorified by Simmel: a form of interaction which is free to be carried out as an end to itself. The pleasure in a meal shared by friends, for example, refers to the possibility of an undemanding collectivity, a space for interaction in which to loosen the bonds present in other contexts and relations in daily life.

Through eating together, man celebrates his own daily regeneration, but it is doing so in the company of his fellow men which makes said gesture a means of communication amongst the participants. If the collective dimension seems, in fact, innate to the human species, the *cumvivere* of the banquet faithfully reproduces said inclination, it "*becomes the symbol of the most intimate of the relational sphere, the communal one, and symbolically marks the social fusion of individuals in groups and communities. All the situations in which the cohesion of a social group is created or confirmed call for the communal consumption of food*" (Simmel, 1997:15). The author, in a chapter dedicated to the *Sociology of Meals* speaks of "material individualism", which characterizes the physical act of eating: that which an individual swallows cannot be physically shared with the others, "*of all the thing which humans share amongst themselves, that which unites them most is the fact that they must eat and drink*" (Simmel, 2006:101).

Society must impose its own rules on the natural individualism of eating, as eating meals together obliges individuals to meet at scheduled times, establishing marked time, introducing respect for the division of roles, so much so that it stimulates trends, etiquette and conventions which no longer have anything to do with the true content of the food.

Food is, therefore, the primary demonstration of sociality; it is the intermediary for aggregation processes.

When speaking about commensality, the system of norms, rituals and taboos which structure the practices connected to the sociological analysis of commensalism. It is the system of beliefs that makes it possible to share the

meal with some people, according to certain rules of behavior and certain procedures, or that makes it impossible to share it with others. Sharing food seems to carry out a function of pacification, calming, or – in more general terms – socialization. Even if it is difficult to perceive one's own behavior as part of a ritual dimension, or attribute a symbolic meaning to it, it must be recognized that the “industrialized societies” (like those which are “postmodern” or “post-industrial”) are rich in these ritualized practices, charged with symbol values, possibly less aware, and that often these practices are carried out through food, also realizing principles of commensalism.

As to the use of alcoholic beverages and the meanings attributed to them (Fischler, 1988), or to the importance which some traditional dishes have in certain festive occasions, such as Sunday, Christmas or Easter meals, or meals for family occasions (Douglas, 1984), or numerous variations on this theme such as the increasingly widespread practice of having lunch or dinner out (Finkelstein, 1989).

How the table is set, the criteria for choosing how the commensals choose their places at the laid table, the manner of conversing, “*create proximity and distance: sitting together, but in a way which supports distance and hierarchy*” (Maffesoli, 1985:7).

The meal becomes, therefore, a fundamental social act in as much as the commensals are given the possibility to experiment, to do a sort of “dress rehearsal” of those which are the social relationships within the group or, more generally, within the society of which they are part; accepting the rules imposed during the meal implies the acceptance of the social relationships of the social hierarchy amongst commensals, also when the meal is over.

Food, throughout the centuries, has been invested with symbolic meanings and values: power, strength, wealth, poverty and divinity are hidden in the *convivium*, in the tables richly laid by the powerful, in the refectory of cloistered monks; daily gestures repeated at the table, in the kitchen, in the areas designated for the preparation and consumption of food, become rituals encoded through time and space, rules and norms of belonging to a social group or a privileged category.

Eating holds worries within itself which are characterized by two concepts: selection and restriction, concentrated in a third concept which envelops them: that of control. The main problem for contemporary consumers is regulating, controlling, their eating, adapting it to their own personal needs and the constraints imposed by daily life.

4. Food and postmodernity

In a globalized world where individuals are more mobile and cultures are more “fluid”, food becomes useful knowledge for an individual, both to reinforce and represent his own identity, and to transmit localism and territorial identity.

One very interesting aspect in the field of food consumption is standardized production and industrialization of the food sector, at the base of that theory which finds its own paradigm in McDonaldization, mirror of the postmodern society.

Ritzer’s theory on the “*McDonaldization of society*” (1983), indicates the adoption in developed countries, by the most important social institutions such as schools, politics, sports, religion, of that principle of rationalization and standardization in the management of human and economic resources which *McDonald’s* adopts daily in its offer of consumer services and its organization of labor. A propagation of the same process which sees its own paradigm in fast food restaurants. Ritzer is influenced by Weber’s theoretical work, according to which at the base of the functioning of society there is bureaucracy and the rigid organization of the behavior of individuals that its application implies; it is the extension of the theory of rationalization, it is a process which pervades all Western culture and brings about the progressive bureaucratization in the coordination of social activities.

McDonald’s operates, according to Ritzer, through the wise use of four variables: efficiency, calculability, predictability, control. *Efficiency* understood as the capacity to offer an optimal method to quickly satisfy clients through an effective organization of the employees’ working tasks. A system which makes the optimal method available to reach the goal of satisfying demand.

Calculability, which means great attention to the quantitative aspects of the product sold, which is identified with quality. In other words, quantity comes to symbolize quality and the emphasis placed on the former refers both to the productive processes and to the final products, considered as consumer goods. *Predictability*, that is, guaranteeing the consumer that the products and services offered by *McDonald’s* allow to obtain pleasure and satisfaction and, above all, the products, services and locations offered are always the same all over the world. A rational society, a world without surprises, the same as itself, in time and in space. And finally *control*, which translates both into client management and into the substitution of human technology with that of machines. This, in fact, allows control to be wielded over employees, clients, processes connected to the business and the final product. Control of the client, for example, is shown in that they must limit themselves to the menus offered, eat quickly and leave.

Alongside the theory of *McDonaldization* goes the idea of a return to localism and to community, together with cooking and a type of eating which is increasingly connected to needs regarding time limits, therefore ready-made, fast, easy to prepare and eat; a way of cooking which, especially during free time, is established, able to bring back flavors and tastes from days of yore, which recall childhood or a past softened by the idea naturalness and quality.

The theory of globalization and the rediscovery of that which is local, glocal (Robertson, 1995), indicates a global and local mix, a contingent and dialectical process in which contradictory elements are understood and deciphered in their totality. The local and global dimension are not mutually exclusive, on the contrary, they are closely intercorrelated. The “glocal” world is a world where that which is local does not disappear, rather, it get stronger; the cultural dynamics reconnect to the study of history and genealogy of the community (Appadurai, 1997) and a re-collocation of local products, in the global flow. The rediscovery of local products is a sector which characterizes contemporary western societies, closer to humane values, bearers of an improvement in quality of life.

The concept of quality has undergone a profound transformation and evolution through time, following the social uprooting between the city and the countryside; the urban consumer has found himself in a destabilized position in which the distance from the countryside, an ideal location where most of the food production is located, has brought about feelings of distrust and fear in terms of nutrition. The scandal regarding GMOs and BSE (also known as mad cow disease) have contributed to concentrating the consumer’s attention on quality products, that is, with organoleptic and nutritional characteristics, technological characteristics such as preservability, easy usage, packaging. Guarantee quality means offering an “added value” to the consumer, a guarantee which the producer offers voluntarily, but now is increasingly considered a distinguishing element and often crucial as to the buying decision in terms of food products.

Fast food is therefore contrasted by *slow food* (Petrini, 2001), a movement which has a snail as its symbol, emblematic of slowness, against the obsession with speed of the modern world. The basic principles are enthusiasm for conviviality and reclaiming the right to flavor, trying to spread and stimulate knowledge of the material culture of each product, characterized by a complex whole of Earth’s fragrances, rituals and ancient techniques of production.

Slow food aims to invert the logic of a system, re building the relationship between the producer and the consumer, considering food with the value it deserves and guaranteeing that its price return to show its true value. In this way, consumers can take advantage of their buying power to influence food distribution and production methods.

Food is life, it is reality, it is immersed in the dynamic flux of our society and, as such, it has to adapt to life which has changed over time, also when it protects its coefficients of authenticity, localism, particularities, in order to recover those ancestral values which each of us hold.

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