

The Social Relations of Food

By Christopher Wilkes
Oxford University, UK

Introduction: the Emerging Sociology and Anthropology of Food.

The sociology and anthropology of food have recently become very fashionable places to work, with large volumes of books, articles and papers erupting from the academy.¹ This emerging concern with food has sent these new researchers off in all directions; to study the rise of national cultures and national cuisines; to examine processes of reification, colonization and the social relations of labour surrounding the process of food production; to reassess the issue of authenticity and inauthenticity in cuisine; to analyse the role of commodification and market pressures; to investigate more fully the pathologies of anorexia, bulimia and over-eating; as well as the newly-discovered old - the investigation of the daily practices of eating. Also emerging is an extensive history of

¹ Among many other examples, see especially R. Wood, *The Sociology of the Meal*, (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1995); George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization Thesis* (London, Sage, 1998); Barbara Haber, *From Hardtack to Homefries: an Uncommon History of American Cooks and Meals* (Penguin, New York 2003); Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All American Meal* (Houghton Mifflin, Boston and New York, 2001); David Bell and Gill Valentine, *Consuming Geographies: We are Where we Eat* (Routledge, London and New York, 1997) ; Jeffrey Pilcher, *Que Viva Los Tamales*.(University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 1998) There is also a far more established tradition within anthropology upon which the world of literary scholarship has continued to draw. See especially the work of Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, (Routledge, New York, 1996) Jack Goody's *Cooking and the Polarization of Social Theory*, in *Food and Foodways* (1989; 3 (3); and Claude Lévi-Strauss's *The Raw and the Cooked: Introduction to a Science of Mythology*, translated by John and Doreen Weightman. (Harper and Row, New York, 1969) More broadly, the study of food has always been a central part of the study of material culture within anthropology, though rarely a topic to be considered on its own. See *The Diffusion Channels of Urban Food Habits* in Alexander Fenton's and Trefor Owen's *Perspective: Proceedings of the Third International Conference on Ethnological Food Research*. (Donald, Edinburgh, 1981) Feminist criticism has also been powerful. See, for example, Carole M. Counihan's *The Anthropology of Food and Body: Gender, Meaning and Power*, (Routledge, New York, 1999) and in philosophy, a new focused and discrete interest has appeared, as in *Food In Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy*, Carol Korsmeyer. (Cornell, Ithaca, New York, 1999) The journal *Food and Foodways* also provides a regular venue for recent work in the field. Workers have also been drawn to Foucault's work and his new understandings of the body and of discourse. Emblematic of this stream of work is Bryan Turner, Mike Featherstone and Mike Hepworth's book *The Body: Social Process and Cultural Theory*, (Sage, Newbury Park, Ca., 1991) in which two important articles, *On the Civilizing of Appetite*, by Stephen Mennell, and *The Discourse of Diet*, by Bryan Turner, appear. A more abstract reading of the same topic, which leans to towards surrealism, is found in George Yudice's *Feeding the Transcendent Body*, in *Postmodern Culture: An Electronic Journal of Interdisciplinary Criticism*. (September; 1 (1) 1990)

manners centred on eating², as well as elaborations on hierarchy, taste and alimentary pleasures.³ And, unlike post-modern theorists of the literary text, sociologists and anthropologists have concentrated less on meaning than on social practices, cultural histories, class, inequality and material conditions. Less Derrida; more Bourdieu.⁴

My paper focuses on a single question: if we were to take this new field of scholarship seriously, what effect would it have on our thinking about nutrition? At first glance, there seems little that is immediately useful to nutritionists from work which examines, on the one hand, the historical sources of conflict in Mexico⁵, and on the other, the relation between Florentine women and their mothers.⁶ So let me start by laying out some preliminary assumptions.

First, I am not concerned narrowly with the physiological and chemical dimensions of food. Rather, I want to make claims about the power of a particular kind of social science to add to what we know about how people organize around food. I argue that there is much more for us to understand about food practices beyond its chemistry and its production if we are serious about nutritional health. *Second*, it is a commonplace in the more enlightened areas of the medical profession to pay attention to the extra-medical issues at stake; the issues of stress, the role of family in caring for patients and those with nutritional disorders, and the importance

² Norbert Elias on the history of manners is iconic here, but a more recent literature has followed his early establishment of the field. Most recently Martha Carlin and Joel Rosenthal have edited *Food and Eating in Medieval Europe*. (London, Hambleton, 1998) There is also a large, emergent secondary literature on cooking and its associated practices. In its more familiar form, see The New York Times on cuisine, including a new weekly section on Wednesday, which pays close attention to the social relations of the production, distribution and consumption of food, as well as the more mundane and traditional emphasis on recipes. The increasing importance of the Slow Food Movement also points less to an emphasis on recipes, an emphasis which has always been present, and more to a focus on the sociability function of food, and its cultural dimensions. See C. Kummer, *The Pleasures of Slow Food*. (Chronicle Books, San Francisco, 2002)

³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Harvard, Cambridge 1984); Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*. Translated by Alan Bass. (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1978)

⁴ Bourdieu famously commented that Derrida 'crossed many borders but with empty suitcases'. By this he meant that Derrida created many innovations, but without the benefit of careful empirical work.

⁵ See Pilcher, op cit.

⁶ See the work of Carol Counihan, cited elsewhere.

of social support in recovering from illness. So I am not trying to bring coals to Newcastle, nor am I repeating obvious points about the need for social support in the nutritional care area.⁷ But what I am arguing is that we must go much further in our social and cultural understandings if we are to make meaningful progress in combating some of the major pathologies we face, such as the epidemic of obesity in the United States, and the various neurotic behaviours associated with body image.⁸ *Third*, I am not much interested in belabouring the ills of the food industries, in which such critiques as 'The Fast Food Nation' and 'Supersize Me'⁹ already excel, but rather in using such critiques as starting points towards developing healthy culinary practices in the world in which fast food dominates.

This paper examines the work of four social researchers for clues about what the social relations of food might look like, and what this understanding would add to the field of nutritional studies.¹⁰ I use Jeffrey Pilcher's work to examine the origins of Mexican cuisine in the light of early globalization, and show how the political struggles to develop the modern Mexican state are closely mapped onto food practices. This means power and nutrition are closely intertwined and cannot be meaningfully separated, and it highlights the 'cultural memory' embodied in food practices. In Carole Counihan's writings, we interrogate the relation between women and their mothers to discover the roots of motivation and desire which drive the formation of body images and the sense of family. In Bourdieu's work, we are reminded of the

⁷ Weightwatchers and many other commercial groups are already making a great living out of this simple understanding.

⁸ A series of recent reports at the BBC web page (bbc.co.uk) reports on the developing issue of male body image. Two reports are of particular interest; the 19 March 2006 report on male teenage steroid usage in Liverpool, reported by researchers at the University of Liverpool, who relate the widespread use of steroids for young men concerned to create 'designer bodies'; and the 16 March report on the pressure adult men experience to get rid of the 'beer belly' of the past as an icon of the masculine form, and to take on the body image of their sporting heroes. David Beckham's body is the preferred ideal. The study, called the 'Mr. Vain Study', was undertaken by the Norwich Union's Health Care unit, and was conducted with 500 participants.

⁹ Erik Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation: the dark side of the all-American meal*, Houghton Mifflin, New York, 2001, and 'Supersize Me', a film directed by Morgan Spurlock, and produced by Samuel Goldwyn Films and Hart Sharp Video. (2004)

¹⁰ See Pilcher, Counihan, Mintz and Bourdieu.

elaborate and powerful relation between social class and food habits, a connection which explains much about why we eat as we do, and in Mintz's formulations, by examining the long chain of social activities which surround the production and consumption of food, we bring history and geography to bear on the subject. Together these analyses provide a rich and provocative account of the social relations of food, which is the focus of this paper.

Jeffrey Pilcher and Cultural Memory

The anthropologist Jeffrey Pilcher reconstructs for us the history of conflict in developing Mexico, centring his discussion on what we might call the 'food wars'. The arrival of the Spanish invaders in 1519 not only disrupted the economy and politics of the sub-continent, but it dramatically reshaped the way in which people fed themselves. Traditional cuisine was based, obviously enough, on local produce and local agricultural practices. Food was central to the most precious elements of Aztec life. Festivals for the gods were centred on food, and the offering of sacrifices. The diet of indigenous Mexican dwellers was extraordinary elaborate. The gods were offered tamales, chocolate, and, sometimes, human blood.¹¹ There were complex rituals of sacrifice, and corn was the centre of this nutritional economy. Foods were distributed on the basis of a sophisticated social hierarchy. There were some who had access to the best foods and others who did not.¹² There were laws in place which governed who could and who could not eat exotic food.

Mesoamerican diet was founded on maize, beans, squash and chillies, which together formed a staple diet, notwithstanding a shortage of protein.¹³ Maize offered a source of 80% of the calories required, and was the major origin of complex carbohydrates. Most of the protein

¹¹ Pilcher, page 14.

¹² Pilcher, *op. cit.*, page 19.

¹³ Pilcher, page 12.

came from beans, which, Pilcher argues, can assure the user of adequate protein because of a synergistic effect which takes place when beans and maize come into contact.¹⁴ Squash adds minerals and water, and chillies provide vitamins A and C, as well as some B vitamins. These four basic elements of the Mexican palate were replicated in some form or other throughout Mexico. Coastal dwellers ate fish, and tropical inhabitants added nuts and berries. People in the desert used cactus, and algae were gathered from the lakes. But this diet would not have pleased European carnivores,¹⁵ who brought livestock with them, and lived and ate quite differently.

For the colonists, the shape of their empire was manifested in the dietary theory that they brought with them. They carried with them the food of Europe in the form of livestock, herds, iron ploughs, irrigation, baking ovens and new forms of fuel. Through the process of domination, they alienated the land, and forged new social relations of production. They brought wine, olive oil and wheat to replace corn, pulque, chocolate, aguardiente and pork fat. Pilcher reports that the first recorded banquet in the New World took place in 1538 when Viceroy Mendoza and the explorer Cortez joined to sign a peace accord between the Emperor Charles V and King Francis 1. The entertainment was local, but the food was decidedly European.¹⁶ Tables were loaded with salads, hams, roasted goat, partridge, chickens, pies, and a roasted oxen, itself stuffed with chickens, quail and doves. There was meat, meat and more meat.

Livestock appeared to have provided a major culinary advance. Sheep did well in the highlands and the arid plains. Horses, goats and chickens also thrived, but what seemed to work

¹⁴ Op. cit. Pilcher argues that 'The protein in either beans or maize alone lacks some of the eight amino acids required by the body. When eaten together, beans provide lysine missing from corn and corn contains cystine lacking in beans...' (Footnote 15, page 169)

¹⁵ Op. cit., page 13.

¹⁶ This section rests heavily on Pilcher, pages 32ff.

best was cattle. But while meat flourished, it was hard to find good bread because wheat could not readily be cultivated. Ploughs and grain were needed. Special soils had to be found to house the new crop. The wheat thus produced then required a system of grinding mills, and bakers who would cook the finished product. An entirely new set of elaborate social relations around food had to be brought into being. And before all this could be put in place, wheat tortillas, a first form of hybrid cuisine, came to be made as native bakers used the new grain to make old recipes.

Wine and oil never flourished in the new country and could never be made cheaply. Grapes and olive trees could not take hold, so pork fat substituted for olive oil.¹⁷ The most popular drink became not wine, which was expensive and imported, nor liquor, but rather chocolate. Women were said to be so addicted to it that they drank it during church services, and priests complained.

But the Spanish brought much more than a new diet with them. The ideology of domination which motivated the entire imperial enterprise meant that they were interested not just in geographical control, but also, and much more ambitiously, in 'civilizing' native peoples, and bringing them the 'gift' of European culture. This reinvention of the social relations of power and economy also involved, at the deepest level, a reinvention of the household, and the way in which food was prepared. By associating the new 'wheat' economy with ideas of progress, science and modernity, the Spanish political class was able to propagate a revolution at the heart of the Mexican family, thus putting in place changes which could not have affected the Mexican way of life more deeply or more intimately. By ruthlessly implementing a process of land alienation directed towards the planting of wheat instead of corn, the conquerors insisted

¹⁷ Pilcher, *op. cit.*, page 31.

on a new nutritional basis for the nation and for the state. Thus emerged what Pilcher calls the 'Tortilla Discourse', in which the very shape of society was fought out around food.

The 'Tortilla Discourse' included both a struggle for the control of the nutritional economy, but also a struggle over the nature of knowledge, science, purity and the modernizing impulse. While the wheat culture was propagated, often on the basis of 'sound scientific principles', as the only civilized and modern basis for an advanced society,¹⁸ the corn food economy persisted as an instrument of rebellion and national pride. Bulnes commented on the need to bring science together with reason, and the vital necessity of the task of building a nation.¹⁹ The language of nutritional science was used to control social relations, and to refashion cultural practices. Positivist certainty coupled with imperial ambition reshaped the eating habits of a nation. From the Spanish, a familiar colonial theme emerged. The indigenous people were lazy and shiftless. Using theorems being developed by Herbert Spencer and the Social Darwinists, they placed the source of this shiftlessness in biological inferiority. The only possible nutritional salvation was to replace the indigenous corn-based diet with one based on wheat. In the Spanish view, all the great civilizations were based on wheat and meat.²⁰ The solution proposed was a dual one: inter-marriage with the master-race, and a shift in the nutritional structure of the nation. Dominant discourse and subversive discourse were mapped onto the disparate culinary strategies. Both strategies gained sources of power, the Spanish as a basis from which to fight for 'civilization', the indigenous people as the basis for counter-

¹⁸ This discussion is a useful reminder of the fact that science is historically grounded, and that those truths that appear to be irrefutable, universal and transhistorical are in fact shifted by history, social necessity and political will.

¹⁹ Senator Francisco Bulnes was a member of the Porfirian elite, the Porfirian elite being those who came to power, or who were members of the elite in the time of Porfirio Díaz, who controlled Mexico from 1876 to 1911. Bulnes published *El porvenir de las naciones Hispano-Americanas* in 1899, and this book, in Pilcher's words '...catapulted the tortilla to the centre of elite discourse. For the next half-century, the language of nutritional science largely shaped Mexican leaders' understanding of and attempts to control social relations and cultural practices.' (Pilcher, page 77)

²⁰ This is the core argument of the Bulnes book, cited above.

revolution and insurrection. Notions of manliness, indigenismo, modernization and civilization were thus all fought out over nutritional preferences.

Yet a familiar paradox emerged. Spanish food was considered closer to culture, to civilization and to 'advanced thinking', the corn food economy closer to nature, to the primitive and the 'backward'. Yet food and sensuality have always been closely tied, and so there were always Spanish yearnings for traditional food, and for the 'natural' sensual pleasures of eating that had little to do with science. Spanish soldiers frequented small taverns, and sought out street food, with its strong flavours and its excessive abundance. Surreptitious snacks could be eaten in alleyways and hidden spaces, far from the preying eye of the dominant order. Domination and subordination thus worked themselves out in the everyday food practices of the dominant and the dominated.

The 'Tortilla Discourse' played itself out over many generations, as the modern state of Mexico came into being. What emerged in the process of forming national identity was the creation of a Mestizo culture, shaped by the duelling influences of indigenous traditions in conflict with the invading power. The creation of modern modern Mexican cuisine can thus not be separated from larger concerns of politics, money, economic exploitation and dominance. And it is in this cultural memory centred on the 'Tortilla Discourse' that we find important lessons about the modern Mexican diet. If we are seriously interested in dealing with the culinary challenges faced by modern Mexico, or coping with the issues faced by those people who form the Mexican Diaspora in the United States, for example, a careful assessment of this history is important. Jeffrey Pilcher's contribution to nutritional analysis, therefore, might be said to be his focus on rekindling our cultural memory, a memory which we did not have until it was reconstructed for us. This analysis enables us to understand why people eat what they do, it

reminds us where the roots of this yearning for particular types of foods originated, and it gives some clues as to what is at stake, and what is needed, if we plan to intervene to alter the way people eat.

Carole Counihan and the Re-Gendering of Food

Carole Counihan is interested in using ethnography to give us what Clifford Geertz called 'thick description,'²¹ a strategy which tries to draw out the various semiotic meanings embedded in a social setting, in two cultural areas - the American college campus and the Italian domestic household. On the American campus, she investigates the shape of college cuisine, what pressures are applied to incoming students, and what kind of challenges result from these pressures. She does this by a process of investigating these settings deeply through careful, detailed questioning over a period of time. She discovers the sentiments, histories and practices of college students as they come upon, and sometimes try to escape, the culinary regimes constituted by the caterers on college campuses. The resulting 'culinary practices' she reveals have very clear implications for health, body image and the construction of gender itself. Happening as it does at a particularly crucial time in the process of adult identity formation, this study tells us a great deal about how young men and women come to view their eating habits and themselves, expressed on the landscape of their bodies.

²¹ M. Murphy says: " In his first chapter in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Clifford Geertz discusses the role of the ethnographer. Broadly, the ethnographer's aim is to observe, record, and analyze a culture. More specifically, he or she must interpret signs to gain their meaning within the culture itself. This interpretation must be based on the "thick description" of a sign in order to see all the possible meanings. His example of a "wink of any eye" clarifies this point. When a man winks, is he merely "rapidly contracting his right eyelid" or is he "practicing a burlesque of a friend faking a wink to deceive an innocent into thinking conspiracy is in motion"? Ultimately, Geertz hopes that the ethnographer's deeper understanding of the signs will open and/or increase the dialogue among different cultures". [M. Murphy]. This material is cited from the web site directed by Claudia Rector in the Cultural Landscape Bibliography Project, to be found at amst.imb.edu/research/cultland. See Geertz, Clifford. "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture." In *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, 1973.

But it is the work in Italy, with a group of Florentine women, that is most important here. Counihan traces the lives of Italian women coping with shifts in the traditional eating patterns of Northern Italy in the face of globalization. As new forms of cooking and new sources of food emerge, coupled with the altered states of women's futures in the job market and in the family, the shifts in domestic patterns and the gendered reconstruction of the self are profound. Italian women might be said to have a healthier view of their bodies than many contemporary American women. Counihan claims that Italian women delight in the natural beauty and comfort of the larger body shape, and try to avoid the anorexic obsessive ness seen in the form of Kate Moss's iconic body image, which is closer to emaciation than to emancipation. The term 'Gola' which describes the pleasure to be had in eating, the desire for food, captures a common sentiment. 'Gola' implies pleasure and acceptance of the body and of the food that nurtures it. A healthy body is the goal, but excess is to be avoided. In this happy equilibrium, a certain peace and harmony can be found. Food can be enjoyed, rather than denied, as long as portions are of modest dimensions, and care is paid to the quality of the food. Food is to be bought fresh, rather than processed, and much care and attention is to be lavished on preparation and presentation.²² Yet this traditional pattern of culinary behaviour is decisively challenged by the shifts towards higher levels of women's participation in the workforce, coupled with overseas trends towards fast foods and convenience foods, as well as shifts in notions of what constitutes a fashionable body, more and more deeply commodified through a globalized media.

²² It's important, of course, to avoid the impulse to idealize Europe, where, as we know, changes in diet towards increasing fast food consumption are rapidly leading to epidemic levels of obesity, especially in Britain.

Counihan uses two case studies to illustrate the issue of the reproduction of gender roles around food. With mother and daughter Elda and Gigliola,²³ a friendly relationship developed around food. Elda found breast-feeding pleasurable, and extended the period of breast-feeding. She loved cooking for her daughter, and her daughter loved eating the food. The daughter now lives in the U.S., but when she returns, she gorges on the traditional foods, embracing the closeness she and her mother enjoyed in earlier years. The relationship in a second family, that of Tina and Sandra, is more fraught. Sandra did not enjoy mealtimes because they were occasions when her parents disciplined her, and made her anxious. Her mother Tina gained much of her self-worth from cooking, and thus she did not share her expertise with her daughter. As a result, Sandra escaped as fast as possible from the family through marriage, and did not enjoy cooking at first. As time passed, she recovered her own sense of cuisine, developing a simple Tuscan palate, using fresh produce from a local farm, where her family shared the produce with the peasants who grew the food. Sandra was forced into a career she did not like, and when she left the job, she had none of the skills she needed to run a household. She was caught between two worlds, neither of which she found comfortable. She resolved her difficulties by a strong act of personal will, and by developing a capacity to reinvent the process of cooking and eating for herself.

These pressures towards eating differently have their effects in family structures. A key question Counihan investigates is how the availability of new foodstuffs, coupled with these shifting occupational patterns, rewrites the structure of gender relations, how women take on the task of food preparation, (or avoid it) and what these movements do to mother-daughter relationships and the sense of self. Counihan shows us several outcomes. First, there is the obvious unwillingness of young Italian women to reproduce the patterns of life that their

²³ Counihan, *op. cit.*, pages 162ff.

mothers followed. For them, there are new challenges, and thus culinary practices will be altered significantly. If they do marry, they will expect their husbands to be active in the kitchen, thus abdicating the traditional role played by women as culinary directors of households. But this very move itself is ambiguous, because it constitutes a loss of control over the domestic space. Second, there is annoyance and disgust at the prospect of being forced into the 'slave labour' of the past, and discomfort with the conflict that this change would necessitate with their mothers. Third, there is genuine ambiguity with the outcomes of these conflicts. Some women yearn for a 'modified traditionalism', in which they 'recover' their roles as central players in domestic nutrition, but yet avoid the burdensome requirement to be universally available to feed the household.

Counihan also tells us something of the Florentine view of the body and its relationship to eating.²⁴ In traditional terms, the body is seen as a source of pleasure, and we can contrast this with what she terms the 'masochistic disempowering narcissism' experienced by young American women.²⁵ Florentines envisage the body being created by the family and by nature. Some families 'tend' to be large; others are smaller. "It is the way God made us", one informant says. The body is seen in an active sense as a place where things take place, where babies are born and nurtured, and where work gets done, rather than being viewed as a passive object to be worked upon until it is made into something beautiful. So plumpness is more readily accepted, while Florentines take greater care with fashion, in comparison to the American counterparts. Italian women still worry about patriarchy and the need to please men for economic and other reasons. Yet while many young women fully understand the commodification that takes place on the surface of women's bodies, it is still hard to resist societal pressures. A struggle is thus

²⁴ See her Chapter 10, 'Body as Voice and Desire', pages 178ff.

²⁵ See Counihan, *op. cit.*, page 187.

taking place between traditional visions of the body, embracing pleasure, moderation and discipline, and the newer influences towards thinness at all cost.

These stories of culinary reconstruction revise what we have taken for granted for many years - the gendered nature of culinary practice - but offer us deeper insights into the way these gendered practices are actually played out in the lives of real people. There is neither liberation nor tradition here, but rather a revision of what identifies a gendered practice in the light of new emerging conditions. Some women take on the roles their mothers played, often with reluctance. Others want to get as far away from these traditional duties as possible, yet want still to hold to some of the commendable values associated with these culinary practices.

From Counihan's 'thick descriptions' we gain thoughtful insights into the way cultural history and gender reproduction shape the behaviour of people in households, and especially those who still control the production of food for others. Again, if we are to make progress in challenging some of the pathologies associated with obsessions directed towards thinness, we need to be carefully aware of family histories, and the cultures that they are embedded in, as well as the positive alternatives other cultures provide for us.

Bourdieu and the Classing of Cuisine

Bourdieu started his career working as an ethnographer in Algeria, and ended working on the issue of globalization. In between, he wrote path-breaking work on art and aesthetics, refashioned the way we situate education in the process of class reproduction, and renovated ethnographic methods and scientific self-knowledge, before alighting on fashion, taste and class

habitus in his 1979 book 'Distinction'.²⁶ Bourdieu refers to this book, almost apologetically, as an ethnography of France. He is apologetic because of the wildly ambitious scope of the book, yet his achievement is considerable. In 'Distinction' he develops his familiar theory of class habitus, which refers to the 'durable dispositions' associated with social conditions.

It is worth briefly rehearsing Bourdieu's general theory of social practice in order to locate his theory of the social uses of food more adequately. Bourdieu imagines the social space of the world to be best viewed as a series of social fields, each of which is connected to others in a relatively autonomous way. For example, one might spend one's life in the field of politics, the field of fashion, or in the domestic sphere. Individuals pass through these fields at various stages of their life cycles with more or less success. In a given life experience, one gains knowledge of these fields, and clearly those who gain the best knowledge and act upon it do better than others. The universe of social life might therefore be best conceived as a series of struggles in distinct fields of human activity, each field having its own sets of rules, with particular strategies to follow and capitals to be fought over. The 'winning and losing' in society is thus a matter of gaining a 'sens du jeu', a feel for the game, an idea of the rules and strategies one might apply to be successful. Hierarchies are thus formed over all kinds of things; the best-dressed, the best educated, the richest, the most glamorous, the most erudite, and so on. Success and failure in these fields thus constructs for the individual a sense of their place in the social world, who their allies and their enemies might be, and what they can expect to achieve. We might call this a general theory of capital, covering fields involved with prestige, power, style, fashion, sport, and money.²⁷

²⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, *La Distinction: critique du jugement*, Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, 1979, republished in English as *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, translated by Richard Nice, Harvard University Press, 1984, Boston.

²⁷ Of course, this general theory of capital has its origins in Marx's work, the now-familiar exposition on economic capital and its correlates.

Consider now how such a theory might be used to examine the role of food in the social world. Bourdieu would claim that in all the social worlds of the life-space, that individuals seek to create modes of distinction, by which they can separate themselves from others, and this is as true of the field of nutrition and culinary practice as it is any other. There are, first and foremost, those who 'make a virtue out of necessity'.²⁸ Bourdieu comments:

The art of eating and drinking remains one of the few areas in which the working class explicitly challenge the legitimate art of living. In the face of the new ethic of sobriety for the sake of slimness, which is most recognized at the highest levels of the social hierarchy, peasants and especially industrial workers maintain an ethic of convivial indulgence. A bon vivant is not just someone who enjoys eating and drinking; he (sic) is someone capable of entering into the generous and familiar ... relationship that is encouraged and symbolized by eating and drinking together, in a conviviality which sweeps away restraints and reticence. (Bourdieu, 1984: 179)

Bourdieu then establishes the broad contours of the class habitus²⁹ which he believes governs the eating habits of most social categories. So, for example, he finds that a majority of senior executives, professionals and industrialists believe the 'French eat too much', whereas farm workers think they eat 'about right'. Many more workers than executives say they have a favourable opinion of those who enjoy eating and drinking.³⁰ Workers prefer 'substantial dishes' rather than those that are chosen for taste and style primarily. He reports from survey results that, given the same amount of extra money being made available to members of different social classes, that expenditures on food would be quite distinctive. Thus it is not simply the rub of economic necessity that separates social categories in their eating habits. Instead, social choices governed by class habitus are what's at stake. Bourdieu comments:

Against the imaginary anthropology of economics, which has never shrunk

²⁸ Bourdieu, op. cit., page 179.

²⁹ The notion of 'habitus' is central to Bourdieu's argument and is worth understanding a little more fully. It refers to the durable dispositions embedded in all individuals, a set of dispositions which come both from background and experience, as well as individual agency. Thus it is entirely likely that two children in the same family will share similar experiences during mealtimes, but not inevitable that they develop similar eating habits as adults. This will result for disparate further experiences beyond the family, and individual tastes, as well as the economic limits of what can be bought and cooked, among other factors.

³⁰ Op. cit. ff.

from formulating universal laws of 'temporal preference', it has to be pointed out that the propensity to subordinate present desires to future desires depends on the extent to which this sacrifice is 'reasonable', that is, on the likelihood, in any case, of obtaining future satisfactions superior to those sacrificed. (Op. cit., page 180)

What Bourdieu wants to argue is that the ruling categories of society are perfectly capable of playing a game of self-denial if the likelihood of a good business alliance, or a good marriage, or a successful political strategy might actually be advanced by it. But for the working classes, these chances are slim, the logic of deferred gratification does not make much sense, and immediate and measurable pleasure is a much more effective strategy. Tastes in food have their origin in the social necessity to eat, not in the biological necessity to ingest nutrients. Thus body shapes are largely determined by occupation in the broadest sense, by the demands placed on the body by the needs of the day. It follows, then, that working people who use their bodies in a manual environment must, by necessity, create a certain bodily hexus, constructed in turn by certain food habits. Similarly, those in the fashion industry or at the highest echelons of society must conform to other modes of control required of their station. Construction of the bodily self thus requires a parallel construction of the social self, and this explains for Bourdieu much of what is important in how people decide to eat:

Thus, whereas the working classes are more attentive to the strength of the (male) body than its shape, and tend to go for products which are both cheap and nutritious, the professions prefer products that are tasty, health-giving, light and non-fattening. *Taste, a culture turned into nature, that is embodied, helps to shape the class body.* It is an incorporated principle of classification which governs all forms of incorporation, choosing and modifying everything that the body ingests and assimilates, physiologically and psychologically. (My italics, Bourdieu, op. cit. page 190)

The whole construction of the male self is, in Bourdieu's view, closely tied up with the patterns of eating which men choose to follow. He argues that fish is not considered adequate for men in many working class households, being insufficiently 'filling', and better suited to the sick and the elderly. It is a 'fiddly' thing which does not suit clumsy male hands. Trying to eat 'fiddly

things' makes a man child-like and emasculates him. It requires restraint; it needs small mouthfuls; it has to be chewed gently.³¹ What is generally called virility is tied up with wholehearted gulps and mouthfuls, rather than with nibbling and picking:

And the practical philosophy of the male body as a sort of power, big and strong, with enormous, imperative, brutal needs, which is asserted in every male posture, especially when eating, is also the principle of the division of foods between the sexes, a division which both sexes recognize in their practices and in their language. (Bourdieu, 1984:192)

In the Bourdieuan universe, this pattern of eating does nothing more or less than inscribe the social on the biological. '...One can map out a universe of class bodies which tends to reproduce in its specific logic the universe of the social structure'. (op. cit, 193) says Bourdieu. So while there are many variations in individual cases, and while no universal laws can be applied, the sociologist in Bourdieu argues that there are structural conditions which account for eating habits, and that these conditions are deeply embedded in the subconscious of human individuals, who find themselves placed in certain positions in society. Thus if we want to understand why people eat what they do, and why they cling to these preferences in spite of logical advice to the contrary, we must allow ourselves to entertain the possibility that social background and social habitus might have a part to play, as well as play a part in any behavioural changes we might want to make.

Sidney Mintz and the Space of Food

The anthropologist Sidney Mintz has written substantial contributions to the field of symbolic analysis for some fifty years.³² He comments:

³¹ This material is taken from pages 190-1 of 'Distinction'.

³² One of his earliest pieces is in the journal *Social and Economic Studies*, an article called 'The Jamaican internal marketing pattern: some notes and hypotheses', *Social and Economic Studies* 4 (1) 311-325. More recently he has contributed *Sweetness and Power*, New York, Viking Penguin, 1985; *Caribbean Transformation*. New York, Columbia University Press, 1989; and *The Birth of African-American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective*,

I've wanted to understand how world habits are changing, and what the causes are; how Asian and western food systems are interpenetrating; how cuisines evolve, and what "cuisine" is; and what the future may hold for human beings, insofar as their food supplies are concerned. Food is too important to be left to the anthropologists, perhaps; but they have things

to say to the "food people," not all of which are encouraging to listen to, but important to hear. (www.marcelloworld.org/foodpage.html)

So what is it that Mintz would like us to know, and that food people may not want to hear?

When studying the problem of sugar, he states the case succinctly:

My own work on sugar situates it in world history, and as an ingredient in the rise of the world market. But I also worked on sugar plantations in the Caribbean region, and tried to trace them backward in time. I'm awed by the power of a single taste, and the concentration of brains, energy, wealth and, most of all, power, that provided it to the world in such stunningly large quantities, and at so terrible a cost in life and suffering. I want to know what will happen with sweetness next: how its desirability will confront the costs it poses in health, physical appearance, the environment, and the world order. How do we get from one child's sweet tooth to the history of slavery and war and corporate lobbying of the Congress? -- and how do we get back again, to the significance of that child's sweet tooth? (Op. cit., Sidney's Mintz's web page, under 'Sugar'.)

Mintz gives himself the task of tracing the spatiality of food; how its growing, production and consumption can track a path across the globe, as in the case of sugar, and bring into being a series of social relationships which would not have existed but for the desire which developed for a particular food. In the case of sugar, the desire for sweetness can be followed back historically to systems of slavery in the Caribbean, and forward to England, and the growing passion for using sugar in tea. From these first beginnings, sugar can be said to have had a moral basis. Food habits, Mintz would claim, are deeply emotional qualities, and are part

Boston, Beacon, 1992; While he is the doyen of Caribbean anthropology, he has also published a good deal about food, and sugar in particular. Among his other writings on food and the food production system are: Mintz, Sydney W. 1959, "Labor and Sugar in Puerto Rico and in Jamaica, 1800-1850" in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 1(3): 273-281; Mintz, Sidney W. 1960 *Worker in the Cane: A Puerto Rican Life History*. New Haven: Yale University Press, and especially Mintz, Sidney W. 1996, *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom: Excursions into Eating, Culture, and the Past*. Boston: Beacon Press, on which I focus in this section.

of the way we make meaning. Sugar consumption quadrupled in the 19th century in the United Kingdom.³³ In that period, the connection between rotting teeth and sugar consumption was known, but sugar was also believed, by the best scientific opinion, to be good for the digestive process.

Some thought sugar stirred up the blood and gave rise to intense passions. It was thrown in with tobacco and potatoes as a 'lewd food'. Thus sugar became the centre of a moral economy in two ways. First, because it was assigned to the world of the fallen, such that religious taboos were established against its use,³⁴ it became a sign of excess and libertinism. Protestantism and other traditional forms of belief could then ascribe clear moral tendencies to those who used it, and, on the other hand, the same substance, by the denial of its use, could offer a form of salvation through abstinence. Second, sugar became part of the moral economy because it was tied to slavery. Those who involved themselves in its use could be damned for a second reason. Eating sugar was conceived to be the last chain in a social system which condemned men and women to live as animals. Denying one's self the use of this food could be seen as a moral action in this second way. By breaking the chain of production and consumption, one could be liberated from the guilt of creating slavery through human desire. Sugar was seen to be corrosive of time and of wealth better spent on other things. And those who ate it were connected to the slave trade and became the enemy of the abolitionists.³⁵

³³ Mintz, 1996, page 71.

³⁴ Op. cit., page 77. Mintz quotes Redcliffe Salaman, author of *The History and Social Influence of the Potato*. (1949:116): 'When the Old Believers, following on Patriarch Nikon's reforms, broke away from the Russian Orthodox Church in 1667, the more powerful group of schismatics known as the *Bozpopvschini*, or the 'Priestless' [ones] regarded certain foods and the like as abominations. Chief among these were sugar, tobacco and potatoes, none of which, it is noted, are mentioned in the Bible'.

³⁵ Ibid., pages 72 and 73. Those who fought against sugar were called anti-saccharites. Christians were asked to give a practical example of their faith by giving sugar consumption up. The anti-saccharites created some interesting equations, including the claim that every pound of sugar used 'may be considered as consuming two ounces of human blood'. Mintz, page 73, citing Lowell Ragatz, 1928, page 261, in *The Fall of the Planter Class in the British Caribbean, 1763-1833*, Appleton-Century, New York.

Thus Mintz's work traces for us, in a way few have done as thoroughly or as well, the track our food leaves as it passes from the hands of growers to cultivators, to processors, to transportation workers, then finally through the chain of wholesalers, retailers and into the hands of buyers for final consumption. At each step of this elaborate process, Mintz is able to show us how a large number of people organised themselves in relations of exploitation, trade, profit and loss, and commerce to produce the final nutritional object. Along the way, he is able to establish powerful arguments about the moral and ethical nature of food production at the centre of the nutritional process.

The implications for contemporary nutrition are also self-evident. We need not be a 17th Russian orthodox sectarian believer to assign moral codes to food. We do this all the time when we find the obese morally deficient in the moral economy of thin-ness in which we all live³⁶, and we continually play out tiny moral plays in restaurants around such things a dessert, (Oh, I shouldn't have one, but I will) or by sharing dessert with our friends, thus subdividing the guilt, or by having our partners buy the ice-cream and eating a mouthful or two. (which doesn't count in the moral calibrations we make) And in a second way, Mintz provides guidance for what might be considered healthy nutritional practice. By following the path that food takes, we can learn much more about what we are eating, and this contributes directly to our feeling of empowerment about what we ingest, as well as providing us with detailed knowledge about these foodstuffs. So when we learn of the origins of MacDonald's hamburger meat in the feedlots of Greeley's meat-packing plants, or that many of the chemicals and additives we put in foods in the U.S. are made or designed along a corridor along the New Jersey Turnpike, we

³⁶ Of course, we don't usually do this openly, but this process of moral judgement is closely tied to our feelings about abstinence and denial, about self-control and the rightness and wrongness of gluttony.

have information that helps us make better choices.³⁷ I was particularly struck by how, during a brief outbreak of Mad Cow disease in the U.S., our local alternative market, was inundated with new customers, because the company knew exactly where their meat and vegetables were grown. This, too, is useful information to work on as we try to create healthier living environments and improve public nutritional practices.

Conclusions

I want to draw four conclusions from these arguments which enrich our studies of culinary practices and our attempts to understand them.

1. In Jeffrey Pilcher's rich account of the cultural memory of the Mexican nation, we are faced with an analysis which connects food, power and cultural identity in a significant way. The origins of the foodways of Mexican inhabitants is thus not to be seen merely as a matter of taste in a global marketplace, but rather results from a long, troubled and much-debated history. This history touches upon issues of domination, sensuality and resistance. It pits the imagined modernism of the Spanish against indigenous 'naturalism'. What emerged as a national cuisine, and therefore as a fundamental part of the national way of life, was a Mestizo eating pattern, mixing elements of both cultures. The cuisine that emerged is so tightly bound to people because it was fought over so long. So that when we seek to intervene in the daily nutritional practices of Mexican-American patients of the health-care system, we would be well advised to know something of this history and this culture. This knowledge, which goes far beyond a mere knowledge of

³⁷ For information about food product design, see Schlosser, pages 120ff., and on the sources of meat in the fast food industry, see his pages 193-224.

the language, which most of us don't have, leads us further on to a familiarity of the things that matter most, and which can't be swept away by the hand of science. It would not be too much to expect our health workers to read a history such as Pilcher's to come closer to this understanding. The Tortilla Discourse is thus about much more than food, but rather concerns itself most centrally with human identity and dignity. The ties to this particular cuisine are deep and long-standing. Pilcher's contribution to nutritional analysis is in reminding us of the power of this cultural memory to shape what people do, and to explain why people yearn for foods we know nothing about.

2. Counihan's anthropological intervention provides us with the advantage of 'thick description', in which she is able to draw out some of the complexities of the choices women make in a globalized world, where traditional and new modes of thinking collide. By reminding us of these complexities, she underscores the value of family histories in explaining how food is produced, and enjoyed, or rejected. The production of food in the household takes place in many different settings, and is accompanied by a variety of emotions, ranging from resentment to the deepest of pleasures. If intense anxiety accompanies mealtimes, then we are faced with certain personal and social consequences. If mealtimes are a moment of celebration and warmth both for the cook and those lucky enough to be present to eat, then a much more benign force is at work. As Counihan traces several such histories in her account of Florentine women³⁸, she also touches on massive questions which face those in the health sciences - the love and loathing which

³⁸ Counihan also introduces us to American college students, and the multiple problems they face, including anorexia, bulimia, self-loathing and its obverse, narcissism, each of which has its own cultural context. Without understanding these contexts, and especially the semiotics of the modern media, we can do little to challenge and to intervene in these processes. All these are sociological and anthropological problems, which go well beyond what is taken to be orthodox 'traditional' medical practice.

accompanies a sense of one's own body, and the eating which is associated with a certain body shape; the varying forms of gendering in the household which create great pleasures and great anxieties; and the role of culture in creating reassurance when human choices become too complex. Again, in order to take advantage of these insights, it seems important for health workers to read closely in a literature which reveals such trends, and to pay close attention to family histories in order to arm themselves with the most useful tools of intervention.

3. Bourdieu's classing of cuisine reminds us that people eat what they do not just for cultural reasons associated with this group or that, but because of their economic circumstances, and how, for example, men from a certain social background view themselves as social objects. Thus to be born into a particular neighbourhood with a particular community of adults means to draw upon certain patterns of behaviour, and specific physical and social ambitions which present themselves. Bourdieu is not suggesting that money by itself makes a lot of difference - that we'd all be eating caviar if we could. On the contrary, Bourdieu is making the opposite point, which is that class memory and class culture deeply shape not just our culinary choices, but how we tend to fashion our bodies. These differences are closely tied to occupations, and what we do with our bodies, as much as they have to do with fashions, sexuality or gender roles. Thus Bourdieu's account greatly enhances the understandings that Pilcher and Counihan provide when they bring culture and gender to the table. And it is not simply a story of locale, class and community which Bourdieu contributes, but rather a theory of enduring attitudes and behaviours embedded in his notion of 'habitus', the prevailing dispositions

that everyone carries around in their head which result from individual action and social conditions. It is in this dialectic that these semi-permanent attitudes are constructed, and it would therefore be valuable for those involved in nutritional health practices to dig deeply for these elements of the individual and social habitus, which explain much of why people do what they do.

4. Finally, Mintz draws us across the globe to trace back the geography of food, and in so doing he tells us two things which are of use. First, he reminds us of the highly moralistic elements which intervened in the slave trade to shape the eating of sugar, both by suggesting that sugar trading and eating caused unnecessary human suffering, but also that eating sugar itself might be considered immoral and a stain on the human character. For those in the contemporary world, the alleged lasciviousness of eating sugar seems laughable, but we should not forget the deeply moral nature of the judgements we make daily about those who eat too much, and what it means for issues of control and self-worth. Moral decisions are everywhere in the food business, and social pressures explain much about why we diet, why we care about our food so much that it frequently becomes obsessive, and how we might overcome these tendencies. But Mintz also reminds us that following our food to its site of production is an immensely practical step to take to understand what we are eating. So we can take from this the lesson that we should eat locally when possible, from sources we fully understand and trust, and that this practice enhances our self-knowledge and the potential we have for staying healthy.

What these writings collectively provide are understandings about the social relations of food - how people organize around its production, its transportation, its

preservation, its buying and selling, and how, most essentially, it is eaten. This account throws into relief in a new way the major issues which health workers face in the culinary area - starvation and malnutrition; anorexia, bulimia and obesity, as well as the psychologies associated with body image for both women and men. Understanding how the social relations of food are organized enriches our understandings and strengthens our capacities to act to ease suffering.

I hope in this paper I have begun to suggest that there might be real value in taking sociology and anthropology seriously in the field of nutrition. There is much more that could be said, but my main impulse in writing the paper is to stimulate thinking among health workers about the extra-medical terrain of nutritional medicine. My hope is that, as we teach health care practitioners on our campuses, we pay very close attention to these deeper issues, rather than dismissing them as beyond the pale of science. If that is what we think, we should seriously reconsider what we mean by science itself.

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