

Symbolic and Social Aspects in the Working of the Food System

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This paper wants to shed light on some aspects of the food system which are particularly relevant for the understanding of the consequences of the globalization process. This task is carried out in reference to both the intensification of accumulation in the sphere of preparation and consumption of food in developed countries, and the destruction of local diets and of local social systems in less developed countries. It is argued that these consequences are better understood from the point of view of the social and symbolic relevance of food consumption. This approach advocates the integration at the analytic level of the different segments of the food system: production, distribution, preparation and consumption. The analysis of the social and symbolic significance of food consumption (how we eat and why we eat what we eat) may also create the premises for a revision of the "food security" concept articulated in national and international food aid policies.

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Introduction

In the economic analysis of the food system, two phases are usually completely neglected: the preparation and the consumption of food — "the kitchen" and "the table", as Goody (1982) put it. With them, we lose the non-nutritional and non-economical — i.e. symbolic, cultural and social — meanings of the food system.

With rare exceptions, the preparation and consumption of food are confined to anthropological and psycho-sociological literatures, which traditionally downplay the socio-economic aspects of these issues. This situation reflects the separate dimensions in which the different segments of the food system are located in industrial societies. While the phases of production and distribution are integrated in the domain of the market economy, the phases of food preparation and consumption have long been confined to the family context.

In pre-industrial society, the four spheres are strictly interrelated and often carried out outside the market economy (Goody, 1982:47).

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The deepening of market relations modified this situation. In the advanced societies, the spheres of food preparation and consumption are transformed and organized by market mechanisms in a process that is specific of the intensive accumulation⁽¹⁾. Food preparation moves increasingly from the kitchen to the factory (Goody, 1982) and dining from home to public places: cafeterias, restaurants, fast food outlets, food stands in airports or train stations, etc. Food related systems in underdeveloped countries are absorbed into market relations by process of global transnationalization⁽²⁾.

The incorporation of the social significance of food consumption in the socio-economic analysis of food systems is very important for a number of reasons. First of all, it would push in the direction of a greater understanding of the complexity of human behavior in this field, elevating the debate from considerations of food as "an abstract item in accounts" to food as "a concrete item that is 'eaten' rather than 'consumed'" (Barthes, 1979:166). Second, the analysis of motivations which constitute the base of human behavior with respect to food consumption may facilitate the understanding of the mechanisms which tend to manipulate needs and may be useful in the design of more effective and farsighted strategies of food policies.

As the extreme variability of manners of food consumption indicate, nutritional goals only explain a small, even if fundamental, part of consumption motivations. In a different context, analyzing the relations between ethics and economics, Sen (1987) showed how economics may become more productive if a deeper and more explicit attention is given to the different motivations which inform the human behavior. For sociologists and anthropologists as well, the integration of social and cultural aspects with the economical ones is proving very fertile, as the work of Goody (1982) and Lindenbaum (1986) shows.

The overcoming of the separation between socio-economic and socio-anthropological analyses of the food system requires significant empirical and theoretical work. Obviously this work cannot be completed in the length of this

article. Nevertheless, initial steps in this direction can be taken.

The following section of this paper introduces a brief review of some important studies on the cultural and social dimensions of food preparation and consumption. The third proposes an interpretation of the modern food system as an organic part of modern society, pointing to some of the social consequences of the intensification of commodity relations in the advanced societies and the extension of the dominant model of food consumption to less developed countries. Finally, the need for a social critique of "food transfer" as the pillar of food aid and food security policies is advocated.

The social and cultural significance of food consumption

The symbolic value of food.

In primitive societies, food is not like any other good. The rules which govern its exchange are completely specific; indeed, food is often not exchanged at all within the group, as it is the foundation of its identity and solidarity. The groups designated "the other" or "different" are described pejoratively as eaters of food regarded as inedible by the "us" of the group. On the contrary, food that is a taboo for a group may be an item of exchange with other groups:

"Traditional food cannot always be treated as any other thing. Food is a vital element of primary necessity, often symbolic of hearth and home, if not of the mother. Compared to other things, food is shared more promptly, more from need, while a cloth made of bark or pearls are more suited to the exchange of gifts. Food transactions are a sensitive barometer, almost a ritual declaration of social relationships and food is used as a mechanism for starting, maintaining and distributing sociability. Within a large social sector where money is exchanged with other things, food is protected against monetary (counterfeit) transactions and is often shared, but rarely sold. Food is too much based on use for it to have value for exchange" (Sahlins, in Grendi, 1972).

However, the symbolic value of food is not confined to primitive societies. Even in modern capitalist society, production and consumption are not, by definition, exclusively economic in nature, nor are they without symbolic meaning. "Usefulness" is not a quality of the object, but one of meanings of objective qualities. "The reasons Americans deem dogs inedible and cattle "food" is no more perceptible to the senses than is the price of meat" (Sahlins, 1976: 169). Sahlins himself devotes some excellent passages to food preferences and taboos surrounding domestic animals in western culture today:

"...the productive relation of American society to its own and the world environment is organized by specific valuations of edibility and inedibility, themselves qualitative and in no way justifiable by biological, ecological, or economic advantage. The functional consequences extend from agricultural 'adaptation' to international trade and world political relations. The exploitation of the American environment, the mode of relation to the landscape, depends on the model of a meal that includes a central meat element with the peripheral support of carbohydrates and vegetables ... Hence also a corresponding structure of agricultural production of feed grains, and in turn a specific articulation to world markets -all of which would change overnight if we ate dogs (Sahlins, 1976:171).

Like Levi-Strauss, Sahlins gives to the antinomy edible-non-edible a significance of universal value: the integration of the diverse animal species into human society. It is this symbolic logic which organizes demand and gives different economic value to "better" or "inferior" cuts, for example, according to a logic that would be difficult to defend on the ground of nutritional or economic arguments (Sahlins, 1976:175). However we will not take here into consideration the analyses which aim at underlining structures of universalistic relevance implied in schemes of food consumption. We

would like rather to shed light on the relationship between the symbolic significance of food consumption and the social system, of which it is a part. We would also like to point out that, being the foundation of processes of group solidarity and identification, the symbolic dimension of food consumption follows society's articulation and differentiation.

Food consumption in relation to processes of Nation-State and classes formation.

If the food system is a system of communication, integrated in the social system to which it belongs (Barthes, 1979; Douglas and Isherwood, 1979), the reference of the identification process changes, in relation to the different forms of social organizations and institutions, historically and geographically possible. The cuisine, taken as a "totality of practices relating to food and symbolic value assigned to it" (Gallini, 1987:194), may be analyzed as signifying different national and class cultures and structures.

According to Barthes (1979) in fact, the significance of elements that constitute a food system is specific to its culture. This is true for the meaning of sugar or the concept of "crispy" for the Americans in the United States, or for wine in France. Mary Douglas (1985a:175) "deciphers" the codes of the structure of "the meal" for the English. Meals require a table, ordered places to sit in and restrictions on movement and alternative activities. Knitting at tables is out of the question. Even at Sunday breakfast, taking up the newspaper is a sign that the meal is finished. The meal imposes its structure on the people involved; the rules which limit and direct a type of social interaction are reflected in the rules that govern the internal order of the meal itself. Drinks are for outsiders, acquaintances and the family, meals are for family, intimate friends and esteemed guests. The "great operator" of the system is the line between intimacy and distance.

Similarly, Goody (1982) contrasts cooking in

West Africa with the culinary practices of the major Eurasia societies throughout history, relating the differences in food preparation and consumption to differences in the articulation of their socio-economic structures. Recently, Appadurai (1988) analyzed cookery books with reference to the formation of post-colonial national cultures.

Further, cuisine reproduces and expresses class and hierarchical relations (Goody, 1982). Social differentiation into classes or groups are represented by differences in taste:

The true principle of the differences encountered in the sphere of consumption and in many other cases is the contrast between luxury tastes (or of freedom) and tastes of necessity. The former are peculiar to individuals who are the products of material conditions of existence which are defined by the distance from need, from freedom or from comfort, which is based on the possession of capital. The second type express the condition of need, of which they are the result (Bourdieu, 1983:185).

And meals are consumed in different ways by different social classes:

The art of eating and drinking remains, undoubtedly, one of the few fields in which the working classes are explicitly opposed to legitimate art of living. To the new ethic of sobriety, associated with the culture of slimness, encountered more frequently as one ascends the social hierarchy, the peasants and above all the workers offer by contrast a moral of good living (Bourdieu, 1983:189).

On a same line, but in a new context, a system of hierarchical opposition is offered by Batstone (1983), in his description of how meals are consumed in the motor industry, by managers and by production line staff.

Service in the directors' dining room reflects and reaffirms the status of director... In the case of the car assembly worker, the mode

of food provision by the employer reflects a tension between the productive necessity of nutritional provision on the one hand and a consideration of cost and time thrift on the other. If breaks are to be kept short, the employer has to devise means by which several thousand workers can obtain food and drink within a short period of time. Hence a variety of tea and hot water points are provided; canteen staff have meals prepared at the appropriate time and they are served at the fastest possible pace. The mode of provision can therefore best be described as functional ... The emphasis is upon meeting the nutritional requirement of a large number of workers in as short a time as possible

Food provision for the car assembly worker and the director reflect and reaffirm contrasting models of different occupational groups. As one moves up the organizational hierarchy, not only status but also employer trust tend to increase. That is, the director occupies a position of high trust or discretion: he is not bound by detailed rules concerning food and drink, in the same way as he is not highly bound by such rules as to what he should do or how he should do it. The car assembly worker, on the other hand, formally enjoys little discretion over his eating and drinking. This reflects the largely pre-planned minutely timed and closely supervised and controlled nature of his work more generally. Eating and drinking, therefore, reflect the fundamental feature of his low trust (Batstone, 1983:47-8 and 50).

Diets and agribusiness. Food as an organic system in the modern society

Batstone's analysis contains one fundamental difference from the preceding others. The meal described is not consumed within a family system, but in the cafeteria of a car factory. The management of food consumption shifts, in this case, from the private sphere (where there is greater scope for exercising individual liberty in working out different forms and models of food

consumption) to the collective one. It is the management of the factory that decides how meals are to be consumed, transferring into the manners of food consumption the models of men on which the organization of work in the factory is also based. This involves the extension of the commodification process to the spheres of food preparation and consumption, i.e. the intensification of fordist accumulation.

The workers may try to defend themselves, bringing their food from home and trying in some way to create a climate of mealtime conviviality denied them by the rules of efficiency. But the autonomy of individual and private planning in food consumption is enormously decreased. Commodification of food preparation involves necessarily the commodification of the time spent in it, but it can also involve a transformation of diets. This, in such cases, does not necessarily come about through a change of taste, but through the integration of food consumption (and of its symbolic meaning) into the market domain. The transformation is not so much one of the structure of the meal within the family (Douglas, 1985b), as it is the placing of the meal in the diverse spheres of collective life. The commodification of the spheres of food preparation and consumption (i.e. their being mainly determined by market laws) is the way through which the main changes in food consumption in western countries are made today.

So, as for pre-industrial societies (Goody, 1982:47), the separation between the spheres of preparation and consumption, previously governed by family norms, and the spheres of production and distribution, governed by market rules, is disappearing. But, in the post-industrial society, the re-unification occurs in the market domain. As a consequence, there is a tendency for meals consumed outside the domestic sphere and for industrial food consumed at home to increase.

"The purchase of ready-cooked food became much more common with the growth of

industrial food in those societies where husband and wife are both working .. and where collective action (in the sense of getting together, either for consuming food or for entertainment) is minimal. When leisure activities are carried out within the domestic group itself, there is a trend towards convenience foods. Typical of this is the TV dinner, pioneered in the United States. Electronic communication involves the high consumption of goods, a heavy work-load, plus "home entertainment"; except on festival occasions "home cooking" becomes mainly a question of heating up" (Harris, 1985:188).

Most economic analyses of the transformation of diets (Blasford 1985; Sanderson, 1986; Malassis and Padillas, 1982; Green, 1986) do not explicitly take account of these problems. Consequently, an intensification of market relation is often, implicitly or explicitly, presented as an autonomous (i.e. exogenous) shift in demand and in consumers' tastes.

Indeed, in an always more internationalized economic context, agribusiness increases its influence on the variable elements of food consumption. The power of the monopoly to structure the field of choice of the dominated operates at different levels: at the economic level through the destruction of (the same possibility of) autonomous food systems —i.e. food production and distribution (Friedmann and McMichael, 1989), but also food preparation and consumption— and at a cultural level, through the de-specification of the symbolic value of food consumption.

In his description of the eating habits of an English rural family, Newby (1983) shows how the development of agribusiness destroys the possibility of self-sufficiency in the English provinces. Like the urban population, the rural family is obliged to buy food at the supermarket, sometimes even at higher prices.

While food was not treated like "any other thing" (Sahlins, 1972) among primitive peoples, with the industrialization of agriculture, a process

of de-specification and commodification of food was set in motion. Like the automobile or an electrical appliance, food is produced by the multinational company in order to be sold; that is to make profits. "Good to eat" corresponds to "good to sell" (Harris, 1985). Nowadays, the extent of this process is testified by the U.S. refusal to consider food security as a valid justification for protectionist policies.

Commodification of food operates also at — and through the— symbolic and the social level. The emergence of fast food is connected not only to the interests of the soya/corn/meat multinational complex, but also to the lifestyle of the typical North American family, composed of the working couple, for whom the occasional suburban barbecue is a typical social event (Harris, 1985). It represents, then, not only an economic, but also a social model, in which the partial elimination of family life as place of socialization becomes the condition for the emergence of new (modern) forms of socialization and communication through food.

The loss of specificity of food itself corresponds to the loss of specificity of the situations it represents and symbolizes. In the global economy there is no legitimation for diversity. Better, diversity is organized through hierarchical lines, going from the most backward to the most modern. The determinant element in the scale of values is not the nutritional or even the economic value of food, but its being "modern", i.e. the attraction of the cultural model it represents. Diet, as any other social system of communication, becomes, generically, the expression of the participation to the modern society:

"energy-giving and light food is experienced as the very sign of, rather than a help toward, participation in modern life. The snack bar not only responds to a new need, it also gives a certain dramatic expression to this need and shows those who frequent it to be modern men, managers who exercise power

and control over the extreme rapidity of modern life.the business lunch emphasizes the gastronomic, and under certain circumstances traditional value of the dishes served and uses this value to stimulate the euphoria needed to facilitate the transaction of business" (Barthes, 1979:172).

If this is true, the problem of transformation of diet cannot be reduced to the simple substitution of one type of foodstuff by another (roots and inferior grains for superior grains and meat). As is already clear from the literature on the transfer of technology, along with the product, a social model (whether of production or consumption) is offered and transferred.

In less developed countries, food consumption becomes one way of representing the participation to the dominant social model. The impact of this model is stronger on the new bourgeois classes. The new elites created, as national states emerged, the "postindustrial and postcolonial middle class (who) is constructing a particular sort of polyglot culture" (Appadurai, 1988:5).

"This spatially mobile class of professionals, along with their more stable class peers in the cities and towns of India, creates a small but important class of consumers characterized by its multiethnic, multicasite, polyglot, and Westernized tastes. This class is linked in particular towns by a network of clubs, social committees, children's schools, cookery classes and residential preferences. They are nationally linked by their tastes in magazines, clothing, film and music, and by their interpersonal networks in many cities" (Appadurai, 1988:5).

This impact is not confined to food consumption, but extends to other spheres of domestic life; taste in the home, furnishing, clothing, etc. (Goody, 1982). Besides being important on particular classes, the impact is strongest in particular spheres; the public spheres, for example, more than in the private:

"While cuisine and manners have remained substantially intact at the domestic level, ... at the public level this is not the case. For formal occasions, defined in the context of the new life, people will repair to restaurants, the more elaborate of which will offer "european cuisine", though some will serve Ghanaian food as well. Formal occasions require formal food, which tend to be defined as European" (Goody, 1982:178).

The success (or the refusal) of the dominant model of food consumption, of which the fast food⁽³⁾ is one preeminent feature, depends, then, not so much on some inexplicable change of tastes, but mainly on the attraction of the cultural model it represents and signifies, which is publicized not only by the competitive strategies of the multinational companies, but also by the demonstrated effect of the films, television programmes and literature of the dominant culture (Jenkins, 1988).

One recent example of this phenomenon can be brought: the enthusiasm raised by the opening of a McDonald's outlet in Moscow. "McDonald's opens: Moscow goes wild" was a headline in Italy's most widely read newspaper" (la Repubblica, 28/29 gennaio 1990). A television news feature reported the comments of Moscow's inhabitants who, three weeks after the opening, continued to form long queues (where did the fast service disappear to?) to eat a McDonald's hamburger while complaining of the high prices (what happened to competitive prices?): "An interesting experience. Restaurants like this have only been seen here in the cinema". At the same time, McDonald's in Moscow means, as the television feature pointed out, technical assistance and various responses to the need of the multinational: courses on cattle rearing and potato seed imports from the US (TG1, News at 13.30; Thursday, February 22nd 1990).

In the same way, the response to the fast food, the slow food movement, founded in Italy a few years ago and itself on the way to

internationalization, is not exclusively or even mainly based on economic or nutritional considerations, but is of a cultural nature. This way of preparing and consuming food is thought to act not only against "anxiety-charged rhythms", but also against the "virus of fast life". The search for lost recipes and for the custom-made lunch is in opposition to fast food and, doubly so, to chemical-ridden agriculture and to a lifestyle that makes of speed a virtue (From the Slow Food movement manifesto).

It is not by chance that Italy is leading the opposition to fast food. Here, it is alleged, the survival of local culinary tradition is so strong—and the tradition of national state so weak—as to hinder for a long time the establishment of either a national cuisine or even a high cuisine. "In Italy at least until very recently, it appears impossible to speak of a high, transregional cuisine" (Appadurai, 1988:4; see also Gallini, 1987).

Conclusión

The consequences of the industrialization of food systems go beyond the nutritional and economic spheres, which are mainly analyzed in the current literature, affecting phenomena of social and symbolic relevance. In the advanced capitalist societies, the partial elimination of food preparation and consumption from the private settings and their commodification are essential and powerful elements through which the process of intensive accumulation promote new forms of re-socialization of people and restructuring of need. To understand these phenomena we need to abandon the claim of traditional economic theory that tastes are exogenous and strictly individualistic. Consumption and production are both part of the same circular process, and both have profound social relevance (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979).

As far as Third World countries are concerned, it would be necessary, at the theoretical level, to apply to the "transfer of food" the same critique

that has been developed for the past twenty years in discussing the transfer of technology. This means evaluating the social and economic impact of a model of food consumption that is largely developed at the center and spreads outward to the periphery, reflecting the availability of resources in rich contexts. As the abundant literature on the subject has already shown (cfr. Friedmann and McMichael, 1989; Singer et al., 1987; Mellor, 1984), food aid has caused a profound transformation in models of consumption and production, after resulting in the disappearance of local products and diets. Although the social effects on domestic organization, food preparation and "table manners" have probably been considerable and relevant to the countries capacity to guarantee food security, these have scarcely been documented until now.

Notes

1. This refers to a regime in which capital organizes not only production, but also the mode of consumption, and in which commodity relations prevail over traditional ones in daily life. See Friedmann (1987) for a description of the international food regime established after WWII and which unifies the extensive and intensive modes of accumulation.

2. While some anthropologists studied the effects of commodification and industrialization on the food systems of some peripheral countries (eg. Godoy, 1982; Appadurai, 1988; Lindenbaum, 1986), sociologists and economists have been reluctant to extend their analyses to both the food preparation and consumption phases and the social significance of food as symbolic and communicative systems.

3. For some people fast food is no longer sufficiently fast. In the US some restaurants have competitions to serve their clients more quickly. "Some have eliminated seating, others are substituting waiters with computers to save time on orders. Even pizza has not been spared in the era of 'zap food'. In Burlington Vermont, a firm has marketed a machine that prepares and cooks a pizza in three minutes. Even preparing a sandwich is becoming too time-consuming. As a result, there is a boom in sales of hamburgers and frozen rolls, which can be rendered edible in 90 seconds with a micro-waves oven" (la Repubblica, 10/11 dicembre 1989). Furthermore, an entire industry of frozen pre-prepared

complete meals has already emerged. Now it is possible to have a complete "hot" meal in just a few seconds. The sections of supermarkets devoted to this kind of food are expanding very rapidly.

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RESUMEN

Aspectos Simbólicos y Sociales en el Funcionamiento del Sistema Alimentario

Este artículo quiere arrojar luz sobre algunos aspectos del sistema alimentario que son particularmente relevantes para entender las consecuencias del proceso de globalización. Este trabajo hace referencia a la vez, a la intensificación de la acumulación en la esfera de la producción y consumo de alimentos en los países en desarrollo, así como, de la destrucción de las dietas locales y los sistemas sociales en países de menor desarrollo.

En ese sentido, se argumenta que tales consecuencias son mejor entendidas desde el punto de vista de aspectos sociales y simbólicos pertinentes al consumo de alimentos. Este acercamiento defiende la integración, a nivel analítico, de los diferentes segmentos del sistema alimentario: producción, distribución, preparación y consumo. El análisis de la significación social y simbólica del consumo de alimentos (¿cómo comemos?, ¿qué comemos?, y ¿por qué comemos?) puede también crear premisas para la revisión del concepto de "seguridad alimentaria", articulado a las políticas de ayuda alimentaria nacionales e internacionales.

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