

THE IMPORTANCE OF FOOD IN THE INDIVIDUALIZED SOCIETY

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Abstract

Why has food become such a popular topic of discussion in the public sphere of contemporary Western Societies?

This work sets out to answer this question from three point of views.

The first regards the characteristics of the societies at hand and the individualization; the second concerns self-expression and identity as the objective of single individuals and, finally, the third involves the influences from traditional media as well as the new forms of media which are transforming the public sphere and moving the physical venue towards a virtual setting.

1. Introduction: Food as Culture

This work sets out to answer a question relative to the importance of food in the public sphere of contemporary society. (Habermas, 1989).

Food is talked about often: face-to-face during various social occasions, in traditional media, on the web, and food is “done” by experimenting with new foods and cooking techniques, rediscovering traditional foods and preparation, going to restaurants in both orthodox and new style settings (tastings, markets, fairs).

Moreover, food is connected to many areas related to private lives that, however, also concern public choices: the body and physical fitness, health and wellness, economic growth through agriculture and food excellence, and ethics. To sum up, today, food is important: why?

Only those who live in societies characterized by abundance will even thing to raise this question: it is clear, in fact, that where scarcity reigns the answer is simple: food is relevant because there is not enough of it.

This answer takes us back to the material nature of food itself: it satisfies a basic need and represents the response to the stimulus of hunger.

Yet, much research from the social sciences shows that there is more to food than its material nature and that it takes on cultural connotations.

In his work on the theory of needs, Malinowski is the first to discuss cultural response to need and indicates how societies and cultures develop different ways of responding to needs: when applied to food, such responses regard those foods that can or cannot be eaten and the procedures used to prepare them, which observe cultural regulations and standards, elaborated in specific contexts. (Malinowski, 1944).

From this point of view, cultural connotations of food pertain to both societies characterized by abundance and those characterized by scarcity: both, in fact, elaborate preferences and taboos and develop regulations that satisfy the needs in the latter and the desires in the former, to form a cultural system that represents one of

the specificities and components of the identity of the different communities and societies.

Thus, food may be considered culture while it is being produced as well as when it is being prepared and even when it is being consumed. **In this context, the concept of culture is that proposed by Kluckhohn: people follow models learned from their own and reference groups, which drive their actions.**

The hierarchy of “edible” foods, the food system, culinary arts, eating habits, how often meals are eaten and the meanings attributed to food can be considered part of a culture and transcend the material nature of foods, that in and of themselves, can be substituted depending upon their calorie content and capacity to satisfy hunger. (Douglas, 1996; Poulain, 2008)

Food is culture when it is produced in that man creates his own food, when it is prepared because the foods produced undergo a transformation through technology and when it is consumed because its nutritional values are tied to symbolic values. (Montanari, 2007)

In this work two topics will be developed concerning food as culture: the contradictions that pertain to food in the global society and in the more developed societies and, in the latter, food and nutrition as a field in which identity and distinctive practices are elaborated and where commercial and interpersonal influences are exercised.

2. The Contradictions of Food

The field of food and nutrition is marked by numerous contradictions, which set rich countries against poor countries, but they are also present within the wealthy countries and affect all segments of the population.

Globally speaking, the clearest antinomy involving food is the disparity between abundance and scarcity.

In 2014, 805 million people suffered from hunger, with a ratio of one to nine in the global population, despite advances made which reduced the number of people suffering from hunger by almost 100 million for each of the last two decades.

On the other hand, global food waste for the entire food chain was 1,3 billion tons in 2011, but when domestic food in rich countries alone is considered, the discrepancy between abundance and scarcity becomes even more evident. In fact, Europeans wasted 180 kg per capita and Americans 109 kg for various reasons that include the lack of product knowledge, the lack of knowledge regarding good food storage and overbuying due to the consumer culture and marketing strategies. (Martinengo, 2015)

The contradiction between abundance and scarcity is not, however, limited to specific nations, but even within wealthy countries segments of the population live in conditions of absolute poverty and nutritional deprivation. According to Eurostat data, in 2013 9.6% of the population lived in conditions of deprivation and in Italy food poverty included five million and a half people, of whom one million three hundred thousand were minors. (Rovati, Pesenti, 2015)

The second contradiction involves the difference between health consciousness and eating disorders; the most widely discussed topic regards obesity which, most recently, has become the focus of an educational and media campaign as it represents

a social problem which reduces life expectancy, creates illnesses, and consequently increases costs for the national healthcare system.

About a third of the world population, 2,1 trillion people, suffer from obesity or problems tied to excess weight. (Poulain, 2009)

This is a growing problem, since in the past thirty years the overweight and obese population has gone from 857 million in 1980 to 2.1 trillion in 2013, and concerns, in particular, children who represent 47% of all obese people. Obesity is widespread in wealthy countries and is particularly relevant in the USA, as the rate of obesity is 33%. However, the obese population in developing countries alone makes up 66% of the world total, thanks to economic food choices and the increasing popularity of junk food. Moreover, obesity is also the consequence of changes in eating habits in populations in both wealthy and poor countries. Meals have become irregular, unstructured and individualized, leading to a loss of control in terms of the quantity, quality and calorie intake of the foods eaten during the day.

On the other hand, in wealthy countries there is a growing trend towards health conscious eating, based on prevention and a correct lifestyle as a means to remain healthy and related to a greater focus on physical appearance. (Low, Malacrida, 2008)

However, while health consciousness characterizes one part of the population, poor eating habits combined with the increased popularity of junk food typifies another segment, especially the young and the poor.

Problems related to food scarcity and poor eating habits were a topic of discussion at Expo 2015 and are reflected in the “Milan Protocol” designed to join institutions and the general public in an effort to make the food system truly sustainable, based on three objectives: the first is the promotion of healthy lifestyles and the fight against obesity. The second, the growth and promotion of sustainable agriculture and the third, the reduction of food waste by 50% along the entire food chain by 2020.

The contradiction between health consciousness and eating disorders and poor eating habits include other contradictions as well: one of the most significant is the antithesis slow-food - fast-food and that on the one hand recalls the dichotomy between nutritious and correct eating habits and the habitual intake of junk food, and on the other, the need to feed oneself and eat, or rather, between eating quickly, which is hardly social at all and standardized, and slow food, which savoured and conscientious about the nutritional, territorial and identity aspects of food. (Andrews, 2008).

Related to this contradiction is another that pertains to globalization and localism and that is tightly intertwined in the dichotomy fast-slow.

On one hand, the process of globalization places diverse cultures in contact with one another and popularizes cultural models, including food, that can represent examples of good practices and are reflected in the melting pot of foods eaten at home and in restaurants; on the other, it leads to negative consequences that can be summed up, in terms of consumption, in the approval of eating habits and the abandonment of local production, dietary habits and food patterns, with frequent negative fallouts on health.

On the other, there is increased interest in local food, biodiversity and the specific characteristics of the geographical areas, bolstering the market for typical products and the appeal of origin markings, generating fairs and events as well as tourism to promote the discovery and tasting of local food and wines.

3. A Social Area for Food in Contemporaries Societies

Different labels have been used to define contemporary Western societies, but most studies agree that these societies share one distinctive feature: individualization. Individualization is the result of a decline in labour, welfare and the nation state and has led to a crisis among the people, leaving individuals alone to face events and maimed in their capacity to take political action. (Bauman, 2001)

The decline of the “social sphere” – including the nation state, the classes, social movements and even agencies of socialization – leaves space for individualism and the search for personal freedom. Individuals attempt to construct themselves as the subject of their own life, and social categories are replaced by other categories, in this case cultural, that have become a fragmented expression of each single person; the subject, or rather the person and his relation with himself, has become the principle objective. (Touraine, 2005)

There are two faces to an individualized society: individualism opposed to collectivism and the social sphere and individuality, centred on itself and its expression.

These two faces are reflected in different trends: while individualism is expressed in a hedonistic tendency in the search for personal pleasure, individuality is expressed in self-realization, centred on itself, and in an openness to others in the “sub political arenas” in which forms of varying stability and organization can emerge in a period of cooperative individualism. [Beck, 1998].

Food is a field in which these trends are easily recognized and associated with different types of consumers.

In food culture, hedonism is expressed in the search for foods that satisfy personal taste and offer the pleasure of food, and in the search for a dish, rich and exclusive due to the type of food it is made with and the location of the restaurant where the food is eaten.

Self realization, on the other hand, is sought in the quality and health benefits of food, their peculiarities in terms of origin, cultivation and processing, as well as in experiences with new types of food.

Finally, an openness towards others is expressed through the food community, conviviality and an exchange of opinions, knowledge and information in a wide range of behaviours that include the formation of groups of buyers, the implementation of practices aiming to save money and reduce waste based on interests or values, and the use of the web and sites dedicated to food and nutrition.

Individualism represents an initial response to the question this work sets out to answer

The decline of the collective sphere of the social class and lifestyle can clearly be attributed to a socio-demographic dimension and makes it possible for individuals to cultivate their own wellbeing and quality of life by freely making personal choices about what to eat.

In the past two decades a process of empowerment has become evident in all fields of consumption and has involved growing numbers of consumers, characterised by greater awareness and autonomy and by their desire for authenticity in both the choices of goods and in how they use them.

Empowerment is a process that represents the expression of self and is fostered by the growth of information regarding products, product knowledge, and consumer

experiences with the many alternatives offered by the growing number of distribution channels.

This process produces more attentive consumers, aware, informed and often critical of more popular models of consumption.

In the food industry, empowerment is expressed in the search for wellbeing in terms of health and physical appearance, as well as in the quality of life created by the pleasure food offers as an expression of a tradition, a culture or a geographical area.

Food becomes a relevant topic because people can express their own knowledge and awareness as individual consumers in a field they share with a sector of the population that is not in conditions of deprivation. From this point of view, food is a privileged field and the first field in which models of consumption change and consumers experiment with new behaviours.

The process of empowerment is connected with changes of supply that can be interpreted as a cause or as a consequence of consumer change, depending upon whether you believe that consumers are free to choose or hold that they are conditioned by the market.

If the contradictions pertaining to food discussed in the first paragraph were reported in the context of contemporary Western societies, the resulting picture would reveal food as a varied and diversified sector of life.

From the consumer's point of view, individuals move within an enormous "hypermarket of food" produced by the economy of scope, [Lipovetsky, 2006] which allows them an almost unlimited freedom of choice. However, in return, it entails personal responsibility and a number of individual choices that can lead to distinct lifestyles as well as to a wavering between them all.

In terms of supply, traditional goods are connected to industrial and ethnic products, the organic to junk foods, the short chain to the exotic, fast food restaurants to slow food. They offer individuals all kinds of products, consumption styles and various experiences according to individual needs and motivations and represent different ways to express oneself.

A second answer to the question set forth in this work consists in the distinct value of food.

The works by Pierre Bourdieu have identified a few distinctive practices in terms of class: among these, in addition to practices pertaining to high culture, there are others that have to do with body care and food. (Bourdieu, 1979).

Bourdieu identified two styles of eating with evident class connotations: one style values form and the other values strength.

The first is typical of the elite, and tends towards an ideal of thinness, while the second is widespread among the lower classes. These eating styles are based on differences in tastes: refined and delicate on the one hand, and heavy, fat and simple on the other. The middle classes are better educated and have more money; they pursue originality at a low price, experimenting with exotic cuisines or taking up "culinary populism", by looking for and eating traditional country dishes.

Later research has shown that, unlike other practices identified by Bourdieu, food no longer holds a distinct function but it has been standardized and no longer marks the differences in social position. (Silva, Warde, 2010; Bennett et al., 2013). However, the changes that have invested Western societies and that have upset the order of modernity, its institutions and social structure, have also left a mark on eating habits, destroying the traditional criteria which regulated them. This has caused

concern among consumers, lacking guidelines and trustworthy criteria and has forced them to make choices individually and autonomously. (Fischler, 1988, 1990).

This process makes the role of food important in creating a sense of personal identity: if eating is no longer distinctive in a social sense, it continues to be the expression of self, a way to create an image of oneself and transmit it to others, a language that is used to tell a personal story to oneself and others and to distinguish oneself at a personal level. The variety of food found in contemporary society offers, from this point of view, an almost infinite number of variants and shades to express and manifest one's uniqueness and differences

In the individualized society, consumption is the privileged field of self expression, and food consumption, because it includes most people, irrespective of social and cultural inequality, is even more so. Everyone eats, everyone buys and prepares food, everyone has memories tied to food, everyone has developed experiences tied to eating, and everyone can go to the enormous "hypermarket of food" created from the economy of scope.

4. Food and the Public Sphere in Contemporary Western Societies

The third answer to the query this work investigates is related to the changes in the public sphere, in which individuals form opinions and talk about topics of public interest.

In addition to the physical locations indicated by Habermas as places where people can meet and exchange information and ideas, there are now virtual spaces like the television and the web which have, in large part, replaced them.

For the populations in contemporary Western societies these two forms of media dominate the public sphere: television for most of the elderly and mature people and the web for the new generations of digital natives (Palfrey, Gasser, 2008). Thus, for the most part, the topics of public interest are those viewed most frequently on television and the Internet.

The nature and content of the messages transmitted by these media aside, the role that food and cooking have recently acquired in the media in question would seem relevant. (Dahlgren, 1995),

As for television, *Masterchef* is an emblematic case: first transmitted in 1990 in Great Britain, the programme has grown in popularity since 2005 attracting audiences in 40 countries and has led to other similar programmes like *Junior Masterchef*, *Masterchef Professionals* and *Celebrity Masterchef*.

At the same time, programmes on cooking, food and physical appearance and health and the geography of food have multiplied and invaded the programming in all time slots.

In the last few years, a similar phenomenon has characterized the web as well: the Internet offers thousands of sites and blogs with recipes, information on various products, and exchanges of opinion with other consumers and fans. Moreover, the web gives individuals the opportunity to become actors and authors and they no longer simply watch what is offered, promoting a reciprocal influence and growth of interest in the most popular topics presented.

Despite the wide range of topics of discussion presented on the web and useful to varied and assorted groups of consumers, some issues may become particularly important depending upon the demand of the moment and market which manages to

grab the community's attention. In addition to bottom up contributions from consumer, persuasion techniques used by business can be added. The Internet and the new media represent new strategies for the advertising campaigns.

The joint force of the Internet and television reduces the traditional public sphere and makes food a topic of general interest, soliciting the attention and discussion by many and distracting them from more important subjects: the relevance of food in social life seems, therefore, to appear as the result of changes in the public sphere and the capacity of the media to direct the interests of the population.

5. Conclusions

The question this work set out to answer deals with the importance of food in the public sphere of contemporary Western society.

The answers to this question can be found in the process of individualization of these societies and in the meaning of self expression when faced with the decline of the social categories which have characterised the modern age. The field of consumption is a privileged field in terms of self expression, and food represents the most all-inclusive field for consumers in every segment of society and generation. For this reason, food has become a sort of identity card and represents a form of self expression that conveys individual tastes, dietary choices and experiences.

Finally, the changes in the composition of the public sphere, where there are fewer physical spaces and more virtual spaces, have stimulated the emergence of food as topic of community interest.

6. References

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