

## Research Article

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# Introduction. Food history and identity: Food and eating practices as elements of cultural heritage, identity and social creativity

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Some aspects of the food system and the human eating behaviours have always attracted scholarly research (in particular, research fields as agriculture, pharmacology, medicine, nutrition, home economics, macro-economics and psychology). The 1980s mark an inflexion point towards the expansion of empirical and theoretical pieces of work on food coming from a diversity of social and cultural disciplines (Walde, 2016). Following in the footsteps of the growing public interest in food of our contemporary consumption societies, the attention carried in food and eating by social sciences has recently shifted from addressing the issue as a topic of interest to approaching it as a concern constructed as a research object.

As a first major contribution to food studies, a large amount of sociological and anthropological literature has elucidated the socio-cultural dimensions of food and underscored its significance for the structuring of everyday life (Boutaud, Becuț and Marinescu, 2016; Marinescu, 2016; Klein Murcott, 2014; Crowther, 2013; Germov, 2008; Murcott and van Otterloo, 1992; Fischler, 1990; Mennell, 1985; Guthe and Mead, 1945).

More recently, two different bodies of empirical work are nowadays filling major gaps in understanding the intertwined political, social and cultural dynamics underlying the production of food and the activities surrounding its consumption. Based on the foodscape framework, the former focuses on the politics of food production and consumption. It analyses how food, places and people are interconnected and how they

interact (Mikkelsen, 2011; Ayora-Diaz, 2012). By framing eating as a social practice, the second body of work proposes a pragmatic approach to food consumption. It focuses on the dynamics of social action, in particular, on how practices change, the temporal and contextual structure of social activities, and the tension between routine and reflexivity (Dubuisson-Quellier and Plessz, 2013; Warde, 2016). The significance of this kind of knowledge lies in the comprehensive insights it can provide with regards to food-related policy interventions, and most particularly for those policies intending to tackle food insecurity and social inequalities or to induce sustainable behavioural changes in their struggle against the so-called “lifestyle diseases” (also known as diseases of longevity or of civilization - namely diabetes, obesity, hypercholesterolemia, hypertension and cardiovascular diseases).

By drawing on the vast breeding ground of Social Theory, sociological and anthropological approaches have brought in the food studies a more complex reading on the relationships between food, social structure and the symbolic universe. In the wake of some classics in Social Theory having questioned the innate nature of taste and preference, documented how eating is an activity regulated by social conventions and moral rules and shown how food and social prestige are interrelated (Bourdieu, 1979; Elias, 1997; Halbwachs, 1964), food choices and eating habits are now conceived as related to phenomena of sociability and social binding, the construction of collective identities beneath which lie logics of social distinction and the organisation of life in society (Régnier, Lhuissier and Gojard, 2006; Brulotte and Di Giovine, 2014).

Moreover, in the light of recent empirical studies that have applied a life-course perspective to food choice (Bisogni et al., 2005; Devine, 2005; Plessz et al., 2016, Lurbe I Puerto, 2017), eating practices have been shown to hardly remain static in a person’s life-course. Biographical transitions and turning points in life, such

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as the experience of immigration, changes in household's composition (one-person household, couple, presence or absence of children), changing work through retirement or the onset of chronic illness, are key moments leading to changes in food choice trajectories in which food management skills, resources and standards are reconsidered. Even if the corpus of food studies that have been developed by the different socio-cultural disciplines encompasses heterogeneity of theoretical frameworks and diverse methodological approaches, a consensus has risen in the conceptualization of food and eating habits as an informative marker of social position through the life cycle, as well as a constituent component of social identity (Régnier, Lhuissier and Gojard, 2006).

Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin's IV Aphorism « *Dis-moi ce que tu manges, je te dirai qui tu es* » (Tell me what you eat and I'll tell you who you are) is often quoted to illustrate that food – a universal primary physiological necessity for all sentient beings - acts also as a support for the singular identity of an individual and the particular identity of a social group. As food production and meal preparation involve the collective work of a multitude of people, food making and food eating are forms of communication, expressing meanings of social bond that allow a kinship group to affirm its difference as regards the others (Sabban, 1996; Mennell, 1985; Goody, 1982). Social groups develop and live according to their own notions of what is either an “adequate food” or a “good taste” (Régnier, 2009; Régnier and Masullo, 2009). Every social class conveys its own system of values and moral order, namely its own definition of what is necessary and decent in order to belong to the group, to find its place within it and, of the moral values and social codes for not losing the face (Halbwachs, 1933; Grignon and Grignon, 1980, 1999). Furthermore, the quality of food holds a social judgment on the status of the consumer; namely, food and the manners of eating are sources of distinction that works as a vector of the feelings of social membership (Bourdieu, 1979; Halbwachs, 1964; Grignon and Grignon 1980).

As historiographical research on food production, consumption and distribution, cuisines and gastronomy has enlightened, local, regional or national cuisines are symbolic representations of the Nation and of the identity of a people (Appadurai, 1988). Indeed, historiographical studies on food have been prolific contributors of the history of material cultures and biological behaviours through their documented accounts on food security, on eating habits and table manners, and on taste and gastronomic sensibilities. But most salient for Social Sciences is that these historiographies have illustrated how gastronomic heritage expresses the common concern

in all human societies for historical continuity and preservation of a shared sense of community membership (Poulain, 2002), even though these fabricated past and origin myth are the construct of imagined communities (Benedict, 1991). As the History of humanity is above all a composition of histories of movements and mobility, the travels of cuisines, food products and technologies have entailed transformative processes impacting local cultures, consumer tastes, regional economies and political developments. Food can also be a powerful tool for the acculturation or assimilation of minorities (Chen, 2012). Different approaches to food history, from its founding in the tradition of the School of the Annales of economic and social history (Watts, 2012) through political, cultural, and labour history methodologies to public history presentations (Pilcher, 2012), have documented how socio-historical research on food helps inform on people, societies, and governments and subsequently contributes to the World history (Chen, 2012). From the acknowledgment of the multifaceted condition of food and eating also arises the claim for the involvement of the multiplicity of socio-cultural disciplines that encompasses the heterogeneous research field of Social Sciences. As contented by the historian of food Martin Brueggle (2009), the explanation of eating practices requires their insertion in the relevant living environments. This empirical research – either conducted by the documentary analysis of historic archives, on archaeological and anthropological grounds, or by means of sociological and ethnographical fieldworks – is important in order to avoid the pitfall of stating moral judgments as often found in the postures adopted by “experts”, but also in the best intentioned scientific productions (Brueggle 2009: 18).

This IRSR special number dedicated to food history and identity includes six interesting articles, three of them about food heritage in several European cultural spaces (Italian in Rita Vianello's article, United Kingdom and Germany in Paul Cleave's and Claudia Kreklau's articles or Romanian in Bogdan Bucur's paper). The other three articles present the relation between food and identity in different places of world, as in the case of Joana Pellerano and Viviane Riegel's article about food practices of youngsters in Brasil or in the case of Elsa Mescoli's research about Moroccan women living in Milan's suburbs.

The opening article of this issue, *Being Moroccan abroad. Objects and culinary practices in women subjectivation*, presents the process of identity construction and defining the self through the culinary practices. The author analyses the role of food in the lives of two Moroccan women, their everyday practices related to food and how they express their care and feeling for the

family through the act of cooking. Keeping their Moroccan identity in a foreign environment is carried out by the help of traditional cooking methods or by Moroccan food ingredients. The author highlights the creativity of these two women's everyday food practices and positioning in the cultural environment where they live.

The second article, *Food and cultural omnivorism: a reflexive discussion on otherness, interculturality and cosmopolitanism* proposes the connection between food and cosmopolitan experiences. The authors use the concepts of cultural omnivorism and cosmopolitanism in order to explain the food practices of young Brazilians who live in the city of São Paulo. The article presents different experiences of young people when they are living touristic experiences or as daily consumption practices. The concept of naturalization is used to express the consumption of foreign foods abroad, as well as local consumption, in people's daily activities and in leisure experiences. Omnivorism and food cultural diversity are seen as a form of cultural capital or as a cosmopolitanism stance.

The third article, *The rehabilitation of mussels in the lagoon of Venice: when the louses become "black gold"*, brings us in the lagoon of Venice, on the island of Pellestrina, through the story of mussels, presenting the process of their transformation from toxic molluscs into an appreciated and largely demanded "traditional food". The topic is very interesting, as the definition of edible and inedible food is an essential cultural process, which defines us as human beings. The author presents the formation of a new food taste as a possible explanation for change of habits regarding the inclusion of mussels in food practices. The history of Venetian cuisine was a great help to explain the food tastes, both among the wealthy and educated classes and the socio-economically deprived. In order to have a larger view of this topic, especially of the reasons of distrust in mussels, the author detailed Palestrina's economic life and its traditional diet. A providential hero, Alfredo Gilebbi, the first fisherman who began mussel farming, transformed the mussels from something "not good to eat" into a typical dish of the traditional local food, equally appreciated by the locals and the tourists.

The article *Leisurely consumption, the legacy of European cafes*, continues the discourse about tourism and heritage from the previous article, with a focus this time on the places of food consumption. Eating out is considered by the author not only a leisure activity, but also a form of cultural distinction and a statement

regarding the culinary legacy and heritage by association with time and place. The article presents the bohemian atmosphere of two old cafés, where the architectural details are combined with the smells and tastes of good food and drinks, resulting in an unforgettable experience that takes you back to the past. The author speaks about the social space around the cafés and captures the unicity of the places through brochures, menus, postcards, souvenirs, as forms of nostalgic appeal and enchantment.

With the fifth article, we remain in the same elegant and distinctive atmosphere and we enter the fabulous world of royal *hôte cuisine*. While in the previous article, class distinction was performed through leisure practices, this time the rank-distinction is expressed through royal dining. The author presents how gastronomy was used as an instrument in the diplomacy in order to ensure peace and establish equality among European sovereigns. The historical details enrich the image of a world where good taste, fine objects and elegant styles are definitory for the royal national cuisine. The author uses the concept of "political gastronomy" in order to explain the explosion of fantasy, spectacular and tastes during that particular period. The French and German relations are expressed through gastronomy and the modern culinary spectacle could be interpreted as a performance of power and cultural domination.

Last, but not least, the article *Prolegomena to the Romanian Sociology and Historiography of Food* directs our attention to the Romanian peasants' dietary habits in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as they were captured by the journals and memoirs of foreign travellers transiting the Romanian Principalities or by the monographic research of the Sociological School of Bucharest. The author presents the context of research by resuming the main theoretical perspectives in the field of anthropology/sociology of food and peasant dietary habits. The socio-economic environment in the Romanian Principalities in the 18th century was characterised by morbidity, mortality and famine and these were important factors that determined the food practices at the time. The foreign travellers registered the Romanian specificity in gastronomy, as well as the regional influences. Mămăliga was the most mentioned Romanian dish and all the food habits gravitated around it. The approach of the Sociological School of Bucharest regarding peasant dietary habits was focused mainly on the point of view of life quality and its effects on people's health.

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