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Claude Fischler. Commensality, Society and Culture. *Social Science Information*, 2011, 50 (3-4), pp.528-548. 10.1177/0539018411413963 . halshs-01246748

HAL Id: halshs-01246748

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Social Science Information 2011 50: 528

DOI: 10.1177/0539018411413963

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Social Science Information

50(3–4) 528–548

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DOI: 10.1177/0539018411413963

ssi.sagepub.com**Claude Fischler**

CNRS & EHESS, Paris

Abstract

The founding fathers of the social sciences recognized commensality as a major issue but considered it mostly in a religious, sacrificial, ritualistic context. The notion of commensality is examined in its various dimensions and operations. Empirical data are used to examine cultural variability in attitudes about food, commensality and its correlates among countries usually categorized as 'Western' and 'modern'. Clear-cut differences are identified, hinting at possible relationships between, on the one hand, cultural attachment to commensality and, on the other hand, a lower prevalence of obesity and associated health problems involving nutrition.

Keywords

altruism, commensality, cooperation, cross-cultural comparison, food patterns, food sharing, meals, meal patterns, nutrition, obesity, reciprocity, sociability, social relationships, socialization

Résumé

Les pères fondateurs des sciences humaines ont identifié la commensalité comme une question fondamentale mais l'ont envisagée essentiellement sous l'angle religieux, sacrificiel et rituel. La notion de commensalité est envisagée dans ses diverses dimensions et fonctionnements. En utilisant des données empiriques, on examine ensuite la variabilité culturelle dans les attitudes à l'égard de la commensalité et de ses corrélats en particulier dans des pays habituellement qualifiés de 'modernes' et 'occidentaux'. On trouve d'importantes différences transculturelles et les indices d'une relation possible entre, d'une part, un attachement culturel à la commensalité et, de l'autre, une prévalence plutôt plus faible de l'obésité et des pathologies liées à la nutrition.

Corresponding author:

Claude Fischler, Centre Edgar Morin (IIAC, CNRS-EHESS), 22 rue d'Athènes, 75009 Paris, France

Email: fischler@ehess.fr

Mots-clés

altruisme, approche comparative, commensalité, comparaison interculturelle, coopération, nutrition, obésité, partage, réciprocité, relations sociales, repas, rythme des repas, rythmes alimentaires, sociabilité, socialisation

One of the most striking manifestations of human sociality is commensality: humans tend to eat together or, to put it more exactly, to eat in groups. Commensality, in its literal sense, means eating at the same table (*mensa*). A wider, simple definition proposes that ‘commensality is eating with other people’ (Sobal & Nelson, 2003). In a 1992 trend report on the emerging sociology of food, three distinguished scholars in the field (Mennell, Murcott & van Otterloo, 1992) remarked in conclusion of their work that ‘it is a commonplace of discussions of food and society to speak of the social importance of commensality’. Twenty-odd years later, one would agree with the statement but remark that, by and large, in spite of a growing number of observations and analyses and some very significant contributions, the topic still needs more investigation and a unifying perspective.

One of the most striking issues raised, particularly in the 1992 trend report’s conclusion, was that of changes in eating patterns and commensality:

Though incompletely investigated, it is highly likely that the meals that are held to be the very stuff of sociality are in danger of disappearing ... part and parcel of the trends characterised earlier in this report as increasing tendencies towards individualisation. (Mennell, Murcott & van Otterloo, 1992: 116)

The authors cite as examples of this trend ‘a reduction from five meals a day to three in Vienna since the turn of the century and a reorganization of their type’; an ‘increased likelihood of solo-eating’; all a consequence of ‘the major reorganization of industrial life’. But they go on, expressing their scepticism about worries about the ‘decline of the family meal’, which look as if they were also signaling worries about the ‘decline of the family’ and even about the notion of commensality itself. They call the thought ‘perilous’, since, while commensality bonds participants, it also excludes outsiders. Whether a loosening of social bonding is occurring as a consequence of the common meal giving way is a recurring question. Although it may look empirically resolvable, it has led to constant debate and suspicion – sometimes well founded – of an ideological or moral bias. The reason is probably that the deepest issues at stake are of essential social significance and carry fundamentally moral undertones. After all, the sharing of food involves the very structure of social organization, no less than the division and allocation of resources.

In today’s world the issues raised in the 1992 trend report have gained in acuteness and, in developed as well as in emerging countries, they take on the appearance of a crisis: the question is repeatedly asked whether commensality really is on the decline and, if so, what the connection is with, among other problems involving public health, obesity and associated pathologies.

In this article, I discuss first how the social sciences have tackled the issue of commensality. I then move on to examine the notion itself and what features it covers. In a

third part, I use empirical data to demonstrate strong cultural variability in attitudes about food, eating, health and commensality between countries usually categorized as ‘Western’ and ‘modern’, hinting at possible relationships between, on the one hand, cultural attachment to commensality and, on the other hand, a lower prevalence of obesity and associated health problems involving nutrition.

Transcending biology: The social sciences and commensality

Eating is often, and of course rightly, described as the primary biological function. It could also be characterized as the primary social function, however, since cooperation in food procurement is essential to social organization and implies, in turn, reciprocity and redistribution. As ethnographic literature shows, hunter-gatherer groups dispatch resources extracted from the environment, particularly animal flesh, beyond the immediate circle of the hunters and their kin, in accordance with often complex, both explicit and implicit rules (Bahuchet, 1990; Marshall, 1961).

Some of the founding fathers of anthropology and sociology – Robertson Smith, Emile Durkheim and of course Marcel Mauss – did address food and eating as fundamental social issues, albeit mostly from a specific point of view: in 1932, the British anthropologist Audrey Richards criticized them for having dealt mostly with the religious, ritualistic and sacrificial aspects of eating, overlooking the fundamental dimension of everyday nourishment (and failing, she added, to care much about collecting data):

It is for want of this concrete data that Durkheim and his followers of the French sociological school have given a misleading account of this question. Like Robertson Smith, they have emphasized that eating is a social activity, rather than an individual physiological process, but in their hands this sociological aspect of nutrition has developed into a positive apotheosis of the ceremonial meal. The ritual sharing of food is, to them, not the act of a specific unit of the tribe, whether of family, age group, or village, but a kind of mystic and religious communion of the society at large ... (Richards, 2004 [1932]: 180)

The criticism is probably not without merit. To Durkheim, daily eating fails the test for being recognized as a ‘social fact’. It is, as it were, too basically biological:

Every individual drinks, sleeps, eats, reasons and it is in society’s best interest that such functions are exerted in a regular way. If these facts were social, sociology could claim no specific object; its domain and those of biology and psychology would overlap. (Durkheim, 1981 [1894]: 3; my translation)

In his view of food, Durkheim seems to be in line with the archetypal view of eating as the lowliest, most basic, biological function involving bodily aspects of the human condition. This notion of the primitive, biological nature of eating, as opposed to the immaterial and the spiritual, permeates Western thinking, particularly religious – as well as that of many other cultures and religions. It is expressed best and earliest in the biblical phrase ‘Man does not live by bread alone’ (Deuteronomy 8: 3; Matthew 4: 4) and in the implicit

advice it provides: to pursue purposes higher than just fulfilling biological needs, i.e. understanding and following God's commandments. Such an endeavour seems to coincide more often than not with controlling one's mundane, bodily appetites. Frugality and fast have literally *elevating* properties in many or most cultures and religions. They bring fleshly creatures closer to spirituality; closer, as it were, to their creator.

But an alternative or a complement is available to whoever is not necessarily devoted to attaining sainthood. While eating in moderation is advised by religions (as well as by physicians), what contributes decisively to transmuting eating into an activity of a higher spiritual essence is sharing. The French philosopher Michel de Montaigne, downplaying food against company,¹ puts it this way: 'one must be careful not so much of what one eats as with whom one eats. There is no dish so sweet to me, and no sauce so appetizing as the pleasure derived from good company.'²

Georg Simmel provided his analysis in *Die Soziologie der Mahlzeit (Sociology of the Meal)* (Simmel, 1997 [1910]). All humans must eat and drink and when they do so, it is the most self-centred, most individual thing they can do. For each morsel they take in is one that will necessarily be lost to everybody else. In Simmel's words, 'What I think, I can communicate to others; what I see, I can let them see, what I say can be heard by hundreds of others – but what a single individual eats can under no circumstances be eaten by another' (Simmel, 1997 [1910]: 130).

This is where the common meal operates its magic. It turns 'the exclusive selfishness of eating' into 'a habit of being gathered together such as is seldom attainable on occasions of a higher and intellectual order. Persons who in no way share any special interest can gather together at the common meal ... There lies the immeasurable sociological significance of the meal' (Simmel, 1997 [1910]: 130). Thus commensality is not necessarily associated with ceremonial occasions; it actually is an essential dimension of the common meal and it could even be said that it finds its most salient expression in that particular, daily social occurrence. Above all, it counteracts the essential, basic, biological, 'exclusive selfishness of eating' and turns it into, at the very least, a collective, social experience.

Commensality and individualization

Diagnosing a general process of subjective individualization³ in affluent societies and its spread to emerging countries has been something of a *topos* in the social sciences. This is particularly manifest in all aspects involving health and the body, the growing concern with appearance, corporal image and its control. A number of domains of everyday life have become privatized, in the sense that they have fallen into the private sphere of decision and have become subject to individual, personal choices. Food and eating have not been unaffected (Fischler, 1979).

Where tradition or usage acted as implicit, collective templates, silently organizing eating, individuals increasingly became the putative masters of their own choices. Within a few decades, in Europe particularly after the Second World War, foods became manufactured, branded products, retailed in vast networks, pushed by massive advertising campaigns, all aimed at each and every consumer. Competing or concurring solicitations proliferated in advertising, the media, and medical and public health campaigns. In the

mounting cacophony, the medical discipline of nutrition gave the social aspects of eating almost no consideration at all. Instead, it kept focusing its concerns and discourse on nutrients, calories, physiology and body weight: in medicine, 'eating behaviour' classically relates to food *intake* in the most restrictive sense. But in fact, as nutrition progresses, the influence of social factors and context (the meal) appears more and more prominent on the nature and amount of intake.

While physicians were overlooking any social, contextual, commensal dimension of eating, economists, on the other hand, rather than merely shunning the notion, proactively denied it.

A privatization of food?

The American economist and Nobel laureate Paul Samuelson established a famous basic distinction between private and public goods: public goods are those that can be used by agents without infringing whatsoever on others' capacity to use them as well, for example education and police. Private goods, on the other hand, cannot be consumed without making them definitely unavailable to others. The ultimate example of a private good, for Samuelson, was a loaf of bread (Samuelson, 1954).

Somewhat later, another economist, Albert Hirschman (Hirschman, 1996), took on the issue. He observed that the sharing of bread has considerable social significance. An abundance of etymologies show the fundamentally shareable, commensal dimension of bread (*companion*, *company*, the French word *copain*, etc.). Examining the concept of commensality in the light of Simmel's and others' works (particularly those by historians of Greek and Roman Antiquity), Hirschman recognized its utmost importance and insisted that one should 'take commensality seriously'. Simmel had observed that the Christian communion transcends the limitations of private consumption:

Only the Christian communion, which identifies the bread with the body of Christ, was able to create the real identity of what was consumed on the foundation of this mysticism and thus an entirely unique type of connection among the participants.

For here, where it is not the case that each person consumes something denied to the others, but where each person consumes the totality in its mysterious undividedness that is granted equally to everyone, the egoistic, exclusionary quality of every meal is most completely transcended. (Simmel, 1997 [1910]: 131)

In other words, since foods are never really shared molecule by molecule, it takes the Christian view of the Eucharist to create a situation in which each of the participants symbolically shares the same, undivided food, i.e. the body and blood of Christ.

Hirschman concludes that commensality actually 'melds the public and private spheres'. If Hirschman, standing on Simmel's shoulders, is right, and commensality indeed collapses public and private, then food cannot be considered just another form of consumption; it cannot easily and completely be 'privatized' and regarded as an ordinary merchandise or commodity. Yet this process of 'privatization' is precisely what nutrition and public health have involuntarily been helping and accelerating.

Features and functions of commensality

Commensality often conveys a more restrictive notion than simply eating with other people. It can involve a sense of sharing food habitually, with an assumption of some degree of dependence of one or several of the commensal parties upon another, or some degree of reciprocal commitment/involvement. Commensality is both inclusive and exclusive: it creates and/or sanctions inclusion (even transient inclusion) in a group or community, as well as exclusion of those not taking part. It can manifest equality (around the fire or a round table) or hierarchy (who gets served first or sits at the 'high table'). It provides the script or a template for many or most of human eating occurrences.

Bonding

Commensality produces bonding. In apparently all cultures, eating the same food is equated with producing the same flesh and blood, thus making commensals more alike and bringing them closer to each other. The perception that 'you are what you eat' seems universal. It holds that, when absorbing a food, a subject absorbs at the same time salient features of the food (Fischler, 1988; Murcott, 1986; Rozin, Millman & Nemeroff, 1986). If eating a food makes one become more like that food, then those sharing the same food become more like each other.

The most fundamental form of food sharing is probably the provision of nourishment through the mammalian link. Essentially, separation from the mother's body is temporarily compensated for by nursing and caretaking. Then the child is increasingly socialized into the family and into society at large. Families undergo a slow gradual process of separation if not dislocation. Commensality preserves, revitalizes, builds up kinship or creates artificial kinship, as in a 'fraternal agape'.⁴ Commensal festive occasions periodically bring together families dispersed in the course of life. They temporarily restore loosened links of kinship. They bring together again households dissolved or disseminated with the passage of generations and offspring marrying away. Family feasts gather under one roof again those scattered children and their own offspring (Bloch, 1999, 2005).

Sharing food has been shown to signify (or create) intimacy. Miller, Rozin & Fiske conducted a series of experiments with a sample of American students. The findings show that subjects associate food sharing with a relationship that is personal, as opposed to strictly professional. Moreover, they associate feeding with a romantic and/or sexual relationship. Consubstantiation, or the sharing of touched food, i.e. food 'contaminated' by contact with another person, indicates greater closeness in personal relationships. Men are more inclined than women to restrict feeding and consubstantiation to members of the opposite sex, while females differentiate less between the gender of givers and receivers. For women, the authors suggest, feeding may more strongly imply caretaking, while for men it may more strongly imply romantic involvement (Miller, Rozin & Fiske, 1998).

This of course should remind us that, in many traditional cultures, eating together, for a pair, is a highly sensitive, even suggestive, situation. If seen sharing food, they can be henceforward regarded as engaged or even married (Wrangham, 2009). That 'cofeeding' is loaded with such undertones or meaning sheds particular light on dual commensality or *tête-à-tête* dining in our societies. In many contemporary urban cultures, it appears to

be a necessary step in the courtship process,⁵ with implicit codes and scripts for conduct, choice of appropriate places and foods for dating (Amiraiian & Sobal, 2009a, 2009b).

Of tables and shapes: Physical space and social space

With the acquisition and control of fire, the hearth literally became the centre of social life, as a circle formed around it and the cooked food. In 'table-less' cultures, a circular arrangement of commensals seems to be most common. Fire and cooking are a decisive step in human evolution (Wrangham, 2009). They probably mark the real beginning of commensality, apparently a specific feature of humans. Wrangham insists primates and other animals do not share food in the same way as humans. There is a stream of literature on proto-sharing in various species, whether in the form of 'tolerated theft' (Blurton Jones, 1987), 'reciprocal altruism' or other forms of cooperation (Kaplan & Gurven, 2005), but apparently no 'altruistic', voluntary sharing in non-kin. Maximal prudence, however, is always advisable about supposed uniquely human features: in 2010, an experiment was reported in which a bonobo, in all appearance voluntarily, shared food with a captive mate (Hare & Kwtuenda, 2010).⁶

Meals regulate social life and individual behaviour both at a social and a biological level. Not all cultures eat around a table, far from it; but all cultures have rules and customs regulating arrangement of commensals, distribution and sharing, as well as 'table manners'.

Size and shape of tables used for commensal eating obviously are relevant to the type and style of interactions between participants in the meal as well as to the circumstances. The long, rectangular table, with a prominent seat at the high end or, as in pictorial representations of the Last Supper, in the middle of one side, is more adapted to hierarchy and 'vertical commensality' (one in which the attention of participants is focused on one leading character, as opposed to 'horizontal' commensality with friendly, informal long tables). The round table allows maximal equality and exchanges between participants in the meal. King Arthur and his knights chose a round table, 'so that none should have precedence'. Religious communities offer a quasi-experimental setting for understanding the workings of commensality. The theologian and social psychologist Jean-Claude Sagne (member of the Dominican order), observing communal meals in a set of monastic communities and various alternative groups, communes or sects, concludes that the effectiveness of the meal in producing social bonding is a function of its capacity to promote equality between commensals (Sagne, 2009). Sagne characterizes commensality around a circular or square table as 'elective', in the sense that all participants enjoy equal chances of interacting, whether verbally or otherwise, and can freely and equally direct their attention and recognition to anyone, thus experiencing empathy and *agapè*.

One of the main issues in manuals of good manners and etiquette is seating arrangements because they reflect or sanction precedence. French manuals, including some currently available on the Web, distinguish two styles of seating etiquette: the French and – of course – the English guest-seating codes (I have no evidence, however, that the concept of an 'English code' is actually recognized in England).⁷ The basic difference resides in which part of the table signifies pre-eminence. In the so-called French code of manners, it is the middle of the long sides. In what French etiquette experts refer to as 'English style', it is the ends of the table for the host and hostess, with the middle of the

sides reserved for the guests of honour. According to the American 'Miss Manners', in a private dinner, 'the characteristics to be noted separately (as if to separate out the edge pieces) are gender, relationship, age, and degree of intimacy' (Martin, 1997). It is to be noted, of course, that such arrangements are based on an assumed long table, and are made irrelevant when the table used is circular.

The physical space delimited by the shape of the table is a social space. The arrangement of participants around it both reflects and determines relationships between them. It also places them in a hierarchical structure.

Private vs. public: The politics of commensality

A commensal occasion readily evokes images of families around meals or of friendly non-kin practicing 'generalized reciprocity' (Sahlins, 1972).⁸ Similar occasions are typically described as 'convivial', in contrast to more formal types of events, such as the prototypical instance of the formal bourgeois dinner party, which is, as one would expect, subject to symmetrical reciprocation. Thus commensality cannot be equated with conviviality (Grignon, 2001), since it is, in its more formal manifestations, an expression of hierarchy and dependence. There seems to be a gradient from intimate, familiar, informal, convivial to unfamiliar, formal, strictly etiquette-driven occasions. The nature and constraint of the links and bonds involved differ, as does the degree of formality or solemnity of the occasion. Mary Douglas, analysing the categories of food events in her own home concludes: 'Drinks are for strangers, acquaintances, workmen, and family. Meals are for family, close friends, honoured guests. The grand operator of the system is the line between intimacy and distance' (Douglas, 1971). This line from intimate to distant is easily prolonged into one from private to public.

Such issues are usually discussed in the light of the social anthropological record and literature. However, in the last decades, history offers remarkable inroads by way of an abundant body of scholarly work on meals and sacrifice in the Greco-Roman Antiquity (Detienne & Vernant, 1979; Scheid, 2005).

Pauline Schmitt Pantel, in particular, examined various Greek instances of 'public meals' over a period of several centuries (Schmitt Pantel, 1992). In ancient Greece, she points out, the common distinction between religious and profane is misleading when it comes to meals. To the Greeks, consuming certain foods or beverages (meat, cereals, wine) involved the relationship between humans and gods. But the status of meat was, in this respect, quite specific.

In ancient Greece, then in Rome, any domestic animal had to be ritually 'processed' by means of a religious sacrifice (*thusia*). A priest/butcher (*mageiros*) would slaughter the animal, which would then be subjected to two distinct divisions, one between humans and gods, and the other between mortals. First, the gods were offered their share in the form of the burning on the altar of the bones and fat. The flesh would then be divided among the humans according to various rules involving both equality and hierarchy. Then the meat was either eaten in the sacrificial banquet (Detienne & Vernant, 1979) or kept and consumed in time at meals of other types. In the sacrificial banquet, however, only full-fledged citizens of the *polis* took part. The young and the women, slaves and strangers were all excluded. Disciples of certain sects, such as the Pythagoreans, because

they were vegetarians, would not attend the sacrificial banquets, thus putting themselves in a position of exclusion from the civic order.

Over time, various types of public meals developed in the Greek city-states. They included only certain representatives of institutions in the community, designated to eat in turns, as it were, in the name of all citizens. In certain cities, participating in the banquet was not just a token of citizenship but also an obligation. Shunning such meals would imply exclusion from the civic body. Other forms developed over time such as *euergetism*, where wealthy patrons devoted part of their wealth to the community, or clientelism in the Roman context.

Schmitt Pantel, in her considerable *opus*, *La Cité au Banquet* (1992), describes the gradual emerging of the distinction between the two polar notions of *koinon*, the common or public domain, and *idion* the particular or private sphere. She actually argues that, in its various forms, the institution of public meals contributed to the emergence of Athenian democracy. Greek commensality appears in superlatively religious and political dimensions. But one should not be misled by the common use of the word ‘banquet’ to describe Antiquity’s public meals. Not all of them were sacrificial feasts, and religiosity permeated all meals, from private occasions to dionysiac *symposion*.

In its Roman version, the political dimension of the sacrificial banquet becomes all the more striking to us. John Scheid shows that much of our political vocabulary derives from that of the sacrificial meal in its Roman version. To ‘participate’, for instance, has its etymology in the Latin *pars capere*, literally to have one’s share of a sacrificial meal, to take part, hence to be part of, to have one’s place in, a group, an institution or an event. Similarly, *princeps*, which produced ‘prince’, can translate as ‘he who gets served first’ (*primus capere*); *meritum* is the share which *assidui* (those with a seat at the banquet) are entitled to in proportion to their rank and status, etc. (Scheid, 1984, 2005).

The antique record illustrates the emergence of the public–private opposition, as well as most of the forms of reciprocity induced by eating together. They include private relations between people, whether equal or based on clientelism, as well as relations between individuals and a community, mediated by institutions and religion. While the public dimension (*koinon*) was developing, institutional commensal occasions were increasingly offering individuals, in their representative banqueting functions, opportunities to develop personal interactions, to build trust and friendship with some of their commensals, to develop what an anachronistic description might refer to as ‘networking’.

Instituted commensality and dependence

The dialectic between public and private, between personal and institutional, is probably a constant and can be observed across history and society. Another case in point is the French royal institution of *domestiques commensaux du Roi*, or the King’s commensal domestic officers. At the court of King Charles V (1338–1380), all servant-officers in charge of personal service to the king were entitled to be fed and lodged by him and they actually shared his table. The climate is described as one of camaraderie, conviviality and trust (De Laverny, 2002). Sharing the same table with trusted companions, eating from the same dishes, seem to offer a relative degree of security against attempts at poisoning (although other risks are associated with commensality). But in the 17th century, under Louis XIV,

the court had grown to novel, grandiose proportions. All the most powerful and prestigious aristocrats of the country were gathered at Versailles, close to the king and under his control. The number and variety of domestic offices reached unprecedented heights. The diversity of services and people was such, from high-ranking noblemen to commoners of the humblest extraction, that actual commensality was impossible. Etiquette had the king eat alone in the presence of a number of people and trust against poisoning was not what it used to be in the previous centuries. One high-ranking officer, the *Grand Ecuyer de France*, was explicitly in charge of personally controlling entry to the royal kitchens and preventing any attempt on the king's life. Serving the king a glass of water involved four different commensals of varying ranks and responsibilities; the *Grand Ecuyer* was personally in charge of calling the order and tasting (De Laverny, 2002). Now devoid of the individual, personal dimension induced by the actual sharing of food, commensality had been reduced to a legal status and a set of quasi-contractual relationships. The physical and spatial arrangement of participants, their seating or stance, the distance between them and to the highest-ranking character, all were a function of their role and status in the structure of power (Haroche, 1998). Power was spatially distributed and materialized.

Manners and socialization

While Durkheim denied eating the status of a 'social fact', he did admit the existence of what he seems to have seen as merely the constraining of biological drives in the interest of social order and tranquillity:

It is obvious that any education consists of a continuous effort to impose upon the child ways of seeing, feeling and behaving which he would not have spontaneously achieved. From the earliest time in his life, we oblige him to eat, drink, sleep at regular times, we oblige him to be clean, calm, obedient. (Durkheim, 1981 [1894]; my translation)

It appears that, rather than merely a simple, negative, orderly process of discipline, inculcation of table manners also is one of the key elements in the process of transmission of culture, social skills, social ethics or social regulation of access to resources. A striking illustration of a display of 'good manners' in a context of scarcity is provided by Lorna Marshall's description of what can be considered appropriate behaviour among the !Kung bushmen:

Good manners in eating express restraint. A person does not reveal eagerness or take more than a modest share. When a visitor comes to the fire of a family who are preparing food or eating, he should sit at a little distance, not to seem importunate, and wait to be asked to share. On several occasions we gave small gifts of corned beef to be shared with a group. The person who received the food from us would take only a mouthful. Once an old headman only licked his fingers. The lump of food would be passed from one to another. Each would take a modest bite. The last person often got the most. I found it moving to see so much restraint about taking food among people who are all thin and often hungry, for whom food is a source of constant anxiety. We observed no unmannerly behaviour, no cheating and no encroachment about food. Although informants said that quarrels had occasionally occurred in the past between members of a band

over the time to go to gather veldkos, and although we observed expressions of dissatisfaction, no quarrels of any kind arose over food during our observations. (Marshall, 1961: 235)

In this instance, ‘manners’ appear to function as a set of rules governing access to generally scarce resources. Helping oneself to food is constrained by what can be seen as consideration for other members of the group – or in this case politeness in a context of hospitality. In a tight-knit society, this can occur out of a sense of ethics, and/or in prevention of potential conflict, or as a manifestation of ‘reciprocal altruism’, i.e. a sense that what is done by each for others will be reciprocated in the future.

In more complex societies (forms involving ‘empires’; city-states; de-centralized, feudal societies; even nation-states), hierarchical rules may take over and replace the egalitarian framework observed among hunter-gatherers. Norbert Elias’s ‘civilizing process’ does include similar rules of restraint and consideration but evolves increasingly complex and specific norms resulting in social differentiation, on the one hand, and in affirmation of the self, on the other (Elias, 2000 [1939]). Whether local indigenous rules about meals prescribe silence or conversation, tolerate or not individual preferences and aversions (most often they do not), some basic tenets of social and cultural values are implied and transmitted in the process.

Thus one of the obvious functions of commensality (one of its *effects*, if one worries about teleology) is socializing individuals into specific rules involving cooperation. Michael Tomasello shows how some traits of human infants relevant to the domain are distinctively human. Infants can point at things if they want to have them and so can chimpanzees. But, relatively early and in particular from the age of 12 months on, human infants develop an ability that seems to be unique to them: pointing at things just to share the experience. Not only they have a ‘theory of the mind’ – the ability to attribute mental states to others – but they can also have ‘shared intentionality’ (Tomasello, 2009). Very early on, in other words, they possess the mental capacities necessary to begin acquiring increasingly elaborate social skills. Much of the process of socialization into which children are soon introduced has to do with food and eating and, as we have seen with sharing and behaving in an ‘appropriate’ manner.

Risks and dangers of eating together

Simply because it creates bonds and cements sociality does not mean commensality is devoid of any risk or pain. It actually involves many dangers and inconveniences, and consequently creates ambivalence (Corbeau & Poulain, 2002). On the one hand, commensal occasions have centripetal, integrative effects; on the other, they evoke centrifugal, disintegrative ones. A review of the latter can be found as early as 1895 in a compilation by Crawley of ambivalences and dangers associated with social eating (Crawley, 1895). In the ‘armchair anthropology’ manner of the time, the author provides a complete tour of the British Empire and its colonized peoples’ customs and beliefs about the dangers of commensality. These derive mainly from one of the essential dimensions of ‘sympathetic magic’: contagion (Rozin, Ashmore & Markwith, 1996).

When eating together with other people, any food can be tainted. Food shared in confidence among kin or equals is mostly comforting. Risks increase with the remoteness or strangeness of the commensals. Or, on the contrary, tensions exist among close relatives

or affines, for various reasons, and family gatherings are occasions for the exasperation of such tensions. Commensality can be poisoned by conflict and betrayal, as among participants in the Last Supper, unless the threat of actual poisoning is lurking.

Commensality, in certain cultures, implies risks associated with the very stratification of society, for instance in classes or castes. Such is the case in Hindu India, particularly for the higher castes, exposed as they are to the constant risk of pollution from contact with food touched by members of lower, incompatible castes (Appadurai, 1981). Cultures characterized by extended commensality, in which domestic units are composed of a wide range of individuals with a relatively loose definition of kinship, such as certain African societies, have to deal with the delicate task of measuring the threat associated with certain persons. Children may be advised against eating in certain families, suspected of 'jealousy'. My graduate student Chelsie Yount, when surveying meals in Dakar, Senegal, recently observed such concerns and worry about 'evil eye' (Yount, 2010). In some cases, the absence of certain individuals – rather than their presence – can be a source of unease: why would one avoid the common meal if not because of malevolence or some obscure scheming? As we have seen, high-ranking characters, kings and despots of all stripes develop elaborate strategies and precautions to protect their person and power against hostile enterprises carried out with food as a vehicle.

Eating alone

In many or most cultures, eating alone generally is frowned upon. An anecdote illustrates this. The story is told by a colleague, a professor of sociology at a French university. One day, his Algerian-born father revealed to him that 'there was once another woman before your mother'. A wedding had been planned but was eventually called off. Why? The father of the bride-to-be had spied his putative son-in-law at the market, eating alone, standing. How could he let his daughter marry a man who behaved in such a way?

Lorna Marshall reports about the bushmen: 'The idea of eating alone and not sharing is shocking to the !Kung ... Lions could do that, they say, not men' (Marshall, 1961: 236). There is convergence in this respect between !Kung wisdom and Greek philosophy, as, according to Epicurus, 'dining alone is leading the life of a lion or wolf'.

In her PhD dissertation, my colleague and collaborator Estelle Masson interviewed a woman in Paris and asked what she had had for lunch on that particular day. The response was that the interviewee had been running errands and, as a consequence, 'had not eaten today'. After a pause, she proceeded to tell what she had eaten: 'I bought something from a bakery and I ate it on the street' (Masson, 2001; see also Fischler & Masson, 2008). Eating something alone on the street, standing or walking, did not make for eating in this interviewee's mind. Obviously, other conditions were required for *real* eating: conditions of time, place and people and, probably, a minimal sequence of dishes – conditions for a meal. As Patty Pliner remarks at the beginning of her extensive review of *The Pain and Pleasure of Eating Alone*, 'a solitary meal ... could be considered to be an oxymoron', since sociality is usually considered a necessary component of the meal.

People generally prefer eating in company to eating alone (Pliner & Bell, 2009; Yount, 2010). We were able to test and measure this on three random samples of about 800 women in three locations: Columbus, Ohio; Rennes, France; and Odense, Denmark (Fischler et al., in preparation). As a part of a comparative survey of subjective

well-being using an instrument called Day Reconstruction Method (DRM) (Kahneman, Krueger & Schkade, 2004), subjects were asked to remember their activities from morning to bedtime the previous day, parse them into discrete episodes of their choosing and fill out for each episode a short questionnaire recording time of episode, type of activity, place, people present and experiencing a set of emotions – five positive and five negative – on a seven-point scale (Kahneman et al., 2010; Krueger et al., 2009). ‘Net affect’ for each episode is the difference between mean positive emotions and mean negative emotions. We selected episodes involving food and checked net affect for eating alone vs. eating in company. In all three national samples, net affect was significantly higher for eating in company (Fischler et al., in preparation).

Why is solitary eating perceived negatively? The obvious answer would be that it is not social, thus the solitary eater incurs suspicion for excluding him-/herself from communal eating: suspicion of some sort of treachery, poisoning or spell of some kind; suspicion of undue eating (without sharing). As it were, food seems to be perceived as a zero-sum game: not taking part may be equated with secretly taking an undue part of the whole.

Commensality and cultural variability

It appears that the relationship to food and eating in general and the role of commensality in particular vary across cultures in ways and proportions which often are underestimated, particularly when it comes to modern Western countries. An illustration is provided by this quote from an Australian expert in public health:

The cultures of societies are underestimated determinants of their population health and well being. This is as true of modern Western culture, including its defining qualities of materialism and individualism, as it is of other cultures ... Materialism and individualism are detrimental to health and well being through their impact on psychosocial factors such as personal control and social support. (Eckersley, 2006: 252)

On the one hand, the author complains that ‘cultures of societies’ (note the plural) are ‘underestimated determinants’; on the other, he goes on to refer to ‘modern Western culture’ in the singular, as if cultural diversity were exclusively a feature of ‘non-Western’ societies. Yet evidence exists that there may be common features in Western, developed societies but there is no such thing as one ‘modern Western culture’. Some features seem to be common to all or most cultures in the developed world in varying degrees; yet at the same time, a growing body of empirical evidence shows great variability between countries and cultures. Medicalization and individualization of food, for instance, are global trends affecting most cultures in the developed world as well as some emerging countries. However, clear-cut differences can also be identified among countries with similar levels of development.

In recent comparative research we showed that, within the Western world and among countries with relatively similar levels of development, striking differences in eating patterns and the general relationship to food and eating can be observed. The main objective of the comparative research program ‘Food, Body, and Health: A transcultural approach’ was to explore these differences in more depth.

The OCHA survey

We conducted a large-scale study (known as the OCHA⁹ survey) on a total of around 7000 people in six countries and speaking four languages (France, Switzerland, Italy, Germany, United Kingdom, United States), combining qualitative and quantitative techniques. Data collection took place in three phases. In the first stage, exploratory focus groups were conducted in each of the six countries and four languages by the same team of facilitators. The goals included identifying 'native' categories and idiomatic language, thus eschewing some of the problems classically arising from translation, in particular wording that would sound foreign, unfamiliar, misleading or even meaningless to some interviewees.

Information gathered in the focus groups was used to construct a largely open-ended questionnaire, which was then administered by telephone to a stratified sample of approximately 180 people per country (one-third physicians, one-third teachers and one-third a randomly selected sample excluding physicians and teachers). The interview lasted about 45 minutes of phone time and was administered by a professional polling organization, in the native language of both the interviewer and informant.

In light of analysis of this data set, a 15-minute multiple-choice questionnaire was constructed and administered, again by telephone, to representative samples in the six countries ($n =$ about 900 for each European country and $n = 1500$ for the USA). The objective was to test and quantify, among the populations studied, distribution of the elements (knowledge, beliefs, representations) exposed in the previous phases. Both the second and third phases included collection of a full range of socio-demographic variables. The focus-group phase was conducted between June and December 2000; the second phase between May and July 2001; and the third phase in the spring of 2002. The sampling for the second phase was based primarily on lists of telephone numbers from public or professional directories, and was carried out by a professional organization. The phase 3 sampling and administration were carried out by the same organization.

An account of the survey and its main results was published in French (Fischler & Masson, 2008). Several articles on specific aspects of the survey were published in English (Leeman, Fischler & Rozin, 2011; Rozin et al., 2006; Rozin, Fischler & Shields, 2009).

Results: Individualism vs. commensalism

Qualitative results (from the focus groups and open-ended questions in the second phase) confirmed that, particularly in the United States and to a certain extent Britain, eating has become individualized and medicalized. It is considered that the individual has the freedom and the responsibility to make informed, enlightened choices on the basis of preferences mitigated by nutritional sense. Health is the major concern or rationale for choice reported in the US and British samples, and American respondents discuss eating in terms of nutrients (carbohydrates, fats, proteins), not foods. In Italy or France, in contrast, variety and quality of the produce are emphasized ('freshness' and 'taste' are frequently mentioned). 'Balance' is the major quality of a good diet. Generally speaking, representations of 'eating well' are more structured around mealtimes and commensality, in conformity with 'tradition' and usage. While autonomy is also valued, eating retains a

fundamental dimension of heteronomy (locus of control, as regards eating patterns, is to a large extent external to the individual) and a social, public dimension. For the French, eating is a social affair, whereas it is an individual and even a personal freedom and responsibility for Americans: each person should eat according to his/her own unique, individual needs and should do so on a rational, scientifically and economically informed basis. Eating should be tailored to fit the specific demands and requirements of each person's body. It is up to the individual to make the right decisions, i.e. those necessary in order to be healthy, live longer and stay in shape. From this idea of individualization-personalization flows the notion of *choice*: the more available choices there are, the more individual freedom there is. These features of perception in the American sample were consistent with previous observations (Counihan, 1992; Rozin et al., 1999).

The quantitative data confirmed results from the qualitative phase in that the French, the Italians and the Swiss shared to a large extent a social view of food and eating. Choice, on the other hand, was a specific concern of the Americans in the sample (Fischler & Masson, 2008; Rozin et al., 2006; see also Iyengar & Lepper, 1999, for domains other than food).

One of the ways we were able to assess or measure cultural differences in this respect was a question in which respondents were asked to imagine they were having lunch with three very close friends of the same sex. At the end of the meal, how would they prefer to settle the bill? The choice was between three solutions. In the first, each commensal would pay exclusively for what they ate or drank – implying that what they pay for is, precisely, the food and beverage consumed. In the second, the total amount would be divided evenly between all four participants. The implication here is that what is being paid for is the company or the circumstance or the experience of being together. The third solution offered was, one of the commensals invites the rest of the group. In retrospect, we regret we did not split the third option into two, different ones: our question did not reflect the two different meanings of paying for the rest of the guests. It can be 'conspicuous consumption': one participant can pay to impress or flatter his friends. Or it can be convivial/commensal: one participant can pay and say: 'next time, you will pay and after that he will pay, and so on'. Nevertheless, results show clear-cut differences between the countries.

Sixty-four per cent of the German sample and 50% of the American one preferred paying for what they actually ate and drank. Conversely, 68% of the Italians, 59% of the British, 58% of the Swiss and 56% of the French chose to divide equally. Other questions in the survey yielded similarly oriented results (with the exception of the British sample, often closer in its responses to the American one).

Commensality and obesity

The social distribution of obesity is similar overall in similarly developed countries, with obesity generally more prevalent in the lower socioeconomic categories (often with gender disparities, women being more affected in the lower strata) (De Saint Pol, 2009, 2010; Drewnowski & Specter, 2004). Yet on the whole cultural differences seem to be an essential factor in the prevalence. One can observe that some of those nations that show more consistent widespread commensality seem to fare better in terms of obesity and related health problems. France and Italy, in particular, have less obesity than other European

countries with similar standards of living (De Saint Pol, 2010). Among those, France seems to have the most characterized attachment to mealtime and commensality. Of all the developed countries, France has experienced the least decline in time spent eating (OECD, 2009; Warde et al., 2007). Empirical data show that meal patterns in France have kept a diachronic structure in spite of overall simplification (Poulain et al., 2003). Commensality, reflected in part by strictly kept mealtimes, is perceived by respondents as one of the keys to 'eating well' (Lahlou, 1995). The national time-use surveys of France and the UK show that, on any given day, at 12.30, 54.1% of the French are eating; a similar peak occurs in the UK at 1.10 pm but only 17.6% are eating (De Saint Pol, 2006). The French are not just eating at the same time; they are also eating lunch and dinner together with commensals in about 80% of the cases (Poulain, 2002; Poulain et al., 2003).

Much of the health-policy effort to improve people's nutrition has been based on the implicit assumption that information about nutrients, energy and exercise delivered to each and every individual should be able to optimize behaviour. But thinking of food and eating in terms of nutrients and responsible individual choice does not seem to be helping much. If anything, the spread of obesity seems to point to the opposite, i.e. that it actually makes things worse, apparently contributing to privatizing, de-socializing and individualizing the relationship to food and eating.

Commensality and regulation of eating

I propose the hypothesis that a strongly commensal pattern of eating can act as a regulating force in food intake and help maintain obesity at a lower level than in cultures where food patterns are less structured, less commensal, more open to individual choices.

At first sight, evidence seems to be against the hypothesis. As reported by Pliner and Bell in their review (Pliner & Bell, 2009), it is a robust result that, in general, people eat more in company than they do alone (De Castro, 1995, 2010; Pliner & Bell, 2009). The reason for eating more in company might have to do with the longer time spent eating when in a group. Conversely, eating alone being less pleasurable to most people, as we have seen, solitary eaters tend to spend less time at table.

However, Pliner & Bell report that there are circumstances in which lonely eaters can eat more. Two mechanisms modulate intake. One is modeling; and the way it affects intake is the following: eating in the presence or company of someone eating a lot increases intake, while a companion with a small appetite will tend to reduce a subject's consumption.

Second, social norms have an effect. In company, participants tend to adjust their intake and behave 'appropriately', i.e. conform to their commensals' behaviour. However, in a situation of privacy, individuals stop being influenced by the need to gain approval. 'It is typically the case that participants who eat alone eat more than those eating with a companion who eats minimally' (Pliner & Bell, 2009). Thus social norms are essential in the sense that 'when social norms might otherwise suppress an individual's intake to less than some desired level, eating alone will allow the individual to eat as much as desired. On such occasions, individuals who are alone should eat more than those who are not' (Pliner & Bell, 2009).

Thus at a 'macro', national level, a body of data, including our own OCHA survey, show a texture of strict social norms governing eating and meals in France, while in the

US, normative representations hold that behaviour is left to individual free will (Counihan, 1992; Fischler & Masson, 2008).

Multiple observations show that obese people tend to adjust their behaviour when eating in public, consuming much less than they do in privacy. All this shows that social control is exerted upon eating behaviour and plays an important part in setting amounts consumed by individuals. In the US, where the obese population is already around or above 30% of the general population, such mechanisms may have an accelerating effect. Not so in France, with an obese population of about 10% and a strong pattern of social norms.

Conclusion

Social scientists, and sociologists in particular, have been preoccupied with ideological and moralistic contents lurking behind questions about food patterns, evolution of meals – particularly the prototypical ‘family meal’. It seems difficult to deny that a number of factors indicate the individualization and loosening of social determinants of mealtimes. Time spent eating has decreased, composition of meals has been simplified, both eating out and take-out have been gaining considerable ground; sandwiches, snacks, fast food, nibbles and ‘grazing’ do not seem to have been on the wane lately. On the other hand, while time spent cooking is falling, gastronomy has become an increasingly popular spectator sport (Pollan, 2009). On the whole, mealtimes still structure social time but they do so in a much more flexible way than they used to. All this is occurring almost simultaneously in the great metropolises of the world. Yet it is important to note that, while trends can be identified globally, local cultures do modulate these trends.

Cultural diversity is no less of a reality among developed nations than it is in developing countries. This diversity should indeed be taken into consideration, as well as socio-economic differentiation within countries – a major factor in the distribution of health and illness in general and of obesity in particular. Rather than blindly spreading alarm over the ‘obesity epidemic’ around the corner, one should delve into the differences, if any, and the specific features of the local culture that might help explain them – thus possibly helping prevent the ‘contagion’.

Public health policies have long been aimed at individuals, urging them to change their behaviour and make ‘rational, healthy choices’. In the domain of nutrition this may have produced quite a few unexpected – unwanted – effects. Medicalization and individualization of food and eating by both the industry (health and nutrition claims) and public health (guidelines for ‘the people’ aimed at individual behaviour, food pyramids, etc.), both echoed and amplified by the media, lead to a ‘nutritional cacophony’ (Fischler, 1993) and to various degrees of anxiety associated with questionable diets, eating disorders, and to no reduction in the prevalence of obesity. If anything, the US case suggests the opposite seems to be true. Actual behaviour is generally not effectively modified in those categories of the population in which improvement is most sought. As we have seen, historical evidence shows that, all things considered, this might be for the better, since progress in scientific knowledge often reveals that success might have done more harm than good (Levenstein, 1988, 1995). Most campaigns and public policies so far

have been based on implicit assumptions, in particular that eating is just another form of individual, private consumption. In most if not all societies on the planet, eating is done in a social context. The procurement, distribution and sharing of food and the social regulation thereof are the basis for much of social organization in human societies. Individualization and, as it were, privatization of eating in plethoric societies may carry more drawbacks than benefits, while there may be long unsuspected benefits associated with the sharing of food in the common meal.

Funding

Some of the data used in the article were obtained with the funding of OCHA (Observatoire CNIEL des Habitudes Alimentaires). OCHA is a department of CNIEL (Centre National Interprofessionnel de l'Economie Laitière).

Notes

- 1 The etymology of this word is particularly relevant in this context: according to the *Oxford American Dictionary*, it derives from Old French *compainie*, related to *compaignon*, literally 'one who breaks bread with another', based on the Latin *com-* 'together with' + *panis* 'bread'.
- 2 'Car je dy comme ce mesme Epicurus, qu'il ne faut pas tant regarder ce qu'on mange, qu'avec qui on mange. ... Il n'est point de si doux apprest pour moy, ny de sauce si appetissante, que celle qui se tire de la societé' (Montaigne, 1962 [1588], Livre 3, 13: 1082).
- 3 Over a century ago, Durkheim wrote that individualism 'is a phenomenon which does not begin anywhere but never stops developing, throughout history' ('L'individualisme, la libre pensée, ne datent ni de nos jours, ni de 1789, ni de la Réforme, ni de la scolastique, ni de la chute du polythéisme gréco-latin ou des théocraties orientales. C'est un phénomène qui ne commence nulle part mais qui se développe sans s'arrêter tout au long de l'histoire' (Durkheim, 2004 [1893]).
- 4 'A communal meal in token of Christian fellowship, as held by early Christians in commemoration of the Last Supper' (*Oxford American Dictionary*).
- 5 Movie buffs will recall the famous eroticized eating scene in the film *Tom Jones*, directed by Tony Richardson (1963).
- 6 For a video clip of this experiment: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sRDc4SCaFLQ>.
- 7 See for instance 'Comment placer vos invités à table': <http://www.toutpratique.com/12-Savoir-vivre/66-Dresser-la-table-accueillir-les-invites-les-placer-et-plan-de-table/4697-A-table-placer-les-invites-ou-le-plan-de-table.php>. Consulted 12 February 2011.
- 8 In Sahlins' words (1972: 193): 'transactions that are putatively altruistic, transactions on the line of assistance given and, if possible and necessary, assistance returned', an implicit assumption being that various transactions will by and large balance out over time.
- 9 OCHA (Observatoire CNIEL des Habitudes Alimentaires) is a part of the French Centre National Interprofessionnel de l'Economie Laitière (CNIEL) in Paris. The six countries were France, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States.

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Author biography

Claude Fischler is a *Directeur de recherche* at the CNRS, and heads the Centre Edgar Morin, a research unit of the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris. His main research interests have been ‘food and eating in an interdisciplinary perspective’ and more recently, ‘happiness and well-being’.