

Research Report
Food, ethics and aesthetics

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Abstract

The authors test the popular thesis of some of the most influential theorists of contemporary societies about the erosion of the social structuring of consumption choices and their consequent individualisation in westernised societies, using the example of food practices. The analysis is based on data obtained from a random sample of the Slovenian population within a research project entitled 'Lifestyles in a Mediated Society.' The aims of the analysis were: (a) to explore the role of socio-demographic variables in food practices, and (b) to discover the inherent logic that motivates each particular set of food practices and which makes them meaningful for the individual, by studying an association of respondents' food practices with their worldview and cultural consumption. A cluster analysis revealed six food cultures (*Male traditionalists, Yes-sayers, Male modernists, Weight-watchers, Carefree hedonists, and Health-conscious hedonists*) lying along a continuum where traditionalism occupies one end and post-traditionalism the other. The authors conclude that although two out of six food cultures crosscut socio-demographic affiliations and transform food consumption into a constituent part of a lifestyle as an identity project, there is still a significant influence of socio-demographic characteristics (particularly gender and formal education) on food practices in contemporary Slovenia. Furthermore, significant associations exist between food practices, on the one hand, and the respondent's worldview and cultural consumption, on the other.

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Introduction

Some of the most influential theorists of contemporary societies (e.g. Bauman, 1988; Beck, 1986/1992; Featherstone, 1991; Giddens, 1991) emphasize the erosion of the social structuring of consumption choices and stress their individualization. On the other hand, empirical sociological and anthropological research on food and eating in Western culture has repeatedly established the persistence of structural differentiation in determining food practices; socio-demographic characteristics such as education, income, occupation, gender, age, life-course stage, etc. continue to underlie differences in food practices. Recent research has found that social class remains a major correlate of food practices in Western societies. It influences the proportion of the household budget spent on food (e.g. Calnan & Cant, 1990), food tastes (e.g. Warde, 1997), the use of convenience food (e.g. Fine, Heasman, & Wright, 1996),

the frequency of eating out and the types of restaurants preferred (e.g. Warde & Martens, 2000). Following of healthy eating advice (e.g. Charles & Kerr, 1988), gender differences in attitudes towards cooking (e.g. Warde & Hetherington, 1994), motives underlying the selection of food (e.g. Steptoe, Pollard, & Wardle, 1995), food attitudes (e.g. Beardsworth, Haslam, Keil, Goode, & Sherratt, 1999) and many other patterns are also class-determined.

Pierre Bourdieu (1979/2000), the most prominent advocate of the objective determination of lifestyles, claimed that differences in cultural tastes and practices, including food practices, are class determined. They result from habitus, his most central concept. He defines habitus as the collective schemata of experience and perception,¹ which establishes a framework for making sense of social experience. It is

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¹ The notion of habitus is Bourdieu's attempt to develop a social analysis of taste. What is called habitus in Bourdieu's analysis, is in Weber's work interchangeably ethos, way of life, spirit or, sometimes also habitus. See, for example, Müller's (1989) analysis of Bourdieu's notion of habitus and its sources.

generated by the internalization of a given set of material conditions in childhood, within the family and through schooling. Thus, according to Bourdieu, the basic divide in taste and cultural practices in contemporary society is attributed to the different experience of class and to a class-specific worldview. As the result of objective social position, habitus is practically embodied—inscribed in the individual's body, ways of eating and drinking, gestures, accent, speech patterns, etc. Habitus therefore provides a link between the objectivity of social reality (measured by the objective social position of an individual) and the subjectivity of personal experience (food taste, musical taste, worldview, etc.). In Bourdieu's class deterministic model, then, socio-structural distinctions are articulated through cultural forms. Or, more specifically, food practices and food tastes are class-specific; they are primarily shaped by an individual's class position.² Similarly, Chaney (1996) argues that "socio-structural distinctions have in the later stages of modernity been increasingly articulated through cultural forms" (p. 65).

Bourdieu, however, never systematically explored other objective sources of cultural differences, such as age and gender, which can cut across and intersect with social class. The body of research on the role of age and life-course in food practices is much smaller than that on class as determinant of food consumption. However, age in combination with life-course stage has been found to explain the types of food eaten (e.g. Fine et al., 1996), food attitudes (e.g. Beardsworth et al., 1999), food motives (e.g. Steptoe et al., 1995) and the frequency of eating out (e.g. Warde & Martens, 2000). Studies have also indicated changes in food practices following marriage/cohabitation (e.g. Bove, Sobal, & Rauschenbach, 2003; Kemmer, Anderson, & Marshall, 1998) and age related nutritional differentiation within the household (e.g. Charles & Kerr, 1988). In contrast to the role of age, the role of gender in defining food practices, including the social and emotional aspects of food preparation and consumption, has been documented in detail. Gender has been found to determine shopping and food preparation in the family (Charles & Kerr, 1988; DeVault, 1991; Lupton, 1996; Murcott, 1982, 1983), as well as a broad field of differential entitlements involving food. The enduring and cross-culturally pervasive expectation that women will eat less and different food than men results in gender differences in food consumption, food attitudes, food motives, weight control, dieting and preoccupation of women with the health effects of diet. Cross-national research on food-related lifestyles in four western European countries, conducted by the Danish Centre for research on customer relations in the food

sector (MAPP), similarly established an association between socio-demographic features and specific food-related lifestyles. Women, for example, dominated the group of 'rational consumers' characterized by a high interest in cooking, careful planning of shopping and dinner preparation, a tendency to maximize quality/price ratios and an ability to find self-fulfilment in cooking; the 'uninvolved consumer' segment mainly consisted of young people and males for whom food does not play an important role, while the older, rural population with lower levels of education and income was over-represented in the 'conservative consumer' segment who characteristically sought security by sticking to traditions (Bredahl & Grunert, 1997; Grunert, Brunso, & Bisp, 1995; Solomon, Bamossy, & Askegard, 1999, pp. 420–421).

The influence of socio-demographic factors on food practices is thus widely acknowledged, particularly in empirical research. In this paper we argue that food practices and attitudes are socially patterned, but are not always a self-evident cultural expression of the class affiliation of the individual. Moreover, socio-demographic variables do not sufficiently explain the specific inherent logic that motivates each particular food culture, also making practices and tastes meaningful for the individual. Food practices and attitudes should be considered in relation to the cultural, ethical and political attributes of the sample. This will enable us to explain the meaning of an identified food regime has for both the individual and collective identity of the respondent; and the meaning of the food regime/culture as a constitutive part of the symbolic and social differentiation within each particular society. Taste choices and food consumption, therefore, should be understood as an articulation (however blurred) of ethical, political and cultural 'choices' that together form a predictable homology, which results in an identifiable sensibility. Food cultures are one articulation of a distinctive sensibility that is part of a broader life-world, while food cultures are also constitutive of that sensibility.³ Sensibility, as a selection and configuration of interests and practices and a particular valuation of them, produces a distinct 'way of life' where variables in the field of culture, for example, are implicitly consistent with variables in the fields of food. Each particular food culture, therefore, has a certain sensibility that is operationalised in our research by a set of ethical, aesthetical and political variables that are culturally specific and never universally applicable. They derive from a discursively formed public culture in

² It is not simply that class determines culture; rather culture (including food consumption and food taste) becomes a means of class differentiation itself. Culture is not just determined by class, but has a central role in class formation and reproduction.

³ 'Sensibility' refers to the patterns of affiliation and is defined by David Chaney (1996, p. 8) as '.../ a way of responding to events, or actions or phenomena that has a certain pattern or coherence, to the extent that identifying a sensibility provides a way of explaining or predicting responses to new situations. /.../ These responses and choices are imbued by those concerned with ethical and aesthetic significance-ways of living that are fundamental to a sense of identity.'

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