Entering the "food social space": sociologies of food, by Jean-Pierre Poulain

SOCIOLOGIAS DA ALIMENTAÇÃO: OS COMEDORES E O ESPAÇO SOCIAL ALIMENTAR
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Abstract

The present review aims to critically reflect upon *Sociologies de l'alimentation: les mangeurs et l'espace social alimentaire*, a book by the french socioanthropologist Jean-Pierre Poulain, one of the leading food scholars in the field of Humanities. In order to achieve our objective, we will highlight and discuss, among the many issues addressed by the author, those we consider to be the most crucial for a better understanding of his work, for example, the lack of a sociology of food as a separate field of studies and the possibility of studying food through the "food social space".

Key words: Alimentation; Production; Consumption; Gastronomy; Social Space.

The starting point of Jean-Pierre Poulain's[1] *Food Sociologies: eaters and the food social space* is the characterization of food as a natural product that undergo a process of cultural construction and are valued, consumed, transformed and respected by a strong application protocol. Far from being a mere reflection of the living forms of communities, food is conceived by the scholar as a collective construct and a vehicle of symbolic emanations subject to change: "Nutrition plays a structuring role in the social organization of a human group. Whether it concerns production, distribution, preparation or consumption activities, it is a crucial object of socioanthropological knowledge[1]". Therefore, one can observe that food as a practice associated with various representations allows us to understand how the various groups constantly leave their marks, wishes, beliefs and values on the world, and it is therefore an extremely important social dimension.

In the first chapter, *Globalization and food delocalization and relocation processes*, Poulain[1] provides an overview of the food in the context of globalization, where it is possible to observe two ambivalent processes of food production and consumption: culinary internationalization, and the strengthening, in certain localities, of gastronomic particularities. From the progress of agribusiness on the use of conservation, transport and packaging techniques, it was possible to produce abundant and varied foods. In turn, transnational food industries ensured the distribution of their products across the globe. Poulain believes that through globalization and industrialization of the food sector, products become standardized, homogenized. However, it would be possible to notice the survival and reinforcement of national and regional trends that use food as a bastion of cultural and identity resistance in the face of the globalization process:

> *The idea that skills, techniques, products are objects likely to be protected, preserved, implicitly gives the impression of their impending disappearance, at least the fear of their disappearance. The patrimonialization of food and gastronomy emerges in a context of changes in dietary patterns experienced in a degrading manner and, more widely, in the risk of identity loss. Food history has eventually shown that local identities are endangered, and that cuisine and eating behaviors are privileged places of resistance.[1]*

From that, the author points out that the former opposition between haute cuisine / rustic local food was replaced by other one, identified in the dichotomy that juxtaposes haute cuisine *and* rustic cuisine *versus* industrial nutrition. At the end of the chapter, Poulain[1] highlights his affinity to Fischler and Corbeau notions, who understand that the globalization of markets would generate a triple tendancy, namely: disappearance of some particularities, the emergence of new forms of nutrition resulting from crossbreeding processes and diffusion of some products

and dietary practices in a transcultural scale. Instead of only playing the role of regional crops destroyers, such mechanisms may also act as coordination forces underlying culinary compositions and rearrangements.

In the second chapter, *Between the domestic and economic: culinary flow and reflow*, Poulain[1] shows that the industrialization process would end up breaking the link that exists between food and nature, disconnecting eaters from their biocultural universe. Thus, the author emphasizes the relaxation of certain social relations related to food, such as food preparation, the community's enjoyment provided by the food taken and the eating habits, which, although not completely eliminated, do not put pressure on people as they did in the past:

> *The change in the social appreciation of household activities leads agri-food industries to develop in the self-production space that represented the family kitchen. Through the offer of products that are almost ready for consumption, the industry attacks the social function of food, without assuming it. Thus, consumers consider food as "faceless", "without symbolic quality", as "anonymous", "soulless", as it "had come out of an unidentified industrial location", in just one word, desocialized.[1]*

Moreover, Poulain[1] stresses that despite the abundance of food found today, nutrition gradually become less and less identifiable and known, and thus increasingly cause for concern. As they do not identify the real origin of the products they consume or know the transformation processes undergone by food or even who manipulated, eaters find themselves in a stormy nutritional and symbolic situation, since industrialization would also mean loss of individual identity through the loss of identity of the food they consume. The scholar also points out a significant food modification the increase of the habit of eating out, in educational and health institutions, companies, as well as gourmet and fast food restaurants.

Poulain[1] begins his third chapter, *The evolution of the ways of eating*, analyzing the famous Fischler thesis on *gastro-anomy*. Encouraged by the idea of promoting a multidisciplinary approach to nutrition and seeking an interpretation of changes observed in contemporary cuisine, Fischler considers dietary modernity from three phenomena connected, "a scenario in which food is superabundant, the reduction of social controls and the proliferation of speeches on alimentation"[1]. Thus, the scholar indicates a process of "deregulation" of dietary practices and empowerment of individuals and their choices, which ultimately makes feeding a permanent sphere of decisions, doubts and anxieties. Similarly, contradictory and imperative speeches regarding food proliferate at a high speed. Such hygiene, identity, hedonic and aesthetic injunctions, among others, contribute

to increase the anxiety of eaters. In this manner, Poulain[1] stresses that what characterizes the situation of the modern eater is not the absence of rules, but their surplus derived from discourses such as "it is necessary".

Entitled *From food hazards to anxiety management*, the author's fourth chapter presents the interesting boomerang effect that would strike modern eaters, "the more the safety and quality are disclosed in speeches from business and public institutions, the more concern increases among consumers"[1]. Influenced, on one side, by food crises and scandals in different steps of production of certain foods and food poisoning cases, and on the other, by the excess of information provided to consumers and the increase in bacteriological controls by firms, such effect would only contribute to increase anxiety among eaters, as they start out from the idea that if there is a great reason for some concern, there is also a great risk related to food consumption:

> *By eating, we take in nutrients that participate in our intimate bodily life. They cross the border between us and the world. They rebuild and transform us or are able to transform us. For this reason, food gives us, in a certain way, a sense of "control over our everyday life". Hence, we have a better understanding of how uncertainties, fears about food, are exacerbated by repeating the uncertainties about the future of the consumer.[1]*

In line with these reflections, the researcher presents the idea of the "omnivore's paradox" from the analysis performed by Beardsworth on the different and ambivalent dimensions of human consumption: pleasure-displeasure, health and disease, and relations between life and death. The first dimension points out the fact that food can be both a source of pleasure, fullness and sensuality or truly unpleasant sensations. The second dimension, in turn, is linked to the fact that foods are both sources of energy, vitality and health, but also potential vectors of intoxication, diseases and disorders. Finally, the third dimension presents the idea that the feeding action that gives us life implies, in most cases, the death of other animals which are considered edible under a cultura perspective. Before ending the chapter, Poulain[1] emphasizes that behind the debate on food, are the social issues at stake. Thus, it is apprehended that certain aspects of the social organization can be observed and effectively discussed within the realm of nutrition.

The author discusses obesity and the medicalization of everyday food in the fifth chapter, in which he also stresses a double point of view adopted by sociological research on obesity. The first position considers the evolution of lifestyles and changes in dietary practices, in addition to the phenomenon of stigmatization overweight people suffer in certain societies. The second point of view, in turn, is dedicated to the analysis of the medical discourse on obesity and prevention and intervention projects associated to it. Besides working with the association between obesity and

the socioeconomic status of social actors, Poulain[1] uses Goffman's ideas to show discrimination and humiliation against obese individuals in contemporary developed societies, and how the medical ideology is used to justify such treatments by connecting obesity to disease. In turn, the ideal of thinness, present in advertisements, on dietary speeches and settings such as gyms and aesthetic clinics contribute to see those individuals as "abnormal" and even repulsive in the eyes of others. As Poulain[1] stresses, transformation processes of representations linked to obese figures are studied by intellectuals seeking to portrait obesity as a social construct, noting that cultures in different times and places did not produce the same patterns of meanings regarding overweight people, and that even in the West, corpulency was, at certain times, more highly valued than it is nowadays. During the Renaissance, for example, the female beauty standard was that of the "full-figured woman" - as can be seen in numerous artistic works of the period - while obese men were associated with wealth and success.

In the second part of his work, Poulain[1] dedicates his research to analyze the pathways that transformed a sociological interest in nutrition into a sociology of food, distinguishing two major periods in the history of social thinking regarding the practice studied here:

> During the first phase, i.e., from the onset of this research field until the mid-1960s, food is not, or rarely is, the core of the sociological perspective. It is a space of interpretation, a place for indexing other social phenomena. The second phase is guided by the desire to establish a territory, in which food is the main object. It is announced by Levi-Strauss's work, clearly begins with Moulin's and Aron's, and continueswith the Garine, Fischler, Grignon, Hubert, Poulain, Lambert, Herpin and Corbeau.[1]

Thus, in the sixth chapter, *The great founding socio-anthropological currents and their convergence with the 'food fact'*, the intellectual highlights the different perspectives adopted by social scientists who have dealt with the food issue. Moulin, among several authors brought up by Poulain, starts from a culturalist perspective to apprehend the differences in food habits and tastes in order to understand the process of identity construction and its transformations. According to the researcher, we do not eat using our teeth and digestion does not take place in our stomach; we eat with our soul and savor according to cultural norms connected to reciprocal exchange systems that are the basis of all social life. Lévi-Strauss, in turn, under a structuralist approach, stresses that food is, in first place, "good to think about", and that there are forms of exchange in food rituals that deviate from the economic logic and participate in the construction of social ties. Finally, while highlighting the way food studies are developed in sociological territories, Poulain[1] concludes that despite the vast knowledge acquired, it not yet possible to articulate and unify the various sociological analyses on food in just one field of study.

As it was highlighted by the author in the seventh chapter, there are two major epistemological obstacles for an effective sociology of food: the apparent futility of food as an object of study and contradictions in the traditional French sociological approach when dealing with food. According to Poulain,[1] the root of the first problem lies in the observation that "food" is not considered a serious matter by individuals nor by the sociological tradition. In part this is due to the fact that everyone eats, and given the triviality of the act of taking food, individuals bear very strong inner convictions resulting from their personal experiences, which give them in turn the sense of a thorough understanding of nutrition. Similarly, according to what was stressed by the researcher, food was considered not noble or a secondary object of study among social scientists. Further to this discussion, the author emphasizes the paradoxical nature of food in Durkheim's thought, considering that, in some analyses, it is excluded as a sociological object due to the fact that it is very close to the biological issue, and, in others, it was included as a "social fact" because society imposes on individuals. Mauss, in turn, seeks to depart from his uncle's ideas by proposing the interconnection of biological, psychological and sociological dimensions of food. This original contradiction would deeply mark, according to Poulain[1], food status in the French sociology, transforming it into an element traditionally disregarded as an object itself, but rather an element to be inserted in the core of a broader analysis or studied in the interstices of academic disciplines.

In the eighth chapter, with the same name as the second part of the book, the author maps food paths within the humanities, starting his analytical study by David Davies perspectives on food consumption in the eighteenth century and highlighting Durkheim's influence, as well as the importance of Halbwachs, who by considering that the mechanics of the digestive system depends on "mental dispositions" that, in their turn, result from habits, imagination, external environment, beliefs and prejudices related to the quality or good taste food, paved the way that would be followed later by other food researchers. From this, Poulain[1] analyzes the contemporary extensions of nutrition studies, emphasizing, among others, the enterpreneurship of Moulin, a scholar who devoted himself to understand the impact of "consumer society" on eating habits.

Poulain[1] also highlights the emergence of a sociology of tastes formulated by Bourdieu, who by studying concrete and daily practices, including feeding, arrived at the famous concept of *habitus*. Therefore, food tastes would be closely linked to the strategies that individuals are driven to create and the dynamics of social distinction. Moreover, Bourdieu points out that the art of eating and drinking would remain as one of the rare fields where the working classes can impose themselves socially and autonomously when they oppose the "legitimate art of living" of dominant groups. In turn, Norbert Elias, another scholar analyzed by Poulain[1], sought to relate the emergence of

"table habits" with what he called "civilizing process", a control mechanism of the impulses and natural instincts, linked to the processes of violence transfer to the individual in the social sphere, which, once internalized, eventually identify the actors and their positions in society.

One can realize that through the academic movements that argued for the interconnection between different knowledges, it was posible to notice, from the 1980s, the emergence of important collaborative works involving sociologists, psychologists, historians, anthropologists, among others, which resulted in a major burst of changes in the perspectives on food within the social sciences. Thus, thanks to Fischler's work on gastro-anomy as well as Morin's guidelines nd the participation of scholars such as Corbeau, food is no longer considered a mere form of expression and identity affirmation (as in sociology of tastes and consumption) to be inserted in the very center of the construction of identities, and thus the attention is focused on the cognitive and imaginary dimensions of the food act.

Poulain[1] opens the ninth chapter, *The sociology of food and attempts towards organization*, pointing out that despite the progresses on the sociology of food, the latter is not completely established as an object, and thus the plurality imposes itself. Following this reasoning, the author affirms that the production of studies on nutrition follow a "double-tension system":

> *[...] The first marks the tension of epistemological positions between, on the one hand, the acceptance of the principle of social autonomy, the respect to the definition of social factor and, on the other hand, the concept of total social factor and the need to establish dialogue with the related disciplines. The second axis articulates the opposition between a sensitive sociological look at changes and another one that emphasizes invariants and social reproduction mechanisms.[1]*

Thus, whereas authors such as Chombart de Lauwe, Herpin and Bourdieu represent the tradition of the "autonomy of social sciences" initiated by Durkheim, intellectuals like Richards, Elijah or Fischler inherited Mauss's thoughts and his "total social fact*". Authors like Ledrut, Hubert, Corbeau and Mennell would, according to Poulain's notions[1], would be in an intermediate position of the first axis. In turn, taking into account the second movement highlighted by the author, Elias, Lambert, Mennell and Warde emphasize the transformation of consumption patterns and their inherent representations, whereas Lévi-Strauss, Bourdieu and Grignon construct their own analysis on permanencies inherent in food. In this axis it is also possible to observe intermediate positions between the two opposite poles, such as Fischler's and Beardsworth's.

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* For Marcel Mauss, the "total social fact" is a phenomenon that expresses at once, all kinds of institutions, religious, legal, economic, moral, among others, simultaneously implying different levels of social reality.

In the face of multiple possibilities to address food issues, many authors sought to articulate different points of view, like Warde, who by resuming the Durkheimian theoretical framework for the analysis of suicide, constituted a typology of food consumption that allows the distinction between four trends of social change: individualization, informalization, "communitarization" and stylization. From the combination of these different social forces, it would be possible to establish a set of explanations about food market, besides obtaining a link between seemingly opposite perspectives, such as Fischler's gastro-anomy, Grignon's permanency in social classes, the rise of Giddens' individualism and Maffesoli's "neo-tribalism"**.

While discussing with the sociology of French cuisine in the tenth chapter, the author also characterizes gastronomy as a aesthetics of cooking and table habits, "a hedonistic turn of the biological purposes of feeding, this activity entirely surrounded by social rules and in the running of which we are condemned several times a day[1]". Hence, Poulain[1] analyzes the emergence of gastronomy in the seventeenth century, comprehending why this phenomenon occurred in France, and concluding that its development took place through the empowerment of gastronomic thought in relation to the scholarly thought, the search by the rising bourgeoisie to gain legitimacy in an exclusive aristocratic sphere, the search for a taste as the main axis in the development of a creative cuisine, and finally, Catholic ethics. The combination of these factors would therefore have allowed French gastronomes to lay down the feeding rules through the aesthetic appearance of the dishes, the establishment harmonious combinations, among others.

In the last chapter, *Food social space: a tool to study food patterns*, Poulain[1] proposes a presentation of the intertwined dimensions of "food social space", understanding this as a useful tool to be used in food studies. The first dimension, "edible space" corresponds to the set of choices that a human group generates to select, acquire and store their food. In turn, the "food system", corresponds to the set of technological and social structures that allow food, in stages of production and processing, to reach the final consumers. The "culinary space" represents a field in the geographical perspective (the kitchen, where culinary activities take place), in the social perspective (in which gender and social divisions of labor in cooking are defined), and in that of structural relationships. "Habits and food consumption space" involves the set of rituals that permeate the food act from the incorporation. Here, there is a clear emphasis on the variation of the structure of the journey of food, from one culture to another and within the same culture, the meal specification, consumption

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** Through "neo-tribalism", Maffesoli proposes an alternative paradigm to individualism for the analysis of the contemporary world, understanding that, nowadays, individuals are compelled to play a role within certain groups, or "tribes", which are characterized by fluidity, by occasional gatherings and dispersion.

modes, rules for table seating arrangements, among others. The "temporality of food practices" allows the visualization of temporal cycles socially determined, in which food is comprised. Thus, food acts follow many steps, such as rites of passage, celebrations, funerals, among others, that are socially organized in sequences defined or following a specific schedule. Finally, through the last dimension, "space of social differentiation", the contours of social groups are indicated by food: besides being the field of symbolic disputes between groups within the same society, food establishes identity boundaries between culturally distinct groups.

Before finishing the chapter, Poulain[1] highlights that food must have four fundamental qualities, namely, nutritional, organoleptic, hygienic and symbolic. The importance of this latter quality lies in the fact that "a natural product must be able to represent the object of projected meanings by the eater. It should be able to become significant, be a part of a communication network, an imaginary constellation, a world[1] vision".

In conclusion, one can apprehend, through Poulain's work[1,2] that food should not be understood only as a consequence of biological or ecological phenomena. It is also one of the main structural factors of social organization. It is currently observed in several countries, including Brazil, a growing "balkanization[***]" and "gourmetization" of markets, with the emergence of sophisticated products and geared towards a more well-defined public. Cooking television shows proliferate and chefs move from backstage to stage. Movements campaigning for the redefinition of certain foods and the patrimony of local gastronomic practices become more organized and active. Peremptory and contradictory speeches about food contribute to increased feelings of anxiety among consumers, who, in turn, become more concerned about what they eat. In such a context, although it has not been yet established as a single field of study, research on food within the Humanities gains strength, emerging as dynamic and essential object to analyze and understand practices, representations and contemporary social tensions. And so the "food social space" emerges as a tool that enables researchers to have a better understanding of the multiple dimensions associated with food.

*** In the context presented here, "balkanization" means the production and marketing of goods geared towards a select public, in reference to the geopolitical term that indicates a particular violent process of fragmentation of a given region into smaller parts.

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