



# Food for thought: on practices, tastes and food systems from a social anthropological approach

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## Abstract

This communication is situated in the field of food anthropology and aims to discuss aspects of the act of eating from the cultural point of view. The research will raise some practical considerations about cooking or eating while mobilizing the marking of meanings and identities. Understood as a unifying field of study on food culture, anthropology has contributed to the reflection and understanding of the food phenomenon in analyzes that incorporate representations, beliefs, knowledge and practices that are inherited and/or learned and that are shared by individuals of a given culture or a particular social group. We will approach the notion of food system as a broad proposal capable of bringing different disciplines into an understanding of the food phenomenon as endowed with complexity and able to grasp the dynamics involved in contemporary living, where there is a clear cultural heterogeneity.

**Key words:** Food. Anthropology. Food Systems.

## A biocultural phenomenon

French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss<sup>1</sup>, in his book *Mitológicas*, resorted to cuisines and food preparation to study various indigenous myths. Moreover, Lévi-Strauss has shown us that food can be used when seeking to better understand what makes us human. So, paraphrasing the author regarding myths – which are good for thought –, we bring the idea that the same phenomenon occurs with food: these substances composed of nutrients and symbolisms are good for eating and also good for thought on the reality around us.

Lévi-Strauss urges us to think about food from its semiotic and communicative function. For him, the cuisine is a language, a form of communication, a complex code that allows us to understand the mechanisms of the society to which it belongs, from which it emerges and which gives it sense<sup>2</sup>. Beyond a pure reduction that sets it as a response to physiological needs, the act of eating must be understood as a social act that incorporates multiple dimensions of the individual.

This communication is in the field of study of the anthropology of food, understood, in accordance with Contreras & Garcia<sup>3</sup>, as a unifying field of study on the set of representations, beliefs, knowledge and practices inherited and/or learned that are associated to food and that are shared by individuals of a given culture or a particular social group. Our argumentative efforts will at first be in the sense of bringing to the debate reflections on food and eating as conditioned by cultures and understood food as dynamic relationships; aspects that we find important as they bring light to and qualify the questions around eating.

In the second part we will seek to raise some considerations about taste and preferences for certain foods, exploring how such definitions and decisions are multifaceted, mobilizing meanings and establishing identities – what comes through when we talk about Brazilian cuisine, French cuisine, Italian cuisine. Thus, taste, far from being an innate and individual response, would be inserted in a context and expressed also at the social level.

Finally, we will approach the notion of “food system”<sup>4</sup>, whose focus, initially treated by French sociologist Jean-Pierre Poulain, seems to be interesting when articulating the various fields who study the power of an interdisciplinary effort to characterize it from the aggregation of different levels or stages through which humans have coexisted with food.

Human eating habits have very particular characteristics. When we reflect deeply, we perceive its scope as unequivocally uniting biological and physiological cultural aspects. Being a biocultural phenomenon, its study is interesting to a very wide range of researchers with diverse theoretical

and methodological approaches. Perhaps the greatest contribution of the humanities and social sciences to the phenomenon of human eating habits is to give it meaning. In this perspective, no food is free from cultural associations, and being part of a cultural system, food and its contexts are full of symbols, meanings and ratings. Understanding the practices related to food as a symbolic action, which allows us access to other dimensions of life, other plans (social, political, economic, psychological), can be thought of as a focus of anthropological analysis.

We agree with Fischler<sup>5</sup>, for whom humans “eat meanings” and share with their peers a multitude of representations in the act of eating. In the author’s words, “man is nourished by nutrients, but also by the imaginary that is socially shared” (p. 20)<sup>5</sup>. If, on the one hand, there is the nutritional value of food and a whole repertoire of elements that characterize it from the biological point of view – proteins, carbohydrates, vitamins –, there is, on the other hand, a symbolic value, a symbolic meaning in the act of eating that complicates the issue, as it requires a comprehensive approach.

So there is a range of foods available in nature, but among these, only a few are actually considered food. This demarcation will be shaped by cultures according to historical processes and specific social dynamics. In this logic, food can be understood as the food that carries with it the dimensions of a culture, which imposes its particularities as to what is edible, on what occasion and with whom<sup>2</sup>. Humans need to feed constantly in order to stay alive, and would therefore be potentially able to eat anything, and yet they do not. Their food is based on choices which, being socially shared, compose a food structure based on rules, classifications, prohibitions<sup>2</sup>.

Mary Douglas calls attention to the symbolism of classificatory processes. In terms of food, each culture has a classification system that points out what is edible or not, in what circumstances, in whose company. Such processes also prescribe or forbid us of certain behaviors. In other words, things are arranged differently according to each cultural scheme<sup>6</sup>. Thus, what is defined as edible in a given culture may not be in others. A classic example is the dog, which to us Westerners is considered a pet, but in some Asian countries makes up an ordinary meal.

It is from this perspective, of exploring eating habits not only considering their biological function, but also their place within a given culture or society, marked in time and space, that the anthropology of food establishes its reflections. What we propose, in this sense, is the need for a dialogue between fields of study that is able to format a holistic understanding, not hierarchical in explanatory terms, but that emphasizes the complementarity of the “biocultural” adjective that marks the act of eating.

## There is indeed accounting for taste

Although some researchers conceive taste as something innate, initially connected to the physiological domain, different authors argue that taste is socially and culturally constructed, linking individual and collective experiences.

The theme of food taste began to be explored in the context of the European court societies as a reference to “good taste” as a means of social distinction. Flandrin<sup>7</sup> makes us think, when historicizing “taste”, that it changes over time, space and for the same person. For this historian, during the passage from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, a conception of food distinct from the concept of nutrition was developed. Therefore, food would be linked to pleasure at the table and sensations of taste, rather than strictly dietary concerns.

Bourdieu<sup>8</sup> reminds us that good taste in food choices would be the result of a social construction through which social distinction strategies are formed. These distinctions express different lifestyles and hierarchical positions in the class structure. Analyzing the variety of cultural practices among social groups, Bourdieu argues that cultural taste and lifestyles refer to ways of relating to individual practices and are deeply marked by social trajectories and experiences that each group or segment of society has lived.

In the book *Fisiologia do gosto*, Brillart-Savarin<sup>9</sup> shows social-cultural ways to understand this issue. The history of taste is linked to the history of everyday life in its subtleties and to social, cultural and ideological structures.

The 1985 work by Mintz<sup>10</sup>, *Sweetness and Power*, also makes us reflect on the issue of taste. In this study, the author examines the social history of the production and consumption of sugar. By doing so, he reveals that, in addition to an explanation based on the innate preference for sweet taste or the simple imitation of a wealthy class by a lower class, the increasing consumption of sugar, especially among the European working class in the nineteenth century, is related to a search for energy to be converted into work and an association with other products – growing in the English market – that became part of the diet of this group, such as, for example, coffee and tea. In this sense, the author notes the interaction between economic interests, political powers, nutritional needs and cultural meanings, refraining from a purely causal explanation of the biological point of view.

From the argument that the formation of food taste is not given solely at the individual level, but socially and historically, we analyze the process from which emerges a food system, also called

“cuisine”, which gives a meaning to what is eaten, and demarcates different tastes. Maciel<sup>11</sup> makes some considerations:

*The “cuisines” represent a complexity of the food act, which includes the preparation, combination of elements, “composition” of a dish, that is, the transformation of sources of nutrients into food<sup>11</sup> (p.150).*

The “taste”, this sense through which flavor is perceived, has a key role in the formation of these cuisines, after all, both the use of techniques and the choice of elements will be according to taste or preferences, both sensitive at the individual plan, but inserted into a given social-cultural context. There is an important criticism in the sense of not reducing cuisines to an inventory or a repertoire of ingredients, nor convert them into formulas or combinations of elements crystallized in time and space. Cuisines must be recognized above all in their dynamics, linked to social identity, a collective project in constant reconstruction<sup>2</sup> in which conventional or traditional aspects are pervaded by aspects of innovation. These transformations are eventually absorbed or “digested” by tradition, which in subsequent steps, creates new models, adapted to previous conventional models. Through a historical process, a number of new and referenced elements in tradition merges in order to create something unique capable of marking identities. In this perspective, ingredients and techniques are constantly compared with the socially produced preferences, thus articulating food taste with the formation of these cuisines or systems.

Such statements become relevant as what is defined as food or edible depends on each culture or segment: when we think, for example, in preferences for high-calorie dishes between classes of laborers, this is not due to arguments strictly related to their nutritional value, but by social representations linked to strength and robustness. Likewise, the observation of increased consumption of fast food among youths ends up not being guided by health risks or dangers, but by shared meanings that define the group and represent ideas of modernity. Thus, since early childhood we are immersed in food criteria, parameters and classifications, which is called “taste”.

It should be mentioned at this point that such formations and transformations are not given consciously and with a purpose, but are modeled on interactions of elements immersed in social and historical dynamics. By analyzing the meanings that people attach to certain foods, it is essential to have a closer look at the various determinants that make up “taste”. These meanings, ultimately, may be different even within the same class or social segment. In more pragmatic terms, reflecting on professional practice dedicated to both individuals and communities, we consider that food choices should not be reduced to objective determinants of utilitarian character.

## An integrated whole – the notion of food system

Briefly and without claiming to be exhaustive, but only to stimulate further discussion, we will discuss what we consider to be an important theoretical and methodological tool for thinking contemporary eating habits. To this end we agree with Velho<sup>12</sup>, who admits that the complex contemporary societies involve distinguishable social categories in a historical continuity; endowed with a cultural heterogeneity that is not isolated, but involved in a web of social relationships, in harmony or not.

In addition to the theoretical and conceptual debate of the field of anthropology, an important notion originally crafted by the French sociologist Jean-Pierre Poulain<sup>4</sup> concerning eating comes with emphasis among social researchers: the idea of "food system". The approach brings together the analysis of the various eating activities and traverses the flow of food without neglecting, however, the actors involved. Thus the process of cultivation and harvest, production, distribution, preparation and consumption are perceived as interconnected and rising from existing relationships. In this model, we must consider that food does not move or transforms by itself; the transformation, preparation and consumption processes involve, above all, subjects. Among the different actors, we can identify producers, industry professionals, families, *chefs* and a whole repertoire of techniques and representations that are specific to each group.

In a rural context of food production, distribution processes and transformation into a dish to be enjoyed at a restaurant, the meanings attributed to what is eaten and its manifested forms are varied, which implies not only that the food goes through a flow in its physical form, but also that, in the process, it takes on different meanings in a systemic model that includes prospects involving food and its different local and global inter-related contexts.

Contreras & Garcial<sup>3</sup> point out that, although initially this concept has been fragmented by the different traditions of the social sciences (sociology, anthropology) in recent years there has been a production of a "transdisciplinary encounter" able to work under this light, taking into account the diversity definitions, interpretations and emphases given to this notion. Such notion, far from being consensual and from which derive different developments such as "food webs" and "culinary systems", carries Mauss's<sup>13</sup> notion of "total social fact", that is, the idea that the act of eating is involved, at many reality levels, in institutions of many orders (economic, political, gender, class) and that an understanding of the phenomenon in its entirety is indispensable, even if the emphasis is on a particular activity or stage specific to each field of knowledge.

It should also be highlighted that the contributions of anthropology as to incorporate to this approach the question of the meanings involved, drawing attention to the fact that the act of eating is something specific. That is, even in a relatively globalized context, where one tries to find a

homogeneity of practices and representations, the universality of eating meets the specificities of different contexts which are marked by sociocultural, economic and individual factors. These should be taken into account when thinking food and eating. We do not intend, however, to determine the focus or the objects of other fields, but rather to propose that they work their different objects based on this systemic perspective in which food and the individual are not isolated, but related in a dynamic flow.

Far from concluding this discussion, we explore eating as a topic that allows for a dialogue between the sciences that seek to account for this phenomenon through different angles. Emphasizing the symbolic and specific actions of the different activities that make up food systems, considering the dynamics and directions of each context, has been the task of the discipline of anthropology. Therefore, the exercise of relativization and the appreciation of diversity are important contributions of this discipline.

Seeing the eating phenomenon as part of an integrated system beyond the simple act of eating food can enrich the fields that deal with this theme. Equally important is the fact that we are dealing with sets of symbols that will be reused by people in their relationships and daily activities, in a process that, in addition to being physiological, is social.

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