

# Feed or nourish in a “popular restaurant” in Spain: reflections on commensality

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## Abstract

This paper is about the changes in food practices of socially vulnerable people affected by the recent economic and financial crisis in Spain. The fieldwork was conducted in a “soup kitchen” located in Reus, Catalonia, Spain. The analysis refers specifically to observations on commensals’ behavior at lunchtime and use of focus groups and interview techniques. The project’s coordinators value the ritual meals as a way to promote solidarity and conviviality, giving commensality a special sense of embracement. The “embrace” is perceived by commensals through the volunteer work. However, commensals relate negatively the commensality with loss of autonomy in food decision. As the “with whom and where to eat” decision in the restaurant is not on them, the act of eating is a personal interest and an individual satisfaction, observing an individualization of eating during the meal. “What to eat” is also not a commensal choice. For them the menu is characterized by less consumption of meat, fruit and vegetables and higher consumption of “carbohydrates”. At the same time, because of the poverty condition, there is a resignation towards the food that is served. Commensals, in spite of feeling supported, present a loss of cultural reference, nutritional quality of food and the power to make decisions about their food.

**Key words:** Commensality. Food Practices. Food Assistance. Spain.

## Introduction

In recent years, numerous social changes have interfered on eating behaviors in the Western society, and the debates on contemporary foods have sought to answer which consequences are produced by such changes, how they happen and in which direction they are heading.

Sociological and anthropological studies place in the so-called “food modernity” the impacts that meals have suffered, and the effects that the social, economic and cultural transformations have had on contemporary society. On the one hand, modern society is characterized by abundant food supply, more production and consumption of industrial foods, increased scientific knowledge related to foods composition, and multiplication of diet-related discourses and patterns. On the other hand, such changes have imposed on people disorganization of eating forms, homogenized foods consumption, poor nutrition and uncertainty about food components.<sup>1-3</sup>

Spanish studies that have established the causal link between the social modernization process of society and changes in the eating habits show a trend towards a new structure of eating behaviors, a simplified meal structure (which in Spain would be only one dish and dessert), changes in timing and in the kind of meals that people have as a function of their professional and school activities and food medicalization.<sup>4-6</sup>

Gracia Arnaiz<sup>6</sup> reminds us that, in industrial countries, the increased accessibility to foods contrasts with persistent, differentiated and socially unequal consumption, taking into account the people’s income level, which clearly indicates that for many people the problems of food modernity are not of oversupply. Data from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations informed that from 2011 to 2013 there were about 842 million hungry people in the world<sup>7</sup>. Thus, it seems that the democratization of food consumption has not been real and that nutritional differences related to socioeconomically variables still remain.

In this sense, we aimed to understand the effects of macrosocial shifts on diets, taking as reference the effects of adopting a neoliberal economic policy – globalization and the chronic processes of unemployment, starvation and poverty that such policy favors.<sup>8</sup> Thus, this work examines the changes in the daily eating habits of socially vulnerable people and affected by the economic and financial crisis, officially recognized in Spain in 2008.

Since then, Spain has revealed a large number of people in temporary or recurrent poverty<sup>9</sup>, leading to chronic situations. According to data from *Caritas Espanhola*,<sup>10</sup> 58% of the Spaniards are in long-term unemployment condition (out of work in the last 12 months) and 35% of them are unemployed for over two years. In addition, one in three people assisted by this entity receives aid for more than three years.

In this scenario, an increased food assistance to the “new poor” has been provided by the government, nongovernment organizations and civil society, such as, for example, meals serving in popular restaurants (or soup kitchens).

Such “new” forms of foods provision (based on philanthropy) leads to changes in behavior, in food-related social perceptions and representations and require more understanding and investigation. As a result, we wish to know to which extent the financial and economic crisis have changed the eating habits of economically vulnerable people and contribute to the discussions on the paradoxes and ambiguities of the current feeding system.

## Methodological considerations

A study was developed for sociocultural reflection<sup>(\*)</sup>, with the aim to address the relationship between the changes in eating habits and the rising impoverishment of part of the Spanish population. Thus, we decided for a qualitative research approach based on a social anthropological perspective.

Fieldwork was conducted in a popular restaurant created in late 2009, as a result of a joint effort between a governmental agency and a non-governmental institution (catholic) in Reus, Catalonia, Spain. The focus is ethnographic, and as research techniques we used direct observation, in-depth interviews, focus groups and daily field records.<sup>11,12,13,14,15</sup>

Because we are interested in knowing and understanding the changes in the eating habits of those affected by the economic and financial crisis in Spain, our research attempted to highlight the point of view of different social actors. Therefore, we found it interesting to incorporate the experiences of those living in critical conditions and in need for food aid as well as of those who work in social welfare programs or collaborate with it.

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At first, we developed an observational script<sup>16</sup> through which we sought to identify the dynamics of people relationships with the space and foods at mealtimes in a popular restaurant. For the interview and the focus group, we sought to formulate questions about the management of the popular restaurant, usual consumers, the reasons why they decided to eat at the restaurant, their usual diets and the crisis in Spain.

Therefore, the analysis refers specifically to the observations of the commensals behavior at lunchtime in a social space defined by a focus group made up of five people, and five interviews: one with the social assistant of the NGO, one with the restaurant coordinator and three with commensals.

In the scope of this article, we considered only the discussions on commensality-related themes relating to a daily meal in a precarious context. Therefore, aiming at supporting the reflections and insights on the social transformation effects on the eating patterns of a particular group, we examined the relationships that have originated around the “eating” habits.

We considered the notion of commensality in its diverse dimensions. If, on the one hand, “eating at the same table” creates bonding and establishes social relations, on the other hand this process is not painless and has exclusion effects.<sup>17</sup>

A popular restaurant is part of a feeding program that fulfills the function of providing a free meal to people in need, or against a small contribution. It assists city residents at risk of social exclusion, people who cannot afford to buy foods for themselves; among them, there are those directly affected by the economic crisis, who had lost their jobs, old people, drug addicts and persons with mental disorders. Most of them are men.

In the city, through popular restaurants, lunch meals are served to a group of 50 to 60 people from Monday to Friday, and, with the purpose of managing the lack of foods more effectively, they are also provided with a bag containing ready-to-eat foods for consumption on weekends. Lunch meals are served between 13:00 and 14:30 o'clock.

Lunch is prepared mostly with donated foodstuffs (food banks and private donations), as well as the bags for the weekends. For this reason, the cook and menu coordinator of the popular restaurant plans the meals according to the foods available. The participants of the study were informed that their participation was free and, if necessary, they would be asked to sign a Consent Letter.

## Eating at a popular restaurant: meal forms and meanings

The basics of social anthropology is to understand the social, economic and symbolic practices of meals, understood as a social and cultural act and, therefore, a producer of diverse food systems. On creating such systems, ecological, historical, cultural, social and economic factors would interfere, involving social representations and imaginaries relating to the choices and classifications.<sup>18</sup> Thus, when feeding themselves, people create practices and assign meanings to what is being incorporated, which goes beyond the mere utilization of the foods by the body.<sup>19</sup>

Eating assumes meanings that refer to significance in the context of an imaginary and symbolic universe, not necessarily rational [but], capable of producing individual and collective identities, social relations and bonding that surpass the conscious logics of the discourse.<sup>20</sup>

Senses and meanings, therefore, are given to the act of eating and are directly related to the meaning of ourselves as substantive bodies of historically-derived cultural materials.<sup>21</sup> Hence, what one eats cannot be eaten by someone else,<sup>22</sup> which makes that the eating act has different meanings for the subjects of the same social space.

“Eating together” gains various meanings, senses, rituals and symbolisms that go beyond the mere biological function. Such form of sharing, interchanging and recognizing is called commensality<sup>23</sup>, and the plurality of meanings that it has comes from the diverse social strata and existential situations that take place.<sup>24</sup>

“Symbolic eating” refers to the intake of food-linked values and is related to the symbolic value of communal meals and the symbolic connectedness of a meal shared by a group. Thus, the first forms of commensality establishes at once the relationships between the exchange rules, the group structure and identity affirmation. The commensality notion includes the characteristics of hospitality and sharing meals and has a strong connection with conviviality, not only restricted to eating, but also when one is seen eating and knowing how to eat together.<sup>23</sup>

Studies on commensality, since its first texts, have dealt with feasts and banquets, entertainment, rituals of different people and/or occasions, but few have dealt with the places of popular commensality.

In this study, we sought to work with “new” social groups, which appear in this particular case in Spain due to the severe world economic crisis. Under a paralyzed economy, poverty in this country has reached three million people, and new forms of poverty arise in many ways, which Gracia-Arnaiz<sup>25</sup> calls “precarization”: families with unemployed adults, illegal immigrants, older people with small pensions, middle-class families debilitated by the lack of resources, etc. Such

impoverishment comes along with changes in the forms that people eat, which are translated into different options, from an increased consumption of the so-called white label brands,\*\*) selection of low-priced foodstuffs as the basic parameter for purchase, growing vegetables at home, and application for social aid, among others.

Therefore, the effects on commensality can also appear in different forms, according to the experiences. Thus, in popular restaurants, the forms and meanings that a meal has for those who provide assistance at this place is different from those who receive it – the commensals. The group working directly or indirectly in a popular restaurant is directly associated with the great social value that almost all societies attribute to the provision of a communal meal, reinforced by the symbolic meaning that a meal has for the Catholic Church, which considers it a strong communion symbol.

The popular restaurant in Reus is managed by a catholic organization and, in the religious sense, food has a key importance, i.e. food gives life and strengthens the soul. From this perspective, the participation of various people at the same mealtime is a communion practice open to forgiveness, hospitality and friendship.<sup>26</sup> Sharing a commensal meal means to be in communion with the others who eat with us.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, the ritual of daily meals is valued as a way to foster solidarity and conviviality. In this sense, the eating act is used as a means of social relationship, attributing to commensality traces of hospitality in a determined and special sense of welcoming. One of the interviewees says: “It is not simply giving food. There is some embracement.” Collective meals succeed in attaining a high social value in this perspective, and the rules of eating and drinking are built during such mealtimes as well as their regularity and hierarchy.

Commensality also leads to regularity in mealtimes, because some people could only meet at predetermined hours – this was the first action that surpassed naturalism in eating practices. It follows the same pattern of what we would call meals hierarchy: one would not simply take the food from the dish at will and without rules, but would serve himself/herself observing a certain sequence. In English merchant clubs, precursors of current trade unions, there was a fine for those who drank out of turn.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, food is consumed by everyone at the same time, following the typical and economical menu in Spain (the ternary type of menu, i.e., first course, second course and dessert). The meal is served by volunteers directly to commensals, who are sitting around the table in groups of four people. The dining table, as described by Fernandes,<sup>24</sup> is used as a means to exchange social esteem,

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\*\* Brand of products that belongs to a retail network that sells products from diverse manufacturers. Also known as “own brand” or “generic brand”.

because it takes family references to bring people together, a rite of aggregation, and the meal, as well as the place and time spent together, leads to a moment of sociability. Thus, through the ritual of commensality, there is an attempt to promote socialization, which allows people not to fall into the void of daily life and contribute to alleviate the distress derived from the socioeconomic determinants of their misfortune.

At these mealtimes, the importance of cordiality, embracement, is reaffirmed, because besides maintaining the same meal structure, the choice of the foods that comprise the dishes and cooking techniques are part of the Spanish food identity, despite the presence of immigrants. For this reason, the menus typically consist of dishes such as *fideo*, *paella*, meat stew, etc., which takes the memories of the group to the foods preferred by this society.

This does not necessarily mean that the commensals' expectations and desires are accomplished. Such embracement is perceived through the work of the volunteers, who, in the words of the commensals, are always kind, friendly and patient. However, commensals relate negatively commensality with the loss of autonomy to decide on what to eat, which shows us evidence of social inequalities that are perceived through the foods and the choices of the kind of foods and how they are served.

Food distinction elements go throughout the centuries and remain in effect. Since Middle Age, food and mealtimes are symbols of wealth and power and, therefore, they distinguish social strata. The meals of rich peasants, for example, were more abundant and diversified than the poor's. The “good” meat was saved for the highest social classes, while meat of worse quality was destined to satisfy the needs of more deprived people.<sup>28</sup>

In fact, people have little (if any) autonomy to decide “what”, “where”, “when” and “with whom” to eat. Rather than eating according to the environment in which they live, people eat according to the society to which they belong, and for most of them, due to the country's current socioeconomic structure and the lack of family links, eating in a popular restaurant became crucial.

Home and commercial restaurants were pointed by the interviewees as the ideal places to have their meals, because in these places one can eat what he/she wants (type of food and preparation method) and choose “with whom” to eat. Despite the preparation of the dishes are close to the Spanish daily meals, “what” to eat is not a commensal's choice. Most of them only have one meal per day, and for them the amount of food is insufficient, taste is different, and what they are given is just to suppress hunger, because the meals contain less meat, fruit and vegetables and more carbohydrates. “They do not give us shrimps nor lobsters. [...] All they give us is to fill us

up”(commensal 1). The food bag that they take home for the weekend is not considered sufficient and appropriate to cook a meal, because they are foods for immediate consumption, such as a baguette, juice or milk, and sweet snacks (candies, chocolate, cookies). Sometimes there is a can of tuna fish or sandwiches; there are no eggs, olive oil, etc. Therefore, the foods that they receive in the bag are associated with “children’s food”, mainly because they just contain goodies.

We can see that for the people who eat at the table of a popular restaurant, food is linked to the purpose of subsistence, a reality inherent to the human structure and the condition in which they are. To food was assigned the function of nourishing only. The meals also mark the social distinction between the “poor” and the “rich”, (re)positioning the commensals, because of the insufficiency and type of food, as poor and dependent on social solidarity.

Not only “what to eat” but also “with whom” to eat is not a commensal’s choice. Reference to the behavior of drug dependents that some commensals have mentioned (speaking in a louder tone of voice or assaulting verbally other commensals or volunteers) is cause of annoyance and appears as an indicator of social differentiation. Rules of behavior at the dining table, which are defined by each and every society, are essential to maintain harmony at mealtimes, to constitute civility and courteous relationships. When such rules are infringed, the harmony of social relationships breaks up and the commensality socializing potential weakens.

The sociability patterns organized in a popular restaurant are conditioned not by the convergence of the subjects’ interests, but by the common conditions of precariousness under which they are living. Hence, conviviality and sociability are endangered, because they depend on the group’s interactive process, mediated by private narratives developed in communications based on affinities. The socialization element disappears. In a certain way, in a popular restaurant, as stated by Simmel<sup>22</sup> about the *table d’hôte*,

*[...] people only get together for the mere reason of eating; being in the company of others is not a choice, a desired situation with a value in itself; rather, although they are sharing a table with other people, in no way it implies that there is a relationship between them. All that expensive tableware as well as good behavior cannot remedy the situation posed by the materialistic purpose of eating: the aversion shown by refined sensibilities against the table d’hôte shows that only socialization can direct such purpose towards a higher aesthetic order. The attractiveness of such order does not work when the situation of being together has no meaning of its own, when in some way it lacks soul, and the silverware and porcelains cannot conceal the embarrassment nor even the ugliness of the physical eating act. (Author’s translation).*



The converging affinity around the table of a popular restaurant, the bonding that the crisis produces among people, is not beneficial to conversations, so we observed, among some of them, some isolation when eating, despite sharing the same table and room. How or with whom and where one eats is not a commensal's choice. The eating act remains as individual interest and satisfaction.

Commensality, which often has major significance in social interactions, in a popular restaurant is much more focused on the place where one gets food rather than on social conviviality.

Finally, despite the negative aspects reported by the commensals regarding commensality, we could see some resignation or acceptance of what they are served, because in situations of need one should accept what is given. People understand the social welfare benefit of receiving food aid and not as a violence against their right to food. Because they feel powerless to deal with the impact of the macroeconomic situation in their lives, they got silent.

## Final Considerations

This study aimed to contribute to discussions and insights on the paradoxes of modern food system based on an analysis of the eating forms of people directly affected by the financial and economic crisis that hit Spain in recent years.

With rising unemployment in the country, the need to seek food aid became a reality for many Spaniards. Among the feeding programs are the popular restaurants, which serve meals to people who are in need and not able to provide food for themselves.

The popular restaurant located in the city of Reus (Catalonia) seeks to give to commensality a welcoming space. However, it is known that the eating act is imbued with different meanings, according to the social actor and context.

Eating, for commensals of a popular restaurant, becomes a mere subsistence operation, which waives the pleasure of feeling the taste of a dish and the choice of “what” and “how much” to eat. Thus, although these people feel supported, they show the loss of cultural reference and the power to make their own decisions on what to eat. They also consider the loss of foods nutritious quality as well as a reduced dietary diversity and reduced amount of food.

For many authors, the existing sociability around a dining table fades away because people no longer can choose “with whom” to eat, and individualization when eating is frequent, even in a commensal meal.

These insights make us (re)think about some positive tendencies encountered in the modern food system, such as democratization of the social feeding system and reduction of social differences in foods consumption.

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