



Sociological aspects of meat in meals

Cultural impacts and meal patterns

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Abstract- Health professionals and environmental experts advocate reduced consumption of meat in industrialized regions. On this background, and in light of a number of sociological studies of food practices and meal formats among consumers, this paper examines some aspects of the cultural entrenchment and vulnerability of meat consumption. Tacit meanings of meat products are seen as arising from the human tendency to rank and grade objects relative to each other, a process that is intrinsic to consumption practices. Examples of the ways in which gradient meanings of meat products are entrenched in food practices and of ways in which this consumption is vulnerable to change, are presented. On this basis, the likelihood that current levels of meat consumption in industrialized societies will remain relatively stable or tend to decrease are briefly discussed.

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Index Terms- cultural entrenchment, cultural change, gradient meaning, meat consumption, meal formats.

INTRODUCTION

CONSUMERS accord pride of place to meat as being the most highly prized of all food products. The evidence for this is neither recent nor local. It does not primarily rely upon what consumers claim to be the case, as reported in surveys. Rather, it rests upon observed patterns of global, regional and local demand over time [1, 2]. It also rests on the observed place of meat in the meal formats of more affluent societies, as documented by anthropological and sociological research during the last three decades of the 20th century [3, 4, 5, 6]. These food practices have been challenged in recent years by dietary recommendations put forward by health professionals, environmentalists and others, highlighting the need to reduce levels of meat consumption in industrialized societies. In the light of a number of studies carried out by members of the Sociology of Food Research Group at the University of Copenhagen, the objective of this

paper is to examine the cultural entrenchment and vulnerability of meat consumption with reference to industrialized societies.

Cultural 'entrenchment' here refers to the manner in which the consumption of meat functions as a carrier of tacitly accepted meanings that are taken for granted in the routine food practices of consumers. Cultural 'vulnerability' refers to the likelihood that such tacitly accepted meanings are subject to change, for example in the light of recommendations advocated by experts.

One instance of recent recommendations is the public health goal formulated in 2007 by the World Cancer Research Fund and the American Institute of Cancer Research. These bodies suggest that the average population intake of red meat should not exceed 300g per week. The personal recommendation to people who eat red meat is to consume less than 500g per week. In each case it is recommended that very little if any of this intake should include preserved or processed meat products [7]. Reaching these goals would entail that world per capita consumption of beef, pork and other red meats would be re-distributed between developed and developing countries, and reduced by one third to two thirds of current consumption levels in industrialized regions [cf.8]. Environmentalists also call for a worldwide transformation of typical diets with a particular focus upon levels of meat consumption in industrialized societies. Reduced consumption is called for with reference to the inherent inefficiency of converting feed into meat, which entails that meat production is responsible for a disproportionate share of environmental burdens [9, 10]. It has been estimated that the cereal and leguminous grain consumed annually by animals contain enough energy to feed more than three billion people [11]. The environmental impacts of modern animal husbandry are identified as including inefficient use of land resources to produce feed, inefficient use of water resources, reduction of biodiversity, and pollution due to the eutrophication of land and waterways as well as CO₂ generated by the combustion of fossil fuels in these production systems. Although the reduction of meat consumption has been called for in the industrialized West, it has hitherto not been predicted as likely to occur. While more than 80% of world growth of meat consumption is expected to occur in developing countries within the coming decade, per capita consumption in industrialized

countries is also expected to increase, if only marginally [8]. Several reasons may account for this including lack of interest in the dietary recommendations of experts among producers and consumers. A closer look at the character of cultural controls on food practices should enable us to better envisage the likelihood that meat consumption in industrialized societies will remain relatively stable or possibly tend to decrease within the foreseeable future.

FOOD PRACTICES AND THEIR MEANINGS

Food practices are culture-bound insofar as they are dependent on shared categorizations of food products and shared rules that govern their usage [12, 13]. Traditional cuisines are or have been formerly location-dependent insofar as land and water resources and local climate limit the range of available products. This factor is no longer generally seen as limiting the range of products consumed in industrialized regions. Another factor that distinguishes these societies is the extent to which demand and choice are income-dependent. Since the middle of the last century it has been found that income, as such, explains consumer choices in the industrialized world to a lesser and lesser extent [1]. The price elasticity of meat is high in low-income countries, but remains relatively inelastic in higher income industrialized countries [2]. In both cases this reflects the high priority accorded to meat products, but only in industrialized regions is this demand not markedly limited by household income.

A focus upon shared categorizations and dietary rules in anthropological and sociological research has underlain the notion that each food culture is unique and that the meanings of any particular set of food practices must be interpreted in relation to their specific cultural setting. This focus has obscured two central characteristics of food practices.

Firstly, many basic food categories (such as 'beef' and 'pork') are in fact fully transcultural [cf. 14], which is to say: precisely the same objects are designated by different terms in different languages. This also applies to more abstract categories, such as the distinction between 'vegetable' and 'animal' foods. The transcultural or global character of many food categories undermines the view that each cuisine is correctly regarded as being unique in all important respects. Indeed, if this were not the case, it would make little sense to estimate actual and expected global demand for meat or any other product category.

Secondly, and much more importantly from the viewpoint of understanding the meanings of food practices, people not only categorize products, they also rank them relative to each other. The order in which food products are commonly ranked in the

Western world was identified 25 years ago as follows [15]. Meat products were seen as having the highest status at the top of the culinary scale, fruit and vegetables as occupying a mid-point, and cereal products as having the least status at the bottom of the scale. Further graded distinctions within these categories were also identified. For example, red meats were seen as having relatively more status than the white meats of poultry or fish, and the latter in turn as having relatively more status than other animal products such as eggs, cheese or milk products. Similarly, consumers rank variants within a single product category. Thus, fresh products are generally accorded a higher status than processed variants. Even among fresh products, however, one variant as compared to another is likely to be assessed as being juicier, larger, cheaper, or perhaps as being quite simply better (on the grounds that it is locally produced, free-range, organic, salmonella-free or something else). The particular criteria (size, price, etc.) according to which such gradient ('more or less') distinctions are made differ to some extent from one person, social class or region to another. Nevertheless, a shared understanding of gradient differences between products is intrinsic to the shared rules that implicitly govern their usage in any given culture or sub-culture. Familiar variants, products, dishes and meals are each located at a particular point on such gradient scales [16].

Any such continuum or 'scale' can be described as occupying the space between two endpoints, each of which is commonly named by means of binary distinctions. Examples are: cheap - expensive, meager - copious, healthy - unhealthy, ordinary - special, important - unimportant, etc. The issue to be resolved by the consumer in any instance might be: just how (relatively) expensive or unhealthy a given product is or just how important a particular ingredient is to a given dish. Mastery of the cultural rules depends on the ability to locate just where precisely on such continua a given item fits in, assessed according to the criteria that count in a given milieu. According to this view of consumption practices, all products that enter the food system of a given milieu are accorded gradient meanings in this manner.

Shared categorizations underlie explicit dietary rules. Thus, pork is forbidden to Muslims and Jews, and all meat products are eschewed by vegetarians. Rules of this kind serve important social functions, particularly regarding the distinction and segregation of social groups. The identification of categories and explicit rules, however, tells us relatively little about the complex food practices that constitute a particular cuisine. Implicit dietary rules, in contrast, are followed in practice, but are not put into words. Keeping the rules is a matter of knowing when it is appropriate for whom to eat and/or drink what, when, and in the company of

whom. The cultural grammar that underlies rules of this kind is one that distinguishes gradient differences between events and persons as well as food products. It takes time to master such a grammar, but it is exceedingly simple in its day-to-day operation. The key to appropriate usage of food and drink in any given situation rests upon the ability to attune the location of items on gradient scales in the culinary domain to the corresponding location of events and persons on gradient scales in the social domain. It is for this reason we tend to move up the culinary scale when important guests are coming to dinner, until the point is reached at which our options are deemed to be fitting [17]. The difficulty in practice is always that of hitting the nail on the head.

This account of the scalar dimensions of consumption practices is one that attributes a central role to items of food and drink as carriers of gradient meanings that are tacitly understood. It recognizes that products constitute the medium of communication by which gradient distinctions in the social sphere are expressed. This is the perspective that is needed in order to understand the extent to which the use of any particular consumer product is entrenched within a given cultural setting.

THE CULTURAL ENTRENCHMENT OF MEAT

Food products (and other consumer goods) are culturally entrenched when they serve as a medium of analogical communication regarding the relative status of social occasions, including eating events, as well as that of persons. Not all of the household meals of the day, the week, the calendar year or of a lifetime are accorded equal importance. Their relative importance is indicated by a number of gradient features: the use of more (or less) household time, money and skill, expectations regarding a greater (or smaller) number of participants, as well as the relative length of time devoted to the occasion. On this basis it can be said that 'dinner' is usually accorded more importance than 'lunch', while least importance is commonly attributed to the first meal of the day: 'breakfast'. The role of meat at the top of the culinary scale is indicated by the fact that meat is traditionally the main ingredient of the main course of the main meal of the day. Since more status is generally accorded to hot than to cold dishes, this course is also served hot [cf. 3]. Among meat products as we have seen, more status has been traditionally accorded to red meat as compared to the white meats of poultry or fish. But there are also gradient differences between cuts of meat, which in turn serve as indicators of the relative status of a particular meal. [18]. Thus, ground or chopped meat is generally accorded less status than are whole pieces, such as a chop or steak. The latter in

turn have relatively less status than that of a joint of meat, and a joint less than that a whole animal. Some ambiguity is introduced to this gradient scale due to relative differences regarding animal size. Thus a whole roast chicken may occupy a location on the culinary scale that approximates that of a joint of beef, lamb or pork, while the same might be said of a joint of chicken as compared, let us say, to a pork chop. Differences of this kind are in turn reflected on a different gradient scale: that of retail prices. The manner in which meat products are culturally entrenched in Western food practices is revealed by considering some examples of the place usually accorded to these products in courses and meals of more and less importance, respectively. Thinly sliced cold cuts of preserved or otherwise processed meat are a familiar feature of lunch formats in most parts of the industrialized world. Given the relatively lower status of breakfast as compared to lunch, however, their presence there serves to raise the relative status of such a breakfast. Cold cuts are therefore likely to be included in the breakfast buffet of more expensive hotels, serving (alongside fresh fruit salad) as one of several indicators of a superior breakfast. Their presence as the main ingredient of the main course of the main meal of the day has a correspondingly different gradient meaning. Such products will tend to render that higher status meal an inferior variant of dinner - both by reason of being cold and by reason of being a processed product. Products located at a higher point on the culinary scale appropriately belong to the more important meal of the day. It can be noted that in cultures in which cold cuts are a feature of the main meal, they function as a first course, not a main course. In Italian cuisine, for example, cold cuts are a treasured feature of the antipasti, not the main course.

Given their lower status on the culinary scale relative to fresh products, preserved and processed meat products also serve as markers of lower status meals - even when cooked and served as a hot dish. The 'full breakfast' in British cuisine and elsewhere includes sausages and bacon among other items, and is traditionally regarded as a breakfast of a superior kind, but only as compared to other breakfasts. These products also serve as welcome snacks and constitute appropriate ingredients of a sandwich lunch. Cooked sausages serve these functions in many societies, but are nevertheless a marker of an inferior variant of dinner should they appear as the main ingredient of the main course. The same might be said of the ubiquitous burger - not because the meat ingredient is a processed product, but because minced meat is lower on the culinary scale relative to other cuts of meat. Used as a topping on otherwise meatless main dishes, however, a product such as 'bacon bits' serves to

raise the relative status of such dishes as a pizza, omelet or salad.

Research in the UK during the 1970s and 1980s identified the ingredients of a 'proper dinner', as seen by consumers and as compared to all other dinners [3, 4, 5]. Unsurprisingly, the main ingredient of the main course was a whole piece of meat such as a chop, steak or joint of chicken. The serving was done in the proper manner when the plate served to each participant also included one helping of cooked green vegetables and small boiled potatoes, over which gravy was poured. The most important meal of the week, Sunday dinner, was marked by the presentation of a joint of roast red meat and by roasting the potatoes in the juice of this meat. The presentation of a whole roast animal of larger dimensions than that of a chicken is, however, commonly reserved for occasions of even greater importance on the social scale. Thus, a whole roast turkey is the marker of Thanksgiving in USA and of Christmas in the UK and elsewhere. The phenomenon of gendered food practices serves as one example of the ways in which gradient scales in the culinary domain are commonly mapped onto gradient scales in the social domain. Men's well-documented preference for meat and women's preference for vegetables has been said to rest on some form of metaphorical understanding [19]. According to the view presented here, consumer perceptions of items of food and drink as being respectively 'masculine' or 'feminine' rest on the same form of analogical cognition as that which underlies all consumer practices, by which one gradient scale is compared to another. We can better understand why preferences for white meat as compared to red, for vegetarian as compared to meat dishes, for tea or coffee as compared to alcohol, are regarded as 'feminine' preferences, given the premise that men are regarded as having more social status than women. All of the food products commonly identified as 'masculine' have a common characteristic: each of them occupies a location on the culinary scale that is a step higher than the corresponding items perceived as being feminine. [21]. Similarly, on the premise that children rank lower than adults, there will be social occasions that are appropriately celebrated by servings of relatively low ranking items on the culinary scale, such as sausages or hamburgers. These occasions are children's parties.

CHANGING FOOD PRACTICES

The cuisines of industrialized regions continually undergo adaptations, the range of options being widened by global sourcing and distribution systems, migration, travel and innovations in the manufacturing, retail and food service sectors, although simultaneously narrowed on a global scale by decreasing biodiversity. A point that remains

constant is the need of consumers to be able to locate precisely where on an already familiar culinary scale new products, dishes and meal formats can be regarded as fitting in, and which products, dishes or formats can be regarded as appropriate substitutions for existing options. For the most part this adaptive task can be accomplished tacitly by observing who eats and drinks what, when, where, and in the company of whom. The question at issue here, however, regards the likelihood that consumers will make reflective decisions about changing their dietary practices on the basis of recommendations from experts.

We can briefly consider the falling popularity of the 'proper dinner' as one example of a change that has occurred tacitly and the rising popularity of 'organic' foods as one example of a trend in which reflective decisions do play a part in changing consumption practices.

The 'proper dinner' comprises one item from the top of the culinary scale, one item from its mid-point and an indefinite number of items from a slightly lower position again. As such it serves as a perfect analogue for the 'proper' family, but only insofar as such a family is perceived as comprising a unit in which superior status is attributed to one (male) adult, somewhat lower status to one (female) adult and least status to an indefinite number of other beings (children) [16]. The increasing recognition of gender equality during the last 40 years has rendered this format a less than perfect analogue of the nuclear family and other households. For this reason alone we would expect to find this meal format less frequently among couples who regard each other as equals.

The case of increasing demand for organic foods has a quite different character. Given the availability of these products, the selection of organic as compared to conventional variants at a premium price may be supported by the assumption that higher prices indicate better products. It may also be supported by the observation of a trend - for example, that people with relatively higher social status are buying these products. However, research documents that reflective decisions with respect to health, the environment and a range of ethical issues do underlie this demand on the part of frequent buyers. Food safety concerns with respect to health and animal welfare also play a role, as does distrust of the conventional food industry [20]. It should be noted that insofar as these purchasing decisions rest upon the substitution of conventional by organic variants, they do not necessarily entail changes in the dishes and meal formats of a given cuisine.

The dietary recommendations of experts are likely to be acceptable or unacceptable to consumers precisely in the measure that specific recommendations, if followed, would disrupt the medium by which gradient distinctions are

currently recognized and communicated. In this light it can be seen that a recommendation to eliminate preserved and processed meat products and a recommendation to reduce the consumption of fresh, red meat products represent two challenges to consumers of quite different character.

Because processed products are generally accorded a lower status than fresh products, the former function as signifying markers of secondary status at all points within the meal system. Their elimination would wreck havoc with the system by which inferior, acceptably appropriate and superior variants of a variety of dishes, courses and meals are currently distinguished. On this basis, it would seem highly unlikely that consumers would or could accept this challenge in the foreseeable future. Changes of this kind, insofar as they are made, would in all likelihood occur very gradually indeed.

The situation is somewhat different with respect to a challenge to decrease the consumption of fresh red meat products on an everyday basis. Decisions on this point largely rest on the acceptability of appropriate substitutes for the main ingredient of the main meal (poultry, fish, meat substitutes, etc.) or, alternatively, the acceptability of meal formats that obscure the role of ranked ingredients. A recent survey among Danish consumers reveals that 38% express a preference for a 'traditional' main course in which meat is the main ingredient, 29% prefer 'modern' dishes such as a stir-fry or pasta dish, while the remaining 33% are equally pleased with either option. Almost two-thirds (64%) of those with traditional preferences declare that they would find a hot meal that did not include meat as 'a meal that is missing something', whereas only one quarter of those with 'modern' preferences do so [21]. These findings indicate the likelihood that consumers would have strongly divided opinions about the prospect of reducing their meat consumption. Nevertheless, it would seem that a majority of Danish consumers would be open to this possibility. Recent surveys of organic consumption among Danes reveal that a tendency to purchase organic foods with relatively greater frequency is positively correlated with a preference for 'modern' dishes [22], and with a tendency to eat less meat [23]. The fact that concerns about health and the environment are widely reported among consumers of organic products in industrialized regions, and the fact that demand for these products is rising are among the indicators that these concerns do function as criteria by which gradient distinctions in the culinary domain are increasingly made by consumers. On this basis it can be said that a decreasing consumption of red meat products in industrialized countries is a possible and even likely development within the foreseeable future.

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