As recent events have made clear, food is once again at the heart of the political economy. In the spring of 2008, food riots rattled thirty countries, among them Thailand, Haiti, Egypt, Cameroon, and Madagascar, drawing media attention to the precarious balance between food supply and demand. Although these events were transitory, they revealed an underlying structural tension: Food shortages, which often lead to famine, are permanent, and they are likely to get worse even if agricultural productivity manages to outstrip population growth.

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations reports that 34,000 people die each day of hunger, and 930 million suffer from severe malnutrition. Once-abundant agricultural reserves are now being used up. Between 2008 and 2009 the European Union increased food aid from 300 to 500 million Euros; this money was earmarked for 43 million people—about one-twelfth of the EU’s total population—whose income does not allow for adequate nutrition. Belt-tightening has affected even the middle classes in industrialized countries, where food represents, on average, about 20 percent of household expenditures (in developing countries about 75 percent of the household income goes to food). The growing gap between the rising cost of living and stagnating salaries has prompted anxiety about the future. In France, the difficulty of meeting basic needs has stimulated collective memory and plucked the chords of sedition. As one respondent told a New York Times reporter, issues of subsistence precipitated the French Revolution.

Food riots always originate in subsistence crises or in the impossibility of meeting the high cost of living. No universal mechanism, however, automatically links scarcity to rebellion. Violent protests punctuate protracted periods during which other means of coping—even just resignation—allow vulnerable populations to endure an unsteady food supply and chronic malnutrition. In fact, physical exhaustion and material destitution lead to cultural malaise and political demoralization as often as they do to insubordination and revolt. Uprisings may result from an exceptional constellation of circumstances: a sudden rise in prices; a dramatic drop in food availability combined with the authorities’ refusal to intervene; or a response to suspected hoarding. Yet these sporadic upheavals always expose an underlying state of need.

Hunger has long held humanity hostage. The fear of want is one of the great protagonists of human history, and bread or grain riots are its most spectacular illustration. This fear and the desire to escape it have been the driving forces behind the exploitation of natural resources and have led to the development of techniques for acquiring food, from gathering, hunting, fishing, herding, and farming to industrialized food production. They have also engendered magical and religious rites to alleviate the anxieties caused by the hazards of agricultural production, and they have guided the construction of political administrations whose legitimacy rests on how successfully they regulate the food supply. Last but not least, fear of want has inspired the creation of cuisines and the refinements of gastronomy. Food, then, is essential to an understanding of community, social hierarchies, the division of labor, manners, trade, spirituality, and communication.

The study of food sheds light on economic processes, social structures, and mental habits, mobilizing a vast spectrum of the social sciences to answer questions about agricultural productivity, the effects of scarcity, individual and public health, the influence of demographics, ecology, and power. The numerous dimensions of food and its centrality to human history prompt an examination of how various societies, from prehistoric times to the present, have posed the problem of a safe food supply and elaborated strategies for obtaining, methods of preserving, and ways of consuming their food.

Need: Between a Biological Standard and a Cultural Definition

Human nourishment is an individual biological necessity. This view underlies the way international organizations, notably the FAO, think about food security. A quantitative
definition of human physical needs has the advantage of fixing a level of rations necessary for maintaining life and for identifying populations that live below this threshold. This manner of seeing human existence interprets scarcity and hunger—and, more generally, poverty—as invariable, something that can be measured as a function of a timeless biological standard, or at least calculated from immutable parameters.

In objectifying a given situation, these figures are useful for calibrating social and political programs for public health. Yet their elaboration, interpretation, and the political use to which they are put regularly give rise to debates in which the stakes revolve around influence, the cost of different policies, and the stigmas attached to classifications that risk reinforcing rather than diminishing exclusion. Polemics say a lot about the way in which power—including the power to define or frame issues—is distributed in a society; they also inform us of the dominant values that lead to the identification of a “problem.” However, polemics say very little about the manner in which these “problems” (scarcity, disease, poverty) are actually experienced—and what they say is often erroneous or stamped with moral judgment. The categories are not commensurate: statistics apply to an average individual portrayed in quantitative terms, but experience is social and, as such, built up from multiple practices and relationships.

The same argument holds for luxury. The rarity of an item and its exalted position in elite consumption do not instill an instinctive desire for its possession among other social groups. The diffusion of sugar in the eighteenth century owed almost nothing to its prestige among the European aristocracy; on the contrary, its high place in the diet of the wealthy might have motivated a rejection of the commodity and the social model with which it was associated. Although a drop in price made sugar available to poorer purses, the increase in consumption resulted from its integration into daily habits.

In England hot, sweet tea, accompanied by bread and jam, marked breaks in the workday and provided energy. On the European continent, late-nineteenth-century publicity campaigns extolled sugar as an alcohol substitute, fuel to drive the “human machine.” Such images gradually eroded the earlier association of sugar and sweets (pastries and chocolate) with idleness and frivolity. Conceptions of living and eating well among the working classes were not based on a desire for sugar (and even less on an innate taste for it); its widespread use was linked to a coherent set of social practices, among which the pause café held an important place.

The taxonomy of goods has its own history, and when examining food and foodways, the social sciences have a double imperative: inquiries must both record consumption routines and elucidate the interpretations that endow them with meaning. The explication of alimentary practices ideally combines a structural, often quantitative, approach...
with an interpretation of the social and symbolic uses of food, for the food supply depends on a whole chain of decisions and definitions established prior to the existence of the individual, whose life and survival depend on them. In other words, food is not consumed in social isolation or in a historical vacuum. History, anthropology, archeology, and sociology have never forgotten that food cannot be reduced to the physical reproduction of the human body but, rather, contributes fundamentally to social reproduction. These disciplines inscribe food in a context that encompasses every aspect of resource management—from the production and distribution of food supplies to their consumption. Even leftovers are of interest. To consume food is obviously to destroy it. Food is useful only to the person who ingests it, as its nutritional value is of no direct use to anyone else. But the food chain engages multitudes, and precisely because it is the result of collective endeavor, food carries messages and meanings. Thus food serves as a framework for collective representations around which human society organizes itself.

These collective representations depict not only the divine creation of the world and its riches but also disclose the criteria by which a culture differentiates food sources into edibles and nonedibles. As mental constructs, these representations allow a community to fix its cosmos and find its place therein. They are codes of conduct ranging from dietetics to seemingly behavior. Involved here is the classification of people and things and of attitudes and gestures, classifications that sort out the external world and structure it according to certain characteristics or desirable traits in order to establish a moral order. Although the principles underlying these classifications respond to imperatives for coherence and regularity that are essential to the smooth functioning of the community, they rarely correspond to our contemporary idea of efficacy. Yet cultural arbitrariness does not prevent them from being efficient—far from it.

Numerous examples illustrate the cultural definitions of alimentary needs. A complete meal in Japan must contain rice; the word gohan means both “cooked rice” and “meal.” The verb chifan in China designates a meal that necessarily includes a cooked grain. The term simhe of the Otomi Indians of central Mexico signifies the main meal but literally means “to eat tortillas.” Cretans—whose traditional way of eating is now touted as a model for the world—cannot conceive of a meal without bread. In this respect the Cretans can be compared to the French, for whom bread should always accompany the meal, even if it is no longer the main dish. On a smaller scale, social milieus have their own notions about what constitutes adequate nourishment. Thinkers as different as Adam Smith and Georg Simmel intuited that each social class supports its own definition of what is necessary, of what is decent, in order to find one’s place in it and avoid losing face. It is noteworthy that French sociologists in the twentieth century (from Maurice Halbwachs to Claude and Christiane Grignon) have empirically demonstrated that food repertoires are socially determined. If a key element goes missing, people may experience hunger, in the sense of want, even when calories and other nutrients are available in sufficient amounts. It is this sense of deprivation, and not simply the reality of the body’s metabolism, that guides human behavior. People may go so far as to refuse substitutes graciously handed out in a philanthropic spirit if the gesture ignores the cultural value accorded particular foods or fails to account for the shame that may accompany the acceptance of charity.

Interpretations of hunger (and of poverty) stretch between two poles. At one end, the burden is placed on the individual; at the other, hunger and poverty are treated as systemic effects. Public authorities vacillate between these alternative causes. But as long as public policies lean heavily on numerical, objective data that champion the average individual but ignore the fact that this individual is part of a specific social context, efforts aimed at decreasing hunger and poverty, whether via educational campaigns or social transfers, remain inefficient at best, and counterproductive at worst. “All things equal in time” is no axiom on which government actions ought to rely. Their effectiveness depends on the recognition of the particular cultures and outlooks of their target populations.

**Clio and Alimentation**

Because cultures attach significance to food and create rules to regulate food consumption, alimentation cannot be reduced to its biological component. Even those historians most passionately attached to quantitative reasoning have not forgotten that we do not eat any old thing with anyone, anywhere, or at any time of day: they, too, know that social norms steer meals and mealtimes.

The original infatuation with numbers is often attributed to the Annales School. This approach, beginning in the 1930s, avoided traditional political history and focused on hitherto neglected topics. Its subject matter was at times heavily weighted toward structures and volumes of production and commerce, and the price of goods, all patiently culled from registries and accounts, both private and institutional. It is true that Ernest Labrousse, who was loosely
associated with the Annales School, proposed a quantitative interpretation of the French Revolution: with a great many numbers at his disposal, he documented how a prolonged subsistence crisis engendered a general economic slump that so enraged the people that it contributed to the eventual overthrow of the monarchy.

This narrative is lodged in the French collective imagination. And yet, the vision that attributes political mobilization to the vicissitudes of provisioning is foreign to the pioneering inquiry on “material life and biological behavior” launched by the Annales School in the early 1960s. For this reason, a more apt precursor is the lesser-known German historian Wilhelm Abel. His work on economic crises and agrarian development in Central Europe, published in 1935, combines an awareness of systems of production with a concern for describing social experiences without undue enthrallment to the spectacular political consequences of hunger. Rather, Abel considers the effect of scarcity and famine on life expectancy, productive capacity, and resistance to epidemics.

In any case, with these historians we find ourselves in the decade of the Great Depression, which influenced the perception of what mattered when it came to food; the point of view was reinforced by the privations endured during World War II. When quantitative modes of historical analysis were at their apogee, in an era when economic underdevelopment became a public issue, researchers wished above all to document shortages. As soon as World War II ended, the paucity of calories, protein, and vitamin D, in Europe and worldwide, preoccupied both the media and the authorities. Concern with these deficiencies was so great that a “milk problem” emerged in France, that being the title, in fact, of a 1947 article published in the scholarly journal Population. The tone was heightened in a November 1947 article on “the agonizing problem of milk” in the widely distributed magazine France Illustration. Experts in public health did not retreat from the fray. They recommended that the state stimulate increased production of dairy products and organize educational campaigns in the schools to “teach our future housewives how to feed [their families] in a manner at once healthy and economical.”

Milk and protein became the panacea for combating worldwide food shortages and malnutrition due to kwashiorkor and rickets. France not only provided milk in schools but also tried to combat alcoholism by distributing it to soldiers in military canteens. This policy has acquired near-mythic status: public memory of Pierre Mendès-France’s government rests more on its promotion of milk than on its anticolonial stance. (Now that our concern is with overweight, fruits and vegetables have replaced the glass of milk distributed at recess, at least in certain prioritized areas of France.) In Crete, American nutritionists considered a five-fold increase in the consumption of dairy products a necessary condition of the modernization of the island’s economy. This zeitgeist permeated academic research, too. The Annales School wanted to test the hypothesis that “the vitality of the tenth century” was indeed due to increased protein intake as a consequence of the shift from biennial to triennial crop rotation, which fostered the reintroduction of legumes in Western European agriculture and alimentation. Measures of energy supply and nutritional balance appeared to be key in explaining unequal development worldwide.

There are good reasons for placing such emphasis on quantities. But these historians also studied economic inequalities and social hierarchies. They knew that food has a symbolic charge that often outweighs its nutritional substance; food and drink resonate beyond the human metabolism. The semiotician Roland Barthes reflected on the research being done on material objects and the body: “Wine is not only wine,” he reiterated in 1960 during a seminar at the Sixth Section of the École Pratique des Hautes Études, the academic home of the Annales. “Sugar (American) and wine (French), substances so plentiful, are also institutions. And these institutions fatally imply images, dreams, taboos, tastes, choices, and values.” No historian could ignore the fact that the quality of the food consumed expresses a social judgment about the status of the consumer. Barthes also noted that foods function as vehicles mediating sentiments of belonging. He described wine in France and milk in the United States as vectors of cultural integration. To refuse their consumption means to refuse the group, resulting in marginalization and threatening the exclusion of those who refuse to partake. In the mid-1950s, right-wing politicians construed Pierre Mendès-France’s endorsement of milk as a recreational drink as yet another sign of his betrayal of eternal French identity.

Identification poses obstacles to innovation. Fernand Braudel encountered “the difficulty of eating the bread of others” as a serious limit to the politics of substitution in times of crisis. A majority of civilizations, he ascertained, define themselves around a cereal (wheat, rice, corn). Food habits resist authoritarian injunctions, and philanthropic intentions run afoul of alimentary traditions. Because milk occupied a minimal place in the time-honored Cretan cuisine, the pressure exerted by the United States in the late 1940s failed to persuade the Cretans to integrate milk into their diet. Or take the Irish example: when the potato blight struck in the 1840s, corn was not readily accepted as a replacement.
By the end of the 1950s French historians had taken their lead from Lucien Febvre and agreed on the relationship between the social and biological attributes of food consumption: hunger and thirst are universal physiological manifestations, but the manner of satiating them takes a great variety of forms. In short, appetite emerged as a cultural variable in its own right. And yet, once this research emerged, the particularities of each food system mattered less than the comparisons based on nutritional equivalences. Today, the knowledge gained from that research is largely shared: peas and beans gradually metamorphosed into “poor man’s meat”; corn from the New World became a mainstay, replacing such local grains as millet; potatoes, also from the New World, became a staple primarily thanks to government campaigns to introduce them.

Although the Annales School is often castigated for its tendency to ignore politics, its representatives have no qualms about posing the question of who profits from food crises. The answers are diverse and nuanced, as are the descriptions of how administrations function in times of crisis. In the modern era rumors, far from pointing to the heights of political power, began targeting the groups involved in the commerce of food: the bakers and millers, the wheat merchants, and, in England, the brewers. These intermediaries were accused of monopolizing the wheat trade and artificially orchestrating famine. Indeed, the structure of commerce and the organization of the commercial chain from wheat to flour to bread determined who pocketed surplus value. In Germany, it was the great landowners who raked in the most spectacular profits, whereas in England, a handful of grain merchants got rich quickly as prices soared. In Sicily, shortage and famine resulted in considerable profits for the aristocracy and the merchants, whose influence on the royal administration was woven into a fabric of sociality that united social and political elites. In France, the gradual substitution of flour for wheat as an item of commerce brought cheer to the bakers and ended by making a fortune for the millers, who had progressively taken over trade.

This history acknowledged food as a total social fact. It recognized the importance of codification, ceremonial practice, and normative discourse and was mindful of...
sensibilities. Some of the Annales practitioners participated in inventing the history of mentalités and collective representations. Nevertheless, something was still missing, and it is hard to overlook these historians’ almost willful ignorance of the research simultaneously being done by ethnographers on popular customs and beliefs. They cited Claude Lévi-Strauss, but not Arnold van Gennep, a surprising lapse, given the real proximity, in the 1950s, between the founders of the Annales School and the French ethnologists with whom they discussed the existence of a common intellectual heritage. Need I point out that Lucien Febvre directed the Commission of Collective Research, one section of which dealt precisely with popular cuisines and left its archives to the Museum of Popular Arts and Traditions? Or what about van Gennep’s reflections on the classification of facts within a general explanatory framework in order to prevent folklore from relapsing into antiquarianism, empiricism, and the study of the picturesque, none of which could contribute to the discovery of the laws governing social life, let alone to the explanation of their underlying logic? Historians shared these preoccupations in their desire to transform their discipline, bound to the particular and to chronology, into a science of humankind capable of discovering and explicating the common determinants of facts that had hitherto been considered heterogeneous.\textsuperscript{12}

Regrettably, the dialogue never happened, and the consequences became clear in the 1960s. There was no intellectual toolkit for describing and explaining alimentary habits and their interpretation by the people whose practices they constituted and whose worldviews they helped express. The social experience of eating among people for whom food remains a perpetual source of anxiety tends to be lost in this mode of inquiry. What remains is a sort of genealogy of taste and, in particular, of good taste—in short, the study of the culinary system as a system of signs.\textsuperscript{13} The exchange between historians and ethnographers would have made it possible to reconstitute models of consumption and to clarify principles of popular taste. These models could then have been linked to agrarian practices, norms, and means of production and distribution at every level, from the state to the household, in order to elucidate the establishment and functioning of social networks of provisioning. Such networks ensured the food supply of the family and of larger social groups according to a “grammar” that included material constraints and allowed for the occasional hedonistic splurge. Early inquiries thus overlooked the archives and did not find the words to describe or explain the pleasures of ordinary food.\textsuperscript{14} Still, the field of food history began by placing food clearly under the double sign of material culture: it favored its biological component and noted, albeit in a minor mode, its symbolic aspects.

### Accounting for Alimentary Practices

This historiographic perspective makes it possible to escape the emphasis on the individual as put forth in the definition of food security used by international organizations under the auspices of the United Nations. The focus needs to be on the social aspects and the collective work, both physical and cultural, that characterize our relationship with food. Whereas the average individual serves as the point of departure and point of reference for biological and nutritional analyses of human nourishment, people must be seen as the sum of their social relationships, which are historical and dynamic. Furthermore, while the individual is able to depart from the norm, only by inscribing him or her in a specific social context can the possible sense and certainly the limits of what he or she can do be disclosed.

The concern, then, is with the sometimes-contested categories by which a society perceives subsistence, highlights the problems it poses, and portrays the opportunities it offers. This approach interrogates the ways that culture mediates our relationship to food; it observes knowledge and skills as they are deployed in natural and social environments. These cognitive systems have eminently practical goals. They explain how natural resources can most effectively be exploited, how a predictable pattern can be imposed on commercial exchanges, how eating habits can be guided toward good health. Such competence is unequally distributed in society, and its implementation can encounter obstacles: game may impulsively follow an unforeseen path; severe weather may destroy a crop; vermin may infiltrate a store of grain; commerce may be interrupted by war; a coherent set of legal rules does not always protect from far-fetched interpretations.

Theory can also collide with practice. The justifications for certain ways of doing things turn out to be diverse, even surprising. A manual of health and hygiene published in 1926 deplored the fact that French workers still thought that alcohol confers strength. Nonetheless, as late as the 1950s the French medical establishment continued to endorse rum as an ally against colds. There has never been scientific consensus about the effects of alcohol. One group finds health benefits in wine and even participates in advertising campaigns, while another group recommends moderation. The hypothesis of a link between alcohol and good health resurfaced in the early 1990s, when the media, especially in the United States, were saturated with reports on the
“French paradox.” Curiously enough, the over-consumption of animal fat and alcohol correlated with a lowered incidence of cardiovascular disease. This incongruity has inspired a number of research projects, whose conclusions remain to be verified. For now, tentative results have enough substance to baffle the skeptics: compared to abstinence, moderate consumption of alcohol seems to contribute to a significantly lower incidence of myocardial infarction in men aged forty to sixty-five, and to sustained mental agility in women over seventy years of age.\footnote{15}

Reversals of official opinion are, in fact, numerous. At the beginning of the twentieth century pasteurization emancipated milk from its poor reputation, which dated back to Galenic medicine, and the emerging science of nutrition helped enthrone milk as a miracle food. Today, milk once again stands accused, this time for its contribution to obesity, particularly as it affects children and teenagers. Another case has to do with \textit{Lactobacillus fermentum}. Publicity for this bacterium touted its ability to stimulate intestinal movement (it did actually stimulate the sale of yogurt in the United States), but \textit{L. fermentum} is now suspected of contributing to weight gain.\footnote{16} The food industry does not hesitate to weigh in on the contradictions and inconsistencies in medical research. Battles are waged for many foodstuffs besides alcohol—battles between fat and low-fat, the original version and the “lite,” good and bad cholesterol, sweetened and natural (the current definition of “natural,” which allows for the addition of sugar, seems counter-intuitive), between those things that benefit health and those that benefit the economy. The most flagrant abuses regarding what is good for the health appear to be proscribed by EU regulations, but the official guidelines are already stimulating the imaginations of industry marketers and lobbyists. Since transparency is not exactly a virtue of labeling, consumers remain confused.\footnote{17}

All of this is to say that the translation of knowledge into practice can collide with a number of things: with nature itself, the contingencies of life in a society, social arrangements, personal idiosyncrasies, and beliefs and recommendations. An awareness of the limits of our practical competence causes us to invent other ploys; in this way gaps in our grasp of the natural world may be filled in by magic. Appeals are made to supernatural powers to intervene, to help protect the fields and preserve the harvest. Indifference to, or deviation from, ritual may be invoked as an ad hoc explanation for poor harvests, loss of stock, or other occurrences that reduce the food supply.\footnote{18} For commercial exchange to operate smoothly, a conjunction of the market and personal interaction is often required. To ensure lasting relationships, gifts can replace impersonal and abstract prices as a measure of confidence that increases the chance (without guaranteeing the certainty) of perpetuating the transactions and preventing the rupture of contracts and the occurrence of artificial shortages.\footnote{19}

Scrutinizing practices and representations from the inside, so to speak, not only allows alternative options to be inventoried and complementary means of analysis to be mobilized; retrieving experience in the context in which it is lived also restores the motivations that explain particular behavior. Such an approach protects us from a surreptitious anachronism that transposes our categories, our ways of thinking, counting, and doing, to times that are not ours, or to anything “other.” Thus, the question of abundance, which has unsettled the social sciences for a generation, retreats behind the impressive accumulation of archeological knowledge regarding the strategies of provisioning and the social organization of prehistoric hunters. This research opens up avenues for exploring the social uses of food in prehistoric times and, notably, its distribution for political ends. It is certain, however, that the sharing of food was aimed at tightening social bonds and important to the exchange of goods and information outside the group. Prehistoric societies did not frame issues of excess food, waste, or resource management the way critics and partisans of consumer society do today. Their ideas of daily activity—work and leisure—are not at all our own.\footnote{20}

Contextualizing allows us to grasp the various and changing meanings of enduring notions. Speculation haunted the Roman Empire as much as it did the societies of the Ancien Régime, which feared monopolization. In the nineteenth century this heritage informed France’s legal reasoning and the political perception of new commercial contracts, and in fact inhibited their growth. Fear of food shortages caused by human greed persisted in an environment marked by ever-greater volumes of merchandise; and apprehension grew with the invention of futures markets dealing in goods yet to be produced. Opponents criticized these practices for introducing delusion into the negotiations. The dire conditions of the 1930s elicited particular criticism: “No merchandise is officially represented in the Commodities Exchange, where goods are, in a manner of speaking, myths, or imaginary quantities through which we exercise our love of gambling.” This criticism resonates anew today, because the commercial and legal scaffolding put into place in the second half of the nineteenth century still regulates our markets. Two distinct prices, one real, the other derived, often characterize such products as wheat, corn, and soybeans on the commodities market. Has the
market breathed real life into a fiction? This anomaly tests the explanatory capacity of standard economics and clouds the decisions that will affect the agricultural supply, and hence the profusion or scarcity of foodstuffs, in the future.21

Chronological distance sheds light on differences and facilitates the discovery of the meaning and functions attributed to meals and the dishes that constitute them. “The pleasures of the repast,” reports Venance Fortunat, an Italian monk living in sixth-century Poitiers, France, are intensified when one has “suffered from hunger.” In an era when wars were more common than peace, Fortunat emphasized the quantities served: mountains of cheeses and meats surrounded by gardens of vegetables through which streamed, in the deep valleys, rich rivers of sauces and honey. As a gourmet, he was extremely sensitive to the organoleptic qualities of food and drink. As a connoisseur deprived for a time of his customary nourishment, he describes in great detail the swollen blackness of plums, the triumphant white of milk, the delicious bouquet of a stew, vegetables sweetened with honey, as well as the sources of his food.

Culinary sophistication continued throughout the Middle Ages. The processes and materials used to conserve food, the combinations of which were devised with well-defined gustatory and medicinal aims in mind, offer an archaeology of taste that is concerned as much with the containers (how food was stored) as with the contents (the kinds of food consumed) and the interaction between them. The gastronomical canon thus accords value to the tastes that remind us of the earth, and crockery becomes the vehicle for gratifying this predilection.22 The inquiry into pottery opens up a new angle on an old problem. Storage represents a relatively efficient way to thwart a temporary setback in the food supply due to a poor harvest or war. Since managing food stocks, provisioning, and exporting are responsibilities of the political authorities, historians are most of all interested in the strategies of food security enacted by cities and states. Attention to the domestic means of conserving food leads us to the central unity of economic thought that persisted until modern economic theory arose in the eighteenth century.

It is possible to posit the emergence of French gastronomy as a counterpoint to pernicious daily scarcity. An obsession with hunger may well have sustained the rise of a culture that aimed to alleviate, surmount, and sublimate—in short, that did its best to overcome limited supply by any means available. Aristocrats made much of the distinction between themselves and the poor souls who ate sourdough black bread (or worse, porridge made of millet or chestnuts) rather than white bread made with baker’s yeast; or who, to fill their empty bellies, added a bit of lard to their soup rather than dining on roast lark. The value accorded white flour was economically irrational and, in retrospect, nutritionally myopic; nevertheless, it suggests the intention of putting distance between rich and poor, and of denying the yoke of nature beneath which the great majority labored each day. The development of French grande cuisine arguably has its roots in the depths of misery.

Descriptions of food invite vivid language. Conversely, food metaphors are often used to identify social relationships and the commentary surrounding them. Thus, Venance Fortunat praises one of his benefactors: “From your mouth there flows a nectar which I drink with great pleasure,” adding, “Your mind is the salt of your soul.” For us postmoderns, there is surely material for reflection here, as food supplied the vocabulary when language became its own subject. More recently, such self-referential games point to something that is easily forgotten: that the joys of the table cannot be reduced to eating, however refined. These joys are incomplete unless sensual pleasures are accompanied by mental delectation and worthwhile conversation. These two types of pleasure necessarily go hand in hand. Dining together constitutes a way of sharing food as well as an exchange that may be intellectual or material. In the first case, the exchange is the fruit of friendship, and friendship is its fruit. In the second, eating together constitutes an act of communication and representation that solidifies alliances but also signifies the participants’ obligation to carry out the plans of the particular society or group united around the table.23

Social Uses and Normative Ambition

Paying attention to ordinary uses discloses the weight of the historical and social determinants of eating habits. Locating these determinants is a way of avoiding the ethnocentric pitfall of judging others according to our own values. When trying to understand the attitudes of the French lower classes toward the links between eating and health, sociologists often face difficulty. People in these social categories take nutritional recommendations lightly, whereas the wealthy see a societal obligation in following them. The body-mass index creates anxiety among the better-off because it highlights the close relationship between physical appearance and self-control, a relationship that has both social and economic importance. Yet ignorance of medical norms among the lower classes, or a willingness to challenge these norms, proceeds less from a lack of understanding of the health risks involved than
from the high value accorded to meals. Meals serve to maintain family bonds and to express affection (toward children, spouses, and other family members) and respect (toward neighbors and distant relatives). Food is also one of the rare things that allow members of the lower classes to participate in consumerism, if only by buying foodstuffs high in calories and low in nutritional value. Because traditional celebrations are a means of momentarily forgetting the insecurity of the food supply and of throwing oneself with abandon into apparent abundance and overspending, daily meals in contemporary society offer the time and space to escape the preoccupations of lives lived at the edge of an economic abyss.

The human warmth associated with a richly laden table is common and familiar. But meals are only partially summed up by this vision of peace and harmony. Feasts give way to overeating and dyspepsia. More than once does the belly of Venance Fortunat expand to the point that he has the impression of being about to give birth, while “the gas that has accumulated in his body escapes in noisy belches.” Breach of etiquette and overweight are costly, both in the short term and the long run. English monks cultivated an embonpoint that harmed their health but distinguished them from laymen in the Middle Ages; analysis of their bones reveals that they were afflicted with pathological conditions associated with obesity. The table not only displays power, it is also a place of power. In order not to be expelled from the family circle, the young Franz Kafka endured the oppressive atmosphere of family meals and the humiliations inflicted by his father, even as he intuited the existence of a tangible happiness far removed from the paternal grip. Meals may solidify relationships or exacerbate social tensions: fatigue and alcohol combine in having harvest home—the banquet at the close of the agricultural season—occasionally end in a fight.

Accounting for alimentary practices necessitates inscribing them in a pertinent context. This empirical work—archival research in history, excavations in archeology, field work in anthropology, surveys and inquiries in sociology—offers protection from condescension and moral judgments, which are found not only in the postures of “experts” but also in the most well-intentioned scientific studies. A little knowledge of history and of the social sciences can prevent the repetition of patronizing admonishments to members of the lower classes and developing nations. Such suggestions appear as a refrain whose leitmotif is how individuals and families from the poorest social classes are incapable of keeping to a budget. The normative framework of this interpretation has its roots deep in the past. Ever since Doctor Villermé reported on the situation of the working classes in France in the 1850s, the source of material difficulties has been considered to lie not in their meager salaries but in a lack of moral fiber. Responsibility for the deleterious effects of ill-conceived budgetary allocations (those outside the normative boundaries) was thrown back onto the victims of these conditions. The desperate situation of the masses was said to result from their lack of discipline. Such an explanation of poverty conveniently eschewed social inequality as the cause of misery.

Settling on self-control as the default explanation, reformers continue to lean heavily on pedagogy to promote its acquisition. “The consumer should learn to optimize his budget,” we read in a recent suggestion, just as in the nineteenth century the consumer was supposed to “learn to drink water [instead of wine] and to make use of a broom” (i.e., clean up his act). This injunction brings to mind the ancestor of our present nutritional programs: the attempt to propagate, in the beginning of the twentieth century, rational nutrition for the working class. Educational campaigns designed to improve people’s “character” disseminated propaganda about a scientific approach to eating that was nutritionally balanced and economically sound. This project failed—an omen or a lesson for today?—because those to whom it was addressed had a different conception of what it meant to eat well.

Despite delicate undertones of benevolence, the same bell is rung in academic circles today. “A common image of the extremely poor is that they have few real choices to make,” begins a panorama of the lives of the poor in developing countries, who subsist on the equivalent of one or two dollars a day. This is an erroneous assumption, the authors assure us, citing a list of expenses that uselessly overburden the budgets of the poverty-stricken. The misallocations involve collective celebrations (weddings, funerals, religious ceremonies), sugar, spices, tea, tobacco, and alcohol. These careless expenses divert money from more rational outlays: investments in children’s education and in fertilizers for crops. The poor even have the audacity to eat rice or wheat, whereas millet, nutritionally equivalent but much cheaper, would do as well. The perfunctory review concludes that the problems affecting the quality of life result from the unwillingness of the poor to participate in more lucrative activities; and that their misery is a consequence of their psychological weakness and shortsighted behavior. But the poor are exercising “their power to choose what they buy,” as they were advised to do by the conservative magazine Challenges in 2007. The article adds, without irony, that the current decline of purchasing power offers those of modest
means the opportunity to loosen the psychological restraints that for so long have kept them from attaining the sovereignty of the rational consumer...Readers, be reassured, the magazine seems to proclaim: other people’s misery has practical advantages.30

It is pointless to deny either the existence of individual waste or the short-term profits made by industry. Conservative pundits and scholars beholden to a timeless theory of how the world ought to work deplore the inability of their economic imperatives to overcome the putative irrationality of poor households or to guide their expenses. And yet, everything indicates that a coherent ensemble of social (or relational) considerations frames these practices. Must we recall that proper burial is prerequisite for entering the heavenly realms in numerous cultures, beginning with the ancient Greeks? Need we repeat that the impossibility of guaranteeing customary funeral rites marked the breakdown of moral order in Ireland during the 1847 potato famine? Must we recall that a culturally consecrated meal not only constitutes (or, in the case of death, reconstitutes) the community but institutes (or reinstates) humanity in the perception of those who partake of the meal? Must we remember that spices are among the ingredients needed to satisfy the expectations of good taste and respectability, or that sweet or alcoholic drinks signal hospitality and furnish energy that is otherwise often lacking? That tobacco, in the words of George Orwell, makes misery and want tolerable?

Certain patterns of consumption do turn out to be palliative, mitigating boredom and deprivation; others are links for maintaining social bonds.31

The contribution of the social sciences to our knowledge of human experience lies in the coherent explanations gained by understanding food habits within the framework of living conditions. Comprehending the meaning of these practices in various economic, social, and cultural contexts constitutes an indispensable step in attempting to redirect, or inflect, behavior. This idea is not new. Even the market-oriented

Société d’économie politique, when facing late-nineteenth-century alcoholism, admitted that “the cabaret responds to certain needs of men living in society; it is a place of meeting, a center of conversations and impossible to entirely suppress. It is a social necessity.” To counteract the harmful effects of alcohol, this group of economists recommended policies that made healthy food available in sufficient quantities. However, supplies represented only one aspect of the poverty and inequality that made the workers’ lives miserable. Thus there emerged from the Société a consensus concerning minimal conditions of health that the State should support in order to create living conditions that were, if not exactly comfortable, at least sanitary, to guarantee the working classes a decent and dignified way of life. Such a policy was to minimize premature loss of life and curb public-health expenses; it also aimed at reducing the danger that threatened the social order when food prices soared and buying power plummeted.12

Food riots remind us that the daily management of subsistence is a permanent back-and-forth between the government and the governed. The Spring 2008 protests made current a repertoire of collective action that was already manifest in ancient Rome, in medieval Europe, in early-modern times and our contemporary era, in Latin America, Asia, and Africa.13 Such popular uprisings affirm a crucial component of the social contract that links political authorities to the society they govern: the right to subsistence, that is, unrestricted physical access to the usual supply of food in sufficient quantity and wholesome quality. The inability to live up to this expectation or satisfy this claim dissolves the legitimacy of the powers that be. Of course, transformations taking place in our systems of production and the rearrangement of trade currently labeled “globalization” have elicited other concerns. But far from contradicting the conclusions drawn from analyzing habits of consumption and the management of food resources, these concerns actually confirm them. Present worries over the environment and health risks, as well as the opposition to pressures leading to uniform foodways and the concomitant affirmation of cultural differences, are manifestations against letting the market—first and foremost the food market—be the sole regulator of society.

Translated from the French by Karen Pepper and abridged from the introduction to Profusion et pénurie: Les hommes face à leurs besoins alimentaires (PU Renes, 2009).

Left: The Panetteria bread riot. From Le Petit Parisien, supplément littéraire, March 6, 1898.

NOTES


