

# The dehumanization of eating

DANTE MARCELLO CLARAMONTE GALLIAN

**A**ROUND the act of eating, in numerous cultures and at all times, people established some of the staunchest and most eloquent procedures, rituals, images and symbols in the history of humankind. From this fundamental act, fruit of life's most pressing need, practices and customs arose that founded and defined various societies and traditions, enabling us to trace a direct relationship between the essentiality of the individual life and the essentiality of collective – or humanity's – life.

Since the remotest times in the history of humankind, the act of eating has been associated with multiple meanings that transcend the mere fulfillment of a “physiological need”. If we now can say that we eat to survive, historically, in untold traditions, eating was always much more than a requirement for survival.

It is interesting to note that the act that arguably brings us closest to other animals is precisely the one that our ancestors held in highest regard and, throughout history, considered to be of the greatest importance. In the caves painted by Paleolithic men, the representation of hunting scenes relates the origins of art and magic to food, and in the most ancient of known cults and rituals, the act of eating always played a central role. It was by *eating* a forbidden fruit, according to the Judeo-Christian tradition, that humanity lost its original blissful state, and it is again in the form of *food* that God offers reintegration or salvation (cf. *The Jerusalem Bible*).

In the prophetic and wisdom books of the same tradition, the law is often symbolized by a book that is *edible*, one that is at times bitter and at others as sweet as honey, depending on the condition of those who eat it. Perusing a broad range of historical registries from numerous traditions and cultures, we find that eating has always been something much more comprehensive and profound than the simple gratification of a physiological need, not only because food was universally imputed with much more than mere physicochemical meanings, but also because the act of eating was overwhelmingly associated with idea of *meal*, of *reunion*.

Some of the most important and memorable events and ideas in the history of Western civilization take place in the context of *meals* or

*banquets*. Jesus' last supper with his apostles, as narrated in the Gospels (cf. Mt 26:26-28; Mk 14:22-24; Lk 22:19-20; 1Cor 11:23-25) comes immediately to mind, as does Plato's *Symposium* (or *Banquet*), where some of the dearest ideas to Western philosophy emerged. These are two landmarks in the history of thought and spirituality, and one would be hard-pressed to admit that both occurring amidst a meal is a mere accident. According to the Gospel narratives, Jesus conceived the last supper as a decisive moment in the transmission of his doctrine and in the revelation of his spiritual mission, when he washes the feet of the apostles, establishes the ritual of the Eucharist, bids farewell to his friends and leaves his testament. Plato resorts to the same setting, which was deeply significant for Hellenic men at least since Homeric times, to incite discussion on the fundamental anthropological issue: love.

The intertwining of both traditions – the Hellenic and the Judeo-Christian – would reinforce the preeminent role of the *banquet* or *meal* in the history of our culture. Associated either with the religious milieu – the Christian mass remains to this day essentially a *banquet*, an *Eucharistic banquet* – or with the philosophical – the congresses and symposiums express the same relationship, at least in name –, the *meal* will always be one of the recurrent forms of congregating, of conveying ideas, values, truths, of *celebration*. In most cultures and civilizations, the *meal* became a *privileged space of human experience and humanization*. That is because the context of an authentic meal, as it was historically constituted, enables the integral involvement of the individual in its broadest and most diverse dimensions.

First, the *meal* – the humanized act of eating *par excellence* – doubtlessly involves the body, whose very existence depends on its service. The *meal* exists to nourish the body, but not only with *food*, for a true *meal* must, above all, *feed* the senses: sight, smell, touch, and, of course, taste. Thus, it must involve the body as a whole, inviting it to experience feelings and abetting the exercise of judgment. In this sense, as ancient culinary and gastronomic culture manuals are keen to point out, the *banquet* is always a “school of the senses”. Prior to eating, one should appreciate with the eyes, smell the aroma, feel the texture, and relish the taste, sorting out the features, the *accidents* of the various ingredients and condiments. Every true *meal*, from the simplest to the most sophisticated, *means, conveys and evokes* something that must be deciphered and identified.

In this sense, then, a *meal* actually involves not only the sensitive dimension, but also and equally the affective and intellective ones. The experience of contemplating and savoring arouses our discernment and involves our memory and imagination – in short, our intelligence as a whole, relating flavor to wisdom in the broadest sense. That is why we can say that eating is also a form of knowing – as long as we eat intelligently or, as Montaigne would say, *humanely*.

Here it is important to mention the intrinsic relationship that exists between, as one might say, the aesthetic and the ethical dimensions of the *meal*. According to an old maxim, the beautiful and the good always walk hand in hand in the universe of gastronomy as well: a good meal must necessarily be a healthy meal. In Plato's *Banquet*, we find the inspired suggestion to counterpoise the intake of food and drink with the expositions of speeches in a way that one activity does not impair the other. And many are the prescriptions one finds in books and manuals, such as Cassian's (1985, chap. XXXI-XXXVIII), for instance, recommending not only frugal meals, but also the presence of foods benefic both for the body and the spirit to facilitate a contemplative spiritual life.

It is in its ethical dimension that the *meal* intertwines the various spheres of individual human experience – those of the senses, affections, and intelligence – and, at the same time, emerging as a place of congregating, of transcending the individual experience *per se*, where the *experience of being human*, of *humanization*, completes and opens itself. That is because in an authentic *meal* one shares not only food, but also and especially experiences, impressions and ideas – in short, the people themselves who partake in it.

Going back to the aforementioned milestone examples of Western history, we find that it was during a banquet in honor of a poet that Plato, speaking through the various table guests therein, expounds and confronts the paramount ideas and values regarding Eros. With this strategy, he establishes the Socratic – or, rather, Platonic – concepts of this fundamental subject. During the *Symposium*, the various characters vent the best of themselves, proffering what lies deepest and most essentially inside. While feeding the body, Plato's table guests also and especially nourish their hearts and spirit.

During Jesus' supper with the apostles, this dimension is even more eloquent; in addition to feeding the disciples with words, the Master gives himself over as nourishment, delivering his flesh in the form of bread, his blood in the form of wine, and forevermore imbuing the image of the *banquet*, the *meal*, with the notion of surrender and sharing. The *meal* is portrayed as an encounter in which one not only *takes* something, but also *gives* him or herself over.

These are the undoubtedly archetypical images that, at least in Western tradition, would eventually configure the conception of both the *family meal* and the *brotherly meal*, the *meal among friends*.

For many centuries and until our own time – but, alas, increasingly less –, the *meal* is seen as the essential stage of family life. It was around the kitchen or dining room table that family life used to revolve. Around the table, at *mealtimes*, all family members assembled and, while helping and feeding themselves from and with the same food, also served each other their stories, experiences and ideas. It was at that moment and in that context that bonds were nurtured or distances made explicit. It was then that the elders distilled

their advices and transmitted their values, and the young brought in the latest news. Thus, in the life of the family, *mealtimes* were endowed with a central and solemn character. It was one of the few events, perhaps the only one, that happened, or at least began, at the right time. It was invariably long – and the longer the better. Courses and dishes followed one another, in concert with subjects and conversations. A large part of the most affectionate memories of those who enjoyed this kind of family atmosphere is related to the moments spent around the table.

The same can be said of *meals with friends*. To this day, meetings between friends, or between lovers, are almost invariably associated with a *meal*. It is still part of our habits to invite over for lunch that great friend with whom we'd like to spend more time with, with whom we can unburden our heart and also fill it with their words and advices. Likewise, the dinner for two remains the favorite formula to exchange confidences and declarations of love, whether on a first date or commemorating long years of matrimonial union.

As singular space for integral individual human experience – from the perspective of the senses, affections, intelligence and will –, as well as for relationships, the *meal* can thus be seen the quintessential *humanizing event*. More than a school of the senses, the *meal* is also a school of relationships, of companionship.

Yet, this state of affairs is changing – swiftly and profoundly. The development of industrial, financial and corporate capitalism has reverberated strongly in our social customs and habits, especially in large urban centers. The conversion of time into money and of life into a closed loop of production and consumption has led to a radical process of dehumanization. To maintain mass production on an ever-growing scale, one needs a mass of consumers that must be not only increasingly larger, but also increasingly automated. In this sense, *eating* – which, as we've seen, became in the course of history the quintessentially humanistic and humanizing act – is being transformed into an act of consumption within the context of postmodern capitalistic society. Eating, in addition to being a prerequisite for survival – essential to keep the production and consumption machine going –, is now heralded as a big business; a “habit” capable of generating millions and millions in profit and dividends.

The experience of the *meal* is, therefore, undergoing enormous change. We have no more time to prepare and even less to savor the foods; in today's dynamic, we “gorge” food down as quickly and with as little reflection as possible. In the fast-food meal, there is no discernment and no guesswork; the meal is no longer a “school of the senses”, and even less a “school of relationship”; it has become merely the output of an industrial chain, where industrialized ingredients are combined in standardized ways by machines and by absolutely impersonal workers, who do not want nor can communicate or denote anything else but consumption for consumption's sake. The pseudo-septic, unwelcoming and uncongenial environment, filled with noise instead

of live music, is a meeting ground not for people and ideas, but only for stomachs and juvenile compulsions that are quickly satiated. No longer a “school”, the fast-food “meal” resembles much more a “training camp” – quite apropos, by the way, for the alienation required to maintain a society of indiscriminate consumption.

This dehumanizing eating experience is projected from the “training camps” onto the intimacy of our homes, where we now find the same brutishness and automation. Nowadays, the meal, instead of taking place around the table, is consumed in front of the television set. Food, which previously had to be prepared, is now simply heated and always tastes the same – which, incidentally, makes no

difference, because taste no longer plays a challenging role in this process. The meal has ceased being a school and a meeting-place. The act of eating has been dehumanized into becoming an act of automated consumption.

In face of the above, many people are now taking stock of the situation and denouncing this entire dehumanizing process and its disastrous consequences on our culture and public health, including not only adepts of healthier meals, but also the advocates of humanized and humanizing eating. Yet, we must see this movement with critical eyes. Many of the increasingly modish gourmets and champions of “slow food” are not aware of how they often merely reproduce the consumerist dynamics under the guise of sophistication. A *humanizing meal* cannot be identified with, nor reduced to *refinement*, a perquisite of the more privileged sectors of society.



*Seated alone in the entrance of the McDonald's building [of a McDonald's restaurant] in Beijing, a woman eats fast food.*

The *humanizing meal*, as we've seen, requires the participation of the individual as a whole and, therefore, presupposes an educational process. However, this education cannot and must not be elitist. Having deep roots in our culture and civilization, it is profoundly related to the constitution of the most elementary bonds among people. Redeem and revitalizing humanized eating, the *humanizing meal*, means working for, and investing in not only the health of individuals and societies, but of humanity itself. Re-humanizing the act of eating a meal is, therefore, an essential task in the overall effort of re-humanizing culture.

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**ABSTRACT** – Considering the “act of eating” as the human and humanizing act *par excellence*, this article seeks to trace the historical trajectory of meals in Western civilization, beginning with cultural references from the Judeo-Christian (the Bible) and Hellenic (Plato’s Symposium) traditions, and to analyze the process of dehumanization in the context of postmodern industrial society and its effects on our culture.

**KEYWORDS** – Food, Meals, History of Food, Humanization/Dehumanization.

*Dante Marcello Claramonte Gallian* obtained his doctorate in Social History from the School of Philosophy, Literature and Human Sciences of the University of São Paulo. He is a professor and director of Unifesp’s Center of History and Philosophy of Health Sciences and a visiting professor at the Centre de Recherches Historiques de l’École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) in Paris, France. @ - dante. cehfi@epm.br.

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