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How I Became a Food Historian: Looking Back on *All Manners of Food*

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Abstract

The author's book *All Manners of Food* was published in 1985 and was well received by historians and (to a lesser extent) by sociologists. In this essay, he reflects on how, having begun his academic career mainly as a sociological theorist, he came to write a large book about the history of food in England and France. In particular, he traces his intellectual debt, in writing this book, to Norbert Elias.

Keywords

Food history; sociology of food; Norbert Elias

All Manners of Food was published almost four decades ago (Mennell 1985), and it established me, at least for a time, as a “food historian.”¹ Yet there is a prior question: how did I become an historian at all? It is true that in my schooldays, history was my favourite subject. Perhaps I would have read history at university, were it not for a quirk of the options offered at my grammar school in Bradford (Yorkshire). Having chosen physics and chemistry at “Ordinary Level” (as examinations at 16 were then called in Britain), I did not learn Latin. And in those far-off days, it was all but impossible to gain entry to read history in a British university without Latin. In the event, I read economics and sociology at Cambridge, and then gained a diverse grounding at Harvard in social psychology, clinical psychology, social anthropology and more sociology. Then, back in Britain at the University of Exeter, I came to be known mainly as a “sociological theorist.” So how ever did I steer myself into food history?

History always exerted its pull. My very first publication was about Prohibition in America (Mennell 1969)—mainly about the politics of it, though the drink connection cannot be overlooked. Nevertheless, what really drove me into passing as a food historian was actually a theoretical problem, fondly known to sociologists as “the

¹ In 1986 *All Manners of Food* was the first English-language book to win the Grand Prix International de Littérature Gastronomique, and the French translation *Français et Anglais à Table* was awarded the Prix Marco Polo in 1988.

macro–micro problem,” with which I had been struggling since my year at Harvard. It is concerned with the connection between the concepts that sociologists use in studying individual people as they interact with each other face to face (or as they respond to questionnaires) and the concepts that they use in studying the large-scale structures of societies and their development over time. Often the two appeared to have little connection with each other, and the best efforts of the most famous sociological theorists of the time – notably Talcott Parsons, with whom I had studied at Harvard – seemed not to have succeeded in gluing the two aspects of sociology (like Humpty Dumpty) back together again. Then, quite by chance I became involved in translating from German a little book entitled *What is Sociology?* (Elias 2012a [1970]) by someone I had scarcely heard of, Norbert Elias.² For reasons I need not expound here (but see Menell 2022), chapter 3 of that book seemed to solve the “macro–micro problem,” and yet Elias was relatively little known at the time. So I came to know Elias himself who, though already in his mid-70s, was still teaching at the University of Leicester. And through him I was led back to history, for he always stressed that time – history, short-term or long-term – was always a component of adequate sociological explanations. Elias later became famous for his theory of “civilising processes.” I read his magnum opus, *On the Process of Civilisation* (2012b [1939]) partly in German and partly in the French edition. It had first been published in 1939 – “not the most propitious moment for the publication of a two-volume work, in German, by a Jew on, of all things, civilisation” to quote a famous comment – but it did not appear in English until 1978–82.

The gist of Elias’s argument – a summary in one sentence of a 650-page book – is that as societies become more complex and larger in scale, as the “chains of interdependence” that bind people together grow longer and longer, until they now extend across the globe, “more people are forced more often to pay more attention to more other people” (Goudsblom 1989). Elias began to document this thesis in his celebrated study of how standards of what constituted polite manners had changed over the centuries. That included changes in the acceptability of inter-personal aggressiveness and changing feelings about aggressiveness. He showed how all these changes were related to state formation – the pacification of territory, the taming of warriors, the growth of the whole apparatus of government and the internal pacification of territory. He also wrote a separate book focusing on manners among courtiers and would-be courtiers at the French court from the mid-seventeenth century until the Revolution (Elias 2006 [1969]), the same period that I would go on to argue was crucial to the formation of the French tradition of *haute cuisine*. His whole study was designed to show how the “micro” and the “macro” were connected through history; he had not just solved the “micro/macro problem” at a theoretical level but

² I tell the story in Stephen Menell, “Elias and the counter-ego,” *History of the Human Sciences* 19, no. 2 (2006): 73–91.

illustrated the solution in an empirical study. I wanted to emulate his approach, and I began to wonder whether I could use historic recipe books in something like the way he had used manners books.

It would be silly, of course, to pretend that it was these high-falutin' ideas alone that guided me towards food history. In my experience, most people who write about food start from just enjoying eating. I was no exception. Soon after we were married, Barbara and I became more absorbed in cooking, and accumulated many cookery books. In addition, when I worked part-time for the Council of Europe in 1974–79, I went frequently to Strasbourg, which stands on the culinary boundary between French and German cuisine, and I became intrigued by that.

Beginning research

I really got down to the research more seriously in 1979, but anything approaching a thesis, a coherent argument, took shape only slowly. Elias urged me simply to immerse myself in facts, to read widely in French and English, and connections would gradually become apparent. He was right, and it was largely insights from Elias's work that helped me to pull together a lot of the discrete facts that were already familiar to food historians. The first theoretical idea that became clear to me was about "the civilising of appetite," and I first presented a rough draft of what became chapter 2 of *All Manners of Food* at the conference on Elias's work that Eric Dunning and I organised at Balliol College, Oxford, in early January 1980.³ Shortly after that, I was given my first six-month sabbatical from the University of Exeter, and with a small research grant from the Nuffield Foundation I based myself at St Antony's College, Oxford, as the guest of Hermínio Martins. There I met Theodore Zeldin and Alan Davidson and took part in the very first of the Oxford Food Symposiums that they organised.⁴ And I settled down to serious work in the Bodleian, the British Library, and the Bibliothèque nationale de France.⁵

³ Eric Dunning (1936–2019), Professor of Sociology, University of Leicester. The conference was technically a meeting of the Theory Group of the British Sociological Association, hosted by Steven Lukes when he was a Fellow of Balliol. But it turned into a far larger gathering than the Theory Group normally attracted – over 100, from many countries. Balliol sticks in the mind for its freezing cold rooms in the middle of winter, and for its truly appalling food, which helped to convince me that the stereotype of English food in those days was well founded.

⁴ This must have been in 1980, and it was a sort of small-scale dry run for the much bigger events that were to follow. I have tended to refer to it as "Oxford Symposium Zero" – I believe the series numbering proper began the following year. I attended the symposiums every year until I moved to Australia in 1990, but only once after my return to Europe in 1993. The Symposiums have since moved from St Antony's to Oxford Brookes University briefly before finding a home in St Catz.

⁵ It is so far in the remote past that I did not fly to Paris for my initial sortie into the BnF, and it was long before the Channel tunnel – I went by train and ferry. When I arrived at the old BnF building in rue Richelieu, I found it had just closed for several weeks for emergency repairs to the leaking roof. It was a very nasty moment, especially as I had committed a big chunk of my Nuffield grant to the trip. Fortunately, Alan Davidson had given me an introduction to Philip and Mary Hyman, at whose apartment I arrived in a panic. They calmed me down and pointed me to the Bibliothèque

At the time, there seemed to be very much more academic writing about food by historians and anthropologists than by sociologists. My friend Peter Burke, the Cambridge cultural historian, says light-heartedly that there are two varieties of food history, for which he adopts a distinction drawn by Katharine Whitehorn in her famous book *Cooking in a Bedsitter* (1961)—between “food to survive” and “food to impress.” Typical of the first, he says, are the *Annales* historians counting calories in the past. That would also include a number of British economic historians (for example Barker *et al.* 1966, Burnett 1966; and Oddy and Miller 1976). Typical of the second, he says, are “your book and other cultural studies.”

As for the anthropologists, food had long been a respectable topic for investigation – but largely for female anthropologists, such as Audrey Richards (1939) and Mary Douglas (1972). Then, around the same time as my book, three important books about food by *male* anthropologists appeared: Marvin Harris’s *Good to Eat* (1986), which took a developmental view in splendidly debunking the dominant structuralist dogma that food taboos were essentially random and beyond explanation; Sidney Mintz’s *Sweetness and Power* (1985), which I saw as taking a broadly world-systems perspective⁶ on the link between slavery and the rise of the predilection for sugary foods, but, like Harris’s book it was also a materialist attack upon the structuralist orthodoxy; and Sir Jack Goody’s *Cooking, Cuisine and Class* (1982), which really alarmed me when I heard of its imminent publication. He was comparing food cultures in West Africa with a generalised European pattern, whereas I was interested in the actually more subtle problem of how differences emerged within Europe. Jack and I later became quite good friends, sparring partners, and occasional drinking companions.

When I began my research, there was much less “sociology of food” than there is now. And such as there was in Britain, I didn’t even know about it. As I became aware later, Anne Murcott had obtained her first SSRC grant in 1979 and was already well into her study of meals in households in South Wales (1980, 1983). At the time, though, we were not in contact with each other; we became good friends later (Mennell, Murcott and Van Otterloo 1992). Nor did I know about the work of Nicki Charles and Marion Kerr, who had collected most of their survey data by 1982; their publications came later, in 1986–8. Moreover, among many of the British sociologists that I did know, the study of cooking and eating was largely regarded as a laughable subject (or implicitly, a women’s subject). A little earlier I had heard the same mocking attitude to Eric Dunning – “Ho ho ho! Eric Dunning does the sociology of football!” The attitude seemed to be “*Real men* do social stratification.” Both food and sport now seem to be fairly mainstream, with a lot of sociologists working in both fields. But why did that

de l’Arsenal, and to its archive of the nineteenth-century magazine *L’Art culinaire*, which had never been studied. Out of that came chapters 6 and 7 of *All Manners of Food*.

⁶ That is, broadly in the spirit of Immanuel Wallerstein’s work *The Modern World System* (1974–2011), although Mintz mentions Wallerstein only once, and then not favourably.

not happen before? It looks to me like a failure of the sociological imagination not to look at such a prominent part of modern life as sport. And still more so to neglect such a basic need as eating is; for human communities, it is, at least in the short term, a need more basic than sex. So it remains a bit of a puzzle why my book appears to have been quite influential among sociologists in general, and helped to promote the widespread interest there now seems to be internationally in the sociology of food.

What the book owes to Elias

Peter Burke once told me that he had always regarded *All Manners of Food* as really a work of history that makes use of some sociological theory. I am perfectly happy with that description, because it made me feel that, yes, I had been accepted as an historian after all. Besides, I have always regarded one of Norbert Elias's achievements as being to show how applying sociological reasoning to the study of history is one of sociology's most important tasks.

The perception of my book as more history than sociology was common among sociologists too. In 1987 when I was promoted to the rank of Reader at the University of Exeter, half a dozen prominent British sociologists were consulted as external assessors, and it was leaked to me that one of them had commented on *All Manners of Food* that it was "a good book, *but is it sociology?*". Thus, in spite of my satisfaction at being accepted as an historian, I still feel the need to justify my book as a work of sociology too.

So what, more precisely, did I gain from Elias in writing this book?

1

To begin with, *On the Process of Civilisation* gave me the courage to undertake a broad *comparison of two national cultures*. I may have gained something too from my perambulations round Europe for the Council of Europe in the 1970s. But, more obviously, Part I, "On the Sociogenesis of the Concepts of 'civilisation' and 'culture,'" was directly important in showing that cultural differences were simultaneously national differences and class differences. Later, Elias also made insightful remarks about cultural differences between Britain, Germany and the Netherlands, but it was more than a decade later that Eric Dunning and I found ourselves translating *Studies on the Germans* (Elias 2013 [1989]), important parts of which Elias probably had not written before the 1980s.

2

In her review of *All Manners of Food*, Anne Murcott (1986) said that the study of France and England is a sort of "book within a book." She pointed out that the book began with the chapter on the "civilising of appetite," in effect concerned with questions about the sheer quantitative intake of food; and that—after the discussion of

France and England—the penultimate chapter on “Food dislikes” returns to something related to the same idea. But, in between, she said, the concern was principally with changing social fashions in food. She was in effect alluding to Katharine Whitehorn’s distinction between “food to survive” and “food to impress.” Anne was not wrong, but I saw the two aspects as more closely connected. For most of the history of the human species – at least since the agricultural revolution – self-control over appetite has not been a problem that most people encountered. They ate what they could get, and perhaps binged when there was a temporary abundance. In winter, even the medieval nobility – if they did not actually go hungry – appear often to have had a fairly sparse and plain diet. The famous medieval aristocratic feasts, sometimes feeding scores of people over several days, were less to do with refined cookery than with social display akin to the potlatch customs of the Kwakiutl and other Pacific-coast Native Americans. Only with the greater food security that went with longer supply chains and great trading warehouses in ports like Amsterdam did overeating gradually become a serious problem, at first still for a small if growing elite. It was then, I argued, that there was a gradual transition “from quantity to quality” as a social marker.

Incidentally, I might mention a small methodological point from the chapter on food dislikes. There, under the discreet heading “Fear of after-effects,” I drew on some casual remarks in one of her cookery books by the great scholar-cook Jane Grigson (whom I came to know through the Oxford Food Symposia). She talked about the “mushroom cloud” of indigestion that hung over some families in her youth in northern England, leading them to avoid numerous foods, especially onions and garlic (Grigson 1978, 291). The after-effects to which she referred were, especially, farting and bad breath. That of course chimed nicely with Norbert Elias, and points to the connection between chapters 2 and 13 to which Anne Murcott pointed: rejecting nutritious foods becomes possible only when there is a certain margin of supply. (Later I developed the idea of a fear of indigestion into an article in its own right – Mennell 2014). The point is, though, that passing remarks or reminiscences in non-academic sources can sometimes be developed into sociological insights.

3

In many ways, though, it was *The Court Society* that most closely guided the middle sections of *All Manners of Food*, concerning changing fashions in culinary culture in England and France from the late Middle Ages to the present day. Here I am able to testify to the valuable part that *retrodiction* plays in historical sociology. Retrodiction means the prediction from present-day knowledge of what future research may show *to be true of the past* (Kaplan 1964, 349). Elias, in *The Court Society* (2006 [1969]), alerted me to the likelihood that in the light of the pattern of aristocratic competitive display in their houses, gardens, and general way of life, French cookery books in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries would show a strong affiliation with court society. And so it very much proved.

Elias gave me a sound point of methodological advice. Drawing on his experience of manners books, he strongly advised me wherever possible to study successive editions of *the same* cookery books; like manners books, some of them went through numerous editions over many decades, and it is then particularly easy to see the changes in their content over time—their recipes, their dedications to aristocratic patrons, their snide remarks about earlier or rival authors. I tried to follow this principle too when it came to “postboxing” – taking samples from – long runs of both catering trade magazines and women’s magazines over the period of about a century in England and France.

Documents, especially published sources,⁷ played perhaps an unusually prominent part in my research, although I think it was nevertheless an instance of the mixed methods that Nina Baur has done so much to champion. I did make use of some quantitative evidence where it was available, and also qualitative evidence in the modern period, as when I drew on conversations with my French neighbour in Exeter, Patricia Chandrasekera, who recounted the nightmare experience of taking parties of fussy English schoolchildren to France, in contrast to French children’s uncomplicated enjoyment of a Devon cream tea when they came to Exeter on the return leg of the exchange (Mennell 1985, 299–300).

One general conclusion that emerges from studies of changing fashions in food, or taste in general, is that it shows how, over the very long term, the pace of historical time accelerates. To use the *Annales* school’s famous distinction, it moves from the *longue durée*, through the *histoire des conjonctures* and now, I think, to the *histoire des événements*. So far as we can tell from medieval manuscripts, the food even of the aristocratic elite changed imperceptibly slowly. (And the food of the peasantry continued to change very slowly for much longer.) By the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the pace of change was sufficiently perceptible for later cookery book writers to pour scorn on the recipes of their immediate predecessors.⁸ In recent decades, fashions seem to change from year to year, if not from month to month.⁹ I

⁷ Back in the late 1980s, John Goldthorpe was conducting something of a campaign against historical sociology (see especially Goldthorpe 1991). Among other things, he was arguing that historical documents were surviving “relics,” a doubtfully representative sample of all the documents that once existed. Interpreting them was a specialist skill best left to historians. Sociologists, he said, should concentrate on creating their own relics, namely survey data. In making his case, he drew upon the historians’ distinction between primary and secondary sources, books being secondary sources of inferior value. When John came down to Exeter to take part in a seminar that Eric Jones, Joop Goudsblom and I were running, I challenged him by asking whether, in the use I had made of them, cookery books were primary or secondary sources. “Oh, secondary,” he immediately replied. Then there was a pause. “Oh, no, primary – I see what you mean.” Of course, the status of documents depends on the questions you are asking of them, so cookery books may be primary or secondary sources, according to the use one is making of them.

⁸ Indeed, in Paris food became entangled in a sort of early culture war: see Mennell (1981).

⁹ To use the term *événements* may seem an exaggeration, but consider the fact that the great wave of *nouvelle cuisine* is said to have begun after a large contingent of French chefs visited Japan for the 1960 Olympic Games in Tokyo.

think the picture of English food that I painted in *All Manners of Food* was accurate, but I chose 1980 as the cut-off point for my research, and since then the British food scene has changed beyond recognition. I would still argue, however, that some underlying attitudes such as a strong concern with economy, with cheap food, has persisted more strongly in Britain than in France (or in Ireland, for that matter).

4

I found that not only did theoretical ideas guide my reading of history, but that occasionally my reading of food history led me to new criticisms of theoretical ideas. The case I am thinking of in *All Manners of Food* is my discussion (250–4) of Roland Barthes's once-famous short essay on "Ornamental cookery" (1957, 78–80).¹⁰ He was writing about the cookery column in the French women's magazine *Elle* in the 1950s, and seized upon a certain showy style supposed to appeal to French housewives of the period:

The weekly *Elle* (a real mythological treasure) gives us almost every week a fine colour photograph of a prepared dish: golden partridges studded with cherries, a faintly pink chicken chaudfroid, a mould of crayfish surrounded by their red shells, a frothy charlotte prettified with glacé fruit designs, multicoloured trifle, etc.

But Barthes was deeply immersed in the French structuralism of the post-war years, and interpreted this as a timeless, static style, something that was structurally linked to the lower middle-class readers of *Elle* at this time. Because I had read so many more historical sources, it struck me that *au contraire* this was a style that could be traced back to the mid nineteenth century and figures like Jules Gouffé, whose patrons were the aristocrats and plutocrats. From them, the style had followed a downward trajectory through the social scale, reaching the readers of *Elle* in the 1950s before dying out. In short, it could best be understood in processual, not structuralist terms.

5

Overall, in retrospect, I think it could be said that most food history had in the past remained at a mainly "micro" level. What I think I set out to do was to bring together microsociology and macrosociology, which is one of the hallmarks of Elias's sociology. "Culinary culture" was very clearly entangled in the absolutist power structure of the *ancien régime*. Indeed, as a humorous summary of my thesis of why English and French taste diverged, I have often said it was because the English beheaded their king 150 years before the French got round to beheading theirs. French *haute cuisine* largely emerged in the last century and a half of royal absolutism. The same trend towards a courtly cuisine can be seen in England before the civil wars, but after the Restoration of Charles II, and especially under the Hanoverians, it largely faded away. That was not

¹⁰ My discussion of Barthes was reprinted under the title "*Elle Cuisine*" in the *Journal of Gastronomy* (Mennell 1986–7, 101–5).

much to do with the tastes of individual monarchs, but rather with the fact that the British aristocracy and gentry remained much more independently powerful and rooted in their provincial estates. (This is a complicated argument; see more fully chapter 5 of *All Manners of Food*.)

6

Elias told us that sociologists should be “hunters of myths,” and I felt it my duty to do some myth hunting among earlier food historians. The most important case was my destruction (as I thought) of the myth that English food had been blighted by Puritanism, and more generally that English and French cuisine bore the hallmarks of dominant Protestantism and Catholicism respectively. Another case, less original perhaps, was the semi-myth that restaurants emerged after the French Revolution when the chefs of the nobility found themselves unemployed. I call it a semi-myth because the Revolution may indeed have accelerated the process. Nevertheless, the bigger picture is that the prototype of the restaurant seems to have been the London inns of the eighteenth century, much *envied by the French*; and the first restaurants had begun to develop in Paris before the Revolution.

Myths in food history, like many other myths, are, however, indestructible. They spring to life again after having been bloodily slain.

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