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# EATING IN THE CITY

## Socio-anthropological perspectives from Africa, Latin America and Asia

Audrey Soula, Chelsie Yount-André, Olivier Lepiller, Nicolas Bricas (editors)
Preface by Jean-Pierre Hassoun

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# Contents

# Preface

In one section of his book *Crowds and Power* (1966), Elias Canetti[1] postulates that everything we eat is an instrument of power, while exemplifying this through two strong figures—chief and mother.

The chief, whether it be the king, president or *pater familias* whose 'full belly' could be viewed as charismatic while also evoking the imaginary and allegedly voracious ogre figure. This omnipotent ruler must be served first and his appetite may reassure those who are less well off but also provoke jealousy, which further underscores his privileged status. The chief's carnivorous appetite is always ready to lend itself to the ceremonial ritual of potlatch and other lavish gastronomic extravaganzas. Otherwise, Canetti refers to the mother from the standpoint of the dependencies arising from the nurturing monopoly mothers have claimed from the dawn of time. From mother's milk to daily food and festive meals, the mother figure is omnipresent in fulfilling the family's orality. Maternal power is wielded through the kitchen and its control. Beyond enthralled declarations, the nurturing mother further embodies the family members' dependency on the culinary flavours she masters. This role also puts her in a position of rivalry with regard to all 'foreign' foods—those made and eaten outside the home—which she may readily belittle at any opportunity.

Beyond these two highly individualized iconic food power figures, Elias Canetti also postulates that eating is the most selfish act there is. This leads us to reflect on individuality as an intractable dimension of eating. This rather iconoclastic approach has the advantage of shifting the focus onto the individual—the eater. This is what Audrey Soula, Chelsie-Yount André, Olivier Lepiller and Nicolas Bricas have done by gathering articles from Africa, Latin America and Asia, most of which are written—based on urban surveys—by researchers from these three continents.

Reading these twelve contributions highlights the extent to which until recently—in countries of both the Global North and South—studies on food practices have overlooked the eater, who is the main stakeholder when it comes to food. There are many reasons for this neglect or omission, but it has undoubtedly been dictated by

1. Canetti E., 1966, [1984]. Crowds and power. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. ISBN 0-374-51820-3.

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the different theoretical paradigms put forward and, with hindsight, the structuralist paradigm whereby both the 'raw and the cooked' were empirical 'candy' now comes to mind. It would be futile to hunt for interview extracts in the very substantial literature that this theory has generated where eaters describe the intimate sensations that eating this or that fruit or vegetable gave them. It would be just as hard to find descriptions of situations where an eater takes a symbolic initiative to pursue novel tastes. In the same spirit, if we consider the numerous studies influenced by Marxism, here too the food issue is viewed in terms of flows, supply and demand, of hopeless dominance relations, and of an enormous food transition hurdle. In short, while these approaches generate a mass of data, the model—be it symbolic, political or economic—is still the sought-after grail. While this remark applies equally to countries of the Global North and South, the absence of 'individual eaters' is clearly even more marked in studies on countries of the South, which are generally described by Western researchers. In this regard, in addition to the question of the paradigms mentioned, the urgency of food situations also (morally) keep us from focusing too heavily on food subjectivity. In postcolonial guilt settings, the issues of malnutrition, even famine or lean seasons were of more concern to researchers than relating the history of a dish or examining changes in urban catering patterns in an African capital city, for instance. This can be readily understood and the issue does not deserve criticism.

Yet times are changing and societies are becoming even more urbanized, as this book illustrates. Although malnutrition issues are still current in Africa, Asia and Latin America (in very different ways depending on the location), a generation of young researchers from these three continents have been trained in social sciences and are approaching these subjects with broader scope and more freedom. Indeed, everywhere in the Global North and South overly cumbersome theoretical paradigms have taken a back seat, which has undoubtedly legitimized curiosity regarding food subjectivities. The fact that the researchers are from these societies, and were actually born in the cities where they conducted their investigations (which is the case for most of the contributors to this book), has enabled them to have a more immediate and open view of situations to help grasp their complexities as compared to comforting models. And this rediscovery of complexity through subjectivities is perhaps also the final stage in an emancipation process or, in other words, an intellectual stage necessary for the decolonization of knowledge.

What does the city do to food practices and *vice versa*? To address these two aspects of the same question—as illustrated in the narratives presented throughout the book—this new generation of researchers takes us from city to city, but each is driven by his/her own curiosity.

In Oran and Casablanca, Algerian and Moroccan women are taking initiatives to reduce their dependencies which the city has not alleviated. In Baroda, a city in Gujarat (India), the Indian middle classes are devising intimate strategies to transform their mistrust of industrial dishes into confidence. In Mexico City and Guadalajara, Mexicans are being subjected to the paradoxical injunction of having to give heritage value to dishes that do not meet health standards. In the restaurants of Lomé (Togo) and the streets of Brazzaville (Democratic Republic of the Congo), multicultural cuisine is being effortlessly invented while affecting urban social cate-

gories seeking distinction as well as migrants who have become city-dwellers in survival mode. In Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso), we see the difficulties that may arise in turning a traditional dish (*tô*) into heritage but which for many remains a symbol of poverty. Conversely, in Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire), in opposition to all of the nutritional norms disseminated, people defiantly insist on eating *garba*, i.e. a piece of tuna bathing in blackish oil! In Jakarta (Indonesia), informal food outlets allow people without any nearby family resources to benefit from a mutual socialization venue, while in the cities of Malaysia, single migrants from rural communities are forced to make do and symbolically comfort themselves with the multiethnic culinary dishes of the Malaysian urban sphere. In Chinese cities, industrial sweet beverages appear to be gaining ground despite resistance underpinned by the local symbolic fabric. In Yaoundé and Douala (Cameroon), children's food socialization subtly (and freely) melds Western norms and local knowledge. Otherwise in Mexico City, families living in a food shortage situation develop symbolic survival strategies whereby they reinvent so-called 'traditional' recipes by diverting cheap industrial food products.

The picture created by these researchers is clearly far removed from a well-defined and reassuring village monograph. The normative disorder of the cities into which they immerse us cannot be reduced to any kind of normlessness. On the contrary, the eating practices they meticulously observe reveal cities that are vehicles of intertwined social injunctions. These food injunctions are often contradictory or paradoxical and the norms seem less static and codified, as well as more volatile than in the village, whereas they shape food practices. They nevertheless do not prevent city eaters—out of necessity and pleasure—from constantly breaching state or parastatal norms and, more generally, from inventing alternative ways of eating. Sydney Mintz said that one of the (unresolved) contradictions that emerges from most food research is the fact that populations are highly attached—in an almost conservative way—to their food practices, while at the same time being open to change, even to spectacular and rapid change. The narrative conveyed in this book helps make this contradiction less steadfast.

Jean-Pierre Hassoun,
Emeritus Research Director at CNRS,
Interdisciplinary Institute of Social Issues (IRIS-EHESS)

# Introduction - viewing food through the lens of urban eaters

*Audrey Soula, Chelsie Yount-André, Olivier Lepiller, Nicolas Bricas*

Feeding cities in African, Latin American and Asian countries is not a novel issue. It was the focus of geographical research in the 1970s (Vennetier, 1972), and then of multidisciplinary research in sub-Saharan Africa (Bricas *et al.*, 1985; Guyer, 1987), Latin America (Douzant-Rosenfeld and Grandjean, 1995) and Asia (Bardach, 1982). The overriding question addressed in these studies concerns how to feed fast-growing cities. How is their procurement organized? What economic impacts arise following the emergence of these new markets? These queries put the spotlight on the dependence of cities on international markets and agricultural commodity exporting countries, just at a time when globalization is accelerating with the liberalization trend resulting from the structural adjustments promoted by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. The influence of Marxist analysis regarding the dependency of peripheral areas on core areas still prevails, even though this interpretation framework has vanished from mainstream research. Yet the idea of the domination of the West over developing countries and of behavioural mimicry with regard to former colonial powers (Touré, 1982) continues to reign, despite the fact that these views are disparaged on the basis of socio-anthropological surveys in the food sector (Odeyé and Bricas, 1985; Requier-Desjardins, 1991) and, more broadly, in consumption and lifestyle areas (Appadurai, 1996).

Two to three decades later, the research focus has shifted from the issue of feeding cities to that of feeding oneself in cities, with urban food models now being specifically hinged on nutrition. Cities are often regarded as an ideal venue for commercial food consumption, the industrialization of food (product processing, supermarkets) and globalization (reliance on imported products and information from the global sphere). The city is often considered as a prime locus for food, nutritional and epidemiological transition—more animal products and product processing, less domestic cooking, more fat, less carbohydrates, more obesity, cardiovascular diseases and cancers, and fewer communicable diseases (Popkin, 1999). As this process arose in the West before other regions of the world, while being driven by major economic industrialization and globalization stakeholders, this transition is sometimes equated with the Westernization of diets (Pingali, 2007).

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Several phenomena that have emerged through long-term research support this view (growth in the contribution of animal products to caloric intake, the share of processed products in meals, the clout of advertising, the delegation of cooking to actors outside the household). However, food is often essentially studied from the standpoint of food consumption, i.e. what people eat, especially city dwellers. Otherwise, food supply balances and major household surveys of food consumption and expenditure could help identify differences in patterns between cities and rural areas and changes over the last few decades, while confirming major trends and convergences.

This interpretation seems inappropriate at the fine-grained analysis scales opted for in this book, namely shedding light on food practices, food perceptions and the ways people experience these changes. The qualitative socio-anthropological surveys presented here are focused not only on what city dwellers eat, but also on how they organize themselves for this activity, and what they say about it. Substantial methodological attention is also paid to the stance taken by researchers and investigators to avoid the siloing bias associated with nutritional research approaches. The aim was especially to avoid survey respondents engaging in a discourse aligned with the standards and health and nutrition dictates that are pervasive in the public arena. Observing and understanding food eaters' practices as openly as possible reveals that food is much more than just a question of feeding oneself, including among disadvantaged populations. Even in situations where people struggle to sate their appetite, they talk about pleasure, links with others and their environment, identity, moral values, etc. With whom, when and where one eats, where the food comes from and who produced it are often more important aspects than what food is actually eaten. That is the beauty and essence of sociological and anthropological approaches. The authors marshalled these approaches here not just to identify the sociocultural factors that determine food consumption and nutritional situations, but also to grasp how sociocultural relationships and cultures are shaped and nurtured, and to mainstream a notion of wellbeing that is broader than just meeting needs. Contrary to uniformity, convergence or transition, a diverse range of situations and trajectories emerge that help view these changes from a fresh perspective.

Monitoring such diversity in urban foodstyles on these finer and more comprehensive scales nevertheless does not question trends that may be observed on broader scales, where convergences emerge regarding the consumption of products from major nutrition-focused agribusiness groups, or regarding nutritional situations. There is indeed a gap between monitoring scales, each of which reveals different phenomena. The challenge is therefore to reflect on the impacts of these standpoints with regard to action, public policies, private strategies, or civil society interventions. While nutrition research may refer to health standards and strive to gain insight into how to meet them, social science research seeks to understand how social standards are constructed, including those concerning 'eating well', which goes far beyond just feeding oneself. Social science specialists thus try not to consider food solely from a normative viewpoint but instead capture the diversity of combined food functions (eating, enjoying oneself, relating to others and to the world, building and asserting one's identity, managing resources) specific to each society.

This was the focus of the method used in preparing the Eating in the City symposium[2] and this resulting book. The aim was to give priority to researchers from African, Asian and Latin American countries to present their results on the basis of issues concerning them, while not seeking to answer a prior question that had been openly put to all of them. The symposium thus brought together about a hundred people over two days, with priority given to detailed presentations while leaving time for discussion. Three main results emerged, each of which constituted an issue upon which the participants were asked to write a contribution. The chapters of this book are grouped in three parts related to these three issues.

The first part focuses on how eaters relate to standards. Cities are made up of mixed populations of diverse origins, while a wide variety of food practices and consumption patterns converge in collective, domestic, public and private spaces. Normative assemblages crystallize or dissolve there, in forms specific to urban settings. Cities are thus spaces where social interactions are constantly being renegotiated, and city dwellers are shaped by and navigate between multiple prescriptive requirements.

The chapter by Mohamed Mebtoul *et al*. shows the extent to which Algerian women in urban centres have to cope with a heavy physical and mental workload within their households, further magnified by their particularly exhausting daily culinary tasks.

Likewise, Hayat Zirari's chapter set in Morocco, another North African country with a different social, economic and political landscape, takes us beyond the issue of women's physical and mental workload. The author highlights changes among young urban Moroccan women who, while continuing to carry out their usual culinary tasks, are seeking to adjust and balance their gender roles in social relationships. They achieve this through their sociability and taking advantage of out-of-home food.

Shagufa Kapadia's work reveals how, in Indian cities, middle-class youth notions of trust and distrust mediate their eating choices.

Liliana Martínez-Lomelí examines how the heritage designation of Mexican street food has clashed with national nutritional and health standards. As such, she underscores the difficulty that eaters face in dealing simultaneously with these two opposing injunctions.

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2. The 'Eating in the city: urban food styles in Africa, Latin America and Asia' symposium took place on 4 and 5 December 2017 at the *Maison du lait* in Paris and was followed on 6 December by a one-day event at the UNESCO headquarters entitled 'A sustainable distrust?' It was co-organized by the French agricultural research and international cooperation organization working for the sustainable development of tropical and Mediterranean regions (CIRAD), with the joint research unit (UMR) MOISA, while benefitting from the invaluable assistance of Sophie Thiron, the UNESCO Chair in World Food Systems at Montpellier SupAgro and CIRAD, and particularly Damien Conaré, its Secretary General, Roxane Fages, its Project Manager, and Hélène Carrau, its Financial Assistant, the CNIEL Observatory of Eating Habits (OCHA), and particularly Véronique Pardo, Head of the Strategy-Studies Department at CNIEL, Caroline Le Poultier, Director General of CNIEL, and Noëlle Paolo, Director of the Studies and Strategy Department at CNIEL; and finally Claude Fischler, CNRS Emeritus Researcher at the *Centre Edgar Morin de l'Institut interdisciplinaire d'anthropologie du contemporain* (IIAC). This symposium benefitted from the support of Danone Nutricia Research, and particularly Charlotte Sarrat, Mila Lebrun, Amélie Aubert-Plard and Nicolas Gausserès; the Daniel and Nina Carasso Foundation; and *Agropolis Fondation*. We would also like to thank Toma Dutter for her animated drawings during the symposium.

These injunctions may also be underpinned by actors such as NGOs or international organizations that are highly active in many so-called developing countries. This is pointed out in Elisa Lomet's box, where it is clear that the promotion of Togolese products by development operators generally does not take all of local people's values associated with local products into account.

These early ethnographic studies shed light on the weight of normative injunctions faced by urban eaters. Yet they also provided insight into the diversity of situations and the heterogeneity of foodscapes, which differ markedly between cities. These foodscapes shape practical and normative forms of food consumption—while also being reshaped by them—in a rationale whereby the material aspect of spaces is linked with the uses and activities that take place within them. This is the focus of the second part of the book, where such links between urban landscapes and food are discussed in three chapters.

Yolande Berton-Ofouémé's work reveals how Congolese urban catering has been changing over the last 25 years. The coexistence of international dishes and 'invented' dishes from other cities, introduced by immigrants and disseminated via the food supply chain, particularly by the catering industry, questions the eternal opposition between so-called traditional and modern cuisine, while at the same time generating a new image of Brazzaville.

Laura Arciniegas reveals another aspect of urban foodscapes based on an ethnographic study in Jakarta's poor *kampung* neighbourhoods. She presents *warung makan*—stationary or mobile shops selling daily dishes cooked according to traditional and 'homemade' recipes—as extensions of the domestic sphere. Some household activities have thus shifted towards these new commercial culinary outlets, fostering relationships between eaters and vendors within social networks formed by neighbourhood, kinship, solidarity and trust relations. The 'geometry' of the city hence reshapes new food practices.

Underlying the seeming individualization of practices, as suggested by the rising popularity of out-of-home food consumption, new forms of socialization are emerging through food. In this regard, in Malaysia, Anindita Dasgupta *et al.* assessed the impact of rural-urban migration on the sense of identity among single men of rural origin who had moved to the capital city of Kuala Lumpur for work in the 1980s. The author highlights the creation of multi-ethnic urban spaces regulated through commensality.

JingJing Ma addresses the new social and family tensions that have emerged regarding the management of beverages and sugar consumed by middle-class urban Chinese. The author shows that urban life offers consumption settings where standards are eased and industrial sweetened beverages are adopted.

The surveys presented in this second part show how individuals rely on food to build their social relations with others and their social and cultural position in cosmopolitan cities.

Urban eaters are subject to various normative injunctions and the urban foodscape shapes their practices, but they are also resourceful in terms of innovation and creativity. This is the topic of the third part of the book. City dwellers reconfigure their food practices by navigating between various benchmarks and articulating multiple

forms of knowledge. Urban eaters thus seem to be reclaiming their food consumption patterns through these new food practices. They "take action"—as Anthony Giddens (1987) points out in his structuration theory regarding agency—and the final chapters of this book highlight the operational capacity of social actors and their pragmatic expertise.

The Burkinabe *bâbenda* food dish presented by Raphaëlle Héron is quite exemplary in this respect. This 'lean season dish' of the Mossi—the largest ethnic group on the central plateau of Burkina Faso—is currently undergoing a "popular modernization", in the words of those who eat *bâbenda*. This new consumption trend is actually part of a broader drive to promote so-called traditional dishes on a global scale. This trend confirms the importance of the identity function in urban food consumption, i.e. in an area where identity boundaries intersect and merge and hence where eaters occasionally need to reassert them. However, all of the studies presented here do not outline identity-related tension phenomena, but rather identification processes.

The work of N'da Amenan Gisèle Sédia and colleagues is part of a wider debate on the challenge of hygienic nutritional standards. The author shows how *garba*—a dish that nutritionists consider unhealthy—is now a menu item in popular food outlets in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, and even elsewhere in Africa.

Showcasing the social functions of food thus sheds light on food practices in the face of nutritional injunctions. The discourse on the risks of new so-called plethoric nutritional diseases linked to overweight and obesity (diabetes, cardiovascular diseases) is omnipresent in the cities studied and city dwellers are subject to or coping with the tensions inherent to the challenge of socializing, building their identities and health issues. Yet the latter are not necessarily a priority for people, although they may be well aware of the risks involved.

Note that food not only has a biological function but also fulfils an important social function. Estelle Kouokam Magne reminds us of this through her study on 'stockpot food' which enables a child to be assimilated into his/her social and household group, while at the same time assimilating the food contained in the stockpot. City dwellers' diets are ultimately in a trade-off position—encompassing the receptiveness of families to new foods and the importance of food as a heritage received and passed on from generation to generation.

Ayari G. Pasquier Merino's study nevertheless reconfirms that not all eaters enjoy this diversified urban offer on equal footing. Cities are also the locus of deep social inequality and the poorest populations often experience unprecedented food insecurity. The author analyses the food situation of poor households in Mexico City and reveals the various strategies adopted by women to cope with the growing economic insecurity and meet their household food needs.

The analysis of food practices and food perceptions of city dwellers thus shows the inadequacy of considering food changes simply in terms of Westernization, transition, standardization or convergence towards an ultimately widely adopted model. Although we are aware that similar foodscape changes may be under way in different cities (industrial products, supermarkets, etc.), the socio-anthropological surveys outlined in this book reveal that city dwellers are inventing new food practices and cuisines based on a range of local and/or outside references that cannot simply be viewed as extraversion or mimicry.

The food reconfigurations presented here therefore depict processes rather than models, acts of identification rather than fixed identities. Accordingly, we are striving to steer clear of rigid definitions of new food models because food is above all a dynamic element in relationships with oneself and towards others, relationships that are intertwined and whose contours are constantly changing. Talking about food in cities is therefore tantamount to discussing ongoing construction and negotiation processes that are never temporally static. Rather than a global convergence towards a single identical way of eating in cities, the book also shows how the inhabitants of cities in Africa, Latin America and Asia are generating new original forms of food from diverse elements, some of which are shifting away from capitalist rationales and emerging as new spaces for sharing.

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Part 1

# Urban foodways at the cusp of normative injunctions