CHAPTER
1

EXPLORING THE SOCIAL APPETITE: A SOCIOLOGY OF FOOD AND NUTRITION

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OVERVIEW

› Why do we eat the way we do?
› What is sociology and how can it be applied to the study of food and nutrition?
› What are the major social trends in food production, distribution and consumption?

This chapter provides an overview of the sociological perspective as it applies to the study of food and nutrition by introducing the concept of the social appetite. We explain how food sociology can help to conceptualise the connections between individual food habits and wider social patterns to explore why we eat the way we do. The chapter concludes by reviewing the major themes discussed in this book, highlighting the social context in which food is produced, distributed, consumed and disposed.

KEY TERMS

agency
agribusiness
body image
civilising process
cosmopolitanism
dietary guidelines
food security
globalisation
identity
McDonaldisation
muscular ideal
public health nutrition
reflexive modernity
risk society
social appetite
social construction
social structure
sociological imagination
structure/agency debate
thin ideal

Introduction: The social construction of food and appetite

> But food is like sex in its power to stimulate imagination and memory as well as those senses—taste, smell, sight … The most powerful writing about food rarely addresses the qualities of a particular dish or meal alone; it almost always contains elements of nostalgia for other times, places and companions, and of anticipation of future pleasures.
>
> Joan Smith, *Hungry for You* (1997, p. 334)

We all have our favourite foods and individual likes and dislikes. Consider the tantalising smell of freshly baked bread, the luscious texture of chocolate, the heavenly aroma of espresso coffee, the exquisite flavour of semi-dried tomatoes, and the simple delight of a crisp potato chip. In addition to these sensory aspects, food is the focal point around which many social occasions and leisure events are organised. While hunger is a biological drive and food is essential to survival, there is more to food and eating than the satisfaction of physiological needs. 'Social drives'—based on cultural, religious, economic and political factors—also affect the availability and consumption of food. The existence of national cuisines, such as Thai, Italian, Indian and Mexican (to name only a few), indicates that individual food preferences are not formed in a social vacuum. The link between the 'individual' and the 'social' in terms of food habits begins early: 'While we all begin life consuming the same milk diet, by early childhood, children of different cultural groups are consuming diets that are composed of completely different foods, [sometimes] sharing no foods in common. This observation points to the essential role of early experience and the social and cultural context of eating in shaping food habits' (Birch, Fisher & Grimm-Thomas 1996, p. 162).

Therefore, despite similar physiological needs in humans, food habits are not universal, natural or inevitable; they are **social constructions**, and significant variations exist, from the sacred cow in India, to kosher eating among the orthodox Jewish community, to the consumption in some countries of animals that are kept as pets in other countries, such as dogs and horses. In Australia, the kangaroo may be on the coat of arms, but it is also a highly prized meat that is increasingly available in supermarkets and restaurants. Many indigenous peoples continue to consume traditional food; Australian Aboriginals, for example, consume 'bush foods' not often eaten by white Australians, such as witchetty grubs, honey ants, galahs and turtles. Some cultures prohibit alcohol consumption, while others drink alcohol to excess, and many cultures have gendered patterns of food consumption (see Box 1.1). As Claude Fischler (1988) notes, food is a bridge between nature and culture, and food habits are learnt through culturally determined notions of what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate food, and through cultural methods of preparation and consumption, irrespective of the nutritional value of these foods and methods (Falk 1994).

BOX 1.1   GENDERED FOOD HABITS

Gendered patterns of food habits can be observed in many cultures (DeVault 1991; Counihan 1999). It is not difficult to find examples of gender stereotypes in the advertising of certain food products. In Australia, over many years, the 'Meadowlea mum' commercials depicted a loving mum who prepared home-cooked meals with margarine to serve her happy family. Meat and Livestock Australia similarly aired highly gendered advertising campaigns, such as its 1990s 'Feed the man meat' campaign complete with sing-a-long

jingle, which depicted dutiful mothers preparing hearty meat-based meals for their growing sons and hard-working husbands. In 2013, the *Masterchef Australia* TV show pitted women against men and used highly gendered advertisements, including pink and blue colours, and graphics labelling some of the female contestants as '1950s housewife' and 'Daddy's little princess'. In preparing these advertisements, the advertising companies are cashing-in on, and reinforcing, existing gendered eating habits. Red meat tends to be perceived as a masculine food, while fruit and vegetables are perceived as being feminine (Charles & Kerr 1988).

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The sociology of food and nutrition, or food sociology, concentrates on the myriad sociocultural, political, economic and philosophical factors that influence our food habits—what we eat, when we eat, how we eat and why we eat. Sociologists look for patterns in human interaction and seek to uncover the links between social organisation and individual behaviour. Food sociology focuses on the social patterning of food production, distribution and consumption—which can be conceptualised as the **social appetite**. The chapters in this book explore the various dimensions of the social appetite to show the ways in which foods, tastes and appetites are socially constructed. However, the sociological perspective does not tell the whole story, which is rounded out by many other disciplines, including anthropology, history, economics, geography, psychology and **public health nutrition**. Sociological approaches are a relatively recent addition to the study of food. Despite the delayed interest, since the 1990s there has been a significant surge in food sociology literature.

A sociological study of food habits examines the role played by the social environment in which food is produced and consumed. This does not mean that individual choice and personal taste play no role. Rather, because social patterns in food habits exist, a sociological explanation is helpful in understanding these patterns, which reveal the social determinants of why we eat the way we do. If food choice were totally based on individual or natural preferences for certain tastes, few people would persevere with foods such as coffee or beer, which are bitter on first tasting. These foods are said to be an 'acquired taste', and we 'acquire' them through a process of repetition that is socially driven, rather than biologically driven.

What is sociology? Introducing the sociological imagination template to study food

Before we discuss how sociology can contribute to the study of food and nutrition, we need to provide an overview of the sociological perspective (with which some readers will already be familiar). In brief, sociology examines how society is organised, how it influences our lives, and how social change occurs. It investigates social relationships at every level, from interpersonal and small-group interactions to public policy formation and global developments. Sociology provides critiques of explanations that reduce complex social phenomena to primarily biological, psychological or individualistic causes.

Charles Wright Mills (1959) coined the term **sociological imagination** to describe the way that sociological analysis is performed. Interpreting the world with a sociological imagination involves establishing a link between personal experiences and the social environment—that is, being able to imagine or see that the private lives of individuals can have a social basis. When

individuals share similar experiences, a social pattern emerges that implies that such experiences have a common, social foundation. For example, food and eating are imbued with social meanings and are closely associated with people's social interaction in both formal and informal settings. Box 1.2 provides some everyday examples of the social construction of food, especially food symbolism, to highlight the value of exploring the social appetite.

BOX 1.2 THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF FOOD AND TASTE

Food is central to social life and it is perhaps this centrality that has resulted in potent food symbolism and connections with key social events. That foods are imbued with social meaning is evident when we examine well-known books and films in popular culture. The film *Eat, Drink, Man, Woman* (1994) explores the importance of food to family life and personal **identity**. *Babette's Feast* (1987) contrasts a pious lifestyle of moral austerity with the sensuality and carnality of food as a feast of sight, aroma, texture and taste—a spiritual experience of worldly pleasure. *The Wedding Banquet* (1993) conveys the social meaning of food in the context of marriage rituals. Other films have comically explored cannibalism, such as *Delicatessen* (1991) and *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover* (1989); and who can forget the vomit scene in *Monty Python's The Meaning of Life* (1983). The film *La Grande Bouffe* (1973) and Linda Jaivin's book *Eat Me* (1995) mixed erotica with the sensuality of food in what could be termed a genre of 'food porn' if it were not for the long tradition of food advertisements that conflate the pleasures of sex and food—just think of any number of adverts about chocolate or ice-cream. The passion of food has been explored in films like *Dinner Rush* (2000), *No Reservations* (2007) and *The Hundred-Foot Journey* (2014), while the manipulative power of the food industry has been exposed in *Fast Food Nation* (2006), a fictionalised account of Eric Schlosser's (2001) journalistic exposé. Food is often used as a metaphor in daily speech, through expressions such as 'sweetheart', 'honey', 'bad seed', 'couch potato', 'breadwinner' and 'cheesed off', to name a few. Imagine some of the food rituals and food symbolism involved in the following social situations:
* a birthday celebration
* a wake
* a wedding banquet
* a religious feast or fast
* an occasion when you might exercise virtue and restraint in eating
* an occasion when you crave 'comfort food' or 'naughty but nice' food.

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Drawing on the work of Mills (1959) and Giddens (1986), Evan Willis (2004) conceptualises the sociological imagination as consisting of four interlinked factors: historical, cultural, structural and critical. When these four interrelated features of the sociological imagination are applied to a topic under study, they form the basis of sociological analysis. We have visually presented this approach in Figure 1.1 as a useful template to keep in mind when you want to apply a sociological perspective to an issue—simply imagine superimposing the template over the topic you are investigating and consider the following sorts of questions:
* **Historical factors**: How have past events influenced the contemporary social appetite (i.e. current social patterns of food production, distribution and consumption)?
* **Cultural factors**: What influence do tradition, cultural values and belief systems have on food habits in the particular country, social group or social occasion you are studying?

- **Structural factors**: How do various forms of social organisation and social institutions affect the production, distribution and consumption of food?
- **Critical factors**: Why are things as they are? Could they be otherwise? Who benefits?

FIGURE 1.1   The sociological imagination template

Historical

Structural ⟵———— Sociological analysis ————⟶ Cultural
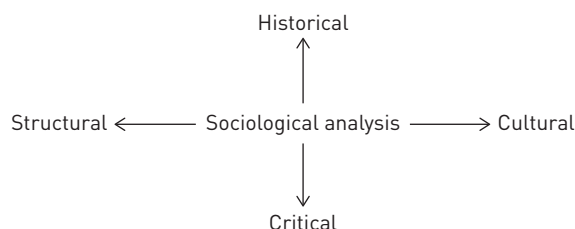
Critical

Applying the sociological imagination template can challenge your views and assumptions about the world, since such 'sociological vision' involves constant critical reflection. By using the template, the social context of food can be examined in terms of an interplay between historical, cultural, structural and critical factors. However, it is important to note that the template necessarily simplifies the actual process of sociological analysis because, for example, there is a wide variety of research methods and social theories through which sociological analysis can be conducted. In practice, there can be considerable overlap between the four factors, so they are not as distinctly identifiable as is implied by Figure 1.1. For instance, it can be difficult to clearly differentiate between historical factors and cultural factors, or structural factors and cultural factors, as they can be interdependent. Cultural values are often intricately intertwined with historical events and may also be the product of, or at least be reinforced by, structural factors. Nevertheless, the sociological imagination template is a useful reminder that the four factors—historical, cultural, structural and critical—are essential elements of sociological analysis (see Box 1.3).

BOX 1.3 ABORIGINAL FOOD AND NUTRITION: APPLYING THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION TEMPLATE

Until the colonisation of Australia by Europeans, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) people lived a hunter-gatherer lifestyle. Today, ATSI people form 2.5 per cent of the Australian population, and suffer from disproportionately high rates of many nutrition-related chronic health conditions, such as type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and overweight and obesity (AIHW 2011). Data published in 2015 showed a lack of **food security**, particularly for those in remote Australia, where 31 per cent of people reported being in a household that ran out of food and could not afford to buy more (ABS 2015). Applying the sociological imagination template highlights the relationship between the social situation of Indigenous people, and their food, nutrition and health.

Historical factors

Before white settlement of Australia, there is evidence that ATSI people were fit and healthy and lived on a relatively nutritious, low-energy diet (NHMRC 2000). When, Indigenous communities were dispossessed of their hunting and fishing areas and forced to live on missions and reserves, they were provided with rations of highly processed Western foods low in nutrient value, such as white flour and sugar. The historical legacy of these developments was a change from a traditional nutrient-dense diet (bush foods) to a Westernised diet high in saturated fat and sugar and low in fruit and vegetables.

Cultural factors

While bush foods such as galahs, turtles, goannas, honey ants and witchetty grubs represent only a small proportion of the food consumed by Aboriginal people today, they remain an important part of Indigenous culture, identity and food preferences, particularly in rural and remote regions. Maintaining this cultural heritage and incorporating bush foods into nutrition-promotion strategies could help ameliorate nutritional problems in Indigenous communities.

Structural factors

Unemployment, low education, overcrowding and poverty are experienced by a disproportionately high percentage of Indigenous people (AIHW 2011). The limited food supply in rural and remote areas (particularly in terms of access to fresh foods such as fruit and vegetables), management of food stores and transport all provide challenges for **food security** in Indigenous communities.

Critical factors

The 2001 *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nutrition Strategy and Action Plan 2000–2010* (NATSINSAP) documented Indigenous food and nutrition problems and proposed a range of food supply, food security and nutrition promotion initiatives (SIGNAL 2001). Yet nearly two decades after this plan was released, food security continues to be a problem for this population group (ABS 2015; NHMRC 2000). Beyond public health nutrition approaches, a number of employment-generation schemes for Indigenous communities have been attempted. For example, echoing the native food sovereignty movement in the United States, a 'bush tucker' industry has developed, using traditional foods (such as bush tomatoes and indigenous oils and spices) as resources to market to the general community. While still small, the industry has received some government funding support, though considerably more funds are needed for industry development, which could result in it becoming a significant source of employment for Indigenous people, as well as a source of cultural connection to their heritage.

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Food sociology and the structure/agency debate

A key sociological question concerns the relative influence over human behaviour (in this case food choice) of personal preferences and social determinants. To what extent are our food choices the result of social shaping as opposed to individual likes and dislikes? This represents a central concern of any sociological study, and is often referred to as the **structure/agency debate**. The term **social structure** refers to recurring patterns of social interaction by which people are related to each other through social institutions and social groups. In this sense we are very much products of our society, as certain forms of social organisation, such as laws, education, religion, economic resources and cultural beliefs, influence our lives. However, as self-conscious beings, we have the ability to participate in and change the society in which we live. The term **agency** refers to the potential of individuals to independently exercise choice in, and influence over, their daily lives and wider society. Clearly, we are not simply automatons responding to preordained social outcomes. Human agency produces the scope for difference, diversity and social change.

It is important to note that structure and agency are inextricably linked—they should not be viewed as representing an either/or choice, or as being inherently positive or negative. The social structure may liberate individuals by ensuring access to inexpensive food or make less healthy options more expensive (see Box 1.4), while the exercise of agency by some individuals may be constraining on others—for example, someone may steal your food!

BOX 1.4   THE SUGAR TAX: STRUCTURE AND AGENCY IN ACTION

One example of the interrelationship between structure and agency is provided by the sugar debate recently sparked by the structural changes made in the United Kingdom. The UK government voted to introduce a tax on sugar-sweetened beverages (soft drinks), which is a type of structural change (Triggle 2016). Similar initiatives introduced in low- and middle-income countries, such as Mexico, have shown that such measures have an impact on purchasing behaviour, with a 6 per cent decrease in the purchase of taxed beverages one year after the introduction of the excise (Colchero, Popkin, Rivera & Ng 2016).

The case is also an example of where people can exercise their agency—consumers still have the ability to choose whether or not to buy these beverages at the higher prices, or to buy non-taxed beverage alternatives instead. In the Mexican study, the purchase of non-taxed products such as bottled water increased over the same period.

The interrelationship of structure and agency is illustrated by the fact that while people maintain the ability to purchase soft drinks, some people may have economic constraints that limit their purchasing power. The evaluation of the initiative in Mexico showed that the households of the lowest socioeconomic status had the greatest decreases in purchase of taxed beverages—9 per cent versus 5.6 per cent in the households of highest socioeconomic status. The effects of the new tax in the UK, as a high-income country, remain to be seen.

A sociological perspective thus sheds light on the potential success or failure of major policy initiatives, and illustrates the complexity of the interaction between structure and agency.

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What's on the menu?

A walk down the aisle of any supermarket reveals food products that were not widely available even two decades ago. French cheese, Russian caviar, Indian spices, Thai coconut cream, Belgian chocolate and Australian macadamia nuts are a small indication of the extent of social change in food habits. In restaurants and cafes in major urban areas of any country, people can now partake of global cuisines such as Chinese, Indian, Thai, Italian, Greek and French. In fact, **culinary tourism**, the promotion of gastronomic experiences and events as a key feature of tourism (such as regional food festivals and foodstuffs), has become increasingly popular (Rojek & Urry 1997), particularly amid calls for a return to authenticity and regionality in food and cooking (Symons 1993).

The processes of mass production and **globalisation** have resulted in such a pluralisation of food choices and hybridisation of cuisines that a form of food **cosmopolitanism** is emerging (Tomlinson 1999; Beck 2000). The popular description of modern Australian cuisine as 'Australasian' is just one example of this cosmopolitan trend. Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck both argue that contemporary social life is characterised by **reflexive modernity** (Beck et al. 1994). According to Giddens (1991), people's exposure to new information and different cultures undermines traditions. For Claude Fischler, this can result in the omnivore's paradox, whereby when faced with such food variety and novelty 'individuals lack reliable criteria to make … decisions and therefore they experience a growing sense of anxiety' (1980, p. 948), or what he playfully refers to as 'gastro-anomie'. In the face of food-borne diseases, such as 'mad cow disease' and avian influenza (bird flu), resulting from modern agricultural processes, the wide variety of food choices coexist with increased risk and anxiety over what to eat (Lupton 2000), the constant management of which Beck (1992) describes as characteristic of a **risk society**.

The food system: Food politics, production and distribution

> If commercial interests make people's tastes more standardised than they conceivably could in the past, they impose far less strict limits than did the physical constraints to which most people's diet was subject … the main trend has been towards diminishing contrasts and increasing varieties in food habits and culinary taste.
>
> Stephen Mennell, *All Manners of Food* (1996, pp. 321–2)

The increasing mass production and commodification of food over the last century has resulted in food being one of the largest industries across the globe, with world food exports estimated to be over US$1303 billion in 2012, more than doubling in value since 2005 (Department of Agriculture 2014; see Table 1.1). In Australia, there are over 1.6 million people employed in the food sector, with the total value of food production estimated at $42.8 billion in 2012–13. Australia is a major food exporter, ranked the 13th largest in the world, representing $31.8 billion in trade (2012–13) (Department of Agriculture 2014).

Food is a major source of profit, export dollars and employment, and thus concerns a range of stakeholders, including corporations, unions, consumer groups, government agencies and health professionals. To conceptualise the size of the food industry or food system, various models have been proposed, such as food chains, food cycles and food webs (see Sobal et al. 1998 for an excellent review). Jeff Sobal and colleagues (1998) prefer to use the term 'food and nutrition system' to acknowledge the important role of public health nutrition in any food model, which they define as:

> the set of operations and processes involved in transforming raw materials into foods and transforming nutrients into health outcomes, all of which functions as a system within biophysical and sociocultural contexts. (Sobal et al. 1998, p. 853, *original italics*)

Food system models invariably simplify the operations involved in the production, distribution and consumption of food, often failing to take account of the global, political, cultural and environmental concerns, or the related stakeholders and industries, such as the media, waste-management, advertising, transport and health sectors. The model devised by Sobal and colleagues (1998) addresses most of these sociological concerns, though the issue of globalisation is absent.

BOX 1.5   THE MCDONALDISATION OF FOOD

The **McDonaldisation** of food is a global phenomenon and represents the expansion of **agribusiness** through the standardisation of food production and the homogenisation of food consumption. Ritzer, in *The McDonaldization of Society*, first published in 1993, used the term 'McDonaldisation' as a modern metaphor for '*the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world*' (2000, p. 1, italics in original). McDonald's is a prototype organisation that has been able, through rigid methods of managerial and technical control, to achieve a highly rationalised form of food production: no matter where in the world you come across a McDonald's restaurant, you can be assured of encountering the same look, the same service, the same products and the same tastes. Not only are there now many other food chains based on the same formula, but there are also fewer and fewer places where you can avoid the McDonald's experience.

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TABLE 1.1   Share of export food trade by country, in value terms (2012)

RANK	COUNTRY	SHARE (%)
1	USA	10.6
2	Netherlands	5.9
3	Brazil	5.7
4	Germany	5.5
5	France	5.4
6	China	4.3
7	Canada	3.6
8	Spain	3.4
9	Argentina	3.3
10	Belgium	3.1
11	Italy	3.0
12	Indonesia	2.5
13	Australia	2.4

Source: Adapted from Department of Agriculture (2014, p. 31)

The five chapters in Part 2 of this book explore some of the key sociological issues affecting the food system, particularly the impact of globalisation (see Box 1.5) and agribusiness (see Schlosser 2001), and the role of food regulations in relation to the corporate influences on dietary guidelines, labelling and public health nutrition. Specifically, Part 2 investigates the environmental impact of current agricultural practices (Chapter 2); the inequitable distribution of food as the basis of world hunger (Chapter 3); the increasing food insecurity experienced in developed countries like Australia (Chapter 4); and the dominating influence of politics and policies on how food is produced and consumed and labelled (Chapter 5 and Chapter 6).

Given that food is a major industry and source of profit, it should come as little surprise that it is also an area rife with politics and debates over public policy, particularly over food regulation relating to hygiene standards, the use of chemicals, pesticide residues, the legitimacy of advertising claims, and various public health nutrition policies and strategies (see Box 1.6).

Dietary guidance is an area where governments involve themselves in regulating food and nutrition. **Dietary guidelines** are statements of recommendations for the way in which populations are advised to alter their food habits (see NHMRC 2013 for the Australian version of these guidelines). The ability of this advice to be influenced by powerful corporate interests, often referred to as Big Food, is demonstrated in Chapter 5. An examination of the development and implementation of food policy exposes some of the individualistic assumptions and corporate interests that have swayed the good intentions of government authorities and health professionals attempting to address public health nutrition. A highly contested example of the influence of the food industry can be seen in the development of regulations governing food composition and labelling, which is discussed in Chapter 6.

BOX 1.6 THE AUSSIE MEAT PIE AND THE DEFINITION OF 'MEAT'

Food regulations are often the outcome of a compromise between the interests of the food industry and public health. Take, for example, the humble meat pie in Australia and how FSANZ adopted a definition of 'meat' that makes it possible for buffalo, camel and deer to find their way into a meat pie, as well as gristle, animal rind and connective tissue.

The quintessentially Australian meat pie—one of the earliest fast foods in Australia—was actually inherited from the British. Its popularity reflected the wide availability of meat in Australia, its simple flavours (meat and gravy encased in pastry), and its ability to be eaten with the hands, which made it a popular convenience food, especially at sporting occasions such as football matches. The industrialisation and mass production of the meat pie has caused much speculation about its actual ingredients, particularly about how much meat and what types of meat it contains. According to Standard 2.2.1 (Meat and Meat Products) of the Australian New Zealand Food Standards Code, a meat pie need only include a minimum of 25 per cent actual meat. Of particular interest is the definition of 'meat', which includes 'buffalo, camel, cattle, deer, goat, hare, pig, poultry, rabbit or sheep', 'slaughtered other than in a wild state'. So not only can a meat pie include very little actual beef or red meat, but it can include animal rind, fat, gristle, connective tissue, nerve tissue, blood and blood vessels under the label of 'meat' (offal must be listed separately in the ingredients list). This means that muscle meat—which is what people normally consider to be meat—may not even be included in a meat pie. Furthermore, meat content is measured by the presence of protein and this can be 'beefed up' by adding soy products (ACA 2002).

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Food culture: Consumption and identity

Tell me what you eat, and I shall tell you what you are.

Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, *The Physiology of Taste* (1825)

People in Western societies are presented with a large number of consumption choices, which can be used to construct their self-identity. As Deborah Lupton has described, food is often defined as 'good or bad, masculine or feminine, powerful or weak, alive or dead, healthy or non-healthy, a comfort or punishment, sophisticated or gauche, a sin or virtue, animal or vegetable' (1996, pp. 1–2). These opposing attributes illustrate the social meanings, classifications and emotions that people can attach to food and, by choosing certain foods above others, define who they are. Pierre Bourdieu (1979, 1984) maintains that traditional modes of social distinction based on class persist through consumption practices, particularly food habits. The theme of Part 3 of the book encapsulates food habits that are influenced by various forms of social group membership, whether based on traditional social cleavages or new social movements (see Box 1.7).

In 2005, the 'Save Toby' website was launched on which it was claimed that Toby, a cute little rabbit, was being held for ransom. Unless visitors donated a certain sum of money, Toby would die. According to the site author: 'I am going to take Toby to a butcher to have him slaughter this cute bunny. I will then prepare Toby for a midsummer feast.' The website included pictures of Toby on a chopping board and in a saucepan, along with an updated diary of Toby's activities. What started as a bad taste joke gained global media attention and soon people sent money to save Toby or buy mugs, T-shirts and a book sold through Amazon.com. Eventually Toby was 'saved', and it spurred a number of copycat money-raising schemes/jokes that served to highlight public hypocrisy about eating meat. Meanwhile, rabbits remain widely available from butchers and restaurants in many countries. The Save Toby campaign exposed the contradictions inherent in meat consumption, particularly when some animals are socially constructed as pets, often with

human-like attributes. The line between 'normality' and taboo foods is often fragile—never more so than when it concerns eating animals; this issue is explored further in Chapter 9.

BOX 1.7 THE 'SLOW FOOD' AND 'TRUE FOOD' SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

The Slow Food Movement began in Italy in 1986 and was formally established in 1989 as a response to the mass production and globalisation of food. It claims to have over 100,000 members worldwide, and aims to protect, catalogue and promote traditional, regional and national cuisines, including endangered animal breeds, vegetable species and cooking techniques. Using the emblem of the snail and referring to members as 'eco-gastronomes', Slow Food opposes the fast-food industry and works to protect food traditions, historic sites (cafes and bistros) and agricultural heritage (biodiversity, artisan techniques and sustainable agriculture). The Slow Food Movement promotes its aims by funding research, conferences and festivals, by publishing material, and by lobbying governments and corporations. Along similar lines but for vastly different reasons, the 'True Food Network', coordinated by Greenpeace, campaigns specifically against genetically engineered food and, in addition to its lobbying efforts, produces consumer guides on obtaining food free of genetic modification. For more information about these social movements and their food ideologies, see the following websites:
- Slow Food: www.slowfood.com/
- True Food Network: www.greenpeace.org.au/truefood/

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Ordering a vegetarian meal, eating a meat pie, dining at a trendy cafe, drinking an exclusive wine or eating an exotic cuisine can be used and interpreted as social 'markers' of an individual's social status, group membership or philosophical beliefs. Part 3 of this book addresses the relationship between social groups, food consumption and identity formation, including an examination of how these aspects change in the life stage of ageing (Chapter 10) or are affected by social class (Chapter 11). Chapters 7, 8 and 12 examine Australian and European food cultures by drawing on the intellectual tradition of historical sociology, which blends the approaches of the two disciplines to explore how complex social processes shape the development of societies across time and place (Tilly 2001) or, as Mills famously stated, 'enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society' (1959, p. 6). No more so is this illustrated than in unpacking the complex relationship humans have with alcohol, explored in Chapters 12 and 13.

The adage 'you are what you eat' (and in some cases drink) was originally intended as a nutritional slogan to encourage healthy eating, but today the meaning has changed as the focus has moved away from the internal health of the body to the external 'look' of the body. Part 3 of this book examines the impact of health, nutrition and beauty discourses on food consumption and body management. The name of the well-known company Weight Watchers symbolises the body discipline and surveillance that is now commonly practised in Western societies in efforts to conform to a socially acceptable notion of beauty and **body image**—a process that can be referred to as 'social embodiment', whereby the body is both an object and a reflective agent (Connell 2002). As we shall see in Chapter 14, attempts to regulate the body are gendered through the social construction of the **thin ideal** for women, and the **muscular ideal** for men. While external pressures from the media and corporate interests play a key role in the construction and maintenance of such discourses, they are also internalised and reproduced by individuals—an example of what Norbert Elias (1978) termed **civilising processes**, whereby social regulation of individual behaviour is no longer achieved through external coercion but through moral self-regulation. Chapter 15 discusses how society treats those who fail to conform to the thin ideal and face the stigma of obesity.

BOX 1.8 'LITE' FOODS, BALANCE AND INCREASING OBESITY RATES

Despite the increasing consumption of low-fat foods, rates of overweight and obesity continue to rise in many Western countries—a fact that should caution against any simplistic beliefs that low-fat foods can be used to control weight (Allred 1995). The 2014 figures showed that over 1.9 billion people (39 per cent of the world adult population) are overweight, with 600 million (13 per cent) obese (WHO 2015).

While so-called 'light foods' are marketed for weight control purposes, Claude Fischler (1995) argues that people seek increased pleasure through the inclusion of light foods in addition to, rather than as a replacement for, other foods in the diet (possibly allowing them to eat more). For example, it is not uncommon for people to use artificial sweetener in their coffee so that they can have a slice of chocolate mud cake, or to purchase diet cola with a hamburger, giving a sense of dietary 'balance'. The commonsense notion of a 'balanced' diet is highly variable, but may be defined as a balance between 'good' and 'bad' choices, hedonism and discipline, healthy and unhealthy food (Fischler 1988).

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Attempts to rationally manage and regulate the human body mean that for many people the pleasures of eating now coexist with feelings of guilt. While food companies encourage us to succumb to hedonistic temptations, health authorities proclaim nutritional recommendations as if eating were merely an instrumental act of health maintenance. The social-control overtones of such an approach are clearly evident in the 'lipophobic' (fear of fat) health advice given by some health professionals. Changes in the advice of health authorities over the decades and the simplification of scientific findings into media slogans, mixed with the contra-marketing efforts of food companies, have served to create confusion over whether certain foods, particularly those marketed as 'low fat' or 'lite', are in fact health-promoting (see Box 1.8). While some people have become disciplined adherents to this marketing propaganda, others have become increasingly sceptical of moralistic nutrition messages, especially when linked to the thin ideal, and instead support size acceptance in the context of a healthy lifestyle, in an alternative doctrine of Health at Every Size.

A preliminary conclusion

There is no sincerer love than the love of food.

George Bernard Shaw, *Back to Methuselah* (1930)

While this book represents an academic enquiry into food, we would like to acknowledge the passion, delight and pure hedonism with which food is intimately associated. In that light, and in the spirit of cosmopolitanism, we end this chapter with the following excerpt from Marcel Proust, which encapsulates the central role of food as part of *la dolce vita*:

> She sent for one of those squat, plump little cakes called 'petites madeleines', which look as though they had been moulded in the fluted valve of a scallop shell. And soon, mechanically, dispirited after a dreary day with the prospect of a depressing morrow, I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of the cake. No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shiver ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, something isolated, detached, with no suggestion of its origin. And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory—this new sensation having had the effect, which love has, of filling me with a precious essence; or rather this essence was not in me, it *was* me. I had ceased now to feel mediocre, contingent, mortal. Whence could it have come to me, this all-powerful joy? I sensed that it was connected with the taste of the tea and the cake, but that it infinitely transcended those savours, could not, indeed, be of the same nature. Where did it come from? What did it mean? How could I seize and apprehend it?

Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way* (1913, 1957)

SUMMARY OF MAIN POINTS

- The sociology of food and nutrition challenges individualistic accounts of people's eating habits that assume that personal likes and dislikes primarily govern food choice.
- The 'social appetite' refers to the social context in which food is produced, distributed, consumed and disposed—the social context that shapes our food choices.
- Sociology examines how society works, how it influences our lives and how social change occurs. It adopts a critical stance by asking questions such as these: Why are things as they are? Who benefits? What are the alternatives to the status quo?
- As Evan Willis suggests, the sociological imagination—or thinking sociologically—is best put into practice by addressing four interrelated facets of any social phenomena: historical, cultural, structural and critical factors.
- The way we eat reflects an interplay between social structure and human agency.
- Food cosmopolitanism, globalisation, reflexivity and risk are central features of contemporary social life in developed societies.

Sociological reflection

Think of the influences that have shaped your own food habits and likes and dislikes by imagining a social occasion at which food is consumed, such as a birthday party or Christmas celebration. Apply the sociological imagination template to explore the significance of the occasion, noting for each factor the influences on your food consumption:

- Historical: When did you first eat that way? What past events have influenced the social occasion?
- Cultural: What customs or values are involved? Who prepares and serves the food, and with whom is it consumed? Why?
- Structural: In what setting does the food event occur? What role do wider social institutions or organisations play?
- Critical: Has the particular event changed over time or not? Why?

Discussion questions

1. How can food and taste be socially constructed? Give examples.
2. What is meant by the term 'social appetite'?
3. Consider the social meanings and symbolism in the examples of the social appetite in Box 1.2. What other examples can you think of?

Further investigation

1. 'Food choice is not simply a matter of personal taste, but reflects regional, national and global influences.' Discuss.
2. Given that social patterns of food production, distribution and consumption exist, to what extent are individuals responsible for their food choices?

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FURTHER RESOURCES

Books

Belasco, W. 2006, *Meals to Come: A History of the Future of Food*, University of California Press, Berkeley.

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Mennell, S. 1996, *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present*, Revised edition, University of Illinois Press, Chicago.

Nestle, M. 2013, *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health*, Revised expanded edition, University of California Press, Berkeley.

Websites

Agri-food Research Network: http://afrn.co/

Anthropology of Food: http://aof.revues.org/

Association for the Study of Food and Society (ASFS): www.food-culture.org/

Australian Food, Society and Culture Network: http://sydney.edu.au/business/food-society-culture

Canadian Association for Food Studies: http://cafs.landfood.ubc.ca/en/

Critical Studies in Food and Culture: www.facebook.com/Critical-Studies-in-Food-and-Culture-105508892823849/

Food Culture Studies Caucus (American Studies Association): www.facebook.com/FoodCaucus/

Food Systems Academy: www.foodsystemsacademy.org.uk/

Gastronomica: www.gastronomica.org/

Health at Every Size: http://haescommunity.com/

International Food Policy Research Institute: www.ifpri.org/

International Rural Sociology Association (IRSA): www.irsa-world.org/

The Secret Ingredient: http://thesecretingredient.org/

Films and documentaries

Cowspiracy: The Sustainability Secret, 2014, documentary by Kip Andersen and Keegan Kuhn, 85 minutes.

Food, Inc. 2009, documentary by Robert Kenner, 94 minutes.

The End of the Line, 2009, documentary by Rupert Murray, 85 minutes.

Fast Food Nation, 2006, film directed by Richard Linklater, inspired by Eric Schlosser's book, 114 minutes.

Fed Up, 2014, documentary by Stephanie Soechtig, 92 minutes.

Ingredients, 2011, documentary by Robert Bates, 67 minutes.

Super Size Me, 2004, documentary by Morgan Spurlock, 100 minutes.

That Sugar Film, 2015, documentary by Damon Gameau, 102 minutes.

The Future of Food, 2004, documentary by Deborah Koons, 81 minutes.

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ACA—*see* Australian Consumers' Association.

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