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“Meal” as a Keyword in Sociological Studies

The word “meal” came into English around the sixteenth century from the German word “mæel,” or “mahl,” a noun which translates to “a getting together” or “a gathering” (Grimm). *Mæels* referred to particular get-togethers which often were held after important meetings or events and at which a lavish feast was presented. Over time, the *mæel* began to refer to the actual feast and food in particular, and the act of eating (almost always socially) itself. While “meal” has two particular references, I plan to focus on the definition of “meal” as the act or ritual of eating, rather than the actual food that one has set before his or herself. As alimentary practices occur for every human being on mostly an everyday basis, it acts as an anthropological lens for understanding the ideas and beliefs that a society holds itself up to.

The meal as indicative of cultural norms is widely believed to be an important aspect of sociological and anthropological studies. The meal, a ritual that every human being takes part in at least, circumstances allowing, once per day, is a basic functioning aspect of social capital for cultural interaction and exchange. Michael Owen Jones argues that “the consuming of provisions figure largely in symbolic discourse regarding identity, values, and attitudes,” furthermore, these identities are multifaceted and always changing, meaning that the meal and the identities and ideas it symbolizes are subject to change and multiple interpretations (129). People have various identities such as family member or dedicated worker which are dynamic, subject to challenge and change throughout life, which will therefore affect practicing foodways and thus the meal. However, As Jones argues “eating practices produce as well as construct identity” and therefore the meal is not only indicative of culture, but has the potential to shape societal values as well (130). I argue then that while

the family and group meal are particularly important to American society encouraging communal participation within culture and using it as a mode of passing on ideas, the solitary meal is beginning to negate these ideas which produce and are a product of a society that encourage solitary individualism and self-reliance leading to a loss of a communal culture.

E.N. Anderson encourages the idea of the meal as a “form of communication [which] finds most of its applications in the process of defining one’s individuality and one’s place in society” (124). If one finds identity within the meal, the meal must act as an indicator of culture; the meal then is an embodiment of cultures values. As food is a real part of one’s identity, bringing together and separating various social groups within a society, it reflects their ideas and values. However, meals are not static, just as they require active participation they are therefore agents of change able to influence society (Anderson 124-125). The meal then is a two-way symbolic street; a multifaceted performance that Jones argues is active in the process of symbol creation and cultural mirroring (133). Raymond Williams notes that the analysis of interrelationships within a complex unity is key to cultural studies, by applying this to the meal, an everyday – not to mention necessary – product of culture we can extrapolate an understanding of the values of the culture’s society (140-141). The food ideologies associated with the meal become a sign-system defined by and defining social structures and relationships, with each part of the meal adding symbolic significance to the ritual of eating.

How a meal as a whole ritual is a symbol of culture as Anderson and Jones argue can be seen through various types of meals. In particular the group meal is one such example. Anderson notes that “eating together means sharing and participating... [buying] dinner, or otherwise feeding a prospect, is so universal in courtship, business, and politics that it is

almost certainly ground in inborn tendencies;” as humans evolved as food sharers we feel a natural link between sharing food and feeling connected (125). Robert Putnam in his book *Bowling Alone* notes that “social capital can generate broader identities,” which is useful in the process of information diffusion (22-23). This information diffusion then allowed for the spread of norms and practices over the meal that would generate the values and ideas within that culture, and thus symbolized in the meal. One of the main places this takes place is at the group meal, where people gather to sit and often share personal or public information that is not only symbolic of culture but perpetuates it.

One particular form of the group meal is the family meal, in which members of the family gather to eat and have social exchange. Putnam points out that “the family itself is, by some accounts, a key form of social capital;” the family is a basic social group performance within a society that reflects and produces dominant and emergent cultural ideas and norms and retains cultural residue from the past (277). Robin Fox explains that every meal is a message when it comes to the family, and the family is usually where children observe and adopt practices that are culturally acceptable and learn to reject those that are not. Jones belabors that the meal as a symbol “[evokes] emotions, [acts] upon opinions, and [influences] actions,” these family meals then become the prime source of cultural exchange within the family setting (136). Theresa Preston-Werner encourages this point that within the family, “[what] we eat and how we eat it defines us as social beings. Cooking ensures the material production and reproduction of the social group” (339). Here the aspects of the meal ideology (who prepares it, who eats it, the ingredients used) are symbolic of greater cultural ideas – “[to] cook is to speak and to mean, as well as to make and to do” (339). For example Preston-Werner highlights in particular how women, specifically mothers, are expected to

cook for the family without any particular recognition as it is simply their gendered role according to society. While this reflects a social consciousness that women should be domestic in their family and social roles in Costa Rican society, according to her research, it is strikingly similar to American cultural values in which cooking in the home is seen as a female role. This can be seen in the use of food advertisements where products are overwhelmingly geared towards women or feature caring mothers shopping or cooking for the family.

Aside from this American culture encourages the traditional family meal as a way to pass on our heritage and values. While the values in each family may differ greatly, it's the idea of the core family unit that reflects society's opinion that the family unit is a fundamental building block to a productive society. The family gathering for the meal cements together a cohesive and functional unit that will raise children that will have their own families, populating society with productive members. Furthermore, the family meal is a chance for parents to encourage the societal value of developing social networks and passing on a communal mindset partially based in food.

Aside from the family meal, the larger communal meal of the feast is particularly important to cultural studies. The feast is the larger communal gathering which functions as a prime form of ethnographic propagation according to Paul Fieldhouse in his book, *Food & Nutrition: Customs & Culture* (41). Here many members of a society gather and reinforce dominant cultural rituals symbolically through a meal ideology practiced in commensality (Jones 129). Gabreile Weichart in analyzing the feasting culture of the Minahasa people explains that communal, feast meal "encompasses notions of sharing, community and equality;" here the meal is a sign system for this society's cultural expectations that its people

should generally be a communal with one another (1). In effect, “commensality is a demonstration of community, of belonging and sharing... of being connected;” communal feasting then symbolizes the overall communal nature of a society (Weichart 16). The feast is then both a propagator of and a result of cultural expectations of society - similarly, groups meals such as potlucks and picnics within American culture produce similar ideas.

Aside from Minahasa feasting, another example of the communal meal as a symbolic of culture is the potlatch, a practice of the North-West Coast Indians. Anderson belabors that the purpose of a feast is to “bring people together and affirm their solidarity” via commensality as a form shared cultural production, the potlatch was effectively a giant feast which would redistribute wealth among society’s members, encourage equality, and act as a mode of redemption for those who had been ostracized or committed crimes (127). Roach notes that the potlatch was a ritual of celebration and coping with superabundance; however, this abundance was then transformed via the meal into symbolic virtues of “religious, ethical and legal concepts [that were] an important functional part of Indian society” (23; Fieldhouse 89). Furthermore during the potlatch various trials, stories, and myths would be recounted exemplifying or denouncing certain behaviors, these actions symbolized and encouraged cultural expectations.

These feasting meals demonstrate how commensality is reflective of culture and encouraging ideas of community. With the rise of urban living settings, there has been a waning of feast meals such as community picnics and potlucks, something once very important to American society when neighbors had more need to rely on each other for various types of support and assistance. As technology and access to food progresses and becomes easier there is less need to depend on the community. This then encourages the loss

of an alimentary culture: if one can provide for themselves and eat alone without difficulty then there is no need for community. As American culture begins to encourage the idea of self-reliance we begin to lose the need for others.

Of course, neither Anderson nor Jones argue that cultural studies should focus solely on the commensalitarian aspects of the meal. While Anderson does argue that the human species is communal at heart in that humans prefer and need the company of others for their mental, emotional, and physical health, as new cultural ideals emerge the ritual of the meal does as well (124). American society today encourages an idea of the lace-up-your boots, work your way to the top, 70-hour work week mentality propagated by an overly white, protestant culture. Personal success in the work place and a large paycheck signify worth (both monetary and societal). To gain this worth in such a society the meal has had to take a back seat, no longer do we have time to cook our meals as it cuts into time needed to work. Furthermore, the family meal lost ground as “all kinds of social and economic and technological factors then conspired to shred that tidy picture to the point that the frequency of family dining fell about a third over the next 30 years,” along with children shuffling between school and activities and the ease of the microwave meal, the family meal lost ground within a society that encouraged constant activity and personal gain (Gibbs). Rarely do people even go to a restaurant unless it’s a business dinner or a martini lunch in which one can have a communal meal where networking for personal gain is the primary purpose. Rather individuals obsessed with self-worth have elevated the idea of ordering in to the office or home and wolfing down fast food in the car. Both eating habits are usually performed alone.

This solitary meal then is symbolic of a culture that encourages solitary independence and devalues reliance on others. Putnam argues that dependence on electronics and the rise of massive corporations which demand more time and attention and offer less time to develop social capital is partially the cause (283). Jones also worries that the decline of the group meal will hamper our ability to create healthy identities, ones in which we are able to interact with members of society, without social construction (141). Furthermore, he notes that in certain studies of teenage girls' foodways that "the teens distinguish between 'healthful food' served at home and 'junk food' purchased [elsewhere]; the former symbolizes ties to family, the latter... independence" (148). The eating habits of these girls then exemplifies the idea that eating out, usually alone, is then preferred by members of American society as it gives one a sense of autonomy and self-determination. Thus the dominant practice of the communal meal begins to sink into the residual – the idea of the family sitting down to dinner is now reserved for many part of American society as part of old world nostalgia or relegated to solely Christmas dinner while the group meal is seen as a threat to individuality.

This loss of social capital via the solitary meal then can lead to the loss of communal culture. Putnam notes that "social connectedness [is] well established in the case of health and well-being," citing that a lack of social capital correlates with a rise in unhealthy behaviors such as poor eating habits and weight gain, both common factors of the solitary meal where pre-prepared food is consumed. Indeed a recent article in Time magazine about the family meal noted that, "studies show that the more often [people] eat together, the less likely they are to smoke, drink, do drugs, get depressed, develop eating disorders and consider suicide;" for the most part the communal meal is simply more beneficial for the individual. With less importance on the communal meal (which more often than not involves

the preparation of the meal as well) the pre-prepared meal gains popularity within society. These prepackaged meals, made to be eaten on the run and often alone via their single serving sizes, the solitary meal, as a propagator of culture, begins to encourage a society valuing personal reliance where cooking and eating aren't important, therefore shifting or negating the communal values of society. The solitary meal then encourages a de-emphasis in personal health and social networking within society.

Furthermore, as the solitary meal becomes more dominant within culture, the communal meal fades into the residual. The communal meal will never fully disappear, as it is still active in the cultural process in the present (Williams 122). The communal meal is linked to ideas of rural living, which in turn is linked to concepts of the residual, however eating alone is then considered to be urban and chic – a marker of independence (Williams 122; Wu). A survey done by David Wu showed that eating at home with the family is seen as too traditional and mundane; rather eating out in a big city “boasts international sophistication,” similar to the girls mentioned by Jones earlier, the communal meal has lost popularity. Within the boundaries of the U.S. this further encourages the trend that communal eating is slowly being replaced with the idea of the solitary meal, and, as Anderson notes, this produces a cultural shift wherein American society further values independence, putting little importance on social capital (156).

Of course, that's not to say that this idea of the single power meal in the car or the rejection of the meal are the norm, indeed communal meals are still the standard in American society where sharing and participating are still greatly valued (Anderson 128). Furthermore in response to the rise of these non-commensalitarian meals, many see the group meal as a solution to the problem. Carlo Petrini, founder of the Slow Food Movement, notes that this is “an

antidote to the lifestyles imposed by the dominant social models” (79). Falling in line with William’s ideas, the group meal needs to – and as part of the dominant/residual eventually will – re-emerge as the main meal type. Commensality then is the cultural panacea to dwindling social capital in a society where solitary alimentary practice is becoming popular. The group meal has been deeply ingrained within nearly all human cultures to be a expected norm, eating alone is a habit practiced by social outsiders, prisoners, or the socially inept (and even then these groups may eat together).

Meals, then, by utilizing Roach’s theories, would suggest a “historical transmission and dissemination of cultural practices through collective representations” (25). Alimentation is a performance symbolic of the values and ideas practiced by a society. However, at no point is the symbolism of the meal unchanging, rather as Williams argues, culture is constantly in flux between the dominant, residual, and emergent (140). This idea reflects Jones’ argument that the meal ritual is always changing; as dominant ways of eating reflect the majority of a society, residual practices remain, and new habits emerge.

“Meal” then, is a keyword critical to understanding the ideas, values, and opinions held by a society. Furthermore, the meal is ultimately more complicated; for example the solitary meal can have many other implications such as whether the eater has chosen to eat alone or is forced to eat alone. The family meal during the holidays in which there is more often an extended family feast, and the implications of how family members interact. Through the meal’s intersections with cultural studies the study of the meal and its various foodways reflect a need for further focus in the field.

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