



A New Representation for the Sociology of Food and Nutrition

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Nutrition has never been the subject of a systematic sociological analysis. Only over the last years studies and researches over the relationship food/consumption or food/identity flourished, but without extending this outlook to the many social representations related to nutrition. This essay introduces a new key to interpret this proliferation that considers nutrition as a more multifaceted and complex phenomenon compared to traditional visions and that includes a series of functional areas that, related to food, make it a real “social fact”, extremely rich and corresponding to a plastic form of collective representation. With these premises, the contribution, after introducing the main theories that focused on the binomial food-society, creates a suggestive path that goes into the world of food in its social and cultural aspects, emphasizing, on the one hand, its complex relationships with the individual and symbolic emotions and, on the other hand, the characteristics of consumer product and economic and identity element. In fact, a new sociology of nutrition, that is a strong symbol of social utility, arises from the organic and systemic study of the four functional areas associated with food.

Keywords: Sociology of Food and Nutrition, Food Consumption, Food Identity.

1. THE ORIGINS OF THE SOCIOLOGY OF FOOD

The classical Sociology has always kept a certain distance from nutrition, as if this were a trivial subject.¹ Social Sciences first met nutrition at the end of 1800's, mainly thanks to Cultural Anthropology activity, according to which food is given, for the first time, a cultural, symbolic and social dimension worthy of empirical researches. From the 1960s, the researches on this field started obtaining their own disciplinary autonomy, so that it was possible to talk about a real Sociology of nutrition, mainly in the Anglo-Saxon world, where the first thematic treatises on this subject were published.^{2,3} However, if we want to follow a historical excursus among those authors that, even though incompletely, wrote and dealt with nutrition, we can identify some Schools of Thought over the years, where the school is not an organic group of thinkers who shared common ideas and theories about food and nutrition, but authors who individually elaborated theoretical approaches on the social research on food, and can be temporally related to each other. One of the first authors who dealt with the subject of “food and society” was Georg Simmel (1858–1918) in his *Sociology of the Meal* (*Soziologie der Mahlzeit*). This essay is particularly interesting for the originality of the subject: in fact, for the first

time, the meal is studied as a social form. The act of eating becomes an associative form whose aim is separated from its content. According to Simmel, “among all things shared by people, the one that most make them closer is the fact that they have to eat and drink”.⁴ These functions have been adopted by people as fundamental for their survival, and for this feature they are considered as one of the most selfish human activities, as the act of eating excludes the act of food sharing. When we eat, therefore, the sharing of feelings and the union of individualities turn food and meals into a social fact that becomes a more aesthetic and stylized form, regulated in a super-individual way. This way, the rules of conduct that every society, over the centuries, set as regards the way of eating and drinking, emerge. The prohibitions imposed on the community of diners are, therefore, only expressions of the social value that every society gave to the act of eating, fixing rituals, functions and hierarchies too.

Food as a ritual, that makes people identify themselves with their own community, sharing their common values, is the subject proposed by Emile Durkheim in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1894). For the sociologist of Epinal, the ritual has two functions: a social function, as it regulates the beliefs (ritual actions are collective representations) and an individual function, for the feeling of wellbeing that the participants experience

as they restore their moral being. In the study on the ritual as social fact, different types of rituals (both positive and negative ones) are identified. The negative rituals have the task of preserving the distinction between the sacred and the profane and, therefore, impeding that the sacred is defiled by manifestations of the everyday life or by people who cannot get to the sacred. The positive rituals, instead, contribute to take people close to religion. This way, a negative ritual is the initiation process of a neophyte in Australia, where the aspirant follower is obliged to abandon his own society for many months, and he is forced to every kinds of abstinence, for example, the prohibition to eat many types of foodstuffs. He only has the quantity of food that is necessary to survive, he is often forced to a strict abstinence from food, or he must eat a disgusting food. Moreover, he cannot touch food with his hands: his godfathers will take it to his mouth.⁵ From food as a purification instrument and a rite of passage, to the banquet as religious symbol. This is the case of the mystic meals in which the sacred animal, or the totem symbol, becomes the main food of the banquets celebrated for particular occasions or commemorative rituals.

From the French School of Durkheim, the work by Maurice Halbwachs (1877–1945), mainly known for studying, first of others and quite originally, the social nature of the collective memory. Little known and translated in our country, the sociologist from Reims, within his theoretical route, also dealt with nutrition, analyzing its social aspect, connected with the aspect of consumption, in a work dedicated to the French working class of 1912: *Le classe ouvrière et les niveaux de vie*. Given that eating is a natural need that everyone must satisfy to survive, its universality makes it a quite complex phenomenon that underwent considerable transformations over time, that *distorted* its nature. The social dimension of food lies in this aspect, that is, all transformations brought about by the cultural sphere of every society over time to the food consumption practices. For the first time, nutrition is considered as a total social fact; on the one hand, the consumption practices on the family budgets are studied, by analyzing statistical variables such as profession, families' size and income, in order to understand if the "social causes do not account for the regularity and stability of the different expenses for food".⁶ On the other hand, the *socializing* aspect of family meals is highlighted, considered as a normative system thanks to which children interiorize the conduct rules of a society. The relationship between food and working class will be considered again by Friedrich Engels as well (1820–1895) in his research: *The Condition of the Working Class in England* [1845] in which, by analyzing the precarious economic situation of time, he noticed that among the causes of the bad health conditions of workers there was the lack of food. The low income of workers does not allow, in fact, to buy the right quantity of food that should be granted to anyone, furthermore, as they they are paid only on Saturday evening,

they are obliged to buy food only at the closing time, that is, when most of the goods have been already sold; therefore, only the daily discards will remain: "what has not been sold at ten at night, is not good the morning after, and these goods are the Sunday lunch of the poorest class".⁷ The theme of low income is therefore strictly connected to the theme of the subsistence; this way, a family cannot meet its nutritional requirements, natural and physiological requirements, that for this reason should be granted to them. This lack of food causes the spread of diseases and epidemic diseases within the society: "a class that lives according to the aforementioned conditions and that is scarcely provided with those things that are fundamental to survive, cannot be *healthy* and go on through years" [*ibidem*: 133]. As already said, the anthropological studies first dealt with the cultural function of food within the different societies in a systematic way. For anthropologists, it is obvious to believe that the study of nutrition is extremely important to understand the different cultures. The classification of many social communities was, in fact, influenced by their food traditions; let us think about Japanese people for the consumption of raw fish; about Inuit and the consumption of seal meat; about the islanders of the Pacific Ocean and their cannibalism; about Chinese and Thai people for the consumption of rice; or about the Nordic peoples for their habits of drinking blood. Undoubtedly, when the exchanges between people were not as massive as today, peoples were divided into rural peoples, hunting peoples and fisher peoples. In this classification, we should not forget the importance of religions over diets, that have often turned food into a religious element, more than utilitarian. Therefore, Cultural Anthropology involved the study of those practices that focus on food in the different cultures of the world, with a particular attention to the preparation, production, consumption and history of food. Anthropology is a fundamental instrument to understand reality through food. In fact, if getting to food is common to every culture, tastes, preferences myths change from culture to culture; "tastes and distastes are culturally, socially and historically determined and they change over the time".⁸ Among the different contributions brought by this discipline to the study of nutrition as a cultural product, the authors who mainly produced the most original theorizations were Claude Lévi Strauss (1908–2009) and Mary Douglas (1921–2007). The interest in nutrition of the French anthropologist Lévi Strauss is based on three fundamental concepts: food, cooking and language. By comparing habits and behaviours of our culture with those that are far away in time and space, Lévi Strauss looks for a common original matrix of the universal structural principles. The way of sitting at the table and the food cooking, which could seem fortuitous, actually represent a means of expression of the mental structures of a society. It is in the cookery that the constitutive elements of a culture can be understood, and the cookery can reveal

the fundamental structures of the human thought. The first two works that investigated on the theme of the analysis of eating habits are *The Raw and The Cooked* (1964) and *The Origin of Table Manners* (1968), in which Lévi Strauss develops the theme of the presence, in the cultures, of the universal categories of the *raw*, the *cooked* and the *putrid*. For this author, the raw is the natural dimension of food par excellence, the cooked is its cultural transformation and the putrid is the transformation without men's intervention. Food consumption takes place through different modalities which can be closer to or further from the natural pure dimension and, sometimes, from the artificial dimension mediated by culture. As a consequence, roast, that is close to the fire, is more natural than boiled meat, in which water mediates between fire and the raw material. Therefore, roasting refers to the natural phenomena of human life, while boiling is the symbol of cultural evolution. Then there is the putrid or the fermented, without any intervention, without men manipulation, suitable for long-term storage: "the axis that connects the raw and the cooked is a characteristic of culture, the one that connects the raw and the putrid is a characteristic of nature, as the cooking carries out the cultural transformation of the raw, like putrefaction is its natural transformation".⁹ The developments of this theory will lead to a heuristic model named the culinary triangle, whose first version appears in the volume of 1964, but will be reviewed in 1968. The first triangle is the expression of a deeper opposition represented by the concepts *elaborated versus non elaborated* and *nature versus culture*. The raw lays in the passage between nature and culture, opposing to the other two categories—cooked, putrid—for its quality of non elaboration, while in the other two cases we are in front of a cultural transformation, on one side, and a natural transformation on the other side. The study of cookery as a cultural fact is even more emphasized in the work by Mary Douglas. According to her analysis, the rules that define the edibility or inedibility of food simply and purely reflect the general rules for the classification predominant in every culture. According to a famous and striking interpretation already anticipated in *Purity and Danger* (1977), Jewish rules about food condemn, through an irrevocable taboo, only those animals that cannot be included in the adopted classification. According to this theory, cosmology precedes and defines the eating rules and these, in their turn, precede and form the individual choices; therefore each person, formed by culture, gets to a sensory universe that has been already delineated and evaluated. As regards food, for this anthropologist, it represents an important means of communication through which men express and distinguish themselves. Food represents a symbolic cultural frontier, as it delimits the borders between ourselves and what is different from us, that is, it creates cultural taboos. Let us think about what happened during the last centuries when European people were repelled by Asian

or African people, and defined them cannibals as they had different gastronomic traditions and different ways of cooking. Therefore, food falls within a complex process of exchanges between codes and messages: "if food is treated as a code, the coded message will lay in the pattern of social relationships that are expressed".¹⁰ Food is, therefore, a means to express and create social relationships, that is, a communication system that makes some fundamental features of the reference cultures evident; moreover, it emphasizes social relationships and differences. Through the eating practices, everyone has free access to the information conveyed by the food communication system. According to Douglas, the meal is a cultural object that has to be decoded, as it is a highly ritualized moment during which relationships and exchanges among diners are built and strengthened. Eating together with other people strengthens social relationships, creates social ties, otherwise the refusal or the prohibition of the commensality. On the contrary, it becomes a powerful instrument to create or stress distinctions and to emphasize strong differences in the social status or role. Even the food cooking acquire a symbolic significance, that is, the subjection of nature to culture. This is a process that takes nature away from food and gives it a cultural significance through the recipe. In order to study one of the most interesting themes for the contemporary Sociology of Nutrition, that will be treated in the volume, the analysis carried out by Douglas on the risk and dangers of contamination in the volume *Risk and Blame* (1993) is very important. For the anthropologist, all possible contamination sources are considered dangerous. The concept of danger is effective when danger becomes a taboo, that is, a series of "restrictions in the arbitrary use of natural things by men, strengthened by the fear of supernatural punishment",¹¹ which aim at defending society from any possible order destructing conduct. Some of the theorizations of these authors will be reviewed, and sometimes criticized, by two other anthropologists: Marvin Harris,¹² and Jack Goody.¹³ In particular the latter, in his *Cooking, Cuisine and Class*, studied food as an instrument of social demand and ostentation of ethnicity, stressing the stratified societies of the pre-industrial age, considering food not a class subdivision factor, but a dialectic factor. The French school of Sociology, in 1900, produced many studies on the relationship between food and society in its many representations. The first contribution was given by Claude Fischler who, through his work with the striking title *L'Homnivore* (1990), inaugurates the modern studies of the Sociology of Nutrition. Even before the aforementioned work, Fischler explains his articulate theory in an article published in 1990, titled *Gastronomie et gastro-anomie*, in which he describes the phenomenon according to which the modern consumer does not have specific regulations for the food customs, and at the same time he is subject to a series of often contrasting hygienic, identity, hedonistic, aesthetic indications. The successful

neologism *gastro-anomia* indicates the existence, within modernity, of a gastronomy without rules and subject to enormous contradictory injunctions. The first consequence is a state of confusion and anxiety for food consumers. As it will be discussed later in the book, through the act of eating and food absorption, we become what we eat; in fact, through food we assimilate the world and, as a consequence, the act of eating is both “banal and full of probably irreversible consequences”.¹⁴ Here we find the paradox of the omnivore: men are caught between two fires: on the one hand, there is the need to change and innovate the diet, on the other hand, men must be careful as each unknown food is a possible danger. Not only for fear of a physiological “poisoning”, but for ontological matters related to subjectivity. Absorbing food means making it part of our intimate essence; for this reason, eating is the field of desire, appetite, pleasure, but also of distrust, uncertainty and anxiety. The human omnivore lives a life divided between two opposite poles: the pole of the contamination fear (*neophobia*), and the pole of striving for changes (*neophilia*).¹⁵ Therefore everyone, being omnivore, is subject to a sort of double bind, that is, a double constraint that bears anxiety deriving from the need to distrust new and unknown types of food that are absorbed through the *principle of absorption*. How is it possible to solve this paradox, then? Through the biological and rational heritage of each person. In France, again, one of the most original and actual contributions of the new-born European Sociology of nutrition comes from the sociologist and anthropologist of Toulouse University Jean-Pierre Poulain. His work, with its meaningful title *Sociologies de l'alimentation. Les mangeurs et l'espace social alimentaire*,⁶ appears as a real manual of the Sociology of food and nutrition. In the book, the author introduces a model of scientific study which is new in the study of themes related to food, that define us as “food social space”. The notion of social space is elaborated on the basis of the studies proposed by anthropologist George Condominas who, polemical against the American classical anthropologists, sees the social space as something that goes beyond the concept of culture. This means that also the environment interaction logics, with all linguistic, technological and imaginary dimensions, are connected to the cultural fact; it basically becomes an example of the Maussian concept of “total social fact”.

According to Poulain, the application of the concept of social space to the nutrition study has three main advantages: the first allows to get out of the artificial opposition between cultural determinism and material determinism; then, it creates a systematization of the relationships between man and nature; finally, it fosters the use of a dynamic perspective. From this point of view, diet ceases to be considered as a consequence of environment or a way of interpreting cultural differences, and becomes a structuring dimension of social organization.⁶ In the study of food

social space, the author points out different dimensions, all linked to each other, that refer to the multidimensional study on total social facts proposed by Gurwitsch. Poulain pointed out six dimensions of the food social space:

- (1) The space of edible things, that is, all the choices carried out by people over the time in order to set the food selection, acquisition and preservation procedures;
- (2) The food system, that is, all the technological and social structures that allow food to be processed and then reach the consumers;
- (3) The cooking space, that is, all the symbolic actions and rituals that make food edible;
- (4) The space of consumption habits, that is, all actions and rituals that physically go with the act of swallowing food;
- (5) The food temporality, that is, the connection between the stages of life and the related types of food, and the cyclical times of food processing;
- (6) The space of social differentiation, food as identity element of social groups or classes.

After determining all the dimensional areas that make up the food social space and make nutrition a total social fact to be studied through new elements, the French sociologist defines the stages of the social construction of food. Food should have four basic qualities: the nutritional, organoleptic, hygienic and symbolic ones. Then, from these qualities, we get to the product identification, selection and production stages that turn animals and vegetables into edible food. At the end of his study, Poulain describes the specific object of the Sociology of Food:

The object of a Sociology, or better, a socio-anthropology of food, is the way cultures and societies invest and organize the free space given by the physiological functioning of the human digestive system, as well as the exploitation of the resources provided by nature or which can be produced within the biophysical and climate principles of the biotype [*ibidem*: 197].

This definition thoroughly shows the transformation, exploitation and production of food, from the beginning, when we have the seeds, to the moment of the harvest and the preparation, but it is not exhaustive as regards the strictly symbolic, cultural and identity value of food in today's society, as to markedly include the Sociology of Food among the Nutritional Sciences, more than among the humanistic social sciences.

Another French author who approached the theme of nutrition, even though from the opposite point of view, was Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002). He associated food to a symbolic practice of *distinction* that is transmitted through the *taste*, a kind of precipitate of the singularities of men and all social, symbolic and historical structures. The basis of the classification systems that structure the perception of the social world and set the objects of the aesthetic pleasure, should be looked for in the structure of the social classes.¹⁶

Finally, also a quotation by the German Norbert Elias (1897–1990) who, in “*The Civilizing Process*”¹⁷ studied the transformations occurred within contemporary societies through the analysis of the good manners of each civilization. In this context, Elias shows his interest in the study of the “etiquette” of the table manners, and this falls within his greatest interest in the study of people’s everyday life.

Food and act of eating are given a strong symbolic value, that combines with the act of eating together with other people following certain rules, such as the arrangement of seats or furniture, the use of plates or cutlery, the way of cutting meat and share it. With the passing of time, these habits have become cultural patterns and, therefore, communication tools which produce and reproduce exchanges of signs in the essence of food and in the rules for its use, that are the commensality and the great joy of eating together at the table.¹⁷ The cultural rituals related to the act of eating or being together at the table, and to the conduct rules that people learn during their lives, represent the main interest of the sociologist in his sociological study of nutrition.

2. THE APPLICABILITY OF THE SOCIOLOGY OF FOOD AND NUTRITION

As explained before, nutrition has never been systematically studied by social sciences, with the exception of Cultural Anthropology that, however, did not go out of its field to follow the many social representations that are associated with food today.

Anyway, food has been always considered as a fundamental feature of life itself; without food, the human body would not survive, that is why it falls within those natural needs (like Epicurus called them) that help reaching a state of *eudaimonia* (happiness).

We can understand why Sociology does not deal with this subject: the first sociologists were worried about describing and interpreting the evolution of society over the time,¹⁸ and gave little attention to those phenomena which were considered as belonging to the biological or individual world. Over the years, this gap has been slowly filled. The sociological speculation started embracing fields and issues that had been little studied before, and that came from the continuous changes brought about by modernity and post-modernity. As a result, the applicability of the Sociology was born (as Costantino Cipolla called it), that is, “that Sociology which can produce a knowledge able to tackle life [...] operational dimension of knowledge”.¹⁹ On the basis of these premises, since 1970s Sociology started dealing with food and nutrition. But most studies on this subject, mainly English, cannot provide a theoretical-structural pattern related to food; in fact, each study deals with a specific aspect of nutrition: that is why there are researches on food and consumption, as regards the Sociology of Lifestyles; on food and

health, as regards the Sociology of the Body; or food and risk society after the scandals that are commonly known as mad cow disease or swine flu. According to our vision, which will be dealt with later on, nutrition is something more *englobing* that includes a series of functional areas which, associated with food, make it a real “social fact”, extremely rich and corresponding to a plastic form of collective representation.²⁰ Nutrition becomes, therefore, a social representation, that is, the elaboration of a social object (food) by a group or a community for the purpose of behaving and communicating. As Fischler¹⁴ reminded us, man is an omnivore, that is, he could eat everything, but the society has decided, over the centuries, what should be brought to the table and what should not.

As a result, food becomes a socially constructed element; it is the related community that decided the order in which people could understand what could be eaten and what could not. Moreover, society also creates people’s diet, it determines all the kitchen rituals and develops that cooking and domestic awareness which makes table the real protagonist of everyone’s life. Perhaps we do not know it, but the great events of everyone’s life take place around a laid table. When someone is born, when he grows up, gets married, meets his/her beloved person, or for business meetings, everything takes place around a table. Food marks all the steps of our lives, and it is the identity element of a community. Every society, in any historical period, everywhere in the world, has its own heritage of rituals, habits and traditions related to food.

Even the simplest dish is a recipe that is passed on from generation to generation. We could say that cooking, understood as cultural symbol, is passed on to the new generations that, this way, get to know the typical products of their community. Therefore, we could say that nutrition, from biological fact, becomes a cultural product of a specified society. The Sociology of Nutrition is a subject that still has difficulties in finding its own epistemological statute even though, during the last years, it was mainly considered as a sub-discipline, we could say, between the Sociology of the Body, Health and Culture in an eclectic vision, where eclecticism is a mix of compatible theories.²¹

If we consider the theories contained in a recent book about wine and society,²² in the attempt of reconstructing the theoretical route that allows us to analyze the theme of food and society, we will refer to what the English sociologist Deborah Lupton, in her work *The Soul on a Plate* (1999), defined as post-structuralist orientation. This approach draws information about the social aspect of the knowledge of a specific topic, acknowledging the great importance of communication in the system of practices and languages determined around a phenomenon like food or nutrition. In this study, particular attention is paid to the way in which discussions on food and drinks are articulated in different contexts, like popular culture or scientific texts about medicine and health. “The sense of touch, taste,

smell, hearing and sight are our access to culture".²³ The language and the discussions about food become, according to this point of view, part of the significances that we construct around nutrition, that is, "the way we interpret and communicate our sensory experiences when preparing, touching and eating food, that, on their turn, shape our sensory responses" [*ibidem*: 26].

Therefore, what a person eats, uses or what he wears, allows him to immediately convey his personality and contributes to the development and the maintenance of his social relationships.²⁴

As a consequence, it can be understood how, in our theoretical structure, nutrition is not related only to consumption, taste or nutritional risk, but food has many different functions and social representations that make it a complex and heterogeneous social fact, understood as "epistemology that tries to apply its own tolerance methodological principles to all events and phenomena that, on the whole, make up the great mosaic of life".¹⁹

On the basis of these premises, we will try to set up an evocative route that will explore the world of food in its social and cultural aspects, emphasizing its complex relationships with the individual and symbolic emotions and the characteristics as consumer product and economic and identity element.

In fact, it is unquestionable that, through the centuries, food has become a symbolic and cultural tool par excellence, characterizing itself as "a symbol that has different meanings" [*ibidem*: 2717].

Jean-Pierre Poulain, in the aforementioned *Sociologies de l'alimentation*,⁶ perfectly caught this multifaceted nature of the cultural significances associated with food, defining nutrition as a total social fact, like in the Maussian theory, that manifests itself in the social space of food, which is made up of different dimensions linked to each other like Russian dolls [*ibidem*: 181].

The French socio-anthropologist, however, does not investigate the whole great world of cultural and social symbols related to food. For instance, the identity value of food like expression of a community is not highlighted, that is, using a French term, the aspect of the *terroir* of food is not highlighted, as it only deals with the social construction of food, or better, the social importance given by a community to food, by defining it edible or not.

Going beyond this model, trying to study nutrition in its many social and cultural representations, a pattern in the shape of heuristic model (the *quadrilateral of food*) is proposed; this is made up of some dichotomous categories, and it allows to point out four functional areas within food. These areas can be divided into instrumental-functional or cognitive-normative functions, according to the value that everybody gives them. (Fig. 1).

The model, on the basis of the theoretical indications provided by Talcott Parsons, shows a functional system for the classification of nutrition, which can be very useful

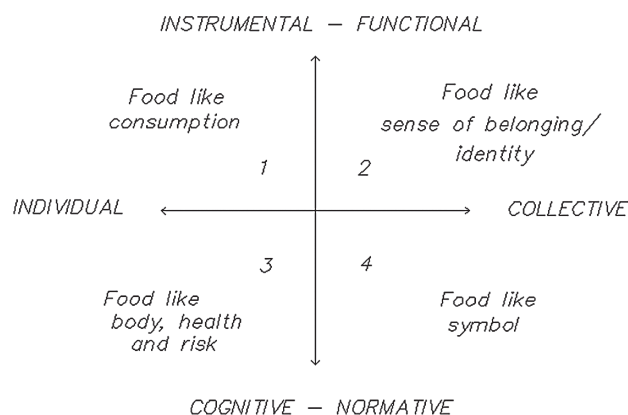


Fig. 1. The quadrilateral of food.

to his study, above all if it is used with flexibility. Nutrition becomes, therefore, a functional system and it will be studied through a functional analysis, using the words of Parsons: in front of a social phenomenon or an institution, the sociologist will ask himself what it is useful for, which is its task.²⁵

As a consequence, nutrition, from the social point of view, will meet four functional imperatives contained in the model of the quadrilateral of food.

These functional areas have been already elaborated in the aforementioned book *Oltre il terroir. Il vino come specchio di una comunità*²² and, with opportune modifications, they have been generally adapted to nutrition.²⁶

This is the reason why, in our vision, different functional areas fall within the sociological study of food as specific areas of research, that are:

- (1) consumption
- (2) sense of belonging
- (3) communication
- (4) symbolism

For each area, then, there are some sub-areas such as: health, risk, religion and local development. The aforementioned model follows the epistemological perspective of the applicability of Sociology, which was introduced in Italy by Costantino Cipolla,¹⁹ who considers the scientific knowledge as a "form of knowledge that turns into concrete facts, which can produce a knowledge that can tackle the world of life" [*ibidem* 1997: 2860].

From this perspective, Sociology turns into applicability through models that must give a good account of themselves "here and now" [*ivi*].

This model is part of the larger group of the circularity of knowledge, which includes the theory (a wide-range interpretative paradigm), the empiricism (practice-based assertion) and the applicability (inescapable operational dimension of social knowledge). On these premises, an attempt to develop a conceptual structure which could explain the nutrition phenomenon from a social point of view was made.

The pattern of the circularity of knowledge, if in its original formulation is useful to explain the sociological knowledge in its entirety, in this particular case is useful to develop an epistemological basis for a rising Sociology of Food and Nutrition. As said before, there is a circularity between the three dimensions of social knowledge that define the identity of Sociology itself and that we apply to the object of our study (Fig. 2).

Therefore, a sociological study of nutrition should necessarily start from a theory understood as “ideas, hypotheses, general frameworks and abstract general patterns”¹⁹ developed in the course of time and which, in our case, are not many, given the little attention paid by the sociological speculation to this subject. From this point of view, nutrition becomes a wide-range conceptual construct that indicates the *entirety of social and cultural dimensions related to the consumption of that food that is fundamental to survive, as well as to the methods to find this food and turn it into something edible*. As a consequence of this definition, the act of eating becomes a “social connector” or, as Durkheim says, a collective representation, endowed with a strong cultural importance that becomes fully part of the path of a community towards its identity, and that includes the world of the costumes, traditions, rituals and symbols that have been always created by men around the theme of nutrition.

From this theoretical picture, still abstract and quite heterogeneous inside, we get to the empirical study of nutrition, that considers food its cultural symbol, understood as representation of the abstract concept of nutrition, and as communication, that is, the transmission of the knowledge of this specific subject.

If nutrition is the general entirety of the social dimensions that revolve around the act of eating food for one’s own survival, food is *any liquid or solid substance assimilated by people, and which is associated by the society and people themselves with specific symbolic and cultural values*. It becomes, therefore, in our definition, a group of significances contained in a symbol, whose features are its collective nature, the transmissibility and the formalization.

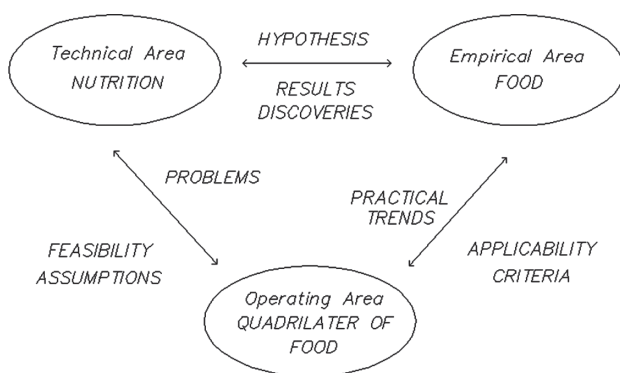


Fig. 2. Hypothesis of applicability of the sociological study of food.

These characteristics make food empirically observable (this is proved by the classical cultural anthropology studies of this subjects, or by some sociological works about the consumption and taste connected to food). But we are still at the level of *the applied*, that is, the transfer from theory to practice, that is only useful to demonstrate the social usability of the concept.

In our perspective, that is, in the dimension of applicability, the sociological study of nutrition and food assumes an operational dimension understood as the continuous comparison with the concrete facts associated with it. It is, therefore, an approach that considers the actual dimension of the world of food in its concrete manifestations, that we have included in the *quadrilateral of food*, that are examples of the Sociology’s applicability according to a circular logic of knowledge. The aforementioned conceptual pattern, on the basis of our revision of the model by Costantino Cipolla,²¹ shows, we hope clearly, how the practical trends of the scientific research cannot free themselves from their own applicability criteria, otherwise the scientific research will be insufficient.

3. FINAL REMARKS

The last goal of the aforementioned theoretical reasoning is to look like a heuristic explanation in which the dimension of the applicability becomes a tool for the interpretation of the different social sectors in which the theme of food and nutrition finds its way. Therefore this theme, for the social scientist, is like an “extremely rich social fact, a particularly plastic form of collective representation”.²⁷

Our model places the Sociology of Food²⁸ among the four traditional sectors of the sociological knowledge, such as: the Sociology of culture, body, health and consumption (Fig. 3) and, as a consequence, food becomes symbol, ritual, identity, consumption, risk and health. Its manifestations are the result of a continuous comparison and exchange between different social actors.

Food is a symbol as in every society it has assumed the form of a “gift”, in order to establish and strengthen the relationships between the different members. Possession,

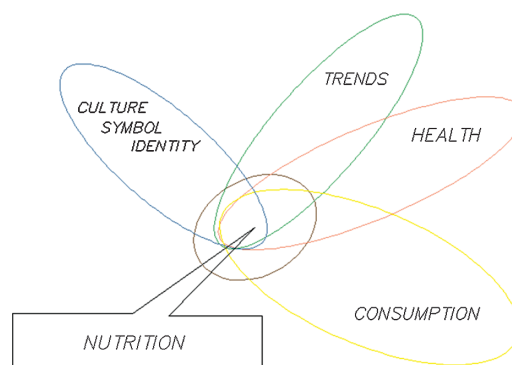


Fig. 3. The disciplinary area of the sociology of food.

control, ability and knowledge which are necessary to provide food have always been the symbol of prestige or submission towards different social classes. Food is a ritual: each religion has created, around food, a varied series of representations and food taboos related to an idea of sacredness that in many cases they continue to create for the whole existence of some civilizations.²⁹

Food is identity: it represents a strong connection with the territory, it is the result of the culture of a community, then become its cultural symbol and, at the same time, an element of economic improvement and promotion.³⁰

Food is consumption: in today's society, which is influenced by media, communication and globalization, food represents an excellent indicator of the quality of life and food consumption coming from it.³¹

Food is health and relationship with one's own body; food is part of the personal care.

Food can be given different meanings according to the person and his way to interact with food. Freud maintained that the first level of self-knowledge is represented by a "corporeal ego"; in fact, in disorders like anorexia or bulimia, food is always at the centre of attention, and the perception of the body is distorted. For these persons, self-esteem is strongly influenced by the form or the body weight. In other words, being thin or fat influences the formation of one's identity.³²

The achievement of perfection, represented by abstinence from food, intense sport training and tendency to stand out in school, has a great importance for those who suffer from anorexia, for instance, as this is the only way to receive positive signals from the external world. Furthermore, food can become an element of social inequality within our societies, as well as a possible risk for the public safety if it is badly handled and not sufficiently controlled during its stages of production.

Only through the organic and systemic analysis of these functional areas, which make up the sociological concept of food, the Sociology of food will gain a strong value of social utility, thus creating a real cognitive and propositional process involving all application areas of the binomial food-society.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declare that he has no competing interests.

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