

There is such a thing as a free choice lunch

Per Otnes

Die Aversion jedes feineren Empfindungen gegen die *table d'hôte* erweist, dass ausschliesslich die Sozialisierung diesen Zweck/ Begegnung nur des Essens wegen/ in eine höhere ästhetische Ordnung leiten kann.

Soziologie der Mahlzeit
Simmel (1910)

Reflection

One would be wrong in characterising the following text or texts, following Baudelaire, as having neither tail nor head, when in fact it has heads and tails all over it, *alternativement et réciproquement*. So I realise in the end that the topic or subject matter has as it were taken over its own description; the text itself is set out much like a lunch table, with little or no ostentative direction for where to begin

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or end, what's good and what less so, or what's new or priceless, and what merely less valuable repetition. There is, then, such a thing as a free choice text as well. Dear readers, dear guests, please help yourselves. C'est servi, très à la française (in the technical sense, cf. below), everything at once.¹

Retrospect; don't start here

For many years now I've been interested in the sociology of things, or more exactly, of matter², material objects (conjects, plecads, connectuals) in all their diversity, a number of papers and a book (Otnes 1997) presenting results so far. Things, or rather perhaps two contrasting aspects of things, as *symbols* pointing *away* from the here-and-now, and as *operators*, capable of effecting or warding off change *in* the here-and-now.

A basic idea is that there is, or need be no absolute difference between inert, 'passive' material things and animated, as material, 'active' agents. An 'obviously wrong' idea according to some, yet possibly a fertile hypothesis, variants of which being well known from authors as different as Marx, Latour and Sartre. Things, then, may in their way act or effect change too, in a minor way often but regularly dominant too.

The first thing analysed was *the key*, an oldish kind of object that, very briefly, *effects differential access* in its operational as against its referential use (Otnes 1989a, 1992). This operation and its not infrequent shortcomings demonstrate how human agency is simultaneously attached to and dissociated from a material world

¹ Some remarks on method and provenance are in notes 16 and 18 below. Thanks for generous comments on previous versions from Güliz Ger, and also from Colin Campbell, Inger Johanne Lyngø, Daniel Miller and Nathan Sznajder.

² "Der Mensch ist kein Ding", says Heidegger (1935-6). Maybe so but yet, Man not only Matters, s/he *is* Matter, a very material being. Matter, materiel comprises all of Heidegger's three, *Ding*, *Zeug*, *Werk*, or Thing, Tool, Work (Achievement), cf. on fixed and transient matter (note 5 below).

largely of our own common making — a tie both vitally important and irremediably vulnerable, that is. The key, then, embodies both *objectivation*,³ "this is mine, my own work"; and *alienation*, "I don't recognise myself in this" or "this may escape me" — all in the condensed form of one single little object, the key, a 'root metonym', sort of.⁴ Or perhaps a 'root operator' rather.

Following were analyses of *Norwegian novels and buildings of the 50ies* (1989b), *meals* (1991), *automobiles* (1994a), Oslo's *Old Masonic Lodge*⁵ (1994b), 'modern' *super markets* (1996). With one (seeming) exception, all these deal with *types* of objects, not single, individual, would-be 'unique' material objects, the *type* being more amenable to sociological analysis⁶. There is also the idea of letting sociology, too, 'begin at home', that is, in everyday, both fragmented and shared, *Lebenswelt* experience, gradually expanding from there later.

Summing up result from the meals (1991) paper now,

meals

(1) are 'the original impersonal mediator', a basic way of gradually learning to deal with objects in the so-called external material world, notably foodstuffs, nourishment for a start;

³ *Entäusserung, Vergegenständlichung, Zurücknahme*, in notable contrast to Lukàcs *Verdinglichung* or reification.

⁴ If an allusion to sign or narrative theory be permitted for once in the present, mostly foreign context.

⁵ Distinguishing *fixed* from *transient* matter, even if felt earlier, became imperative here. Following an edifice during 150 years couldn't help see the contrast between say *promenading habits* of the 1880-1920ies very material but having left not one material trace today, hence transient, with *architecture* - buildings, streets and town plans - much changed yet very largely still with us as basic, fixed or inert matter.

⁶ Cf. Foucault's 'asylum', 'hospital', 'prison', even 'knowledge'.

(2) enact or effect the sharing of prepared food, letting a group discover itself *as* a group,⁷ so as to make a 'group' never sharing meals possibly leave that category, never attain or lose its 'groupness';⁸

(3) (help) constitute social time in its daily etc. cycles, the etymology of 'meal' going back through 'mark, fixed time, meal' and Lat. *mensura*⁹, Gr. *metron*, to Sanskrit *mâti*, *mâtra*, which still in modern Hindi form means 'unit of measurement, a quantity, dose', or even 'unit of rhythm' in poetry or music.¹⁰ A day with no, or very irregular, hasty, solitary meals will tend to disintegrate *as* a day; a 'day' which is not an every-day, not repetitive, a private or recluse sort of a day.

(4) are rarely about food alone; most meals have subtexts as it were or hidden agendas, reflecting ranking or authority for example, or celebrating new or older members, or being occasions for more or less general encounter, tabletalk etc. The famous philosopher Kant in one of his less famous works (1775/1800) wrote:

⁷ I'm familiar with the debate over whether or not eating together, sharing meals, may be a declining custom, with e.g. 'grazing' taking over. A moderate but persistent global tendency is there, very likely, but there's evidence that it's secondary, even spurious, reflecting changes in family and working life rather than a rising taste for solitary eating in itself, i.e. a disliked consequence of a growing proportion of single person households and smaller jobs. 86 % of Norwegian couples with or without children have dinner every day, as against 72 % of singles; couples (as above) have dinner together at home 95 % of all weekdays, 98 % of all Sundays - as against singles 18 and 45 % (Bugge and Døving 2000, survey data from 1998). It would seem, then, that the 'groupness' of shared meals is a regular choice, and missed if the choice is not available.

⁸ The addition of a new defining point has been suggested by Kaj Ilmonen, that of (2.1) a meal celebrating "family collective memories". However, this may easily be subsumed under the present (2): a family is certainly a group, and a group discovering itself will soon develop a history, however brief, memories of preceding occasions. - On the other hand, the meal will make group or family memories of *losses*, permanent or temporary, very conspicuous: After divorce or bereaval, when e.g. 'dad isn't here any more', 'a chair is empty', this may be a reason for *avoiding* shared meals, glossing over the pain of loss, or seeking new group guests or members, substitutes for filling 'the empty chair'.

⁹ Or a measuring, noun from verbs *meto*, *metor*, *metior*.

¹⁰ The etymology of Germ. *Mahlzeit* as given in Otnes (1991:105) is mistaken; there is, it appears, no relation to meal (flour), mill, milling. Etymologically, *Mahlzeit* or Norw. *måltid* are pleonasm, 'time-time'. Pre-Mediaeval Nordic meals were thought of, in essence if not in effect, as only two in number, *davre* and *navre*, *nadverd*, the morning and the evening meal (cf. Troels-Lund 1879-1901), the latter term now in use only as a synonym for the Eucharist (Gr. *eu-charis*, 'good grace, good gifts', cf. *charis-ma*).

Allein zu essen ist für einen philosophierenden Gelehrten ungesund; nicht Restauration, sondern (vornehmlich wenn es gar einsames Schwelgen wird) Exhaustion; erschöpfende Arbeit, nicht belebendes Spiel der Gedanken. Der geniessende Mensch, der im Denken während der einsamen Mahlzeit an sich selbst zehrt, verliert allmählich die Munterkeit, die er dagegen gewinnt, wenn eine Tischgenosse ihm durch seine abwechselnden Einfälle neuen Stoff zur Belebung darbietet, welche er selbst nicht hat ausspüren dürfen.¹¹

Following (1) the basic meal ontogenetically speaking is (wet-) nursing, usually in the form of a mother and her infant discovering themselves as such through the feeding/mealstakeing, a miniature but very primary group. Which brings to mind the obvious but not often focussed fact that even the simplest meal presupposes somehow both providers and receivers of nourishment, the usual thing being to take as if automatically the guests' and only the guests' point of view, letting hosts, cooks, servants, purveyors, producers, raw materials, changing seasons¹² etc. pass without (much) mention¹³.

This by the way is where the super market (Otnes 1996) enters the picture. For this is where most contemporary city dwellers meet the produced, wo/man-made nature, part of their meals-taking and making — for the custom of leaving shopping and kitchens exclusively to (female) partners would seem to be declining if not entirely *desuet*.

¹¹ Thanks to Inga Gammel for directing my attention to this out-of-the-way source. - Interestingly, judging from his biographers, *allein zu essen* or eating alone for Kant probably involved being served meals by his servant or cook, seen as not worthy or capable of a conversation lifting his spirits.

¹² Present conservation techniques, freezing, vacuum drying etc. modifies this but not entirely: All conservation affects quality, most often negatively in the longer run.

¹³ Not excluding Simmel's brief paper, cf. our motto above.

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Man sass, speiste mit schwerem
Silbergerät schwere, gute Sachen,
trank schwere gute Weine dazu und
sagte seine Meinung.

Buddenbrooks
Thomas. Mann

Following (4) the meal is so much more than foodstuffs or a mere succession of dishes. Lunching with colleagues some years ago, three out of four at one table were speaking of plate contents as 'our meal', while the fourth said: '*That* is food - *we* are a meal'. A meal, then, is an encounter of two related but different types of transient matter; prepared dishes and the persons enjoying both - the food and each other, the conversation or general exchange, of glances, pats, laughs, quarrels etc.¹⁴

Meals thus defined raises the problem of avoiding *doxography*, of finding the *ruptures* (Bourdieu 1973) or fault lines between what guests, hosts, chefs etc. think and what sociological analysis can substantiate. Further, this is hardly a 'field' analysis, a meal alone rarely being a field in Bourdieu's sense (1979, 1980), perhaps an ingredient of another, the larger fields/spaces of taste, power; or smaller, local fields of family, household or seminar life; of institutions (prison, hospital, military camp, school etc.); or the field of travel or catering industries (Finkelstein 1989, Warde & Martens 1995). There is the consuming vs. the producing side, the lunch table staff, waiters and chefs, assistants and *mâîtres de cuisine*.

As for guests, the lunch, our main topic in what follows, is a setting for the larger group only — 20 plus, cf. below.

¹⁴ Reports has it that even Simmel's *table d'hôte*, today largely a rural form of catering, tends to *not* focus on eating only; often agreeable conversation plus a transient but possibly 'real' sense of sharing or belonging will arise too. A *ungehäuere sozialisierende Kraft der Mahlzeit* indeed, nearly disproving the author's own assumed counterinstance.

A table talk (4) can feature main or subordinate foci of the encounter — the seminar topic say, or personal story - as against discussing the mealfare, view, physical activities etc. Both have their advantages and drawbacks. We all know the *convive* who goes on talking shop or personal feats or problems — nothing else, no matter what goodies s/he is served.¹⁵ The lunch or other meal may be a goal in itself, a stopover, a needed pause, or an unwelcome distraction.

***Epulae oculorum*, or a Feast for the eyes: The lunch table¹⁶**

Moving on to the kitchen itself being seen as too complex a task for the time being, lunches suggested themselves as a suitable next step, or matter, thing or cluster of things, i.e. a type for analysis. Or more precisely, the fairly recent Norwegian custom of presenting lavish lunch tables for hotel and restaurant guests. The number of separate dishes hot and cold — fish, meat, vegetables, salads, puddings, cakes, cheeses¹⁷ etc. — may well exceed a hundred, though less extravagant forms are more common. It is certainly designed to impress or appeal not only to the taste but no less by its aesthetic display and design. While a natural size butter swan might decorate a lunch table two decades ago, today you're more likely to see a double-size salad swallow.

Semiologically speaking, the more or less lavish lunch table, should be seen or 'read' in relation to alternatives. Among these,

¹⁵ In Heideggerian terms for once, a case of *Abwesenheit*, as opposed to *Dasein*: 'I'm not really here', or 'There's nothing but me here'.

¹⁶ The essay's is based, of course, on personal experience of several decades, as well as numerous informal discussions with lunch-table fellow guests all along. On the formal side, ten interviews were conducted with experts from within the trade, seven prominent chefs, two of them celebrated innovators, plus a chef's teacher with decades of experience and a food-and-cooking journalist of equally long experience (one chef was interviewed twice).

¹⁷ Soups for some unknown reason form a near exception; if present at all it's rarely more than one.

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- (1) a *served* group lunch with one single dish, or a choice between two or three dishes, plus possibly a modest pudding and coffee;
- (2) a *cafeteria, self-service system*, a smaller number of choices, each in a fixed quantity having its individually fixed price;
- (3) a *restaurant lunch* with à la carte service, which may have as many courses on its written menu than a lunch table, only none of them visibly present, and all individually priced;
- (4) for those who work or stay at home for lunch, *your home fridge*, where most keep a small, modest or great number of sandwich fillings, salad ingredients etc.; finally
- (5) in Norway, the *matpakke*, a packed lunch, two or three loaves of bread with say cheese, typically Norw. *brunost* (brown cheese), ham, sausage etc., one loaf on top of the other and wrapped in grey greaseproof paper. Some 61 % of our active population has *matpakke* for lunch at least trice a week (Bugge and Døving 2000:105).¹⁸ A French visitor once remarked, only half jokingly, that substituting *matpakke* for lunch in France would trigger instant revolution.

Only the first of (1)-(5) shares the fixed price feature with our lunch table: Everyone pays equally, the same sum for all. Whereas (2)-(5) all bring in inequality, options of saving or spending more or less. So much for the pecuniary side of it; as for the courses actually consumed, (1) will entail most equality and all the others more or less unequal goods consumed.

It is most often paid for as a not specified part of hotel full board and lodging price - i.e. a "hidden" lump sum - but in any case, *the price is fixed and equal for all*, no matter what types of dishes (expensive or less so) you go for, *and notably, no matter how much or little you take of each*. If paid for separately, prices vary, but

¹⁸ At two conferences where preliminary versions of this paper was read, ESA Colchester 1997, ICRC Isegran 1997, an exhibit *matpakke* was passed around. The contrast to a Norwegian hotel lunch table is very striking for anyone who's experienced it, explaining, part of the way and for a period, the popularity of the latter - 'an instant luxury and affordable too, now and then'.

around Oslo presently (2000) may vary from c. £ 15-30 - more for the exorbitant variants - c. £ 20 being given as a typical figure, drink not included.

A free choice lunch

A basic problem here goes back to an earlier phase of my research, which focussed criticism of the use of market exchange and similar 'rational action' models in sociology (1987, 1988). Economists of the profession often state the essence of their subject as '*there is no such thing as a free lunch*'. Maybe, yet ours certainly is the case of a free *choice* lunch, with an abundance of alternatives of different price, taste, rarity etc., with no price tags to guide lunchers' choices, quantities chosen, or spending or saving preferences. How then, do people choose, how are the dishes selected? And how do the producers provide in order, for example, to not frustrate guests if a 'most wanted' dish is finished while appetites for it still are high?

Another group of problems relate to more recent interests: What really do lunch tables do to their groups of guests? In what way is this type of meal set out from others? Can we surmise a form of the general 'key problem' (1991) — the coupling of objectivation and alienation — even in this, rather distant context? Can we trace 'post-modern' aspects — imagined or faked pleasures (*epulae imagium*, the once so famous "simulacra") or even 'splatter' or horror aspects (*convivium infundibulorum*)?¹⁹

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Our thing or materiel type, the lunch table has of course a *history*, as well as a *phenomenology*, i.e. a situational or operational aspect, both from the point of view of the single guest or group of guests,

¹⁹ An images' feast, a feast of funnels (cf. below).

and the view from the kitchen, from the media etc., all lending themselves to typologisation.

A trace of pasts

Some would trace the trade's *auto-history* back to big farm hospitality a century back or more, and some even back to antiquity (Englund 1991, for drinks alone cf. Qviller 1996²⁰). A link may be there but not very strong. It dates rather from the days of more general vacations and travel, i.e. post 1918 in this country. The lunch table still is a speciality of certain hotels, notably of the sports type (mountain, fjord, beach, spa). Not many town or city hotels have adopted the custom.²¹ However, the universal two weeks' vacation did not spell hotel sojourns for the multitude during its first decades. And after came the war or occupation years, i.e. general scarcity, rationing etc. The late forties/early fifties, then, provides a more reasonable starting point. By then, the Joneses of almost every neighbourhood could be heard talking not only of new fridge's, washing machines, 'radiogramophones' or cars - they were also heard mentioning the incredible hotel lunches during their last autumn weekends.

It seems to have started as mainly cold buffets, salmon and hams being typical delicacies. Later, cold courses multiplied and hot courses were included too, following perhaps the pattern of traditional "Christmas Tables",²² but every day now, not only once

²⁰ This classic scholar sees the symposion, and later the (beer-)drinking guilds, as ancient, basic forms of political decisionmaking. His is a book of political history more than of drinking ethnology; an implicit good-bye to Habermas' and Sennett's idolised coffee houses, now in their proverbial historic *da capo* as comedy: lots of coffee, no discussions.

²¹ Though there is probably a spillover to breakfasts, whose tables have grown sometimes to sizes approaching a minor lunch table.

²² A senior chef's view is that the hotel Christmas table, the most opulent of them all, started in a Bergen hotel in the 1920ies as a meal laid out for staff, 'the kitchen brigade' only, celebrating the end of the season's rush. Later, paying guests were added in substantial numbers, until now, a business manager who fails to give a group Christmas

a year. Designed to overwhelm, it certainly did yet largely escaping the attacks on gluttony or luxury so common in a country of puritan ideology. This 'weekend in Cocagne' was considered acceptable fare *and* bragging - remarkable in a country where "lunch" still regularly is a matter of a cup of black coffee alongside the *matpakke*.

During more recent years several new trends are evident: (1) *The health trend*, low fat, e.g. salads, bran bread, fruit, more fish and less meats and gravy. (2) *Home-made, fresh, breads and pastries*, still warm, as against distant bakery products (3) *new local raw materials and dishes* being featured rather than excused.²³ Unknown or rare originally these are now practically ubiquitous.

From the *guests'* point of view - and that means several cohorts, even generations of guests by now - a main feature is that the newness, the overwhelming effect is likely to fade, first for the older cohorts. The lunch table's size or number of dishes seems to have reached a limit where additions, even major, would have little effect ("diminishing returns", for once). Further, encountering many 'real novelties' will occur less often, even with (3) above in mind.

From the *kitchen staff* point of view three trends are notable: (1) for some, cutting cost by sacrificing top quality, utilising leftovers for example, (2) going for new specialities based on unusual local produce, gwyinad or grayling not only salmon say, or turbot or angler etc. (3) 'imported local specialities', e.g. lasagne, ratatouille, paella, piroshki, samosas, falafel, and what not - only that the really

table for his employees will earn a cheapskate reputation. - Private, family or farm Christmas tables are probably older but less of a general, homogeneous custom.

²³ 'Localisation', a style taken up from wines, cheeses and hams, are becoming widespread as a means of 'personalising' or 'individualising' ever more agricultural products — now that the western agricultural markets are seen as saturated. A movement from 'cold' to 'hot' products.

filling single plates will tend to be excluded - cholents, *pot-au-feu*, *minestrone* e.g.

In the early days the 'fabulous lunch table' filled a role as 'loss leader',²⁴ a 'lure' designed to attract attention to a new, marginal (not only in the geographical sense) offer — the sports hotel long weekend. In the following years this expanding trade saw its ups and downs. After the Middletown bridge-club type of market failed, there was a slump until the course and seminar market emerged, or was created. Pedagogy and new middle classes, then, instead of civil higher society and the old lower middle class.

So far this is largely doxography or auto-history, roughly the field's own conception of what happened — an orderly narrative of growth, plan, increasing satisfaction. An alternative, very briefly sketched, based on Finkelstein (1989) could focus on the service *à la russe* vs. *à la française* distinction dating from the birth of restaurants proper, i.e. the late 18th/early 19th c.²⁵ It appears that *à la russe*, now general for all dinners, a menu consisting of plates brought to guests' tables one at a time with no previous display, replaced the older *à la française* (mediaeval, says Finkelstein) system of serving "all the foods at once", i.e. a great number of courses simultaneously, which "meant a large meal that took the greater part of the evening" (1989:41). Thus viewed, our 'modern' lunches become more of a lapse into old-fashioned, 'mediaeval' customs of overeating to the extent of neglecting other urban pleasures, exhibitions, theatres, concerts, *balls* etc. How apt, then, that most such will be absent near our Norwegian sports hotels.

²⁴ Thanks to Sunniva Vinje Kloed for finding *le mot juste*. The Norw. term, *lokkevare*, meaning 'decoy commodity' seems more apt by taking the customer's point of view. 'Loss leader' does the opposite, sees the seller as accepting a loss in order to lead the customer into buying what s/he wouldn't otherwise have bought.

²⁵ 1765 being given as year which saw the first restaurant in name and deed open, in Paris of course. For the distinction and the discussions involved, cf. e.g. Gilbert (1925:78). The *à la russe* system is occasionally confused with a distinct Russian custom, the *zakouski*, (cf. Andersen 1986:49) or serving a sizeable number of *hors d'oeuvres* simultaneously - a system reminiscent of *tapas* or *meze*, little appetisers - *before* the main dinner, served as usual *à la russe*, with full size courses one at a time.

We could take this one step further, that is, see our lunch table as basically *display*, not eating, among other things because it's practically impossible to taste everything for a normal stomach. The rest, and why not the whole, turns into a real-life picture, for observation, not digestion. Here then is a forerunner of the recent generation of pictorial coffeetable cook-books, TV chef or kitchen series, video or web-page pictorial recipes and what not; a pornography as it were of (very) real dishes, close-ups, lubrication and all (cf. Baudrillard 1979, Klitgaard Povlsen 1991). With all this to look at, who needs to eat? Yet, and even precisely therefore, the generations/cohorts who tire of it are bound to expand.²⁶

What meets the eye

Now for the encounter or phenomenological aspects:

A lunch table is shared with many, in a less or more personal way, 20-25 being a typical *minimum* number of guests worthy of a special set-up. In hotel top season practice customers multiply into the hundreds. This sets it apart from the home or family meal or event, where guests' *maximum* number rarely exceed 12,²⁷ today more typically 4-6.

Some hold that the lunch table really is nothing but putting all the types of courses of a full, prestige, formal dinner - said to be 12 or 13 in sum - on a table simultaneously. An attractive simplification yet not entirely tenable, since soups as mentioned are rare on lunch tables while figuring prominently in large dinners.

²⁶ The saga bard who kept complaining over not enough to eat at his king's table comes to mind. The king retaliated by serving him a giant pot of best porridge, commanding him to eat all of it. The bard, full to the rim, finally quote: 'Kill me, Sire, but not with porridge!' And in the end, images for all their 'immateriality' may end up as *as* filling.

²⁷ Even the high bourgeois who 'entertains a great deal', Buddenbrook style say, will rarely see more than 24 guests at a time - that will call for banqueting rooms outside even a wealthy home.

A (formal) dinner approaching lunch table numbers will because of the seating tend to set you with a very small number of interlocutors, typically 2-5, for a matter of hours, which may feel anything between perfect match, just safe, plain claustrophobic or even torture. Whereas the lunch table, the buffet etc. will give opportunities to leave your seat, find (or avoid) other interlocutors much as you find (or avoid) other dishes. Some find this preferable, a 'more social' form²⁸ where you meet more people. Still the 'groupness' of the occasion must, somehow, suffer. Lunch-table fluidity suits best people having the confidence, the 'relaxed habitus', of not shying away from mixing with all levels of prestige. Or, those who either don't need or don't really want to get to know each other better. To which the rejoinder has been proposed that dinner party guests know, or get to know each other only too well, to the point of boredom.²⁹

Your fixed seat remains fixed, though, until you've finished your lunch. Even in impersonal settings your place at the table is as it were sacred. If even this minimal 'safe' — or stuck — base isn't there, the occasion is probably a reception or cocktail party with a buffet of canapés or little snacks. Here, 'stand-up convivians' all, nobody can be certain that the circle you leave will remain open or at all the same if or when you return. I still know no better exposé of cocktail parties' challenges, pleasures and scares, than that of Parkinson (1957). Bewilderingly inscrutable, even a terror for some, they seem to provide the 'chosen few' with a setting for discreet encounters, business or personal.

²⁸ Depending of course on the comparison. For single's meals, others hold that being served is the more social form, since an amount of conversation with your waiter(s) is required.

²⁹ *Tatler* magazine recently pronounced that 'The dinner party is dead', featuring a photo of its actual being buried by a number of formally dressed waiters. Boredom being given as the main reason, it seems that the old art of matching invitations is what's really dead.

Returning to lunch tables, the number of course combinations is legion. Practically none will ever have the same vector of foods from the same lunch table. The meal is shared, that is, but not its food. Typical conversation items are: 'You should try', and 'Was that good?', i.e. giving and seeking advice (cf. on Blau 1957 below), degrees of distinction discretely on display, as expected.

Then, there is the second type of transient matter constituting meals - *ourselves*, including all our personal, class, habitual etc. peculiarities or vulgarities, not excluding the literal sense of the latter. Eating together is revealing - and the revealers rarely realise all that they disclose or display. Judgement is general - indeed 'alternatively and reciprocally' once again - yet not often of the Etiquette-Manual-type some fear, more probably of Bourdieu's 'classification classifies the classifier' sort, the classifiers in their turn being classified by distinct classifiers. One 'golden rule' wards off open conflicts: Commenting on 'bad manners' on the spot is even worse manners.³⁰

Course typology

A sketched typology of guests' strategies, plate or course combinations, from the visitor' point-of-view, types *not* all mutually exclusive:

- (1) 'Taste as many uncommon delicacies as you can'
- (2) 'Play-safe', or 'Avoid bad mannered combinations' (such as never meat before fish, never white wine with meat, never let them catch you eating with the knife etc.)
- (3) 'Go for a few favourites and only that', i.e. a contrast to 1 above and 7 below,

³⁰ Possibly a corollary of the more general: Real snobbish people are much too snobbish to let you surmise the full extent of their snobbishness.

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(4) 'With all these delicacies, who wants bread, potatoes, staples?'³¹

(5) *The stubborn*: 'I'd be damned if I eat differently from my everyday habits just because abundance is at display'

(6) *The blasé*: 'Just another lunch table, nothing exceptional here, is it?'

(7) 'Experiment with unlikely, even repugnant combinations' - chocolate pudding with béarnaise say.³²

There are others

(8) 'Plainfare' - only oat porridge e.g., an almost exact opposite of (1), (3) and (4) above;

(9) *The sceptic or connoisseur*: 'All this cannot be of equal top quality but I will avoid/disclose all traps',

(10) *The culturally distant*, reminiscent of (7) above but not out to experiment or shock, only having a different conception of the basic composition and sequence of a meal.

(11) and perhaps summing up several, the *anomic*.³³ 'I'm totally at loss as to where to start, what to choose or avoid'. However, since a display of one's state of anomie is, for many, personally disturbing, this will usually soon yield to varieties of

(12) 'follow your leader' or '...as the Romans' strategies: See and copy what others do. Or, trying or affecting patterns among (1)-(10) above. Or finally

(13), seeking or giving advise. But as Peter Blau found out years ago (1957), seeking and receiving advice is far from free and open;

³¹ A counter-counterpart being given by a senior chef's saying: "We don't fool our guests here". Which means that he advises guests away from starting with heavy, filling courses, to the point of giving them a 'touring guide', sort of, containing his recommendations for up to *twelve* helpings or returns to his table, yet hinting that less generous advice is given by colleagues.

³² Though take care, the tops of *haute cuisine* hinges on new, unexpected combinations, lobster ravioli, say, or chocolate caponata. Or what would you say of *cabillaud au pamplemousse*, cod with grapefruit?

³³ Thanks to Olav Kasin for suggesting the type. The anomie term is fitting, both in its wider sense of plain 'normlessness' and in its more technical Durkheimian sense - human desires being essentially immoderate hence need bonding, fixed rules or else frustration, either 'too much too soon' or 'I can't bear going without ...' will ensue.

it reflects and reinforces hierarchy, or it is avoided in an attempt of tuning down perceived hierarchies.

Comparison of meal types as signs or processes is now in order once more: A served lunch involves few or no choices and not much frustration except possibly having to return, or make-believe you have eaten at least some of, a disliked course. Delays can be frustrating too, but is as regular for both types of meal. A cafeteria lunch, on the other hand, will probably induce a degree of guests' calculation, not often of the cost-benefit type, more likely of a wavering between a 'should I indulge, treat myself?' and a 'should I save?' type, commonly solved by routine, habitus-based responses.

Among the types listed, (1) is by far the most frequent, and (7-8) least. There is an important relational aspect, though, especially for (1) and (3): rarities or favourites depend on what one's usual habits are. Generally, mediations have histories: Alters' dealing with unknown Tertius will depend on different previous experience with things or situations considered (dis)similar (Otnes 1997).

Two further types are notably rare or missing:

- (i) 'I want my money's worth, hence nothing but the most expensive course(s)'
- (ii) 'I want to eat record much now that it's no extra cost.'

Why? Though the setting from the trade point of view is very largely plain economics ('loss leaders', 'hidden' yet fairly high lump sum price, saving labour costs in service etc.), the fact remains that the table itself, from the guest's point of view, remains something of *an oasis in market society*, where you can pick and not pay apiece or according to quantity. There are elements of 'local market thinking' in types (1), (3)-(4) above, but related to taste- or use-value rather than to maximising economic value, as 'Economic Man' would.

Oasis or chaos? Market good-bye

From the point of view of economic theory one expectation would be for people to read or estimate 'shadow prices' into the lunch table's various unpriced courses, and next to go on making choices which maximise personal value as measured by these. For the prices, or the price span, will tend to be guessed or roughly known. *In our small sample, however, (i) and (ii) definitely falsifies this expectation.*

A second important tentative finding is that combinations (1)-(13) do not add up to anything very predictable, for individuals, for groups or for kitchens. Interviewed chefs tend to agree - hesitatingly at first, for it approaches admitting a professional flaw - that it is not easy to foresee even what special delicacy will be finished first — though age, 'habitus' and nationality of a group of guests will sometimes help, part of the way.³⁴ It's not the choices which determines the table, nor even vice versa, the table which determines the choices except as a 'sample universe'³⁵ - *the choices, or more precisely the quantities consumed of each item remain indeterminate* except for the gross main tendencies just mentioned.

But the idea of 'shadow prices' and maximising value is not the only prediction that economic theory could come up with. A perceptive economist might make the point that anomie, our (11) above, could be another predictable consequence, exactly when all price-tags are missing, all portioning, all scales or other quantity-controlling equipment etc. In the conventional view, 'there is no real market providing guidance' here.

³⁴ In the words of one chef, "of course more hot gravyish courses and less salads etc. will go when we serve the plumbers' guild, and the reverse if it's the medical association".

³⁵ Which certainly does not mean that the don't try to guide guests; both menus and tables know their ways of highlighting one course and shade away another, well-known tricks of the trade that few guests recognise. To a great extent, then, we don't make choices, we're guided imperceptibly into accepting choices *made for us* - "hidden persuaders". - For a general model of acting vs. being acted on, cf. Otnes 1997, esp. chap. 8.

Well, yes but then chefs would have to agree that there is indeed unpredictability and nothing but that, which they do not. Anomie can be traced, true, but is not general, not the only, not the dominant or the most common response – frequent perhaps yet transient. Even if chefs find detailed predictions too difficult, an amount of gross prediction is indeed possible and customary, but then, only in a gross and not very 'economic' way - more of the common-sense type, "different strokes for different folks" (cf. note 34 above).

Some suggested reasons: We fuel, we eat food, not values; we taste tastes, not prestige,³⁶. 'Conspicuous consumption' is for displaying to others rather than for one's own indulgence. Everyday preferences probably vary widely - for one just mentioned reason since 'uncommon delicacies', (1) above, rarely are the same, even less so for sophisticated or blasé people — and for newcomers etc., too wide a choice. And the 'shadow prices' tend to be *more or less* well known or guessed at for different classes of customers.

A next reason is our conception of a (main) meal. Its tripartite composition of a *staple*, a *centre* or *complement*, and *accessories* - e.g potatoes, sausage, beans - might constitute what amounts very nearly to a 'cultural universal' (Mäkelä, Koctürk-Runefors 1991, cf. Mary Douglas 1984 and other works). Consciously or not, 'nothing but complement', cf. (4) above, would feel wrong, for cultural or even physiological reasons,³⁷ and nothing but accessories e.g. childish ('all pudding'). Finally, nothing but staple would tend to feel nothing but cheap, even degrading. An acquaintance still

³⁶ Over the years I've come to doubt that: Of course people nourish their bodies, and they sample and judge tastes, but as or more regularly *eat riches or poverty, prestige or contempt, abundance or scarcity, honour or shame*. For example, people who oppose vegetarianism do not so often miss the actual tastes of fish or meat etc., they dislike being served what they see as only cheap, common, base ingredients, "only supplement: where's the centre?". The classification of meals and their ingredients as 'cheap' or 'rich' is to a large extent cultural, varying, and not economic, i.e. not based on consumer prices and production costs.

³⁷ Omnivores, not carnivores, aren't we? It's a matter of physiology too, different lengths of the intestines etc.

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remembers his school lunch sandwiches with cold porridge filling: The taste was bearable, the shame of it not.

The stomach is the limit

Finally, how many 'tastes' make up a full stomach? A normal stomach, though very elastic, will contain c. 2 pints. One's 'taste' of a plate from a lunch table will be anything from half an ounce to half a pint, that is a range of anything from less than 20 up to 50 'tastes' per normal guest, adjusting for staples, and drink which alone will often make for at least .5 pint or a quarter of the total. While a real gourmand could probably double or even triple our 20-50, the more frequent thing is to go for less. People - without the slightest trace of anorexia - are regularly in the habit of eating to less than capacity. Once more, recent experience and one's present field is important: An 'after ski' lunch with a nap to follow will invite more indulgence than a 'between meetings' one; generally, physical activity plus no or a very relaxed work schedule engenders more indulgence - for those who want to indulge.

For some, as normal people, will be repulsed by a magnum display of foods, not attracted. We suggest as a metaphor *'the Strasbourg goose's nightmare'*. You not only feel you have to eat as if fed by the funnel, you have to make believe that it's voluntary, and that you enjoy it enormously as well. Hence the *convivium infundibulorum* — the Feast of the funnels. Eat till you bust but do keep smiling.

Christian rief ausser sich: "Ich will nielmals wieder etwas essen! Mir ist übel, mir ist *verdamm*t übel!"

Buddenbrooks
Thomas. Mann

An 'eyes' feast' turned into repulsion for some, then: Here at last we find objectivation, and alienation or frustration after all. The objectivation of enjoying choice courses in chosen amounts, versus the frustration, either of being made to eat much more and differently from what you'd really want, given less to choose from and more calm for reflection. Or the frustration of not realising how to choose at all, even after reflection, i.e. acute anomie.

What makes it viable from the kitchen point of view? We have mentioned the 'hidden price' feature. Further, limitations of stomach capacity are rarely being well realised by unsophisticated guests, for whom the stunning or overwhelming effect³⁸ still works. Most important, though, seems to be the savings in hotel labour costs as guests serve themselves. Same trick as the IKEA or general supermarket system: making customers pay in 'invisible' ways for what is largely their own work.

Then, there are the limitations of quality: Not all agricultural produce can be very best. Consequently there is a great demand in that trade for less discerning chefs, supermarket managers etc. who will put up with different degrees of less than top-standard products.³⁹ In the future, some will probably go for the real top, which probably means fewer dishes, possibly individually priced and per quantum served, if few enough and different enough in production cost; a luxury cafeteria, sort of. Other chefs will save by

³⁸ And when it wanes, may perhaps be exported to less blasé corners or ethnies of this world, much the same way as automobiles or cigarettes or powdered mother's milk are now marketed in less developed lands.

³⁹ Near-classic Caplovitz: *The poor pay more* (1967) comes to mind.

cutting or masking less than top quality, or go for unsuspecting, novice customers. Surrounding all, however, are the general culture's changing discourses on food, cooking, eating, gourmetism and health - full of conflict but certainly changing in the longer run, though possibly in different directions.

Finally the problem of product development, or 'new luxuries', new, unseen delicacies: As mentioned, traditional local cuisine and its products are now fashionable among enterprising chefs. The problem is that our tradition is very largely one of poverty — plenty of staple, little complement etc. It is also one of bias - for example, our traditional fishing communities had very strict distinctions between 'fish' and 'non-fish' (Norw. *ufisk*) such as angler, lumpfish, and even catfish, not even mentioning mussels which were classified as nothing but bait – strictly for fish, not for people. It took foreign cooks to start breaking with this tradition, which by now is luckily waning. Consequently, new luxuries wanting to pass as 'real local tradition' will be, in that respect, post-modern *simulacra*.⁴⁰ But *bon courage!*, bias and poverty may well be basic in *any* tradition. The currently popular 'ethnic' cuisine is certainly no exception, masking cheap staples and even complements by a careful selection of as cheap spices.⁴¹ And certainly, *as* delicious and luxurious-looking as anything yet seen on Norwegian lunch tables.

⁴⁰ Cf. Miller (1998:173) on the demand for 'real, home-brewed ales' in the UK, a huge demand for a brand new, only *as if* old, rural and local, beer.

⁴¹ A North African relative speaks of his country's custom of breadbaking in big, outdoor ovens, with peppers, onions and garlic's scalded alongside, mortared into the very hot sauce known as *midshuia*, a very appetising accompaniment for new-baked *chups* or bread. Delicious, yet very definitely plainfare.

Paroxyst epilogue

In the words of Baudrillard

Il a longtemps suffi au capital de produire des marchandises, la consommation allant de soi. Aujourd'hui il faut produire les consommateurs, il faut produire la demande elle-même et cette production est infiniment plus coûteuse que celle des marchandises.

Ainsi il a longtemps suffi au pouvoir de produire du sens ... et la demande suivait, elle absorbait l'offre et l'excédait encore ... Aujourd'hui, tout a changé: le sens ne manque plus, on en produit partout, et toujours davantage - c'est la demande qui est défaillante. Et c'est la production de cette demande de sens qui est devenu cruciale pour le système (1982:32).

Is it, in the longer run, at all possible to keep up this 'infinitely more costly production of demand'? Maybe, and maybe not; it will certainly require massive amounts of creativity in the display, design, publicity and marketing businesses, certainly with us already, yet leaving the question "enough?" open. But despite this, prospects for our local lunch table, the 'oasis in market society', would almost certainly seem bleak in the longer term. Not because they're unlikely to pay off, 'be profitable', but because prospects for re-creating a demand for itself, as a commodity and as a sign, seem gloomy.

We've touched on semiotics at a number of points. In the end, there is perhaps a sort of uniqueness about our object seen in such terms. Some have wondered whether at all there could be a sign which signifies itself and nothing else - an arrow pointing at itself, say. That being a poor, a mistaken idea, what about our lunch table? It could, of course, be 'read' Barthes style, as the embodiment of a

myth, a super-sign standing for, say, opulence, freedom, and (superficially) for equality. Or it could be read as the epitome of Lévi-Strauss' categories "the raw, the cooked and the rotten",⁴² for all these types of courses will be present on it, laid out in varying perhaps, yet "structuralist" forms, not scattered arbitrarily, for example. But the plainest, 'what meets the eye' reading sees the entire table as a sign, *signifying itself*, a grand, life-size publicity for the food on it: "I am food, *and* an icon thereof. Take a good look. You can take and eat but you'll never finish me". - Table stardom⁴³ as it were, an image so strong it cannot ever be consumed, perhaps not even be decoded or deconstructed - "I am my own image". Take it or leave it, fact or fiction, real or construction, idea or simulacrum - it's "such stuff as dreams are made of", nothing but dream - or nightmare.

As for economic theory, this smallish, local oasis⁴⁴ in the vast desert of market society, "our obsolete market mentality" (Polanyi), may be thought not to prove or substantiate very much. True-blue economists live in a world closed for foreign arguments. Modern econometrics is a marriage of pure mathematics and what I call *the bookkeeper mentality*, the economists own, gratuitously extended to everybody else; we're thought to count, calculate and compare and nothing much else.⁴⁵ Telling them this is mistaken will not be heard,⁴⁶ for both bookkeeping and mathematics, despite their narrowness and errors, *work* so exceedingly well, for those who have books to keep, merchandise for sale, calculations to make. The market certainly is a marvellous system - for those who are on the

⁴² Thanks to Lise Kjølørød for the suggestion.

⁴³ Stardom, "another hysteric and supernatural metaphor", says Baudrillard.

⁴⁴ One may of course ask *how* atypical, *how* isolated. Possible and expanding parallels may include the much-praised internet or 'world wide web', where you pay, but not much for your time use and then gain admittance to what is in effect the hugest 'lunch-table' of them all, with individually priced items increasing yet vast numbers of sites you can visit for free remaining.

⁴⁵ Much more about similar topics in Bourdieu (2000) and Lebaron (2000).

⁴⁶ They might, perhaps, mind mathematician Poincaré's principle of theory multiplicity: a natural phenomenon capable of mathematical explanation can always be explained by contradictory mathematical models.

right side of it. For the rest of us, the great majority, it's a risk of constant little mistakes or misdirection's; we're being produced as demanders, as demand, of ever new products and signs. And all the while being told that this our demand are choices that we make ourselves as "sovereign consumers". Today, sovereigns are extinct in the political sphere, and, ideologies notwithstanding, *as* extinct in the economic. It cannot but reflect negatively on the intelligence of the economics profession and, on their perception of peoples' intelligence generally, that they offer us "the sovereign consumer" as credible fact, even as theory. A simulacrum good as any.

Suggesting a superior, non-bookkeeping view might draw on Foucauldian ideas: Detail prices as a *system of discipline*, in fact not having much operative effect yet all the more clung to *precisely because of that*, as an almost constant reminder of the ideas of restraint and moderation, of not overstepping budgets seen as fixed etc.

The free choice supermarket next?

As for the perennial 'need for further research' I'd like to propose an experiment exploring possibilities for generalisation of our finding, from 'oasis' to 'a desert full of oases': What would happen if an experimental 'free choice supermarket' was tried, where you pay a fixed, average lump sum and after, are free to pick whatever you prefer? There are difficulties, to be sure, but also remedies: For one thing, the stomach's not the limit in shops. Re-sales must be ruled out, for one thing. And more than one full shopping trolley per customer likewise. And unusually costly items must remain behind special counters, as now. Such a system also wouldn't work except in the longer run and in a general way, for example all shops in one small village for a start.

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Before you dismiss the idea as totally unworthy of research funding, think of the queues that would disappear, to say nothing of the totally tedious yet demanding jobs of being counter cashiers today. Losses of jobs, true but very boring ones. And saving labour costs - as our lunch table. My hypothesis is that many, perhaps most shoppers will return to previous routine practice after the surprise of the system shift has faded.

A final taste from our lunch table now, a last little wafer before we bust - or alternatively, a last disliked item to be hidden or excused when not eaten: *It may perhaps stand as a metonym for the entire world at present.* A hidden inequality masking as opulence, for all. Where 'all *who can pay*' is a largely forgotten clause. And 'all who know how to choose' another. And not least, the poor and starving, in nearby ghettos or in distant lands, knowing little or nothing of it all.

What better end when you start with theses and antitheses, than to see syntheses emerging: We started with oppositions between matter/operation and sign/signification, and end by seeing a case of their merger, sign and matter uniting. Further, with active agents and more passive things/products, whom we from quite early on saw merge or draw near each other - the concepts of fixed and transient matter/agency. And last but not least, the opposition of mind and matter, where - since minds (help) produce most matter (tools and products), and no mind can work without material input, for fuel or reflection, inert or lively, the two are not really so distinct after all. Marx called it dialectical materialism, three score and ten years before as many years of state marxism brought that concept in some disrepute.

Post festum

Of all the sound advice Pierre Bourdieu has suggested for the craft of sociology, by far the most difficult to follow is his dictum to 'objectivate the objectiating subject'. Or

(le sociologue...) s'efforce de traquer son impensé spécifique, la philosophie sociale qui hante les concepts utilisés, les mots les plus ordinaires du discours sur le monde social. La sociologie a le privilège de pouvoir retourner ses instruments à penser contre elle-même, c'est à dire contre ses propres instruments à penser (cited in Otnes 1997:109).

Very well, if I make an effort of going behind this paper's analysis, looking for its limitations and possible biases, briefly, going behind my institutional or personal 'impensés spécifiques' trying to think what I've hitherto not been able to think, what will I find?

It could well be, for example, that predicting a decline for the lunch table custom in coming years is tinged by its author's being a fairly established, middle-aged and middle-class intellectual of modest means, retiring habits and a largely left-leaning world view. The ideas of distinction, *la distinction* - the space of tastes and life-styles - liable to rise in such circumstances might well involve elements of 'allodoxia', or mistaken beliefs about what 'higher' positions in the fields take to be distinction, now or in the future. It may also well underestimate the 'market potential' of 'lower' positions who may make lunch tables grow and multiply instead of fading off fashion. After all, over-eating now and then is part of a pattern dating, possibly, back to the period of 'stone-age economics' (Sahlins 1974).

Much harder to 'look through', though, are the ideas surrounding the shortcomings of market society. It is true that I agree with C. Wright Mills words about Veblen, that "he rejected another all-American

value: the heraldry of the greenback, the world of the fast buck". Never having had the slightest part in that, I too rejected it, as if by instinct, from long before I came to realise that this could be seen as 'leftist' views. Yet writing this in a period of almost unparalleled escalation of these very values may make for less credibility - for some, and for a period. For even if the 'dominated classes' are, today, largely divided and as if robbed of their traditional ideologies, it is nevertheless a fact that accumulation of wealth, style and 'distinction' on one end will entail relative depletion on the other⁴⁷. And even Weber is quoted, as saying that no one able to dodge the law of the market will yield to it willingly.

The prospect may be distant indeed, but in the long run, therefore, there can be no doubt that the more market rule expands, the more opposition to it is bound to form and gain force, once more.

My efforts here of debunking my *impensés* may yet well be deficient. If so, then the Bourdieu quote above ends on a hopeful note:

Et si (la sociologie) l'oublierait, le fait qu'elle s'avise de mettre en question les autres disciplines la vouerait à se voir renvoyer, avec une force redoublée, ses propres questions.

⁴⁷ Ricardo's much lauded 'theory of relative advantage' comes to mind. But it gives no guarantee whatsoever that an exchange which gains both strong and weak parties to it will ever reduce inequality between them. Indeed if the strong gain grossly while the weak only trifles and no better option for each party, the gap will widen. Without due regard to these (im)proportional *degrees* of advantage Ricardo's is in fact a *theory of relative coercion* – by strong over weak producers.

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