Eating Out

Social Differentiation, Consumption and Pleasure

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1 Studying eating out

There has been an explosion of social scientific interest in food in the last decade. Nutritionists, social policy advisors, anthropologists, agricultural economists and historians have always studied food habits, though for different reasons. However, before the 1990s general social scientific interest in the practical, social and cultural aspects of food was minimal. For a sociologist, the field consisted of a stuttering debate on the nature of the proper meal and its role in domestic organisation (e.g. Douglas, 1975; Douglas and Nicod, 1974; Murcott, 1983a and 1983b; Charles and Kerr, 1988), a few occasional essays on exceptional behaviour like vegetarianism, health food shopping and children's sweets (Twigg, 1983; Atkinson, 1980; and James, 1990, respectively), and Mennell's (1985) major, largely neglected, historical comparison of the development of food habits in Britain and France. This situation had changed markedly by the time of writing, with the publication of a series of literature surveys and textbooks (e.g. Beardsworth and Kiel, 1997; Bell and Valentine, 1997; Mennell et al., 1992; Wood, 1995) and of research monographs and essays (Caplan, 1997; Fine et al., 1996; Lupton, 1996; Marshall, 1995; Murcott, 1998; Warde, 1997).

One indicator of the growth of interest in food was the Economic and Social Research Council's programme 'The Nation's Diet: the social science of food choice', which began in 1992. We undertook one of the sixteen projects. We designed a survey and undertook semi-structured interviews in order to analyse the contemporary patterns and the symbolic associations of eating out and to relate those patterns to social and demographic characteristics of households. We reasoned that eating out has serious implications for any comprehensive understanding of the nation's diet. Eating out, for instance, throws into sharp relief narrow concerns with food as merely a means of subsistence, for eating out seems to be expanding as a form of entertainment and a means to display taste, status and distinction. Also significant is the willingness of people to swap their private domestic food provisioning arrangements for commercial or communal alternatives. Upon that issue hangs the future of both one of

Britain's largest industries and a major buttress of that troubled institution, the family.

At the outset of this investigation there was almost no systematic social scientific research on the nature and experience of eating out. After the project began the National Food Survey (MAFF, 1995, 39–92) reported for the first time details about eating out in the UK on the basis of its national sample survey. However, it was more concerned with the nutritional than the social aspects of the topic. Previously only highly inaccessible market research reports and occasional historically oriented campaigning books by food connoisseurs (e.g. Driver, 1983) reflected on the practice of eating out. Yet, Britons increasingly consume their food outside the home. As a proportion of food expenditure, that devoted to eating away from home has been increasing since at least the end of the 1950s.

Historical accounts of food provision tend to concentrate either on overall levels of consumption within societies, on questions of poverty and hunger, or on particular foodstuffs, like sugar or tea. Few of the general books on British food habits pay any attention to the commercial provision of meals. Restaurant and café appear very infrequently in the indexes of such works. For example, Burnett (1989) gives a comprehensive overview of changing behaviour in the UK since the Industrial Revolution, showing how differences of class and region influenced types of diet and overall standards of nutrition, and while there are useful short sections on changing patterns of eating out, only a small proportion of a large book is devoted to meals away from home. There is no satisfactory historical account of the catering industry or restaurants, information emerging in passing from Medlik (1972), Mennell (1985), Driver (1983) and Wood (1992b). General histories of food consumption in the USA make more reference to the practice (e.g. Levenstein 1988 and 1993) and, because the habit of buying meals on commercial premises is longer established, America is better served with studies of its historical and geographical diffusion (e.g. Pillsbury, 1990; Zelinsky, 1985). But literature is sparse.

Food and its consumption may be examined at several different levels. Depending upon one's purpose, attention may focus on one or more of the following: nutrients, ingredients, dishes, meals or cuisines. Each poses different kinds of analytic problem and generates different kinds of popular concern. The analytic decomposition of foods into their component nutrients engages biologists, biotechnologists, nutritionists and health professionals. Notions of diets, healthy eating, using food to protect against illness depend on the isolation, measurement and understanding of nutrients. Studies of agricultural production and the economics of the food chain, with concomitant regulations regarding the

preservation and the purity of foodstuffs, direct attention to ingredients. Some of the most politically challenging issues about food production arise from examining specific food items, for example sugar (see Mintz, 1985; Fine et al., 1996). Hitherto, most scholarly attention has been paid to nutrients and ingredients. Work on dishes has been primarily practical, as the basis of training in cooking, whether domestic or professional. The stock in trade of a genre of popular literature, food columns in magazines and cookery books, are recipes giving instruction in how to prepare dishes. When people talk of cooking it usually connotes combining and assembling ingredients to create a dish. Levi-Strauss's (1966) observations about the symbolic significance of different techniques for transforming ingredients into foods – of the differences between roasting, boiling and rotting, for instance – has been a major source of social scientific reflection. Also some attention has been paid to recipes and recipe books (Appadurai, 1988; Tomlinson, 1986; Warde, 1997). By comparison there has been far less work on meals, the most clearly sociological topic because a meal presumes social ordering of dishes, rules and rituals of commensality and forms of companionship. Nor has there been much scholarly analysis of cuisine, the realm of general principles governing what is, and what is not acceptable to eat, the bedrock of general meanings attributed to food and eating in different cultural formations (though see Goody, 1982; Mennell, 1985).

Wood (1995: 112) correctly observed that theoretical claims arising from social scientific food research far outreach current empirical knowledge. More focused and detailed analysis of particular practices is essential for our better understanding of the myriad aspects of food provisioning. We therefore concentrate closely upon one level, the meal, and one of its forms, meals taken away from home. This is essentially a book about *meals out*.

Sociologists and anthropologists in the UK have operated with a definition of the meal which was formulated as a curious mix of everyday meanings and structuralist analysis. Nicod (1980, see also Douglas and Nicod, 1974), defined a meal as 'a "structured event", a social occasion organised by rules prescribing time, place and sequence of actions . . . (and which) . . . is strictly rule bound as to permitted combinations and sequences' (quoted in Marshall, 1995: 266). A snack, by contrast, has no structure. Structured eating events in Britain, Douglas and Nicod suggested, contained similar elements, but with different degrees of elaboration. Their sparse definition provided the basis for an elaborated, and arguably stereotyped, model of the 'family' or 'proper' meal, whose properties were identified in the course of interviews with households first in South Wales, then in Yorkshire (Murcott, 1982, 1983a; Charles and Kerr,

eating out ———— domestic events

street food — take-away

meal at work ———— subsidiary meal

meal out ———————— 'proper' family meal

sandwich or snack ———— tea and biscuits

confectionery or ice cream
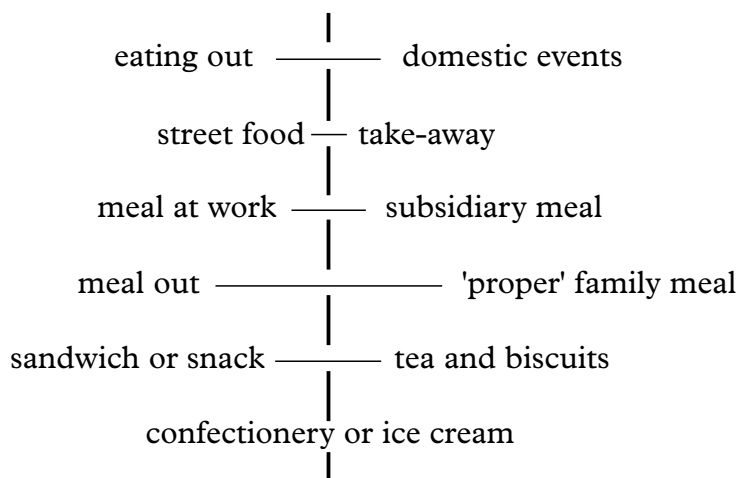
1.1 Eating events: at home and away

1988). As many anthropologists and sociologists have noted, family meals are structured food events particularly important in social and cultural reproduction (Douglas, 1975; DeVault, 1991). Unsurprisingly, then, predictions of their erosion before social trends like commercialisation, informalisation and individualisation have given cause for concern.

Determining whether the habit of eating out is eroding the domestic mode of provision depends very much on how eating out is defined. Prima facie it is the taking of food in some location other than one's own place of residence. In that sense there are a great many eating out events; eating a packet of crisps or fish and chips in the street, as well as a sandwich in the office, a barbecue at a friend's house and an elaborate dinner in a restaurant would count, while returning home with a take-away pizza or a made-up dish from the supermarket would not. Figure 1.1 identifies some of the possible variants.

Analyses of contemporary commercial provision of meals out are mostly restricted to estimates of their economic value and prospects for future investment. Many types of organisation provide food in multifarious forms. Restaurants, bistros and cafés specialise in providing food. But for many others food is not their only service or product – hotels, public houses, hospitals and motorway service stations are only partly concerned with food and estimating the proportion of their income derived from food is hazardous. In addition, the catering industries include businesses whose purpose is not to provide meals on the premises; the fish and chip shop has been included in various different categories in official

statistics over the years. When the economic and social history of the catering trades comes to be written it will not be helped much by official sources. Some indications of the dimensions and trajectory of the industry can be obtained from market research reports, of which there have been a great many in the last twenty years. But they have well recognised limitations: they are commissioned for the purpose of guiding business decisions, mostly exaggerate short-term trends, are not comparable over time, and are also not easily accessible as public documents (Gofton, 1998). Nevertheless they often offer the only available information on the shape and size of particular sectors.

By contrast there is an interesting and expanding literature on the nature of work in the catering industries. Studies of the labour process are comparatively well developed, with a little on chefs and commercial cooking (see Fine, 1995a; Gabriel, 1988; Chivers, 1973) and a considerable amount on how serving staff manage face-to-face relations with their clientele. Ethnography, observation and interviews have been effectively used to map the variety of work activities in different kinds of establishments which have developed over the years. The work of waiters in traditional restaurant settings is examined by Whyte (1948), Mars and Nicod (1984) and Gabriel (1988). Marshall (1986), Crang (1994), again Gabriel (1988) and Sosteric (1996) offer insights into the experience of waiting on in less formal settings, including pubs and theme restaurants, since the 1980s. In addition, work in fast food places has been subject to intense scrutiny as exemplary of alienated, routinised, 'Fordist' labour in the service industries (see Leidner 1993, Reiter, 1991). However, from these we learn comparatively little about the impact upon consumers. We know much more about what waiting staff think of their customers than vice versa.

That most literature is driven by the concerns of the catering industries rather than consumers is not unique to this field. Social science has typically paid far more attention to production than consumption. Reference to the consumer experience is also mostly in terms of its construction or manipulation by producers. A book by Campbell-Smith, *The Meal Experience* (1967), is often credited with formalising the marketing insight that there are many factors which influence customer satisfaction with commercially provided meals. The restaurant should be not just a provider of food but a site of a theatre performance, in which the atmosphere, appeal to sensual perception and the character of service were all key elements. A text for the aspiring restaurateur, it concentrated on aspects over which an owner might exercise control. The degree of power exercised by the provider is one issue of dispute in studies of dining out. Wood (1995: 199) endorses Finkelstein's controversial extended account in *Dining Out* (1989) which attributes considerable power to restaurateurs. Finkelstein's

central thesis is that, in modern restaurants, the decor, service and atmosphere are designed in such a way as to relieve customers of the 'responsibility to shape sociality' (*ibid*.: 5). The regimes of commercial establishments are planned in a way that encourages simulated, rather than genuine, engagement between companions (*ibid*.: 52). Conventional behaviour in restaurants amounts to accepting an 'obligation to give a performance in accord with the normative demands of the circumstances' (*ibid*.: 53). Eating out, she says, is incivil. However, Finkelstein's thesis might be criticised for its scant empirical basis, its construction of customers as passive and misguided, and its indifference to the sub-cultural differences of advanced societies (see further, Martens and Warde, 1997).

Eating out has both practical and symbolic significance. People eat out sometimes out of necessity, sometimes purely for pleasure. Previous research using the British Family Expenditure Survey had suggested that modes of eating out had become a principal form in which social distinction could be expressed through food consumption (see Warde and Tomlinson, 1995). This implied that eating out had considerable social and symbolic significance for some groups, a circumstance making it worthy of study in terms of theoretical debates concerning the expression of social divisions through consumption behaviour and the bases for differential involvement in public and private spheres. Passing reference to eating out in studies of the social division of taste in North America suggest something similar (Erickson, 1991 and 1996; Holt, 1997a). Recent official data and market research reports in the UK indicate that there are social group differences both in the frequency of eating out and with respect to which venues are frequented. Income, age, region, class, gender and household composition all influence access to eating out (e.g. MAFF, 1997). However, there are many sociological questions about variations in practice which could not be answered on the basis of existing materials, hence our empirical study.

Methods of investigation

The empirical research involved in the project was designed to examine the symbolic significance of eating out and the relationship between public eating and domestic cooking. It aimed to describe contemporary patterns and the symbolic associations of eating out and to relate these to socio-demographic characteristics of households, their domestic provisioning of food, diet and taste. A second and separate field of empirical and theoretical controversy, about domestic organisation of households, was also amenable to scrutiny via the investigation of eating out. It was anticipated not only that the composition of households would influence

their eating out behaviour but also that the experience of eating out might influence domestic habits and tastes. Exploration of eating out, besides supplying the first systematic baseline study of a practice accounting for a substantial and increasing part of household food consumption, promised to illuminate many aspects of contemporary social and cultural practice.

Briefly, since methods of data collection and analysis are described in detail in the Appendix, two principal forms of fieldwork were used, semi-structured interviews and a survey. The combination of qualitative and quantitative methods is becoming a more common feature of social scientific inquiry and proved essential for this study (Brannen, 1992). As would be anticipated, the semi-structured interviews provided superior data on the meanings and reasoning associated with eating out. The survey allowed estimation of general patterns among urban populations and the opportunity for statistically based exploration of the association between the social characteristics of respondents and their conduct. The two different techniques proved compatible and the results generally complementary. We use the term 'interviewee' to refer to the people involved at the qualitative stage, and the term 'respondent' to apply to those contacted through the survey.

The research design entailed two phases of data collection. In the first, we conducted interviews with thirty-three principal food providers[1] in thirty households in diverse circumstances living in Preston and the surrounding area during the autumn of 1994. Concentration on Preston, a city in Lancashire in north-west England, with a population of 121,000 in 1991, was opportunistic, but we have no reason to think Preston highly unusual in any respect (see Appendix, p.228).

The personal characteristics and household circumstances of each are indicated in Figure 1.2.[2] Interviewees were asked questions about aspects of eating at home including descriptions of household routines and distribution of food preparation tasks. Questions about eating out included the interviewee's understanding of the term, frequency and reasons for using various places and information details about recent eating out experiences. Discussion was wide-ranging around the key topics and not all interviews addressed each topic in the same depth.

In Phase II, 1,001 people were surveyed, using a questionnaire in three cities in England; London, Bristol and Preston. Respondents were

[1] A principal food provider is defined, following the work of DeVault (1991: 22) as 'anyone, man or women, who performed a substantial portion of the feeding work of the household'.

[2] Names of interviewees are pseudonyms, as are the names of all commercial establishments mentioned in the text.

Key
Household members
Pseudonym and age-group of respondent

Adult woman/man

Independent female/male child

Dependent female/male child

Employment Status
ft   Full time
pt   Part time
hw   Housewife
s   Student
o   Other

Occupational class
1   Professional
2   Managerial and technical
3n   Skilled occupation (non manual)
3m   Skilled occupation (manual)
4   Partly skilled occupation
5   Unskilled occupation

£30,000

£25,000

£20,000

£15,000

£10,000

£5,000

Chris 50
pt ft
3n 2

John 20
ft ft
1 1

Janice 30
pt ft
3n 1

Jane 40
hw ft
2

Jenny 40
ft ft
3n 3m

Sara 30
hw ft
3n

Lorraine 40
pt ft
2 1

Jean & David 50
pt ft
5

Lorna 40
hw ft
2

Trisha 20
ft ft
3n 2

Steve 20
ft ft
1 1

Margrit 50
ft
1

Smina 20
ft ft
3n 3m

Liz 50
ft ?
3n ?

Sheila 40
ft
3n

Sally & Peter 30
s ft
2

Julia & Al 20
ft o
1 1

Debby 20
pt ft
4 4

Lisa 30
pt ft
4 4

Rose 40
hw ft
3m

Anne 20
hw ft
3n

Nadia 20
ft ft
3n 4

Andy 20
pt pt
2 1

Meg 50
o

Katrine 30
o o

Elaine 40
pt o
5

Petra 30
s

Mary 50
pt o
5

Hannah 30
s ?

Nasreem 50
hw o

1.2 Social characteristics of interviewees

engaged face-to-face in their own homes, interviews lasting on average between thirty and thirty-five minutes. Questions were asked to ascertain frequency of eating out, types of outlet visited, attitudes to eating out, extensive detail about the nature of the most recent meal eaten away from home and rudimentary information about domestic routines. Socio-demographic data was also elicited in order to explore variation by class, income, age, gender, education, place of residence, and so forth.[3]

The cities were chosen to offer contrasts of socio-demographic composition and, putatively, cultural ambience. Preston was included partly so that we might compare the survey findings with the evidence of the qualitative interviews, partly as representing a large northern free-standing city without any particularly eccentric characteristics. London was selected in anticipation that its unique features, including its system of supply, would prompt distinctive consumption behaviour, and the two sub-divisions were chosen to illustrate potential differences between central and suburban areas of the metropolis. Bristol was selected as an example of a southern, non-metropolitan city with some claim to be culturally heterogeneous. Since no three cities could be representative of all others in England, these sites were deemed as satisfactory as any. Despite not being a nationally random sample, there is no reason to consider the survey biased in any particular way as a basis for an initial portrait of urban English practice. The survey was undertaken in April 1995 and was administered to a quota sample which matched respondents to the overall population of diverse local sub-areas of the cities by age, sex, ethnicity, class and employment status.

Overall, our estimates of current behaviour, based on what people say they do, are derived from data which are more reliable and representative than those which sustain popular and media speculation about eating out. The use of two different methods gives us extra confidence that we can describe with unprecedented accuracy the range of experience of people eating out in England. Our complex data also give us a fair means to evaluate claims emanating from recent social theory about consumption and consumer culture.

Theories and themes

A service provisioning approach to consumption

We approach eating out as a case study of consumption and seek to develop sociological perspectives in the field. Recent sociology of consumption has

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[3] The data from the survey is lodged at the ESRC Data Archive at Essex University, which holds copies of the questionnaire and the associated technical report from Public Attitudes Survey, who conducted the survey.

focused particularly on the consequences of the intensification of consumer culture and the commodification of services previously supplied by the state or household. Despite some significant theoretical developments like Featherstone's (1991) nuanced incorporation of insights from postmodernist speculation within a cultural studies tradition and Fine and Leopold's (1993) exposition of a 'systems of provision' approach deriving from political economy, there remains a need to develop more fully an integrated understanding of the relationship between consumption and production. Arguably, the further theoretical development of the sociology of consumption requires experimentation with new heuristic frameworks as well as more empirical case studies (Warde, 1996).

We adopt a 'service provisioning' framework because we believe that it is the most effective way to connect analytically processes of production and consumption (Warde, 1992). The essence of the approach, which is elaborated in the introductions to Parts I – IV, is to distinguish between the phases of production – consumption cycles involved in the delivery of services and to identify different modes of service provision. We propose that all items consumed, whether goods or services, incorporate a residue of labour and that the form of the labour affects the meaning and status of the product. The vast majority of goods now arrive as commodities, sold in the market and produced by wage labour. But services are provided from many sources, not just through the market by commercial firms, but also by the state, by household members, and by friends and non-resident kin. Such labour is often unpaid. These different modes of provision entail different relationships between producer and consumer, a proposition that might be supported, for example, by reflection on how complaints are lodged. It is also corroborated by consideration of the social relationships that entitle the consumer to receive such services. Typically, money, citizenship, family obligation and mutual reciprocity govern access to services produced in the different modes. A further key element of service provision is its manner of delivery. As regards eating out, the organisation of service (for example, formal, casual or self-service) and the manner in which interactions between server and served are managed are essential defining aspects of the occasion. The fourth element in a production-consumption cycle concerns the experience of final consumption, the feelings of gratification or discontent which the consumer derives before, during and after the event itself. A phase rarely reflected upon in any detail, we argue that it is central to appreciating the social significance of consumption practices like eating out. This framework permits analysis of key features of any consumption practice and brings to the fore some particularly important contemporary social processes.

Recent sociology has concentrated on the market mode, the commercial provision of items which previously had emanated from the state, communal or domestic modes. Substitution between modes occurs constantly, but the reason for concern about temporal succession is that each has different consequences for social relations. The obligations and bonds associated with feeding friends (communal) or family (domestic) are very different from those entailed in market exchange. For example, DeVault (1991) shows how the family meal acts as a vehicle for the socialisation of children, the reproduction of class and gender relations and the reproduction of the institution of the family itself. The commodification of meal provision might systematically transform these social relations.

Social divisions

Modern capitalist societies have always been characterised by powerful social divisions along the lines of gender, class, ethnicity and region which have often been manifest through differentiated patterns of consumption. Precisely how these operate and how they relate to one another is a major issue for sociology, raising both empirical and theoretical questions. For example, perceptions of 'time famine', the normalisation of consumer culture and the consumer attitude, limited employment opportunities for immigrant settlers, the changing social status of women and the levels of married women's participation in the workforce, greater travel and daily spatial mobility, intense mass media attention paid to food, and increasing affluence among the population would all be candidates for a multi-causal explanation of increasing consumption.

Moreover, different types of venue attract different social groups. For instance, French government anxiety about the demise of its culinary traditions is partly generated by the knowledge that young people are increasingly frequenting the fast food outlets of international and national corporate chains (Fantasia, 1995). Other types of establishment also have a clientele concentrated by age group. Previous research has suggested that modes of eating out have become a principal form of class distinction and that the restaurant is a site of strong patriarchal relations (see respectively, Warde and Tomlinson, 1995; Wood, 1990). Moreover, given the way in which domestic food tasks have traditionally been distributed, the benefits and pleasures derived from eating away from home might be expected to accrue more to women than men. Neither would it be surprising if there were some regional differences, nor if the size of a town or city affected the food consumption of their inhabitants.

Regarding all these issues, it seems necessary for social scientific pur-
poses to be more precise about the patterns of eating out than has previ-
ously been required by market research or official statistics. This is partly
necessary because of the proliferation of claims that social boundaries
based upon socio-demographic characteristics are collapsing as social
groups become less homogeneous.

Many argue that such divisions are diminishing – though few would
claim that they have disappeared. Mennell (1985) argues strongly that
social contrasts in food consumption have diminished during the later
twentieth century. Contrasts between classes especially, but also between
regions, seasons and so forth are, Mennell contends, less prominent. In
parallel, market research is abandoning, or at least downgrading, the use
of socio-demographic information as a way of identifying and targeting
consumer markets, convinced that it is increasingly less effective for the
purpose. Such trends challenge traditional sociological orthodoxy which
has insisted upon the centrality of class differences in structuring con-
sumption opportunities. The most prominent contemporary expression
of such a view is that of Pierre Bourdieu (1984) who argues that styles of
life are a primary means of social classification because they express dis-
tinctions between classes.

Some arguments about the decline of class see other divisions as
becoming more important; for instance Shulze (1992) discerns growing
generational differences in consumption. Others, however, foresee merely
increasing fragmentation, the disappearance of group identification
through consumption. One influential version of this diagnosis predicts
greater individualisation. Individualisation may be detected when people
cease to behave like other people in a similar social position and with
whom they share roots and trajectories. Collective norms are less
binding, the claims of other people less obligatory. It refers to a process of
social uprooting, suggesting processes either of detachment from the
group or of much greater internal differentiation within groups. The
social origins of individualisation are usually attributed to institutional
developments which make trajectories through life less predictable and
hence any one's experience is less similar to those of peers. Beck (1992),
for example, sees greater insecurity of employment, the erosion of class
alignments, renegotiated relationships between men and women and the
instability of marriage as developments requiring individuals to take
greater personal responsibility for their own futures and well-being. As it
is sometimes put, individuals are now obliged to choose for themselves
because the comforting guidance and guaranteed support of other people
in their social network is no longer available. Consumption, it is argued, is
precisely one of the fields in which decisions are taken to differentiate and

distinguish one individual from another. Peer groups and social networks afford neither collective criteria of good taste nor confirmation of appropriate behaviour. With fewer collective constraints conduct becomes less likely to reproduce the sense of belonging or group cohesion.

Individualisation may manifest itself in many aspects of food consumption. It might be demonstrated by a decline of the *family* meal, the reduced likelihood of eating with other family members. Members of the same household might adhere to different diets and have more diverse tastes than before. Individualisation might take the form of refusing highly-valued key items of the groups to which one belongs – for instance men refusing red meat or adolescents refusing to drink Coca Cola and eat fast food. Perhaps its most extreme expression would be the growth of a tendency to prefer to eat alone. Eating out could encourage more resolute individualised conduct by increasing the potential options as regards food items. It might also increase the range of potential companions. But it does not necessarily do either. Nor does it entail the relaxation of ritual practices surrounding food consumption.

The impression that individualisation is a major contemporary trend is much enhanced through the rhetoric of consumer choice. Sovereign consumers are precisely people who can please themselves, choosing what they personally desire without reference to anyone else. Prima facie this is more easily attained when eating out commercially than in any other situation. Only commercial venues generally offer a menu with alternatives from which one can pick a few minutes before eating. It is therefore interesting to explore the extent to which eating out is seen as, or is practised as personal choice, to examine the extent to which individual choice is actually constrained (see Martens and Warde, 1998) and to estimate the effects of group membership on taste.

Cultural complexity

Culturally, eating is a highly complex activity. The 55 million people in the UK probably each eat about five times per day. There must therefore be approaching 300 million food events per day of which approximately one in ten is away from home (see Table 2.4, below p.33). Viewed in this context, the field might be characterised by widely shared understandings and regularised behaviour. We have few names for meal events and there are comparatively few ways of being fed. Eating is not a field much characterised by eccentricity. On the other hand, eating must fit in with people's daily schedules, material resources, social support, views of food acceptability and so forth. Consequently the practice of eating is inevitably differentiated. This raises difficulties in classifying behaviour, of

recognising those features of practices which are socially or symbolically significant, of determining which aspects of difference are worthy of note.

Mennell (1985) claimed that diminishing social differences were symbiotically related to 'increased variety' in the field of food. The immediate contemporary plausibility of a claim to increased variety is attested by inspection of the shelves of supermarkets or consideration of the range of restaurants advertising themselves as specialists in the diverse cuisines of the world. Variety is a primary talisman in the legitimation and celebration of consumer societies. Variety is commonly associated with choice, freedom, personal control and discretion. Yet quite what use individual consumers make of available varied options delivered by the market is less clear. Does everyone pick-and-mix in a random way or are there preferred combinations which convey social messages? Do some people try to experience everything, while others stick to a limited range of items that they know and like? Are some items or tastes considered superior to others or are all sets of preferences of equal worth? Is there any social meaning or status attached to making use of, or knowing about, a broad range of cultural items, or is specialised concentration just as acceptable? Moreover, is the impression of variety an illusion, a way of obscuring standardisation? These are questions which arise from many studies of consumer culture and which will only be satisfactorily answered in the light of case studies of how different goods and services are used and evaluated in everyday life.

The dominant answer to these question in the last decade has been to offer a picture of fragmentation and specialisation, as the boundaries between high and popular cultures dissolve. As a consequence, cultural rules, especially those which implicitly judge aesthetic quality or the appropriateness of particular forms of consumer behaviour, may become less certain. In this respect, the process of informalisation deserves attention. Informalisation refers to a process in which social and cultural rules become less clear and their non-observance less consequential. Though often conflated with individualisation, informalisation does not necessarily refer to the atrophying of social bonds or individuals breaking away from groups and evading group sanctions, for informality can be collective (see Warde, 1997: 186–9). Informalisation implies greater flexibility and discretion, a situation for which casual observation provides evidence. Not only do rules about what to eat appear to be being relaxed, but so are those regarding how to eat. Styles of service, styles of dress, table manners, and various other elements of the interaction situation become less rigid, less bound by rules. Remaining rules are less enforceable. This informalisation of manners and of the regime of service when eating out may mean less embarrassment, greater likelihood of alternative styles of

behaviour and perhaps the disppearance of anything that might be considered a hegemonic rule system.

For many, however, a world without rules is dystopian. For instance, Fischler (1980) forecast the steady advance of gastro-anomie, a regrettable condition of widespread anxiety about food choice induced by the absence of authoritative rules of conduct. Indeed, many people seek rules to guide their eating behaviour, as is witnessed by the fascinating government-commissioned report of Symons (1993) on the prospects for, and potential principles underlying, a distinctive Australian cuisine. The problem of meaninglessness might be solved by the construction of new gastronomic principles, or the recovery, reaffirmation or reinvention of older rules which define cuisine. Lack of meaning was probably less of a problem in the past; with less variety and less disposable income diet was often the effect of routinisation of behaviour embedded in a localised 'habitus' – necessity was the mother of convention!

However, the true situation may be less the absence of any regulation, more one which encourages wider interpretation and improvisation upon an older set of shared understandings and rules. Most eating events are characterised by very orderly behaviour, suggesting less anomie and more a shift to a different form of control or discipline which perhaps cannot be prescribed in the manner of a manual of etiquette but which nevertheless imposes social restraint. Notions like courses, their order, the habit of eating the whole meal in the same place and strong rules regarding disapproved behaviour persist.

Necessity and luxury

Modern capitalist societies have constantly re-defined the boundary between necessities and luxuries. Social and cultural developments have entailed that items once the property of the few and merely the dream of the remainder become commonplace. Economic growth generates higher levels of consumption, higher thresholds of comfort and greater expectations of future satisfaction. So while people still operate with a notion of necessities to which all should have access, that which is necessary is regularly re-defined to include more goods and services. Necessities are also relative to any agent's circumstances: living in a rural area is difficult without private means of transport; making provision for childcare problematic for dual-earner households. Casual conversation provides many reasons for imagining that the imperatives of everyday life modify food habits. Eating away from home and buying 'convenience foods' and so forth are ways of aligning the requirements of regular nourishment and the constraints of daily trajectories through time and space which disperse

household members. It is thus worth reflecting to what extent eating out may be accounted for by the circumstantial pressures of other social activities and conditions (like limitations of time or money) as opposed to a desire to engage for its own sake.

The distinction between need and luxury does not coincide perfectly with that between satisfaction and pleasure. Food is a necessity, and people talk of eating until they are satisfied, but it may also be a source of great enjoyment. The circumstances in which people eat – their surroundings, their companions and their schedules – also serve to create distinctive experiences. Context is all-important, perhaps especially when eating out. Hence there is much value to analysing more exactly the experience associated with the different versions of the practice in order to understand better the gratifications in a field which, prima facie, affords opportunities for a form of consumption simultaneously both necessary and pleasurable.

The organisation of the book

The rest of the volume attempts to account for eating out as a practice. We are unable to tell with any precision how the practice has changed, but can describe in considerable detail its current condition in urban England. The book is divided into four separate parts, as dictated by our service provisioning approach to consumption, with two chapters each on provision, access, delivery and enjoyment. Within each part we report materials, usually together, from both interviews and survey. In chapter 2 we sketch the development of three differentiated systems for producing meals out – the commercial sector, institutional catering and the communal mode. Chapter 3 is concerned with shared understandings of that provision and attitudes to the practice. Chapter 4 analyses the unequal social access to eating out opportunities and chapter 5 explores the ways in which domestic arrangements affect, and are affected by, the spread of eating out. Chapter 6 examines face-to-face relationships, between staff and customers and within groups of companions, identifying the structures of service delivery. Chapter 7 describes the myriad variations in what is eaten, where and when, giving access to the nature of contemporary tastes and the social performances involved. Chapter 8 documents the levels of satisfaction expressed by people dining out and chapter 9 attempts to explain this in terms of the several types of gratification which the experience affords.