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BUSINESS AND THE SEMIOTICS OF FOOD:
AMERICAN AND FRENCH CULTURAL
PERSPECTIVES

In North American and European societies, business negotiations are conducted over lunch and cocktails. People chat over coffee at nearby cafés. Occasionally, invitations extend to dinners and special events such as weddings, christenings, funerals, retirement parties, or national holidays. These social gatherings around food offer opportunities for interaction. Also, inevitably, misunderstandings and awkwardness arise. Imagine a French person recently arrived in the United States who is invited to a potluck party by an American colleague. The French person does not really know what to expect and, following his/her code of etiquette, arrives with a bouquet of flowers or a box of chocolates. The door opens, and s/he is at once unexpectedly thrown into a lively crowd of people carrying drinks and food on paper plates. Lost, s/he is left to find his/her way around in a desperate search for the host and a convenient place to hide the chocolates and the flowers! The reverse situation can also occur. An American on business in France is invited to a lunch in a private home only to find that it lasts the whole afternoon and runs into dinner. In the process, the American also realizes that s/he was the only one to hold the fork with the right hand. What if s/he had been confronted with snails, *rogmons* [kidney], or horse meat (but the French would obviously not do this to a foreigner)! There is something destabilizing and inherently troubling for adults to find out that they have no past experience of something. Self-confidence is lost when perceived *good* manners are turned topsy turvy and the conduct that parents have painfully inculcated is seen as bad manners elsewhere.

What matters after all is less what we share as a meal (the actual food items), than the perception we get while being involved in the activity of the meal. The fact that we have invited someone, or have been invited, to

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share a meal is important. It is no coincidence that the sharing of bread, *co/pain - com/pagnon*, combines the word “pain” with the meaning of “friend.”

The *New York Times* magazine had a special issue entitled “How we eat: An America Divided. Commenting on American eating habits, past and present, this issue made a noteworthy remark on the McDonald’s phenomenon, whose “brand image” cultivates a relaxed family atmosphere, and where the food is just like “home” (45–47). While the article focused on the American “home cooking” nostalgia, an article entitled “Approaching the Artichoke” by Noelle Oxenhandler, illustrated a case of French culinary tradition and hinted at a strategy of approach to food which is also culturally charged. The anecdote of the artichokes served to German soldiers during World War II stands as a symbol of polite revenge on an enemy by means of the “table.” It represented a “pièce de résistance in the truest sense of the term” as the Germans, with nobody to imitate, choked as they struggled to eat the artichokes, bristles and all. Such severe pitfalls due to a lack of knowledge of a cultural “code” are fortunately rare, but subtle awkwardness linked to cultural ignorance is frequent, particularly in the social context related to food.

Food habits (coined *food ways* by anthropologists such as Kemp) are part of a cultural heritage. Attitudes concerning food give an understanding of cultural traits, social institutions, national histories, and individual behavior (Farb and Armelagos 4). This confers some truth to the well-known aphorisms of Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, the famous nineteenth-century gastronome who wrote: “Tell me what you eat, I’ll tell you who you are” (Aphorism IV) or more to our point: “The fate of nations depends on the way they eat” (Aphorism III) (13–14).

In *The Rituals of Dinner*, Margaret Visser shows how food and feast have a long history that parallels that of mankind. Indeed, elaborate rituals of reciprocity and exchange of gifts accompany the concept of hospitality in all early societies. The cultural model of the Biblical Last Supper, a shared, latent cannibalistic sacred meal (Girard) pervades the Christian world. In the medieval literature of western Europe, the Round Table of King Arthur became the symbol of social order. Commensalism between the king and his knights reflected the feudal ideology in twelfth-century France and represented the ethical and social bonding of the chivalric order. A recent French study (*L’Histoire de l’Alimentation*) by historians Jean-Louis Flandrin and Massimo Montari showed how the

evolution of food habits is a complex mix of unstable economic systems and changing mindsets. Meals, they say, depended upon the agricultural resources of the times, but also indicated a certain lifestyle or manner in which people enjoyed “being together.” The meal is a ritual of “fusion,” and a social institution. According to the book, throughout history, the pleasure of the palate was secondary to that of coming together at the table.

Thus, the taking and sharing of food (how, where, with whom) functions as a catalyst for interpersonal relations, which it also reflects as a sign and symbol of those relations. Food is a form of language for social communication (Levi-Strauss), and attitudes relative to food are signs (structural signifiers in the Saussurian sense of the word) encoded with messages about the nature and structure of social relations.

Signs reflect the way of thinking of a culture, its mindset and world vision. They reveal subtle things, such as levels of hierarchy and formality, degrees of inclusion or exclusion, openness or closure, and directness or indirectness. In Ancient Greece and Rome, guests would lie on couches and eat with their hands. The invention of the fork and the habit of sitting up straight at a table not only indicated a change of perspective towards food in the late Middle Ages but also distance between people. The fork was, at the beginning of the Renaissance, a cultural reflex of distancing from food destined to others (perhaps a reflex of protection against contagion from the plague in the fourteenth century). This also paralleled the growing social movement towards individuation and isolation.

Like the Proustian “madeleine,” food imagery can express many things that are difficult, or at times inappropriate, to articulate verbally. Love and sex for instance are often referred to euphemistically through the use of a language appropriate to food in many cultures (Douglas 61; Pouillon; Biasin; Levi-Strauss, on incest and cannibalism). For example, the expression “consummation of marriage” is encountered both in French and English. The semiotic function of food is particularly effective in films. Food and love are symbiotically presented in *Like Water for Chocolate*, *Babette’s Feast*, and *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* in an effort to signify non-verbal, socio-cultural discourse. In *La Grande Bouffe*; *Delicatessen*; *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*; and *The Belly of an Architect*, sex and food intensify a sense of decay and perversion.

Derrida made the point that there is “no culture or cultural identity without the difference with itself” (90), meaning that culture creates difference. Todorov, who subtitled his book on America *The Discovery of the Other*, suggests that a culture has to be seen and discovered through the “other’s” eyes, or more precisely, through the senses. There are some pertinent essays (such as Biasin’s) on this concept and indeed many tourist and culinary guides blend the discovery of a country or region with that of their food products and specialties (Woys Weaver, Floyd). Since each culture is unique, we need to compare one with the other, which often begins with stereotypes (Pineau and Kelly, and Platt are good reference sources).

One can also define a culture by looking at its *food ways*. As stated above, *food ways* are signs of a mindset. Edward T. Hall’s framework¹ led to the following extrapolations for Americans and French regarding attitudes to food and social dining in general. The American culture tends to prefer informality, little fuss over food, and no unnecessary decorum. One finds an openness with people, since the point is to have fun and eat together at home, and to do business together whether at home or at a restaurant. Skills in etiquette, though indicators of social distinction, do not seem to matter as much as the ability to display wealth while entertaining. Also, Americans tend to like guidelines and predictability. In business they have a strict dress code in comparison with the French. As far as dinner/lunch is concerned, they also tend to enjoy a structure that will give them guaranteed satisfaction in food, such as their club or certain fast food chains where the food is plentiful, fresh, and has high quality and good value.

The French place less importance on dress codes in business and greater importance on codes of *bienséances* and civility in the realm of social life. This is a long-standing obsession among the French, as seen in Molière’s plays or the recent film *Ridicule*, set in the court of Versailles in 1783. There is always a sense of ritual among the French, with formal meal structures and a strong sense of class-consciousness (Bourdieu) as well as taboos on certain topics of conversation (until one becomes better acquainted). For example, religious affiliations and

¹Hall analyzed the cultural uses of time and space. He characterized the American and French cultures as being respectively “low context, monochronic and high context polychronic” (13–17). American and Germanic people in general are time conscious, goal oriented, verbal, and explicit. The French and Latin people and virtually the majority of the world tend to communicate indirectly, non-verbally, and with implicit codes. For “polychrones,” people-issues are more important than schedules.

money are considered too private to be openly discussed, whereas sex is not. Money is discussed indirectly, as can be seen in a remark made by one of the employees of the BULL-HDR company interviewed in a video entitled *Cultural Diversity at the Heart of Bull*:

In business, the difference between the French and the Americans is that the Americans will talk about their company returns and hide their personal affairs, whereas the French will hide their balance sheet and talk about their affairs.

French social life involves selection, invitation, and a concern for establishing trust and reciprocity. The table, where socialization takes place, is the focal point of the get-together and the locus for exchange of information amidst food and conversation. A procession of dishes, ending with cheese and wine, coffee, dessert, and liqueurs punctuate the conversation. The French enjoy nothing better than to sit around a table with friends and chat, often about the food before them. Food is the pretext for conversation, which occasions more food. It all works towards building confidence, though conversation might make some Americans ill at ease. The attention lavished upon the guest by the host/hostess is also a mark of respect that not only accentuates the roles of guest and host but in a paradoxical way keeps both at a distance. The French create and nurture a feeling of elitism and detachment from mundane preoccupations that they apply to their business practices also. For example, one motto states: "don't talk business before the cheese." Known for their coldness at first, the French do not smile a lot (without a reason, according to Platt). They are distant, unless introduced formally. They restrict access to the salon and dining room, yet once relationships are made they are long-term. Once the trust has been established, the apparently cold and distant French will turn out to be open and warmhearted in a strange, yet genuine way.

The American's immediate familiarity will never cease to puzzle the French, who can be confused by the friendly signals s/he receives upon initial contact, when told to "feel" at home and "help yourself to the fridge." Assuming all the stages of making an acquaintance have been established at once (which the myth of the American smile seems to project), the French, relying on their own cultural codes, are led to assume an equal amount of trust and confidence has been established between people. Nothing is further from the truth and the open American

smile hides a distance that remains to be bridged. This can lead to disappointments and frustrated expectations. It is not surprising that the French consider Americans friendly but superficial.

Stages of intimacy for Americans merely consist of different phases. They may cook dinner but are more likely to invite their guest to a nice restaurant, to their club or, more informally, to a fast food chain in order to give a guest the widest freedom of choice possible. Or they might have a buffet at home and invite other friends. They will extend their welcome in a different way from the French. The American invitation is relaxed. Americans do not spend a whole evening sitting, nibbling, and smoking around a dinner table. Once the food is eaten, the company tends to move on. The connection to food seems to be only one aspect of American social interaction, necessary yet not absolutely central. In other words, the sacred values connected with food are different. The focus is on sharing space as a way to establish and test future compatibility in a relaxed and fun environment.

Business lunches and dinners in general take place in restaurants. While dining out, the responsibility and care involved in cooking for a guest is taken away and placed in anonymous hands. In return all can enjoy a guaranteed product. Sociologically, both host and guest shift into the role of guest. The *rapport de force* lies then with the ability to pay and treat guests with minimal involvement, a detached distance, and a “no fuss no mess” kind of attitude, while one concentrates on enjoying the meal or conducting business. Restaurants are considered by the French to be privileged places for observing and perhaps “seducing” the potential partner with expensive wines and gastronomic delicacies. Home invitations may follow, as a sign of trust in the partnership.

The advent of the restaurant has been interpreted as a democratizing phenomenon, associated in Europe with the rise of bourgeois culture and access to privileges and luxuries formerly reserved for higher social classes of the Ancien Regime (Finkelstein 13–14). This democratic nature of the restaurant as a place open to all is at the heart of the popular American habit of “dining out.” Still, in France, people only tend to go to restaurants for special occasions, in particular when the family is concerned. Choosing to eat out when one could eat at home is thus unusual in France and in Europe in general. Therefore some American customs such as “taking the children for Sunday brunch” strike a European as odd.

These examples show that the American perception of sociality is different. Figuratively, Americans prefer to open out to the group and to a variety of social encounters rather than focus on a few individuals. In other words they tend to explore social space. In contrast, the French approach focuses inwards, bringing a few people together for dinner and conversation. It is an *open* versus *closed* perspective that parallels the cultural history of both peoples.

In the United States, the newcomer is welcomed into an American dinner party with great enthusiasm. The potluck is the equivalent in food symbolism of the great social melting pot, the American egalitarian effort. Hierarchy is deemphasized by familiarity, and responsibility is delegated. The United States has developed a gregarious, social informality that looks to the possibilities that lie outside, as the ever-advancing western frontier fostered a network of social interaction (“amoebic” i.e. shape-changing and highly mobile). In contrast, history holds the French down, keeps them in place, ties them to roots and regions, to family homes and traditions, to people and places, to century-old cultural practices of which rigid codes of food and eating habits are a reflection. In other words, *les bienséances* [rules of decorum] betray a closed code, itself the mirror of a mindset.

The French carry the burden of their fame. The historical roots of cuisine and etiquette are closely connected with French culture (Peterson, ch. 10; Goody; Jeanneret). “Taste” has been described at length by Brillat-Savarin. Visual and tactile at the same time, the experience of taste goes beyond that of the taste buds, since it is applied to preferences in clothes, literature, colors, entertainment, or people. Taste is the epitome of value judgments. As Bourdieu explains, food is part of the general analysis of dominance and subordination of aesthetic judgment within the French class system itself. Where the French have codified, rigid, strict, and therefore closed criteria for taste, Americans appear freer. Their sense of taste is unfettered, and they are therefore better able to appreciate novelty and change. Free from the weight of past traditions and conventions, the creativity of the new-style American cuisine is unrivaled. American taste can be called “open” despite the presence of a clear love-hate relationship to food. As Michelle Stacey puts it, a “thread of guilty pleasure is woven into the fabric of American history and stems from a puritan past” (22).

Contemporary American society is struggling with the enjoyment of food, and is now shifting its preoccupations to health, to an obsession with fats, sugar, caffeine, and vitamins. This concern strips food of its most basic function, the giving of pleasure (illustrated in Alan Parker's comedy *The Road to Wellville* and in Carol Marashi's book *Sensual Eating*). There is a paradox in American society. Capitalism, access to wealth, and the rise of the Protestant work ethic went hand in hand. Yet American attitudes concerning the use of wealth associate *eating* with sin and guilt (*New York Times Magazine* 38). This indeed was influenced and encouraged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by concerned health experts and religious fanatics such as John Harvey Kellogg (the cereal tycoon) and Wilbur Olin Atwater (the calorie guru) who exhorted Americans on the evils of their diets. (Stacey 12, 28; see also the film *The Road to Wellville*) Consumerism and materialism are the direct consequences of access to wealth. Restaurants, dining out, and excess food followed.

Baudrillard and others have written on consumerism as a motif of modernity. It is positive by virtue of its democratizing effect, but negative in that it encourages superficiality and measures human social life, ethics, and social location in terms of material values (Finkelstein 122). While American and French *food ways* are the product of different historical circumstances and reflect different mindsets, it is also clear that consumerism has affected both cultures and shaped their food habits. In France, McDonald's restaurants are appealing as a sign of modernity, and their marketing strategy is to take the burden away from the kitchen and recreate a "family" atmosphere, a home outside the home. McDonald's is offering everyone a break, a vacation. At the same time, those devoted to traditional French eating habits abhor this invasion.

Whereas many recent publications focus on whether or not the French will start eating out more frequently, American-style, we can see that the issue is rather whether and how such a development would affect broader cultural practices. As was stated earlier, what matters is less *what* we eat or even *where* we eat, than the human values invested in the activity. The "code" and signifying non-verbal behavior over food can be observed and analyzed in how these values are perceived and shared by all parties involved. The French and American cultural dynamics surrounding food and entertaining have traditionally obeyed a structural opposition between closed versus open, translating a state of mind that applies to the

way both cultures treat the “other”: newcomer, potential business partner, or potential friend. Will new trends in agribusiness, in meal preparation, and delivery, in gender and family roles, and in new kinds of restaurants in France foster changes in the contrastive definition of the two societies? Only time will tell.

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