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*The social significance of dining out: A study of continuity and change*


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What is the significance of learning about social eating practices and in what ways can this shape our thinking? “The quality of eating at the same table” is known as commensality but this also implies community. Documenting the social aspect of dining has become popular particularly in the form of blog posts but empirical work on the socialisation of dining has largely been neglected (Murcott, 2018). Although, a select few monographs have engaged with such topics, the authors of this book offer an insightful comparative account of ‘dining out’ across three English cities; London, Bristol and Preston. The book is organised into five seamless parts and will be of interest to both scholars and those interested in culinary practices of consumption. Eating out has become a popular recreation and holds considerable cultural and symbolic significance.

Part one (introduction) of the book introduces the subject of dining out and method by highlighting the variety of contexts through which food is consumed which include commercial provision such as street food, the burger bar, cafes and restaurants which are said to express personal and individual taste. Although, it is also noted how many other provisions exist such as the institutional sector of the catering trade meals in hospitals, schools, prisons and factories. What is most refreshing about the opening chapter is the debate on the suspicions around dining out and how the masses view these as positive when engaged in such activities. However, the reservations begin to demystify moral obligations whereby by dining out we are replacing the intimacy of eating at home with family so then engagement with domestic food preparation and meals is replaced. These are merely some of the reasons for why the activity of dining out arouses sociological inquiry. The book is unique as it forms of the basis of a sociological re-study (‘focused revisit’) as the first one took place in 1995. The first study was based on a qualitative household interviews and a survey in three English cities, with the main focus on main meals consumed on commercial premises or as a guest of friends or non-resident kin. Twenty years on, the study was repeated using the same research instruments, asking the same questions in the same cities.

Part two (familiarisation) of the book begins to outline how individuals have become familiar with the practices of dining out since 1995. Only slight changes occurred over the twenty year period with the most notable change being the decline in satisfaction with some features of the dining experience, which is not a surprise yet interesting given the move to more tailored restaurants. The perspective of participants are discussed in detail through which they are able to engage in discussions on personal reasons for eating out. Most connect with enjoyment from a variety of aspects which include but are not limited to food quality and companionship. We also learn how eating out has become more commonplace and this activity has increased since 1995. Part three (informalisation) accounts for three different modes of delivery: the domestic, the communal and the commercial. Such observed understandings are then discussed comparatively in the final chapter of this section (organising eating). Part four (diversification) demonstrates a more comprehensive and elaborate understanding of the effects of class on dining out and social divisions are presented. Sociological measures of social position are said to generate such inequalities and include class, age,
gender, ethnicity, place of residence, education, household structure and income, all of which contribute towards variations of dining out.

Part five (continuity and change) begins to draw conclusions by reflecting on the mixed methods data including interviews and surveys to discuss dining out between 1995 and 2015, which also giving consideration to potential directions of longer-term change. So how did social practices evolve during the twenty year period across the three cities? The practice of dining out exhibits strong social continuities. Although, key structural features and understandings are little changed since 1995. Twenty years is a short period for studying cultural change and for this reason and eating habits are said to resist rapid and radical change. Based on observations and findings from this mixed methods re-study, the authors find no strong evidence to suggest any significant changes to dining out during the twenty year period in the sense it such social foundations are stable. Whilst we know eating patterns and the social practices which surrounding consumption have evolved and adapted to modern day living, understandings of commensality and conviviality, manners and purposes are firmly rooted in society. Essentially, the power of sociability is said to apply a social brake to commercial innovation.

References