



Personal Dietary Requirements :

Novel pathologies, self-diagnoses, elective taboos and health regimens.

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OCHA Symposium chaired by Claude Fischler

Rules for sharing food and the partaking of meals with others (commensality) are nearly universal and exist in each human group. Whether people eat together or in groups, with or without women, with or without children, by rank or in an egalitarian manner, in silence or in conversation, individual behaviours are framed in varying degrees by an implicit or explicit code of customary practices. Children are taught “table manners” and with them and through them they are taught the most fundamental rules of how to interact with others and with their close relations, as well as the rules of sharing, responsibility and solidarity. Indeed, eating together is said to bring people closer together: since eating the same thing is to produce the same flesh and blood, it is symbolically building or rebuilding a community of fate.

This system, however, seems to be called into question by the development of new preoccupations characterized by a rising individualization of dietary choices in the Western world and in certain emerging countries. A large and apparently growing part of the population in these countries are adopting and asserting “personal dietary requirements.” Some must watch their diets because of serious pathologies (food allergies, gluten intolerance) the growing frequency of which has yet to be adequately explained. Others are bothered by various intolerances, often self-diagnosed, or have adopted a specific health regimen (blood type, “living foods,” macrobiotic, instinctivorism or raw foodism, etc.) Still others follow diets that are political, ethical or spiritual commitments (vegetarianism, veganism, etc.) or tied to religious beliefs. And still others choose various selective and restrictive diets, imposing personalized elective taboos on themselves or on their friends and relatives with more or less insistence.

The frequency of these occurrences and the way in which these dietary particularisms are greeted vary greatly from one country to another, particularly in the West. Due to the importance given to meals and sharing in France, it is still rather hard to imagine a situation such as that observed at a reception held in New York. The two organizers did not eat red meat. Discarding the easy solution of serving chicken, they chose a pasta appetizer and a salmon entrée for the menu. Out of the 58 guests, one had severe nut and fish allergies, another had a severe seafood allergy, three did not eat fish, one was a vegetarian, one was a vegan, two were diabetic and two ate kosher. The invitation RSVP card asked the guests to specify any “personal dietary requirements.” And it was up to the caterer to do the rest.

Where do all of these differences come from and how can they, as well as the rise of individual demands, be explained? These are the questions that this symposium will address by analyzing the nature, causes and effects of these “personal dietary requirements” from a biomedical as well as a social standpoint and in relation to the forms of individualism and sociability that they express.