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Portfolio

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Name
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Datum

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Assignment for Session 2 on October 27, 2011

Food and Eating Habits in the Context of Cultural Studies

Margaret Mead, "The Problem of Changing Food Habits" 3

Academic statement 4

Works cited 5

Assignment for Session 6 on November 17, 2011

American Foodways: Historical Aspects and Thematic Categories (2)

Ethnic Dimensions of American Foodways 6

Academic statement 9

Work cited 10

Assignment for Session 8 on December 1st, 2011

Readers Respond to The Omnivore's Dilemma:

An Examination of Selected Reviews 11

Academic statement 13

Works cited 15

Assignment for Session 2 on October 27, 2011
Food and Eating Habits in the Context of Cultural Studies
Margaret Mead, "The Problem of Changing Food Habits"

1. Read the essay by Margaret Mead, mark and annotate your copy of the text, and record important observations in your personal notebook.

- The text was written during the second World War (1943) => U.S. actively engaged and government realized food shortages / problems => they had to act / intervene
 - They had to change their food habits, due to the wartime
 - this time and the time after changed the supply of food (e.g. food shortages) => a perfect moment to start thinking about food habits and to change them
- Mead was part of the committee with a special task / research-project
 - She studies surveys and studies by experts on food (health and cultural component)
 - Historical and psychological approaches, animal experiments were studied => interdisciplinary approach
- Food habits = “culturally standardized set of behaviors”
 - “manifested by individuals [...] within a given cultural tradition”
 - Interrelated with other standardized behaviors and traditions in the same culture => due to this connection to different habits it is difficult to change food habits (patterns that developed slowly over time are difficult to change)
 - E.g. who shops what or where? Who pays for food?
 - Remain flexible => influence and change food habit with the help of the media
- Question of social status
 - Food defines what social status you have, e.g. how much money do you want to spend on what? (attitudes towards brand names); educational aspect: how much do you know about food? Interest?
- Appearance of the food vs. taste
 - Preference for refined, purified, highly processed food, which puts a distance between the food and the people

- 2. Write a short academic statement (no more than 300 words) in which you summarize the most important points that Mead makes about the connections between food habits and cultural factors.**

Academic statement

Margaret Mead was an American anthropologist, who “was a dominant influence in introducing the concept of culture into education, medicine, and public policy” [1]. In her text *The Problem of Changing Food Habits*, she comments on how problematic it is to change already existing food habits in a specific culture or subculture.

Mead defines food habits as “culturally standardized set of behaviors in regard to food manifested by individuals who have been reared within a given cultural tradition” [2:18]. In other words, food habits refer to how and why people eat and are “interrelated with other standardized behaviors in the same culture” [2:18]. Therefore, one has to be very specific while discussing eating habits, i.e. “we do not think of an abstract human being eating an abstract food, but of particular human beings, members of an identifiable subculture of the United States, eating particular foods with definite qualities.” [2:22].

As a result of many different studies and experiments by various scientists, Mead states that “it is possible to identify [...] characteristics of the American food pattern” [2:19], such as “an importance to white bread, much sugar, meat every day” [2:20]. Those traditional dietary patterns can be very confusing for a person who does not understand the rules of the culture, i.e. members with different cultural background have different conceptions about the “number and form of meals” [2:21] (e.g. skipping breakfast or having it twice in the morning).

Nevertheless, Mead is convinced that there are ways to influence a person’s dietary pattern. The public may be influenced by literature, media, family members or neighbors. However, she also explains that people do not want to be told what is good or bad for them – they rather want to be convinced through reliable channels of communication (which can be very different).

Works cited

- [1] "Margaret Mead." *Encyclopedia of World Biography*. 2004. Encyclopedia.com. 26 Oct. 2011 <<http://www.encyclopedia.com>>.
- [2] Mead, Margaret. "The Problem of Changing Food Habits." *Food and Culture – A Reader*. Ed. Carole Counihan and Penny van Esterik. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2008. 17-27. Print.

Assignment for Session 6 on November 17, 2011

American Foodways: Historical Aspects and Thematic Categories (2)

Ethnic Dimensions of American Foodways

1. **If your last name begins with a letter from the first half of the alphabet (A-K), please read the article by Alan Kraut attentively, annotate it, highlight important information and ideas, and record important observations in your personal notebook.**
 - Food is frequently associated with a particular ethnic group (Jewish, Italian, ...)
 - “Ethno-religious stereotypes are quite common in American popular culture because of the pluralistic quality of the American population” (409)
 - “many ethnic stereotypes concern food and food habits” (409)
 - Food “of immigrant life after arrival in the United States” (410)
 - Food “appears to have been of crucial importance in the cultural lives of newcomers” (410) => “struggle with poverty and deprivation for physical survival” (410)
 - Assimilation into the mainstream of American culture (white Anglo-Protestant) (410) vs. “abandoning ethnic values, customs and traditions” (410)
 - Want to hang on to their cultural heritage – **cultural importance**
 - “food and rituals involving food have been particularly powerful identificatory symbols for ethnic groups” (410) – **to indicate social boundaries and define cultural boundaries between ethnic groups**
 - Second and third generation descendants => “continued to be linked with their past through food preferences, customs and taboos” (417)
 - 3 categories (410)
 - 1) “socioeconomic determinants of immigrant food practices”
 - 2) “national origins as a factor in determining immigrant food preferences and practices”
 - 3) religious or ritualistic functions for certain immigrant groups”

- Waves of immigration: 1820 – 1921
 - People were fleeing from poverty and starvation (411) – immigrants were physically in bad shape (“undernourished and generally unhealthy appearance”, 411)
 - Americans thought that their species was endangered by the immigrants – Boas disagreed: “American environment would soon alter, for the better” (412)
 - 1921 – Congress’s establishment of the “principle of restriction based on nationality” (411) => 1924 – permanent program of restriction: *Johnson-Reed-Immigration Act*
- 1840-1860 (4,3 million), 1880-1921 (23,4 million)
 - Northern Europeans: Irish, Germans, Italians, Slavs, Poles, Jews, Greeks, Asians
 - They “brought with them many ritual foodways unfamiliar to the Anglo-Saxon Protestant majority” (415)
- Result: great variety of diets (412)
 - Immigrants leaving the port cities => became farmers (corn, cabbage...)
 - Urban areas:
 - Immigrants were suffering from hunger and malnutrition (low wages!)
 - “Social workers sought to ‘Americanize’ the immigrants and improve their health by educating them” (413) => e.g. also in public school (414) – hot lunch programs
 - The kitchen became the most important place (cook, eat, talk and work) => “provided an opportunity for sociability, a place to maintain identity” (413)
 - “Time, education, and improved economic circumstances eventually eliminated the differences between the foodways of immigrants and the foodways of native Americans” (413)
 - “The diet of the immigrant family in America was a variation of what they had eaten in their native country, subject to availability and economic circumstances” (414)
- Strategies to maintain their cultural food habits => maintain ethnic identity
 - Recipes and method of preparation reflected cultural differences (412)
 - “cultural importance of food, mealtimes and mealtime mores” (413-14)

- Immigrants patronized shops and restaurants that catered to their tastes (414)
 - often even own by one member of a specific ethnic group
 - Reasons: familiar foodstuff, spoke their language, knew their needs and customs, served as friends/advisor
 - For these entrepreneurs it was “a unique opportunity for social upward mobility” (417)
 - “Foodways were recognized by politicians as markers of ethnic boundaries that demanded respect” (418), e.g. “habits and traditions of all groups”
- Ethnic identity is expressed through food habits => they belong to a culture
 - After a certain time they may change
 - Immigrants: later generations without original contact to the culture hold on to those habits => symbolic ethnicity and dimension of food habits
 - Immigrants created food in the U.S. that doesn't exist like that in their country of origin (it is also adapted to the American taste => traditional food becomes mass-food)

2. Write a short academic statement (ca. 300 words) in which you discuss the importance of food in the context of the fact that the United States is a country of immigrants. Please include quotations from the text to illustrate and support your statements and interpretations.

Academic statement

The text *Ethnic Foodways* by Alan M. Kraut¹ explains the significance of food and food habits for the different immigrants, who came to America from 1840 to 1921. He states that it is quite common in American popular culture that food is “frequently associated [...] with a particular ethnic group”, i.e. “many ethnic stereotypes concern food and food habits”, which is due to “the pluralistic quality of the American population” (409).

It is common knowledge that food is important to every human being, but for ethnic groups it “is of crucial importance in the cultural lives” (410), especially when settling in a new and unknown country with already established foodways. Ethnic foodways indicate not only social boundaries, but also define cultural boundaries between ethnic groups. However, due to the economic circumstances, not every item or ingredient what the newcomers had eaten in their native country was available during that time (cf. 414). That is why the diet of the immigrant family in America had eventually to assimilate some of the mainstream of American culture (which is the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture). Nevertheless, many of them were keen to preserve their cultural heritage or “ethnic values, customs and traditions” (410). For that reason, immigrants who remained to live in urban areas (in contrast to the self-sustaining farming newcomers living in rural areas) established strategies to maintain their cultural food habits. For example, they patronized shops and restaurants (often run by a member of their own ethnic group) that catered to their tastes, in order to feel at home. Additionally, Kraut illustrates methods how the American government tried to handle the immigrants’ hunger and malnourishment: first, they established a program that restricted the immigration (cf. 411); and second, they tried to promote the ‘Americanization’ by programs in public schools or by employing social workers who would teach them how to be an American (cf. 413-14).

In this respect, food and food habits (including all the social aspects concerning food) are very important to demonstrate the diverse cultural values, traditions and boundaries between the different (ethnic) groups. Ethnic identities are expressed through food habits, and especially for immigrants food habits have a symbolic dimension.

¹ He is Professor of History at American University in Washington, D.C., a specialist in U.S. immigration and ethnic history, and was the president of the Immigration and Ethnic History Society, the largest organization of immigration scholars in the country. (<http://academic2.american.edu/~akraut/biography.html>)

Work cited

Kraut, Alan M. "Ethnic Foodways: The Significance of Food in the Designation of Cultural Boundaries Between Immigrant Groups in the U.S., 1840-1921." *Journal of American Culture* (Fall 1979): 409-420. Print.

Assignment for Session 8 on December 1st, 2011

Readers Respond to The Omnivore's Dilemma:

An Examination of Selected Reviews

- 1. If your last name begins with a letter from the first half of the alphabet (A-K), please read review no. 2 (from the New York Times) plus two additional reviews of your own choice.**

Review no. 2 (in NY Times, by David Kamp, 2006)

- At the beginning: mocking remark about the humans being burdened with intelligence “and such inventions as agriculture and industry”, and overwhelmed with making right food choices (2-3)
- Contains information about Pollan:
 - “a professor of journalism of Berkley [...] a liberal foodie intellectual” (3)– i.e. this man can be trusted, he is a good researcher and supposedly offers reliable information
 - “you are not likely to get a better explanation of exactly where your food comes from” (3)
- Describes Pollan’s writing style
 - “thoughtful, engrossing new book” (3)
 - it stokes fears / fuels anxiety (3)
 - he “diagnoses a ‘national eating disorder’, and he aims to shed light on both its causes and some potential solutions.” (3)
 - “his super-meticulous reporting is the book’s strength” (3)
 - He has a “tendency to be too nice”– “he doesn’t write with [a] propulsive rage” (4)
- The structure of the book is briefly summarized, but it is criticized that the results are predictable

- Addresses issues of the book:
 - failing government policy – concerning corn: it “can become a number of things, from ethanol for the gas tanks to dozens of edible [...] products” (3)
 - therefore is of interest to produce it in large amounts (economical factor)
 - Joel Salatin a “‘alternative’ farmer in Virginia” (3) who has “found the secrets of sustainable agriculture” (4)
- Wishes for clear solutions to the dilemma (“be more prescriptive about how we might realistically address our national eating disorder”, 4)

Review no. 4 (Library Journal, written by I. Weintraub, 2006)

- Information about author, content of the book, some criticism
- The book is described as “the confusing maze of choices facing Americans trying to eat healthfully in a society that he calls ‘notably unhealthy’” (5)
- “a bit long and sometimes redundant” (5)
- “folksy narrative provides a wealth of information about agriculture, the natural world, and human desires” (5)
- Serves as a recommendation

Review no. 5 (Plenty, written by W. Yang, 2006)

- “masterful new book“
- “traces four individual meals back to their sources in different systems of production“
- Pollan is clearly taking side – i.e. pastoral is better than industrial agriculture

My opinion

- Book written as a narrative – uncomplicated to read => contains wit and many detailed information (of which some are too long)
- Pollan’s mission is clear – there needs to be change in production of food
 - Therefore he uses many eye-openers
 - The book makes one reflect on the food situation (where it comes from and if it is good for the body?)
 - it may change food habits or notions/opinions about food
- BUT => it does not offer practical ideas or solutions, to ultimately change this described dilemma => Reader feels helpless: knows there must change something, but how? Where should one start?

2. Write a short academic statement (200-300 words) in which you summarize the reaction reflected in the reviews. Please include quotations from the text to illustrate and support your statements and interpretations. Use the last paragraph of your statement to add your own comment on the way the book was treated by the reviewers.

Academic statement

In general, book reviews critically evaluate publications and their contents to indicate its value or quality. The review of Michael Pollan's book *The Omnivore's Dilemma* written by David Kamp for the *New York Times* (2006) is a detailed description of the book's content, mission as well as a performance rating.

Kamp does not only give information about the author (Pollan is "a professor of journalism of [the University of California] Berkley", Kamp 2006, 3), but he also evaluates Pollan's writing style. For example, Kamp considers the book to be "thoughtful [and] engrossing" and thinks that the Pollan's mission "to shed light on both its causes and some potential solutions" of the American "national eating disorder" becomes very clear (Kamp 2006, 3). However, Kamp criticizes that some of the described events are too predictable. Furthermore, he wishes for clear solutions to the dilemma, i.e. Pollan should have been "more prescriptive about how we might realistically address our national eating disorder" (Kamp 2006, 4).

The review by Weintraub (published in the *Library Journal*, 2006) is much shorter, but contains the same essential statements as Kamp's one. Weintraub's review serves more as a recommendation to read the book and describes it as a "folksy narrative [that] provides a wealth of information about agriculture, the natural world, and human desires" (Weintraub 2006, 5). In addition, the review by Yang (published in the environmental magazine *Plenty*, 2006) clearly states that Pollan is undoubtedly taking side, i.e. pastoral agriculture is better than industrial agriculture. Yang also considers the book to be a "masterful new book" (Yang 2006, 5).

All in all, Pollan's mission that there is a general need to change our food habits (starting with the production of food) is illustrated very clearly. Therefore, I believe that the book serves as an eye-opener and makes the readers reflect on their own food situation (where does the food come from, and is it good for the body?). Additionally, I support

Kamp's opinion that Pollan does not offer practical ideas or solutions to ultimately change the described dilemma. Without these suggestions the reader feels helpless, in the sense of one knows all about the bad habits, but one cannot change anything. Nevertheless, although this book is a bit lengthy (cf. Weintraub 2006, 5) and offers no solutions it may certainly change notions about food or food habits for the better.

Works cited

Kamp, David. "'The Omnivore's Dilemma,' by Michael Pollan." *New York Times* 23 April 2006. Print.

Weintraub, Irwin. "The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals." *Library Journal* Vol. 131. Iss 7. 2006: 103-104. Print.

Yang, Wesley. "The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals." *Plenty* Jun/Jul. 2006: 59. Print.