



Food

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Introduction

The study of food is at once a classic theme in anthropological theorizing, as well as a burgeoning field in contemporary ethnography. Some of the earliest attempts to characterize culture, or identify the minimal, “elementary” features of social life, drew inspiration from a consideration of food prohibitions. In the 19th century, and again in the middle of the 20th century, the text of Leviticus provided fodder for a host of theories—historical, symbolic, and materialist—that attempted to account for the kosher food laws this text details. The study of these same prohibitions laid the foundation for a comparative anthropology to develop arguments about totemism and taboo, each expressions of human restrictions on the category of “the edible” that are seen as foundational features of social and cultural activity. While these largely (though by no means exclusively) symbolic concerns have dominated much of the anthropology of food, ethnographers and others have also explored a host of very different concerns in the last few generations (though many of these projects also have much-earlier antecedents). The sociological capacity of food as a substance with manifold material dimensions (i.e., it must be cultivated, harvested, distributed, processed, cooked (or not), served, and consumed along with—or rigorously separated from—other foods, to cite only a few of these material considerations) allows its production and consumption to characterize, represent, and shape the relationships by means of which it is eaten. The study of feasting, food exchange, and food offerings makes powerful connections between the symbolic and social potential of food as a sociocultural form. This same potential for revealing complex interconnections has been critical to political-economic analyses of food and food systems. Whether examining the flows of labor necessary to produce global commodities; the impact of the same commodities on diet, nutrition, and the structure of meals; the shifting gendered character of the time needed for food production, and of certain foods that are meant for various persons in the household; or the changing character of class tastes, aesthetics, and wider patterns of consumption, food has proved to be a highly valuable resource—at once a lens and a touchstone—through which to trace the unfolding of capitalism’s diverse histories. In the early 21st century, scholars have returned again to the rich symbolic and material potential of food to think about an ontology of food: the kinds of “naturecultural” worlds, and the encounter between different worlds (e.g., human and other animal forms) that food reveals and embodies.

Foundational Texts

The emergence of the social sciences in Europe in the mid-19th century coincides, and not incidentally, with the study of food as a social and cultural form. The lectures by Robertson Smith on Semitic religious practice ([Smith 1889](#)) have been enormously influential (his ideas, along with Fustel de Coulanges’s in [Coulanges 1864](#), prefigure Émile Durkheim’s in most important respects). Smith also developed valuable theories of sacrifice that continue to be relevant to this day; his understanding of the ways that eating together—commensality—formulates and establishes social connections, divisions, and hierarchies of all kinds has hardly been improved on. In addition to sacrifice, 19th-century scholarship was fascinated with the generalized practice of “totemism,” often attended by food prohibitions, one version of “taboo.” The psychological theorizing in [Freud 1938](#) has not held up to scrutiny, but the questions of food avoidance proved to be an important topic of discussion throughout the 20th century and gave rise to some of

the more forceful claims in structuralism (e.g., [Lévi-Strauss 1966](#) and [Douglas 1966](#)) as well as cultural materialism ([Harris 1985](#)).

- **Coulanges, F. de. 1864. *La cité antique: Étude sur le culte, le droit, les institutions de la Grèce et de Rome*. Paris: Durand.**

A study of Antiquity that ties domestic relations, ritual obligations, and civic order to the family hearth, and the daily life of cooking and consuming that is its focus.

- **Douglas, M. 1966. The abominations of Leviticus. In *Purity and danger: An analysis of the concepts of pollution and taboo*. By Mary Douglas, 42–58. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.**

Douglas's work develops two critical themes in the structural analysis of taboo. First, she shows how the logic of the Hebrew Bible's categories renders the tabooed animals of Leviticus anomalous. Second, she shows how the rejection of anomaly generates a model of completeness that provides a compelling metaphor of Holiness.

- **Freud, S. 1938. *Totem and taboo*. London: Pelican.**

Freud's text is an origin myth that rests the foundations of civilization on the guilt that ensues from an act of cannibalistic patricide. Highly influential in its time, Freud captures a distinctive enduring sensibility of modernity that is entirely speculative but betrays many commonplace assumptions.

- **Harris, M. 1985. *Good to eat: Riddles of food and culture*. New York: Simon and Schuster.**

Harris spells out his "cultural materialism" in his assessment of food taboos, arguing that such prohibitions derive from the excessive expenditures of energy associated with the production of such tabooed or sanctified animals. His views have largely been rejected in anthropology as reductionist in the extreme, dismissing all questions of meaning and culture more generally in favor of dubious claims about maximizing resources.

- **Lévi-Strauss, C. 1966. The culinary triangle. *New Society* 8.221: 937–940.**

The foundations of cuisine are shown to rest on pair of structural oppositions—nature versus culture, and elaborated versus unelaborated—which in turn generate the tripartite division (raw, cooked, rotted) that Lévi-Strauss argues provides the logical underpinning for all systems of food preparation.

- **Smith, W. R. 1889. *Lectures on the religion of the Semites: First series; The fundamental institutions*. New York: Appleton.**

In these influential lectures, Smith develops the core concept of commensality and demonstrates how social-relations care is constituted through acts of food preparation and sharing.