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The consumption of food in the field of Food and Nutrition

O consumo de comida no campo da Alimentação e Nutrição

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ABSTRACT

This theoretical-conceptual essay, based on an interdisciplinary literature review, aims to analyze the symbolic and economic meanings of food consumption within the field of Food and Nutrition, emphasizing the logic of "sign-value" and the commodification of social relations. The analysis integrates Jean Baudrillard's perspective on the "system of objects" and "simulacra" with sociological and anthropological frameworks, such as those of Poulain, Bourdieu, and Bauman. Food consumption is observed to operates as a cultural practice in which technical "preparations" are consumed not only for their use-value but as signs of social distinction. The technical term "preparation" is identified as a core element of the professional repertoire that becomes a commodity-sign in contemporary society. Commensality is presented as a fundamental symbolic exchange that structures human socialization, acting before and beyond the intake of nutrients. Finally, eating communicates and subjectivizes within a system of simulacra. The synthesis between food, consumption, and the field reveals that Nutrition must transcend biomedical reductionism to recognize the economic and symbolic orders that shape contemporary identities.

Keywords: Culture. Food. Food consumption. Nutritional sciences.

RESUMO

Este ensaio teórico, fundamentado em revisão bibliográfica interdisciplinar, tem como objetivo analisar os significados simbólicos e econômicos do consumo de comida no campo da Alimentação e Nutrição, enfatizando a lógica do "valor-signo" e a mercadorização das relações sociais. A análise integra a perspectiva de Jean Baudrillard sobre o "sistema dos objetos" e "simulacros" a referenciais sociológicos e antropológicos da alimentação, como Poulain, Bourdieu e Bauman. Observa-se que o consumo alimentar opera como uma prática cultural onde as "preparações" técnicas são consumidas não apenas por seu valor de uso, mas como signos de distinção social. O termo técnico "preparação" é destacado como parte do repertório profissional que se torna mercadoria-signo na sociedade contemporânea. A comensalidade é identificada como a troca simbólica fundamental que estrutura a socialização em torno do comer. Por fim, o comer comunica e subjetiva dentro de um sistema de simulacros. A síntese entre comida, consumo e campo revela que a Nutrição deve transcender o reducionismo biomédico para reconhecer as ordens econômica e simbólica que moldam as identidades contemporâneas.

Palavras-chave: *Cultura. Comida. Consumo alimentar. Nutrição e alimentação.*

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INTRODUCTION

This essay is addressed to researchers and scholars in the field of Food and Nutrition and proposes a conceptual reflection on the theme of consumption. The central aim of the study is to problematize the distinction between food consumption and the consumption of signs in the contemporary cultural context. This differentiation proves necessary insofar as aspects related to the consumption of foodstuffs, of nutrients, and of symbolic codes are often treated indistinctly in the scientific output of this field. Accordingly, this text seeks to explore the theoretical complexity surrounding the concept of consumption, considering its place and relevance within the scope of Nutrition Science. The proposal is to interrogate this concept as an analytical category in order to broaden the understanding of its ramifications within this domain of knowledge.

METHODS

This is a theoretical essay grounded in a qualitative approach of a theoretical-conceptual nature. The methodology consists of an interdisciplinary literature review that draws on frameworks from the Social and Human Sciences, with an emphasis on the Sociology and Anthropology of Food. The analysis is organized into thematic axes that push the concept of consumption beyond its purely biological and nutritional dimension. The literature search covered seminal works by Jean Baudrillard, such as The System of Objects [1] and The Consumer Society [2], as well as contemporary authors who discuss the commodification of social relations and food culture. The data were treated from an analytical-critical perspective, seeking, as stated above, to push the concept of consumption beyond the biomedical dimension that predominates in the field of Nutrition.

THE INHERENT COMPLEXITY OF THE CONCEPT OF CONSUMPTION

As a starting point, this complexity presupposes a distinction between the terms "eating," "feeding," and "nourishing" (*comer, alimentar*, and nutrir), which are often used interchangeably even though they express distinct perspectives [3]. From this standpoint, "foodstuff" (*alimento*) is understood as a substance, at times devoid of cultural meanings, whose main function is to provide the nutrients essential for sustaining life. The act of "nourishing," in turn, corresponds to the physiological outcome of food intake. Under the influence of a biomedical conception of health, the value attributed to foodstuffs generally centers on their chemical composition, sanitary quality, safety, technological processes of production and distribution, and therapeutic potential. In this context, foodstuffs are conceived as commodities embedded in market logics and in the production and distribution chains of the food industry.

In the field of Food and Nutrition, the term "food consumption" is usually understood mainly as the intake of calories and nutrients and is thus reduced to its biochemical dimension and its physiological effects on the biological body. This perspective adopts a view centered on the functionality of foodstuffs, regarding them as therapeutic instruments or as means of preventing health problems. In this approach, foodstuffs are assessed on the basis of their nutritional composition, to the exclusion of their symbolic, affective, and cultural charge. Consumption is thus understood narrowly, as a purely organic phenomenon geared toward health promotion or disease prevention according to biomedical parameters. This understanding, however, overlooks the fact that nutritional value is only one of the multiple dimensions that give meaning to the act of eating. According

to Jean-Pierre Poulain, the social space of food is organized around choices, prohibitions, and prescriptions that reflect the habitus of eaters [4] which shows that food carries meanings that go far beyond its physicochemical properties. Food thus takes shape as a cultural language, traversed by symbolic struggles and processes of subjectivation.

"Food" (*comida*), unlike "foodstuff" in its biological sense, is a symbolic construction that varies across cultures and carries with it social codes, value judgments, and cultural classifications. It is an entity that belongs to the order of culture, expressing subjectivities, affective bonds, consumption patterns, and socially constructed food practices. Whereas foodstuff refers to the sphere of nature and to the physicochemical properties necessary for sustaining life, food expresses cultural meanings embodied in everyday habits. In this sense, eating goes beyond its merely physiological character and assumes a role of symbolic mediation between the individual and the social environment. As Laraia states, human behavior is culturally, not biologically, conditioned [5], which shows that the meanings attributed to food are not universal but socially constructed. When we eat, we also internalize cultural values and meanings, ideologies, and symbolic classifications that guide our perception of the world [6,7]. In this process, as Chauí suggests, we naturalize behaviors and eating styles, converting social practices into seemingly objective norms [8].

The second assumption stems from an understanding of the scientific "field" of Food and Nutrition in light of the theoretical framework proposed by Pierre Bourdieu [9]. According to Bourdieu, the field is structured by relations of symbolic power that organize practices and discourses, shaping forms of perception and attributing meanings to social reality. This is an invisible form of power, exercised with the consent of the subjects themselves, whose social function is to promote cohesion and consensus, thereby contributing to the reproduction of the established order. Symbolic power is at once a mode of apprehending the world, an instrument of knowledge, and a mechanism for legitimizing social hierarchies, acting as a political force that sustains relations of domination between distinct social classes or groups [10].

For Bourdieu, the concept of "field" refers to a network of objective relations between social positions occupied by subjects, agents, or institutions, determined by the unequal distribution of the various types of capital within a specific structure [9]. Each field constitutes a relatively autonomous microcosm with its own rules, defined by the interactions and struggles among the actors that compose it. The possession and accumulation of capital – whether economic, cultural, social, or symbolic – confer hierarchical positions on individuals or institutions within the field, establishing asymmetrical relations of domination, subordination, dependence, or homology. This hierarchical power is at once structuring and structured: it organizes agents' practices and strategies and, at the same time, is continually (re)configured by internal struggles. The field thus appears as a dynamic instance, marked by the constant re-actualization of the positions and power relations that give it form and meaning.

In the context of the scientific field, Bourdieu emphasizes that what is at stake is the monopoly of scientific authority – that is, the technical capacity, social power, and symbolic recognition that grant certain agents the legitimacy to act and speak with authority in this space [11]. By considering the field as a locus of struggle, one understands that its operating logic is anchored in specific interests, oriented toward the imposition of a particular conception of science. According to Bourdieu, this struggle mobilizes specific forms of capital: temporal capital and scientific capital. Temporal capital refers to institutional control over the means of production and reproduction of knowledge and accumulates on the basis of the agent's trajectory and contribution to scientific progress. Scientific capital, in turn, is linked to peer recognition and to the construction of political and institutional strategies capable of conferring prestige and authority within the field [11,12].

Within the field of Food and Nutrition – marked by struggles among social actors, agents, and institutions – the term consumption takes on distinct meanings depending on the perspective from which it is mobilized. The consumption of foodstuffs (*consumo de alimentos*) is often approached from the standpoint of the market, Food Science, and the food industry, privileging aspects related to the production, circulation, and marketing of products. Food consumption (*consumo alimentar*), in turn, refers to the intake of nutrients and the biological outcomes of this practice and is anchored in the biomedical rationality characteristic of Nutrition Science. The consumption of food (*consumo de comida*) transcends these approaches, incorporating symbolic and identity dimensions related to culture, affects, emotions, and memories – individual or collective – that give meaning to the eating experience in the social sphere. For Weber, every social action involves the subjective meaning attributed by the agent and by others [13]; therefore, the act of eating is also inscribed in the dynamics of recognition and construction of social identity, revealing shared values and stances toward the world.

From Bauman's perspective, consumption can be understood, from an economic standpoint, as the act of acquiring and using goods and services through which individuals constitute themselves as social subjects [14]. In this sense, consumption is not limited to the material sphere but plays a central role in assigning a "social place" to individuals, who are recognized and positioned in the social hierarchy according to the goods they consume. It is a phenomenon situated at the core of the dynamics of material cooperation and competition, social inclusion and exclusion, and the processes of identity and symbolic construction and differentiation. According to Bauman, we live in a "consumer society," marked by a consumerist culture in which individuals are constantly encouraged to adopt consumption-based lifestyles and strategies. Consumerism is therefore a social arrangement through which consumption plays a structuring role in reproducing the logics that sustain social stratification.

THE ECONOMIC ORDER OF CONSUMPTION: BETWEEN OBJECT AND SIGN

To understand the consumption of food in the field of Nutrition, it is imperative to move beyond the idea of satisfying biological needs and enter the logic of the system of signs proposed by Jean Baudrillard. In contemporary society, objects - and here we include food - are consumed not only for their use-value (utility) but for their sign-value, which communicates status, identity, and social differentiation. Consumption becomes a cultural practice in which the individual consumes not the product itself but the meaning attributed to it by the market structure.

In this context, training in Nutrition introduces the concept of "preparation" as part of its technical repertoire. A "preparation" is the result of the technical handling of foodstuffs, but, from Baudrillard's perspective, it also becomes a functional object that adapts to a system of prestige. Whereas "foodstuff" refers to nature, the "preparation" is born within a cultural and economic order and is susceptible to commodification and fetishism. Eating ceases to be a physiological act and becomes a simulacrum: an experience mediated by images and advertising discourses that continuously manufacture desire.

Through the goods consumed, it is possible to observe how individuals incorporate cultural models, symbolic codes, lifestyles, and social dispositions associated with the group to which they belong. From this perspective, consumption is a marker of social position, serving as an indicator of processes of inclusion and exclusion. It expresses the competitive dynamics among social groups for

access to the best jobs, social benefits, tax advantages, material goods, services, and information - and, consequently, knowledge. The consumption of food, specifically, is part of this symbolic game that confers status on or stigmatizes subjects, hierarchizing society and normalizing food practices. It is in this context that the consumerism of certain foods driven by fad diets emerges, reinforcing the symbolic charge attributed to foods. Thus, the act of consuming food goes beyond the biological realm, functioning as a practice that carries social meanings and significations that take part in the construction of individual and cultural identities.

ON FOODSTUFFS AND FOOD

The term *alimento* (foodstuff) derives from the Latin *alere*, meaning to nourish, to feed, to provide the elements essential to the functioning of the human organism. Although the word appeared in the literature around 1120, it was only in the 16th century that it came to be used in its current sense, gradually replacing the term "meat" (*carne*). At the time, "meat" designated not only products of animal origin but the entire set of foods considered suitable for sustaining life, regardless of their composition [4].

According to Poulain, foodstuffs can be understood in terms of four fundamental qualities: nutritional, hygienic, organoleptic, and symbolic [4]. The nutritional dimension refers to the capacity of a foodstuff to provide the nutrients and substances essential for the proper functioning of the human body. Hygienic quality, in turn, requires that the foodstuff be free of toxicity and not harm the consumer's health. The third category, organoleptic in nature, relates to the psychophysiological sensations triggered by the physical characteristics of the foodstuff, such as color, flavor, texture, and aroma. Finally, the symbolic dimension understands the foodstuff as an "object of projections of meaning" [4, p. 240], embedded in communicative networks and worldviews that give it multiple, socially constructed meanings.

Historically, the Agricultural Sciences have played a central role in producing knowledge about foodstuffs, establishing themselves as the main actors in the technical-scientific approach to this object. In this field, foodstuffs are commonly conceived as mere vehicles of nutrients, devoid of symbolic or cultural meanings. The area privileges a perspective oriented toward food technology, with an emphasis on chemical composition, sanitary quality, and the development of products intended for both the domestic market and foreign trade. When this knowledge is incorporated into the field of Health, a close dialogue is established with Nutrition, broadening the scope of scientific application, although the focus remains on the functional and productive dimension of foodstuffs [5].

In the field of Nutrition, a foodstuff is defined as an edible substance that provides the nutrients necessary for survival and for the proper functioning of the human body. Influenced by the biomedical conception of health, disease, and care, this perspective assigns value to foodstuffs on the basis of their chemical components, sanitary quality, safety, production and distribution technologies, and therapeutic potential. There is thus a tendency to reduce the concept of foodstuff to its nutritional and hygienic dimensions, focusing on its biochemical properties and its capacity to cause or prevent diseases [3].

Several theoretical frameworks from the Social and Human Sciences have spurred efforts to incorporate food and eating as a legitimate object of investigation within the field of Nutrition. This interdisciplinary dialogue has enabled the development of studies on social relations mediated by food, acknowledging the symbolic and psycho-affective centrality that pervades the act of eating. The Social and Human Sciences have contributed decisively to broadening the view of foodstuffs,

understanding them not only as a nutritional substrate but also as bearers of cultural, affective, and identity meanings, which are essential for understanding the complexity of commensality in contemporary societies.

In the field of Food studies, it is acknowledged that biological determinants alone are insufficient to explain the complexity of the eating practices and behaviors of the human species. To understand this complexity, one therefore turns not to the biomedical concept of foodstuff – centered on its nutritional composition – but to that of food, understood as symbolized foodstuff. Food belongs to the order of culture and, as such, carries multiple meanings shaped by social values, symbolic systems, and worldviews that vary across time, space, and social groups [6,7]. As Laraia explains [5], these meanings are culturally rather than biologically constructed and express classification systems that organize the social world. The naturalization of certain eating habits, such as preferences, prohibitions, or hierarchies, reveals, according to Chauí [8], the workings of ideology in converting historical practices into behaviors regarded as universal, reinforcing hegemonic social roles and lifestyles.

Food is an expression of culture at every stage of its production, preparation, and consumption. In production, human beings not only use the resources offered by nature but also develop and transform foodstuffs through historically constructed social and technical practices. During preparation, food is elaborated through specific cultural processes, such as the use of ingredients, cooking methods, utensils, and culinary knowledge, which give identity to food practices. At the moment of consumption, food choices go beyond nutritional criteria and come to reflect economic, social, and symbolic values that organize eating habits in different contexts [15.].

By becoming inscribed in culture, food carries meanings that go beyond its material character. The act of eating thus acquires symbolic meanings linked to a collective imaginary universe, capable of producing and reinforcing individual and collective identities, social relations, and affective bonds. To understand these meanings, one can draw on the concept of action proposed by Max Weber [13]. According to Weber, all meaningful human conduct, that is, conduct oriented by subjective intentions, constitutes the central object of Sociology. Sociology, in turn, seeks to understand it in its logic of meaning, causality, and effects [13].

From this perspective, the act of eating must be understood as a social and cultural phenomenon that goes beyond the physiological need for nutrient intake and takes part in the construction of customs, norms, and bonds between the individual and the collectivity [13].

THE PLACE OF CULTURE IN THE FIELD OF FOOD AND NUTRITION

The concept of culture is polysemic, admitting multiple and distinct interpretations. According to Chauí, culture can be understood as the creation of a symbolic order of law, structured by prohibitions, obligations, and attributions of value to human actions, thereby distinguishing itself from the natural order [8]. Also, according to Chauí, culture plays a fundamental role in the constitution of society by establishing rules and norms that guide social behavior, which are continually reproduced, valued, or rejected by subjects.

Ways of eating – what is eaten, at what times, how it is prepared, and even the gestures associated with chewing – are not entirely spontaneous or natural practices but are immersed in symbolic constructions that operate within cultures. Culture, in this sense, establishes a symbolic order that confers meanings on the everyday world, operating on objects, gestures, and practices through the naturalization of social codes that come to be perceived as self-evident or natural. At

the center of this dynamic is food, whose analysis can reveal social hierarchies, collective belongings, and the ethnic and family affiliations that structure certain social groups. Thus, the act of eating becomes not only a biological practice but also a symbolic marker of the social positions and identities constructed in cultural space.

By instituting a symbolic order, culture socially constructs the meanings attributed to human actions, which vary according to historical processes, specific contexts, and the social relations that structure different groups. Culture thus not only reproduces social dynamics but also regulates and guides them. Beyond its normative character, culture can be understood as a creative instance, capable of inventing new symbolic codes that challenge or unsettle the established order. This perspective highlights cultural dynamism in the face of social transformations, new collective demands, individual aspirations, and emerging possibilities in the social fabric [8].

Culture is instituted at the moment when human beings establish for themselves a set of rules, norms of conduct, moral values, ethical parameters, and modes of political action that ensure the reproduction and cohesion of social life. In the food domain, practices such as what is eaten, in what circumstances, the way of eating considered "correct", the appropriate spaces for having meals, and even the bodily gestures involved in eating are socially shaped and subsequently naturalized. These patterns come to be perceived as self-evident universal truths, almost biological in nature. Accordingly, foods such as sushi, crab, chicken hearts, *mocotó* (cow's foot stew), ox tongue, or pig brains tend to be treated as equally accessible and neutral food practices. However, each of these items carries a dense symbolic and evaluative charge that reflects social judgments about taste, belonging, distinction, and acceptability, regardless of its nutritional composition.

Within the polysemy that marks the concept of culture, it is possible to understand food and eating beyond the biological aspect. Although hunger manifests itself as a physiological need, the ways of satisfying it are deeply permeated by the subtle symbolic codes produced by culture. From this perspective, eating can be interpreted as a form of domestication of nature, in which human beings adapt the environment to their needs and projects. Culture thus acts as a mediator between hunger (understood as an organic need), will (expressed in sociocultural contexts and in the material possibilities of access to food), and desire (which goes beyond mere physiological satisfaction, conferring affective, aesthetic, and identity meanings on food). Eating thus becomes a complex practice, endowed with meanings that articulate nature and culture, biology and symbolism, need and subjectivity.

Culture constitutes a space for the production of norms, principles, and standards that are socially accepted and maintained by individuals within a collectivity. These elements guide the judgments, choices, distinctions, and valuations that regulate behavior in each social group or specific culture. They manifest themselves through the tastes, attitudes, prejudices, and value judgments that subjects mobilize in interpreting reality and are responsible for constructing the meanings that guide social action. Values, in this context, directly influence the criteria of evaluation and judgment reproduced by individuals in their everyday practices. As Chauí states [8], it is through culture that subjects organize the world into symbolic systems of value, naturalizing behaviors and making self-evident categories that are, in fact, historical and ideological. These values are neither external nor transcendent to human experience; on the contrary, they are cultural creations produced in the process of social constitution [16].

Eating (or not eating) red meat, for example, goes beyond the limits of the biological need to satisfy hunger. This food choice is embedded in a complex web of social, cultural, and symbolic meanings that attributes value – positive or negative – to the eater, depending on the political, moral,

religious, and ideological convictions that pervade a given group or social context. The consumption of red meat can thus operate as a marker of distinction, placing individuals in differentiated social strata and eliciting judgments related to food ethics, environmentalism, classism, or tradition. Weber [13] contributes to this understanding by defining as social action all behavior endowed with subjective meaning that is recognized and interpreted by other social agents. Food consumption is thus not merely a physiological gesture but a practice charged with intentionality, which positions the subject within structures of meaning and collective recognition.

There is yet another dimension in this process of social constitution: the exotic face of food. Reducing the cultural aspects of food and eating to the perspective of the exotic, the regional, or the dietary patterns of specific groups amounts to overlooking the deeper symbolic apparatus that structures food practices. Such a stance implies disregarding the subjective elements, social meanings, and marketing appeals that pervade the experience of eating. One thus ignores the semantic complexity that may be contained, for example, in a simple piece of bread, reducing it to a biochemical compound – an organic mass devoid of human meanings. In doing so, foodstuffs are deprived of their humanity, their dignity, their charge of subjectivity and sociability, and even their possible religious meanings.

Food consumption places subjects in the field of social relations, assigning them a specific place in the symbolic and material hierarchy of society. Through what they consume, individuals are recognized, classified, and positioned as consumers and citizens, constructing themselves as social subjects. In this context, seemingly banal practices, such as posting a photograph of one's dinner on social media, assume a performative role of recognition and distinction. This is an action charged with symbolic intentionality, not an innocent or meaningless gesture. The phenomenon known as *camera eats first*, an expression that designates the habit of photographing the dish before the meal, illustrates this contemporary logic [17]. For Bauman [14], in the society of consumers, subjects simultaneously become commodities and agents of their own promotion, dissolving the boundary between personal identity and consumer brand. In this scenario, food operates as a symbol of distinction, shaping the *self* according to the logics of visibility, validation, and belonging imposed by digital culture.

According to Bauman, in the society of consumers, individuals are enticed, encouraged, or even compelled to promote desirable commodities, using all available resources to raise their market value. However, the product to be promoted is themselves: subjects become simultaneously commodities and their own marketing agents, the goods and their salespeople at the same time [14]. This logic promotes the "blurring" of the boundaries between human beings and objects of consumption, dissolving the distinction between those who consume and what is consumed. The construction of identity, in this context, takes the form of a simulacrum, an idealized and reified representation of the self, based on the consumer's material choices [18]. Thus, by opting for specific brands or sharing images of meals on social media, subjects do not merely consume but perform a socially valued identity shaped by market logics. Food, in this scenario, goes beyond its nutritional function and comes to operate as a code of cultural distinction. In many cases, flavor or nutritional value becomes secondary to the projected image and to the potential for symbolic engagement that the dish can generate on digital platforms.

Food and eating are not limited to nutrient intake; on the contrary, they involve the appropriation of a set of codes, signs, and symbols that coexist on the same plate. An emblematic example is the plate of rice, beans, and egg, whose reading transcends its biological and biomedical dimension. This food combination is permeated by cultural and social significations that attribute

different values to its consumption [19]. As Laraia notes [5], judgments about what is eaten are determined not by biology but by cultural systems that qualify food as an identity, moral, and aesthetic expression. Food thus takes shape as a social language, legitimizing or stigmatizing the eater according to culturally constructed parameters.

THE CONCEPT OF COMMENSALITY

Commensality can be defined as the act of sharing the table and food, a fundamental form of socialization that structures human relations around eating. Before being a practice of nutrient intake, commensality is a system of symbolic and reciprocal exchanges.

COMMENSALITY AND CULTURAL CODES

Contemporary commensality reveals symbolic dimensions that transcend the mere satisfaction of nutritional needs. Although the act of eating, understood as food intake, represents a biological requirement proper to the order of nature, food choices are strongly mediated by cultural and social codes, varying according to the context, group, and culture to which subjects belong. In this sense, feeding oneself and others is a subjective, affective choice situated in the "order of culture". As Laraia puts it [5], human behavior is culturally, not biologically, conditioned, with food practices shaped by inherited and shared values, symbols, and patterns. Sharing the table, deciding to eat alone, or even being unable to access this collective space because of social barriers all mobilize codes that express social belonging or exclusion. In this logic, as Poulain notes [4], the social space of food is structured by choices and prohibitions that reveal the habitus of eaters, making the consumption of food a device of mediation in human interactions.

Food is not a neutral object devoid of meanings; on the contrary, it carries a complex set of symbolic codes, social values, and structures of hierarchization. In the field of Nutrition, however, the term food consumption is commonly reduced to the mere intake of calories or nutrients, disregarding the symbolic and cultural dimensions surrounding it. The terms "consumption of foodstuffs", "food consumption", and "consumption of food" are often used as synonyms, which contributes to emptying them of their specific meanings and of the complexity that constitutes them. Nevertheless, all of them coexist symbolically on the same plate of food and belong to the broader universe of the consumption of goods that produce meanings and constitute the social being. In this way, a process of objectification of the subject is established, whereby subjects come to be defined by what they consume – what they eat, where they eat, with whom they eat, and how they do so. Likewise, subjects can be defined by what they do not consume: what they do not know, do not value, or reject. The consumption of food thus reveals itself as a social language, an expression of identity and of individuals' positioning in the social structure. This movement of transforming social practices into naturalized norms is addressed by Chauí [8], who emphasizes that "every ideology has the function of making social behaviors, cultural roles, values, and ways of life natural". In this way, food ceases to be merely a material good and becomes a social sign that communicates belonging, lifestyle, and symbolic location in the cultural hierarchy.

From the perspective that predominates in the field of Food and Nutrition, a large share of the published scientific output tends to understand "food consumption" from a strictly nutritional standpoint. This approach privileges analyses focused on meal frequency and composition, macro- and micronutrient intake, and risk factors associated with food (in)security in different population groups, such as schoolchildren, children, adolescents, older adults, or athletes,

with an emphasis on the physiological effects of intake or on the absorption efficiency of specific nutrients. This conception reduces eating habits and food consumption to the biological dimension, disregarding the symbolic, social, and cultural elements involved in these practices [20, 21].

From the standpoint adopted here, the consumption of foodstuffs extends beyond the strictly biomedical dimension, encompassing subjective aspects that, although fundamental for understanding individuals' everyday food choices, do not always receive due attention in academic studies in the area. Beyond the Medical Sciences, the Social Sciences offer relevant contributions to the analysis of and reflection on the complex web of meanings surrounding the consumption of food.

Precinotto et al. [16] illustrate this complexity with a study conducted to investigate how the COVID-19 pandemic affected eating behavior, attitudes toward food, and physical exercise practice in 786 adult women with overweight or obesity aged 30 to 50 years. The symbolism of food became more pronounced during times of crisis. These authors indicate that women with overweight and obesity experienced significant changes in eating attitudes during the pandemic, revealing that eating can take on compensatory, affective, and coping meanings in the face of social vulnerability.

Thus, codes of social distinction inscribed in food choices, taste and affective memories, and cultural patterns marked by preferences or prohibitions are expressions of an everyday commensality that becomes naturalized.

In the food experience, two complementary dimensions coexist: that of the order of nature, which responds to the biological need of hunger, and that of the order of culture, marked by symbols, rituals, judgments, and prohibitions, often ancestral in character. Far from excluding each other, these two orders are inseparable, since the nutrients that nourish the body and the meanings that organize social life share the same plate. From this perspective, Weber [13] contributes by understanding consumption as a social action, that is, one oriented by subjective meanings attributed by individuals and recognized by other social agents. Eating is thus also communicating, acting, and positioning oneself in a world of relations that attributes value to food choices.

The consumption of certain products, such as whole-grain breads, natural juices, imported wines, specialty meats, foods deemed healthy or sustainably produced, as well as trendy gourmetized or exotic items, places the subject within the logic of conspicuous consumption or of consumption socially legitimized as "politically correct". This dynamic reflects a hypermodern rationality in which social identity, consumption habits, and life experiences become interdependent elements. In a world marked by instability and fluid social relations, consumption comes to represent a form of subjective stabilization: companies offer the subject the promise of personal fulfillment through access to goods that function as symbolic anchors of belonging, distinction, and happiness. This is a social arrangement in which stability is sought in the objects of consumption themselves, as Lipovetsky points out [22].

CONCLUSION

The consumption of food in the field of Food and Nutrition cannot be reduced to the nutrient-body binomial. As demonstrated, the act of eating is traversed by an economic and symbolic order in which the technical "preparation" is often converted into a sign of social distinction. By privileging biomedical rationality, the field of Nutrition runs the risk of ignoring the commodification of social life and the role of consumption in the construction of contemporary identities. An ethical and humanized approach requires recognizing that food communicates and subjectivizes, operating within a system of simulacra in which the real and the imaginary merge on the plate.

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