

Food and Social Meaning

1. Social meanings

Foods themselves can be seen to convey a range of cultural meanings; [they] communicate information in terms not only of occasion but also social status, ethnicity and wealth. These meanings, however, are not inherent in foodstuffs. They depend on the social context in which the items are found. (Murcott 1982, 203)

The preparation and consumption of food provides, moreover, a material means for expressing the more abstract significance of social systems and cultural values. It may be argued that what people are prepared to take inside their bodies reflects their social identities, and their membership of social groups. To view eating habits as a matter of culture is to understand that they are a product of codes of conduct and the structure of social relationships of the society in which they occur. (Murcott 1982, 204)

Food, then, has both a material and a symbolic significance. (Murcott 1982, 204 – my underline)

Let's start with obvious cases in which something has meaning: language and conventional signs. Written language is a set of marks, but what the marks mean depends on the context, e.g., what does 'fin' mean? In English it means an appendage on a fish; in French it means 'end'. A flat red octagonal shape means 'stop' in many cultures. When we learn the meaning, we learn, and typically internalize, a set of apt responses. In the case of conventions, the learning is often explicit. But we also learn many meanings implicitly.

Social meanings are not just a matter of intention.

Seatbelts in a Budapest cab. Because most cabs in Budapest are quite small, most passengers sit in the front seat. Until about two years ago, if you tried to put on a seatbelt in the front seat of a cab, the driver would try to dissuade you. If you nonetheless insisted and buckled your belt, your action would have an important effect: To wear a seatbelt was to insult the driver. That insult is a social meaning. (Lessig 1995, 952)

2. Symbolic significance and material significance

We use objects, our bodies, our clothing, our children to convey messages all the time. *Symbolic significance* is a matter of what is expressed based on the conventions, "codes," social meanings, in the context. Not everything conveys meanings, and not all meanings are easily recognized. And they are not fixed or stable: they can be contested, changed, etc. *Semiotics* is the study of such symbolic meanings.

The *material significance* of a code concerns the social framework that gives rise to it and the consequences it has for that social framework. The Murcott reading discussed the "cooked dinner." The "cooked dinner" has a symbolic significance; it conveys a message:

'I think it lets him know that I am thinking about him-as if he knows I am expecting him. Fair play, he's out all day-it's not as if he's been very demanding-it's really a pleasure to cook for him'. (Murcott 1982, 209)

But it also has material conditions and consequences:

The nature of the dinner, its mode of preparation, demand that the woman be in the kitchen for a required time before [the husband's] homecoming-and that not too infrequently, even daily, she has been shopping. Otherwise, the "cooked dinner," visibly composed of appropriate items, could not be ready on time. If a job defines how a man occupies his time during the working day, to which the wage packet provides regular testimony, proper provision of a 'cooked dinner' testifies that the woman has spent her time in correspondingly wifely fashion. (Murcott 1982, 208-9)

The "cooked dinner" not only expresses a meaning, but is possible only within a particular social context where women, on the whole, play a different role in the home and workplace, and it reinforces that

division of labor insofar as those responsible for preparing the “cooked dinner” come to have different skills than those who don’t, have their time constrained in different ways, and find support and companionship amongst those who have similar responsibilities.

3. Individual and social meanings: ethical questions?

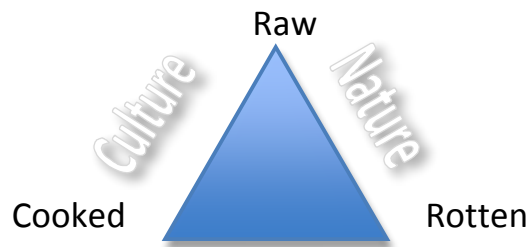
What something means to *you*, to an individual, may not always correspond to its social meaning. Consider the Budapest cab example. Sometimes we are ignorant of the social meaning. Sometimes we don’t care about the social meaning. Sometimes the social meaning and personal meaning exist happily together.

Questions to consider:

1. How do we determine what the meaning of someone’s (including our own) action is?
2. When are you morally responsible for symbolic meanings (insults, encouragement, etc) you didn’t intend?
3. What is our responsibility for the material consequences (intended or not) of our actions?
4. How are social meanings changed?

4. Other questions:

5. Why does food carry such significance?
 - a. “[Claude Levi-Strauss] has proposed that the place of eating and drinking in myths and rituals provides the medium whereby people may express their conviction that they are civilized and human, rather than savage and animal.” (Murcott 1982, 204; see also p.



209) Is this a helpful analysis?

- b. How does food help us draw boundaries between “us” and “them”? What kinds of boundaries, e.g., ethnic, class, gender?
6. Do food choices provide a way to express your identity? What aspects of your identity?

References:

Lessig, Lawrence. 1995. “The Regulation of Social Meaning.” *The University of Chicago Law Review* 62(3): 943-1045.

Levi-Strauss, Claude. 1975. *The Raw and the Cooked*. New York: Harper and Row.

Murcott, Anne. “The Cultural Significance of Food and Eating.” *Proceedings for the Nutrition Society* 41, no. 2 (June 1982): 203-10.

© Cambridge University Press. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <http://ocw.mit.edu/fairuse>.

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

24.03 Good Food: The Ethics and Politics of Food Choices
Fall 2012

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.