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UC 254 Assignment 3

Etiquette and the Times

Throughout the spectrum of time and history, dining etiquette has always been important. Rules on how to behave properly are found in every culture across the world. They define social boundaries, provide a code of conduct, and have been shown to reflect social structures. The message that food encodes is found in the pattern of social relations being expressed. The message is about different “degrees of hierarchy, inclusion, and exclusion, boundaries, and transactions across the boundaries.” Food, therefore, has a social and biological component which regulates social events such as formal and informal meals (Douglas, 1972). That being so, primary sources on dining etiquette from the past can teach people today about what was valued, what was acceptable behavior, and what identities and relationships were important. Two etiquette books, *The Boston School Kitchen Textbook* (1887) by Mrs. D. A. Lincoln and *Dinners, ceremonious and unceremonious, and the modern methods of serving them* (1892) by Abby Buchanen, show how social prestige and hierarchy were extremely important in the late 19th and early 20th century. They give extensive insight into the study of food and general principles of proper dining as both a host and a guest in this period. These two sources reinforce the notion that etiquette throughout history has been correlated with a sense of esteem. Dining etiquette books from the past provide insight into more than just cooking and table manners, they explain how dining etiquette was an important determinant in social prestige, which reflected the interests of the public during that time.

In order to understand how these dining etiquette books from the late 19th and early 20th century reflected the times, one must take into account the historical events that defined it. The Gilded Age in America was the period following the Civil War from 1877 until the beginning of the 20th century. The Gilded Age was defined by a period of widespread economic growth due to increased industrialization. A new concept called social darwinism was proposed; this justified the stratification of the wealthy and poor and essentially created a notion that there was ‘survival of the fittest’ in society between classes. The Progressive Era was a period of social activism and political reform between the 1890s and 1920s. The progressives were modernizers, meaning they were advocates for

science, technology, expertise, and education. Progressives put an emphasis on intervening in economic and social affairs by using education to improve the countries social problems. During these stages in history, prosperity and education were major concerns.

Etiquette books written at this time instruct the public on how proper manners and good form are needed to have high social standing. *The Age of Reform (1955)* by Richard Hofstadter states that progressivism was caused by the class status revolution after the Civil War. The leaders of the progressive movement expressed a need for entrepreneurship, individualism, and moral responsibility. Food serves to solidify groups memberships and to set those groups apart. Therefore, food fits into social categories in terms of class (Mintz, 2002). *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions (1899)* by Thorstein Veblen claimed that economic life was driven by division of society according to status. Veblen believed that people were constantly trying to imitate those with higher social standing in order to achieve greater social status. Hence, manners and etiquette were “formal practices of the social strata” in society and were important in determining and enforcing class divisions. For that reason, these books on dining etiquette played an important role in teaching one the perceived ‘norms’ of society in order to be able to obtain higher stature within society.

Two sources on food etiquette from this time period both discuss the proper way to conduct a meal yet the authors do so in different ways. Many cared about following the accepted rules of conduct but others needed to be taught these customs because they were not socialized in the ‘proper’ fashion. Hence, the study of food and explanation of general principles regarding practical lessons in proper dining and cooking was attuned to the classes to teach those of lower status who needed to learn these skills. There was a great lack of knowledge of the inherent qualities of food and its proper combinations. The *Boston School Kitchen Textbook: Lessons in Cooking for the Use of Classes in Public and Industrial Schools* discussed the appropriate way to cook. Not only did Lincoln explain how to cook through a wide array of techniques, she also described how to prepare diverse elements of a meal such as vegetables, meat, poultry, fish, bread step by step.

On the other hand, *Dinners, ceremonious and unceremonious, and the modern methods of serving them* by Abby Buchanen discusses dining etiquette in a different, yet equally important style. This source breaks down the logistics of organizing a dinner, either formal or informal, in the right way. Buchanen expands upon the many details that must be done to have a successful and respectable dinner. According to this source, there was a proper way to invite guests to dinner and respond to these invitations. Additionally, Buchanen exemplifies the importance of being timely and courteous. At this time, arriving for dinners at the proper time, treating guests with honor, seating guests in the correct place around the table, the arrangement of a menu, laying the table correctly, good table manners and quality service were essential to conducting a dinner appropriately.

The values stressed in the etiquette books by Lincoln and Buchanen reflect the socio-economic climate of that time. There was great concern over obtaining power, prosperity, and high social standing during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era in America. Etiquette books taught people the skills needed in order to be perceived as high class or even gain higher social standing. Veblen believed people imitated those of higher classes to acquire prominence within society. Learning the proper way in which to conduct a dinner was essential in order to be seen as elite in America. Buchanen stressed that even a small, unceremonious dinner should be treated with the utmost decency. When inviting one to a dinner, “notice of as many days as it is possible to give is not too much.” Giving as much notice of a dinner as possible is the honorable way to extend an invitation to guests. Dinner attire was important in presenting an image of wealth and excellence because “It is a poor recognition of a hostess’ effort to give pleasure by a beautifully decorate table and an attractive dinner, to dress otherwise than handsomely” (Buchanen, 1892). Therefore, proper etiquette is important in the organization and decor of the dinner. “Membership in a high social class frequently entails relatively high decorum at ordinary meals” (Visser, 2003). Even during the smallest, simplest of dinners, hosts were to be perceived as if they were elite because food serves to solidify groups memberships or to set groups apart. Upward mobility in society depended largely on how one acted at the table:

“If one is much perplexed with a strange viand, a little waiting and observant attention to others will do no harm. A glance toward host or hostess is usually edifying and assuring. A professional diner-out who is exceptionally gallant, always treats his food exactly as his hostess does hers. He claims that this is good manners, and he is not without justification; but as he confesses to performing some droll table antics with knife and spoon by following with fidelity the examples set him, one cannot but wonder if he would not be more useful to his entertainers if he sometimes provided them with more graceful object lessons than they have yet been permitted to see in their upward social progress.”

For that reason, it is evident that having good manners is essential for both guests and hosts. They learn from each other. Etiquette books therefore were necessary to teach the correct way in which to conduct oneself at a meal so that they can continue moving up in society.

Education also played an important role during this time period and this was reflected in Lincoln's, *The Boston School Kitchen Textbook*. There was a lack of knowledge in both food and manners. The point of Lincoln explaining how to prepare meals was to teach girls that cooking was an honorable job. She states, that, “It is a part of education to be able to blacken a stove, to scour a tin, or to prepare a tempting meal of wholesome food, as it is to be able to solve a problem in geometry, to learn a foreign language.” Yet, “No matter how high her social position may be, no girl is sure of retaining it through life.” Hence, Lincoln's etiquette book was used by people to both learn and hold on to their class standing. Education and knowledge was an important part of culture during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, so being knowledgeable in cooking and manners was considered protocol. Neglecting the use of formal cooking and manners was a result of ignorance for the esteem and honorability of these skills (Lincoln, 1915). Etiquette relies on training and knowledge so that these expertise may be used to serve a class system and reinforce elitism (Beardsworth, 2002). Etiquette during this time in America was correlated with success and knowledge; hence, the books by Buchanen and Lincoln illustrate the intricate details that go into proper dining and food preparation that are essential in being seen as powerful and opulent as well as to move up in the rank of society. Etiquette was the practice of formal social strata, therefore the skills taught in these books were essential to achieve their goals of success.

The study of food has illuminated broad societal processes and assisted in value creation. The ritual of dinner has always been an important feature in all cultures but the rules of etiquette that have formed throughout time “cloak the proceedings with a system of rules about places and times to eat, specific equipment, decoration,

sequence, limitations of movement, bodily propriety which are not a biological necessity but a carefully cultured phenomenon” (Beardsworth, 2002). These sources reinforce the popular narratives about the history of food and eating because they provide a way to learn the accepted way to behave and can be used to protect power and class distinction just as books on good form are supposed to. “No society can survive or flourish unless its members accept rules governing food sharing and consumption” (Visser, 2003).

Yet, etiquette relies on training and knowledge so that these skills can be used to serve a class system. The history of everyday dining decorum is part of the ‘civilizing process.’ There is a transformation in behavior and culinary habits when broad social processes progress throughout time. As the rules of etiquette have change throughout history, people have become increasingly self-conscious and shameful as well as less impulsive because of historical changes have encouraged this ‘civilized’ behavior toward one another. These etiquette books show that it is important to eat food that is appropriate to status and respectability to display taste, respectability, knowledge and a ‘search for marginal differentiation’ between classes (Beardsworth, 2002). Therefore, books on etiquette were important in the late 19th and early 20th century because this was a time of social and economic change in which class stratification was a a main concern. These two sources show how important it was to pay meticulous attention to detail in both in cooking a wholesome meal and planning a reputable, dignified dinner for guests. The documents were used in response to peoples concern for appearing distinguished at this time. Proper etiquette, like knowing how to handle cutlery, was a way of being considerate to others and presenting knowledge and sophistication. Etiquette books are used today for people who want to ‘polish’ their manners, “including their table manners, in order to become upwardly mobile” (Visser, 2003).

Therefore, these etiquette books by Mrs. D. A. Lincoln and Abby Buchanen express the necessary formalities that must be learned in order to survive in the higher social stratum of American society in the late 19th and early 20th century. Today, these values are not as eminent, showing that changing social systems influence the food system. Throughout history, etiquette books would reinforce themes of social hierarchy.

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