Food consumption and urban poverty: an ethnographic study

Pierluigi Musarò*

1. **Author/s information**
*   Department of Sociology and Business Law,
        University of Bologna (Italy)

2. **Contact authors' email addresses**
*   pierluigi.musaro@unibo.it

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Pierluigi Musarò

Pierluigi Musarò, University of Bologna (Italy), Department of Sociology and Business Law

Corresponding author:
Pierluigi Musarò
E-mail: pierluigi.musaro@unibo.it

Abstract

Focusing on the emergence of old and new forms of social fragility, the paper investigates the dynamic and multi-dimensional relationship among food consumption, urban spaces and population living below the poverty line. Our starting point is that food is primarily a social fact. In cooking, eating and feeding one another, humans have throughout history celebrated the social nature of food consumption, the fact that food sends messages to body and mind, and that the journey from field and farm to kitchen and mouth is a social journey, made attractive by the bonds of kinship, friendship and companionship.

Drawing on case studies, participant observation and non-standard interviews on life history, the empirical study in this article explores the experiences of food insecurity among urban soup kitchen consumers in soup kitchens and day centers in Bologna, North of Italy, and in Kent, South-East of England. In particular, on the basis of a comparative ethnographic research (which counts on 83 in-depth interviews), realized in 4 soup kitchens and 2 day centres in Kent, South-East of England and in Bologna, North of Italy, the article reflects on the limits of welfare state and, specifically, exploring the cost of social stigma and isolation which are experienced by the poor who have to accept humiliating social spaces and conditions in which they consume food.

Keywords: soup kitchen; food; poverty.

Introduction

The recent economic crises have brought changes in the behavior of consumers, who have begun to worry about the future, modifying and restricting their consumption. In recent years, looking at the national and European food consumption, there has been a depletion of food habits and a constant reduction on foodstuff purchases. For instance, Istat data on Italian households, concerning the first quarter of 2013, show how we are getting poorer and changing our consumption patterns significantly and in particular the food ones[1].

The outbreak of crisis in advanced economies has produced the need to reconsider the traditional categories of analysis. The pattern of food consumption in times of crisis should be interpreted considering that the purchase of goods is deeply linked to the perception that each individual has of himself and his place in the socio-economic context. Since consumption has been the most powerful communication tool of the social role of individual (Codeluppi 2005; Secondulfo 2012), quit the level of consumption and well-being achieved means admit themselves, and to the others, a personal defeat. This is the reality for many people today, living with inadequate economic resources and facing the need of manage a family budget. The situation is still worst for those who live "on the edge" of society, forced to turn to the services of local welfare begging for a hot meal (Bovone, Long 2009; Bergamaschi, Musarò 2011). According to the latest Eurostat analysis on poverty and social exclusion, about 80 million Europeans (16% of the total population) live below the poverty line; including 40 million citizens who live in state of severe poverty and 16 million who depend on food aid. Furthermore, almost a quarter of the population of the Union, about 120 million people, live at risk of

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[1] http://www.istat.it/it/files/2013/05/Rapporto_annuale_2013.pdf, accessed 27/09/2013.

poverty, for whom it can not be ruled out the need to contact the charity soup kitchen. In 2012 these structures registered the number of users double comparing to the previous year[2].

This essay will focus on the most vulnerable subjects of population, forced to accept and consume their meal on conditions and places that can be humiliating. These people do not necessary belong to severe marginalized group, long known and present in the care system. The latter, which already comprehends differentiated and articulated figures, is not necessary connected to a single established condition (Guidicini, Pieretti, Bergamaschi 1995; Lavanco, Santinello 2009).

Despite a well-established research branch on poverty, sectorial researchers have not yet focused specific attention around nutritional issues of the most disadvantaged sectors of population. In the few studies in which this aspect is analyzed, it is only considered as one of budget items available for most poor people, it is finally a budget item on which possible exercise restrictions "to adjust the expenditures". Only recently "food poverty" has become a central subject, considered as a form of specific poverty parallel with those who have already been recognized and studied (Campiglio, Rovati 2009). The persistence of food deprivation forced to tackle questions related to the relationship with the food of underserved groups in large sectors of the European population. The empirical research on working-class families of the nineteenth century by Le Play or Halbwachs, observed that, for social groups and individuals, consuming was not just related to acquire certain assets individually, but to take part to the life of their time, according to social representations (habitus) obtained over time (Capuzzo 2006). The same Bourdieu (1983), establishing the contrast between the «taste of luxury» and the «taste of necessity», highlighted how power defines specific cultural boundaries, becoming a vehicle for solidarity and for differences among people.

In the past thirty years, there has been a flowering of literature on consumption across a wide range of disciplines. Scholars in history, anthropology, cultural studies, literature, sociology, geography, and marketing (among others) have studied consumption from a large number of angles, with a multiplicity of research methods and perspectives (Miller 1995). The emergence of this new field of consumption studies have enormously enhanced scholars' understandings of the emergence and growth of consumer society; how consumers experience their consumption activities and goods, subcultures, consumer agency, and meanings; and much more dimensions of consumption. These are important contributions. However, we will argue that for some strange reason, literature on consumption sees it as part of the theory of the upper classes. This might be due to the excess of influence of Veblen's classic work on «conspicuous consumption» (1925) based on the spending patterns of the rich and *nouveau riches* in the late nineteenth century, which influenced many other subsequent scholars. For much of the twentieth century, class-based status-driven models were the dominant approach to consumption, especially within U.S. sociology. From the authors of Frankfurt School to Duesenberry (1949) and Galbraith (1958), who focused on the economic approach to consumer demand, to the more recent critiques of Baudrillard (1970), Ritzer (1993) and Bauman (2001), who theorized transformations in late capitalism to a shift in the mode of domination from the modern exercise of repression to the postmodern exercise of seduction, consumption has been considered important only for the "leisure class" with excess income, as a means of signaling power, rank and social honor.

On the other hand, since the 1970s cultural studies have shifted from a critical to an interpretive framework that has relied far more on consumers' own interpretations of their actions and what consumption means to them (Appadurai 1986). Postmodern consumer theory also rejected Veblen and emphasized an active consumer making her or his own meanings, undaunted by symbolic meanings intended by producers or any hegemonic structure (de Certeau 1984). Scholars of consumption have struggled to demonstrate that consumption should not be trivialized or moralized (Campbell, 1987; Slater 1997; Slater, Miller 2007; Sassatelli 2004) and several have emphasized the possibility of consumption as an important mean for achieving equality and sustainability (Martens, Spaargaren 2005; Paltrinieri 2012), they have rarely considered consumption practices, and its social and symbolic significance yet, for marginal and destitute populations of the world. In this process, the poor were confined to the domain of mere survival and their consumption practices were dismissed as biophysical gestures, of no symbolic interest (Appadurai 2011). Some exceptions to this trend were

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[2]http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/People_at_risk_of_poverty_or_social_exclusion, accessed 24/09/2013. For an analysis of poverty and material wellbeing in Europe and Italy, see: Cecchi (2013).

Mary Douglas or Pierre Bourdieu, who paid considerable attention to the commensal patterns of the poor in England or France. Underlining the social and symbolic significance of their food rituals, they noted that these patterns had a great deal to do with community, solidarity, communication and festivity.

In line with Mary Douglas (1987) studies, the essay focuses on a depth ethnographic analysis. It detects the *capabilities* of most vulnerable (Sen 1994) to negotiate their needs, exploring the limits of the welfare state in recognizing the dignity of needy citizens and the cost of social stigma related to the places of distribution of food. In order to investigate the dynamic and multi-dimensional relationship among food consumption and population living below the poverty line, the article explores whether living under economic and social marginal conditions doesn't constitute by itself the presupposition of exclusively following the logic of need and its satisfaction, recognizing the activation of processes of negotiation for necessities, also of those more fundamental or basic, than those alimentary.

Drawing on case studies, participant observation and non-standard interviews on life history, the empirical study in this article explores the experiences of food insecurity among urban soup kitchen consumers in soup kitchens and day-centers in Bologna, North of Italy, and in Kent, South-East of England. In particular, on the basis of a comparative ethnographic research (which counts on 83 in-depth interviews), realized in 4 soup kitchens and 2 day-centres in Kent, South-East of England and in Bologna, North of Italy, the article reflects on the limits of welfare state and, specifically, exploring the cost of social stigma and isolation which are experienced by the poor who have to accept humiliating social spaces and conditions in which they consume food.

2. Food is never just food

Today, food is one of many things we take for granted, we do not give to it a particular meaning because it has always been present and will always be present in our lives. We always eat what we want and when we want; when we are hungry, it is enough to open the fridge and choose. Everyone never thinks that behind a simple steak or plate of pasta there is a story, feelings and whole theories that make that plate one of our favourites.

The act of eating is related to the body of a person, biologically related. Food in fact gives energy, power. It is the fuel of our bodies. A good diet can permanently influence the structure of ones body: skin tone, weight, strength of bones, condition of hair and nails, digestion, are all commonly said to be directly affected by the diet (Lupton 1996). However, «food is never just food» (Caplan 1997). We do not eat food in a social vacuum and we do not eat nutrients but whole food. Food is intimately related to someone's feelings, emotions, social inclusion and exclusion, cultural ideas, meaning of health and personal identity. As argued by Levi Strauss (1964): food, in order to be good to eat (bonne a manger) it must be good to think of (bonne a penser).

On this purpose, Bakthin (1984, 281) argues that «at the simplest, biological level, by the act of eating and absorption of food, we become what we eat. By taking food into the body, we take in the world». Individuals eat something instead of something else because food is related to how individuals perceive themselves or would like to be perceived by others. On this sense, «food is central to our sense of identity» (Fischler 1988, 275) because through incorporation, food becomes the self.

Food is primarily a social fact: apart from its biological functions, food has many social, cultural and psychological functions. Food is an important vehicle for social relationships, communication and control. Not only it conveys friendship, integration and acceptance, but also social status, differences in social standing, and exclusion as well (Parmiggiani 1997). As argued by Appadurai (2011, 4): «In cooking, eating and feeding one another, humans have throughout history celebrated the social nature of food consumption, the fact that food sends messages to body and mind, and that the journey from field and farm to kitchen and mouth is a social journey, made attractive by the bonds of kinship, friendship and companionship».

Is this also the case for the poor? If this is true in our lives when commodities are present, how is the relationship between food and a person that everyday has to struggle with scarcity of resources including deprivation of food? If it is true that when we talk about food we are talking about someone's life, personality and culture than, it is interesting to understand this relationship when talking about someone living in a situation of exclusion and marginalization.

The author is aware that poverty obviously reduces the possibility of choosing what we can eat and in what place. From this point of view it is interesting to note that price and availability of food are two variables that affect the relationship between socio-economic position and food purchasing, as well as different perceptions may contribute to socio-economic inequalities in food purchasing (Atkins, Bowler 2001).

The main idea of this paper is based on the concept that living in a marginalized situation with a scarce economical availability does not drive someone to satisfy only his physical needs but also emotional ones. These situations may drive to the activation of negotiation processes of all needs; also of those that are considered fundamental, such as the need of eating, through activities of getting food and satisfy the feelings of hunger.

Moreover, although it is obvious that food and poverty are strictly connected – Hickey and Downey (2003) had shown how "food poverty" has become an increasingly recognized aspect of living on a low-income and of being socially excluded – the literature has mainly focused on them separately, or when scholars were considering them together, they referred mainly to developing countries. On this purpose, there are studies on the relationship of food and poverty in Asia and Africa (Ntiamoa-Baidu 1997; FAO 2002), the literature has been in lack of studies yet about this connection in developed countries, except for some researches done by homeless charities and pressure groups (Salvation Army 2008).

In this study we cannot consider the complex relationship that interviewed people have with the assistance circuit, nor the differences between the Italian welfare system and the English one. So we are considering more important aims of the study in this actual phase where old and new poverty and old and new forms of social fragility come to light in Europe (Valentine 1999).

So, in the case that living under economic and socially marginal conditions doesn't constitute by itself the presupposition of exclusively following the logic of need and its satisfaction, the paper aims to answer to the following questions: how is the symbolic and social relationship with food for someone that everyday struggles because of scarcity of resources, including deprivation of food? Do marginalized people consume food only to fill in their belly or have further meanings? How important are rituals and spaces where these activities are held? What role does social stigma play in the relationship between food and the construction of their identity?

3. Aims and settings of the research

In order to explore the qualitative aspects of the relationship between food and poverty, the research has focused on the soup kitchens that offer food and other services for the poor in Bologna and Kent county, specifically in the cities of Dover, Folkestone and Canterbury[3]. In both cases we are referring to two rich European areas, with a low percentage of homelessness, and with many places and services where food is given for free.

Presuming that soup kitchens have a "mirror use", because it is in these places where social situations usually hide becoming visible, we have initiated to a mapping of places in both geographic contests where primary food needs are partially satisfied to those who have not other economic and relational possibilities (Glasser 1988).

 Both researches have selected three centres in each city and the same research methodology has been applied. In Bologna, the research has focused on: Antoniano, Santa Caterina soup kitchen, and Via del Porto day centre. In Kent the three centres that have been selected are: Dover soup kitchen, Salvation Army in Folkestone, and Catching Lives in Canterbury. Obviously, on both cases these were not the only centres that were offering this kind of services, but they were the largest ones as well as the most inserted in the local welfare state.

In this way it has been possible to observe the consumption practices of offered food to their consumers through structures, to intercept a variety of life situations exclusively united by the necessity

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[3] This research is constituted of two phases. On first instance (July 2007 - June 2008), three centres that offer food and other services for the poor in Bologna have been identified. The results of this research are published in *Trading Spaces. Urban Poverty and Food Consumption* (Bergamaschi, Musaro, 2011). The second phase has been part of a research project that took place three years later (September 2011 - March 2012) in the Kent County. I am grateful to Anna De Pretto for the field work.

to satisfy a food need. From this point of view, the essay aims to take a deeper look into the analysis of a phenomenon which is too often reduced to quantity aspects.

The three centres in Bologna can shortly be described as follow.

Antoniano, originally called "the restaurant for the poor": it is a religious centre founded by *Frati Minori* of Emilia-Romagna county in 1954. Nowadays, it is open only for lunch, at 11.30 am and it serves around 60 dishes every day. In 1929 it was something closer to a soup kitchen where the poor were eating the same soup of the monks. In that time, there was not a real structure, no kitchen, no tables, and no cutlery. From 1954, the poor were able to eat in a friendlier place. Between 1950 and 2007, Antoniano was offering the so-called "Armadio del povero", which is the service that offers clothes that the population has donated to the needy. The shower service has been active since 2003, everyday from Monday to Saturday from 8 am until 3 pm. Today this centre offers different services that are named Antoniano Onlus[4].

Santa Caterina soup kitchen: it is the *Caritas* soup kitchen placed in the centre of *Fraternità San Petronio*. This place is open since 1992, only for dinner, at 6.30 pm, serving around 120 dishes every day. This organization, beside of food related services, offers to the needy the possibility to shower (this service started in 1993 for the refugee that were arriving in Italy from ex-Jugoslavia), three afternoons per week. In order to be able to use this service it is necessary to book it on advance. It is also possible to get clothes that have been donated. Moreover, in the afternoon (between 3 pm and 6 pm) there is a room where people can have rest and socialize with the other individuals in the centre[5].

Via del Porto day centre: this is a centre that belongs to the local welfare state and two no profit organizations are on charge of the structure: *Nuova Sanità* organizes the food service, while *La Strada* helps the needy to get inserted back in the society. Although this centre daily offers 55 meals, its main objective is to offer something more than just simple nourishment. It is, in fact, possible to identify three levels of help that this place offers: welcoming clients, socialisation and entertainment with recreational activities, and instructive help through work groups. In this day centre it is possible to eat from 12 am until 2 pm, however the place is opened from 11 am till 5 pm. During the whole day the users can relax while playing cards, watching tv, listening to music, sleeping and reading. By time-to-time volunteers organize various activities, such as labs of art or writing in a Blog[6].

The three centres that have been selected in Kent are: The Dover soup kitchen, which is what is literally called a soup kitchen. As quoted in their website: "The Dover Soup Kitchen, founded by Steph Perrow in 1991, is a resource for the homeless, elderly, lonely and poor in Dover, providing free hot meals and clothes, and creating a sense of belonging and community"[7]. Three local Christians organize it, and it relies on a large group of volunteers, made up of members from churches across Dover and Deal (two towns placed on the seaside in the south of the Kent area), and those without a church connection. This soup kitchen offers 10-15 meals a day and is open from 6 pm till when the food finishes: usually this is just twenty-thirty minutes after the opening time. In order to be sure to have their dinner, clients have to arrive in front of the centre, which is located in a 'container', much earlier and wait, in the dark, standing.

The Salvation Army in Folkestone, is a drop in centre open every day but it focuses only on breakfasts for the poor, which is served from 8.30 am till 10.00 am.[8] The rest of the day this centre offers other services for another types of clientele such as the elder and children. This is a religious organization and as such many clients participate to the church services that are offered. As argued by the Salvation Army Manager of Folkestone: "the clientele are mainly poor people, and a few people who feel lonely and seek some company and somewhere they can socialize".

Catching Lives is a day centre in Canterbury that during the coldest months of the year it also offers a night shelter service. Catching Lives is one of the biggest centre in the area of Kent and therefore it also has the highest number of users that come from everywhere in the county. It is an independent charity where the main aim is to catch the lives (as the name highlights) of homeless, vulnerably housed people in Canterbury and nearby who have fallen through the gap of poverty and feel they have nowhere else to turn. It offers food twice a day (breakfast and lunch). It is somewhere to spend

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[4] http://www.antoniano.it, accessed 22/09/2013.

[5] http://www.fondazionesanpetronio.it, accessed 22/09/2013

[6] http://www.poverivergognosi.it/_226.htm, accessed 22/09/2013.

[7] http://www.doversoupkitchen.org, accessed 22/09/2013.

[8] http://www.salvationarmy.org.uk, accessed 22/09/2013.

the day in a warm place from 9 am till 2.30 pm. Catching Lives works closely with partner organisations, other support charities or through specialist case workers within the centre. The centre also offers access to medical and dental services-care, which is often impossible for the visitors to access anywhere else. On average, it offers 18 meals a day, however only lunches are counted; people that only have their breakfast are not registered on the statistics since breakfast is free and the way it is organized is more similar to a "all you can eat" service between 9 am and 10.30 am. Lunch is served between 11.45 am and 12.30 pm.[9]

The research will focus on the meanings that are the basis of food the consumption of poor people. At first we have tried to describe the different profiles that make up this fluctuating users, and the conditions that lead to take advantage of these meal distribution services. A socio-anthropological work has supported this first quantity phase which intended to study the relationship that people have with food and verify the assumptions of research by a direct observation of the use of places and meal time, by 83 interviews with consumers, managers and operators of canteens. This second part of the study has been made possible by the presence of researchers as volunteers in these structures for six months. It has been paid particular attention to the direct or latent ability of consumers of soup kitchens to negotiate the consumption of food in a context of marked deprivation. The essay will focus on this second part of the research.

4. Persons, spaces, food

Data collected within the six centers show that users are mainly men, in their early or late '40s and they can be included within the range 36-50 years old. To what it concerns the gender, in both researches males are more likely to attend one of these centers. To what it may concern the nationality, it is possible to state that although in the soup kitchens more than 50% of the clients are foreigners, in both day centers users are mainly originally from the country where the centre is placed (Italian for the three centres in Bologna, 85% and British for the three centres in Kent, 81,5%).

Access rules are more restricted to the two day centres than canteens. There has often been poor people in charge of social services for the longest time. These data show the poorest people are rooted in the urban, where path of impoverishment are developed and, even though they are different, converging in situations of severe marginalization. The social composition of users is composite and the presence is fluctuating. A lot of interviewers claim to be homeless and use the canteen as "the last resort" or "lifeline", underlining the absence of a family structure or a network of support. These data confirm a poverty which is not only a deprivation in the subsystem of economic resources, but also an isolation and lack of relational supports mobilizing in times of need (Beck 2000).

In fact, lack of family and loneliness seem to emerge as coordinates in which the biography of most users of centres is written both in Bologna and in Kent. This also explains fundamental differences in the ways in which are experienced different places. Changing from the user profiles to the role of food consumption practices having in their path of daily life, we can report a clear distinction emerges between short time spent sitting at table or standing for the distribution of hot food in Dover and prolonged hours in daily centres by participant observation and by interviews.

Where most structure managers and those who work most of all at centres of religious inspiration have answered that there is the awareness of how food is a way of making social relationships, interviewees say that a soup kitchen seems to satisfy only a primary need.

From one hand professionals say that the food is a "hook" for approaching marginalized groups of population in a place where a spirit can be nourished, a bonus-prize for the ones who do a reintegration gradually, a useful moment of a day creating a sphere of sharing that makes feel homeless people at home. On the other hand, most users say that soup kitchens are a border service in low-threshold, which slaps a band aid on an urgent need. Even though users knowing functional value of nutritional plan both in the interviews made in Italy and in Britain, they consider these structures as a necessary safety net, a necessary stop during the day, a place where they can have a meal in a rapid way and alone.

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[9] http://www.catchinglives.org/ccs, accessed 22/09/2013.

Raising an objection to the stigma that users combine to these places, there have been a foreign component of users and the ones who go more to day care centres of Bologna and Canterbury than to soup kitchens. In fact, in both contexts foreign people are less discriminating towards soup kitchens that provide services (day centres). For a lot of people it is a break looking for a job or learning a language during a day. It is a free "fast food" where there is the possibility to meet their countrymen and a step towards a gradual insertion into the host society. Even though soup kitchen is an obligatory stop for the whole who go there, for Italian and Britain citizens it seems a tangible sign of social defeat. While for those coming from abroad it is a refreshment place which is part of an inclusion process.

As regards who go to day centres it is easier to find correspondence between their statements and the ones of service employees. Compared with meal eaten in a hurry at soup kitchens, observing day centres you can see groups of people who tend to be located to share meal time especially after lunch in "tested" places. The presence of recreational activities (TV, game cards and newspapers in Bologna, foosball table, stereo, TV, computer and books in Canterbury), more open and dynamic physical location of spaces (in addition to the dining room, there are other rooms where performing various tasks, as using a washing machine at Catching Lives, or simply stop, maybe on the 3 sofa in the dining room of Canterbury), extended hours and a load more sets. These are all elements which promote the socialization of users, turning often lunch in a collective ritual.

In contrast to soup kitchens, whose spatial and functional organization seems stiff and more suited to a short and irregular frequency, the physical structure and activities of day centres seem to favor the socialization of users among themselves and with the same experts.

Finally, nobody complains of suffering hunger or the quality of served dishes in the relationship with the food served in various structures in Italy as in Kent. If interviewees of Bologna know it isn't also difficult eating three time a day, the ones of Kent underling the fortune of living in a place where nobody is hungry. This is also possible for charitable structures and the others which give a hot meal in an articulate "survival circuit" everyday. Apart from Dover Soup-Kitchen case, where a single dish is served, the other considered structures offer a very careful dietary value. Keeping out some complain of those who go to the day center in Via del Porto and say that foods are precooked and put into aluminium boxes, in the other soup kitchens food is cooked on site. Practically, everyone evaluated served food of good quality, so the quantity of cooked portions. On the other hand, a full menu is often served in five of the six inspected places. It includes a first course, a second and / or a boundary, same bread, and in some cases fruit and / or sweet (at the day center of Canterbury, for example, it is served a different pudding every day).

The great majority of interviewees complain about the impossibility of change or at least customize a dish, which is choosing "a different meal" for special occasion, a typical food in the feast-day or a different spite in the "usual dish". Beyond some precautions (avoid serving a pork that the Muslims users do not eat, and vary the diet of a person if there are proved health reasons in Bologna), when you find yourself sitting in the soup kitchen everyday it appears to be equal to another, every origin or ethnic origin canceled. In England, for example, different users underline their denied desire of a vegetarian food. Different elements which are well summarized in a manner of speaking often recorded during of interviews realized in Kent: "*beggars can't be choosers.*"

5. Conclusion: the role of food in the poor's life

Our society is living a moment of change and therefore also the definition of the poor is changing: nowadays we moved from poverty to poverties (Castel 1995). The typical user of day centres is strictly connected to the changes that society is living: there are cases of divorced men that after breaking up they cannot afford a house anymore and those young men that after school cannot find an appropriate job and so they end up in day centres in order to be able to eat. Unlike popular stereotype, the population of the soup kitchens is not all the time the typical homeless person, the so called *clochard* asking for money to people who walk in front of him, someone who is dirty and sleeps under the bridges. Poor people not always look dirty, drunk or are begging on the street. They mostly look like us, mature or young people that live on the street (or have a house), with their plastic bags in their hands (Bell, Valentine 1997).

Throughout this paper, I have argued that eating in a day center or soup kitchen could be recognized not only as a moment of stigmatization but also as a way of acceptance someone's incapability of satisfy his own primary needs and also acceptance of what they serve you without possibility of choice. This is what anyone would think straight away when talking about consuming food in these kinds of places.

Through food someone's personality and someone's culture arises, grows and changes. Food is a sort of indicator of all these aspects. Food allows people to have souvenirs about their childhood, their habits in special occasions (Christmas or birthdays) and it lets people to have daily moments where they can focus on their own tastes. Food is all this. In the choice of our daily alimentation there is a strong influence with symbolic meanings and social conventions. It is very rare that people eat anything they find and with whoever is around them. Usually individual can choose what to eat, where to eat, when and with whom. Food satisfies the human hunger, and it also helps men to organize their social lives, to structure social classes and tastes but not only this.

According to Ashley et al. (2004), eating in developed countries becomes a social and family event, an act of pleasure that goes beyond the ingestion of the necessary nutrients to sustain life probably also in situation of extreme poverty. These statements, all together, destroy the truthfulness of the old English say: *"Beggars can't be choosers"*.

Day centers do not only offer food as soup kitchens. They also offer a place to spend the day, a warm place. While users are inside, they can participate to different activities that are offered by volunteers and members of the staff or they can just relax or socialize with the other users, with staffs and volunteers; they can also shower, do their laundry, learn how to sew, read and use computers. The British day centre, for example, also offers access to medical and dental services; care which is often impossible for the visitors to access anywhere else.

Also the organization of the space and activities help the poor to get back inserted into the society and towards a new beginning. This is helped also by the way these places are structured; the way tables are positioned as a sort of invitation for the users to stay together, to chat. This is a clear indicator that in these day centers people have firstly to try to build social relationships in the social environment where they eat in order to be able, then, to live and get inserted back in the society. The day centre is a small society, a landmark for those that live on the borders of the main society. Most of the people in here do not have a family any more therefore do try to feel like at home when they are in the centre. People do behave like at home; they activate routine activities and repeat them every time they are in the shelter. Some people always sit on the same chair, with the same people around. The repetitivity of these kinds of actions is a way to mark their territoriality. Space in fact is strictly related to someone's personality. And again, also food is strictly connected to the rituals and the space someone is acting.

In conclusion it is possible to state that if it is true that food is never just food, also within day centers and soup kitchens, places where people do not own much, food is a way to socialize, to make friends, food helps to find who can help you to get out of your problems. Food is what you are; food is what you want to be. Food helps you to survive, not only physically but also mentally. It helps needy people to forge their capabilities and conquer their freedom (Sen 1994).

On the whole we can see the importance and consequence of possible or not possible "room for manoeuvre" in the relationship among people, places and food. As regards soup kitchens which can ideally offer a house to the poor, understood in the widest sense of meanings the logic of social urgency do not often support those daily rituals through which we have available of common meanings for giving a sense to the reality (Douglas 1985). It is true eating one's house foods satisfying the hungry of soul, also symbolically coming back to a known place and where we feel protected. It is also true the impossibility of choosing or participating in the preparation or only in the distribution of foods which reduce users in a passive role, following the image of a poor person as the one who always confide in the others. In fact, in Italy some interviewees desire to be involved in choosing and cooking of foods. On the contrary, today the interviewers of Catching Lives are proud of being involved in cooking and staying in the dining rooms.

Clearly, it is necessary a gradual professionalization of existence and consequently the restriction of manoeuvre fields of workers like users. A passage from an "ecumenical" relationship to a versification services to those people who are expelled in an older and older number to the margins of society, making it more difficult to identify canteens as places of spirit besides their stomach (Finkelstein 1989).

In theory, this means that food keeps emotional dimension and symbolic value for more helpless subjects, which is useful to share same culture, as a preferential viaticum for being part of the same community. Rather, being food primarily a social fact, as argued by Appadurai (2011, 8), the research «reminds us that even for marginal and destitute populations of the world, food spaces without friends, festivity and social connectivity become spaces of alienation, distress and loneliness». From interviews is clear that not only the impossible of menu choice does not promote the recognition of a symbolic-affective value when people eat but also being able to desire and aim for something. This is not directly related to the ability of grocery shopping.

Finally, we need to reconsider the link between poverty and welfare state, which endurance and legitimacy are today put into question (Honneth 1993, Bauman 2010). As argued by Di Nicola (2011, 38): «the minimal state, placing so much emphasis on individual interest and competition among isolated individuals, deprive of meaning and moral cogency (sense of mutual obligation) the enlarged solidarity principle among citizens, which is the basis of cohesion and social integration». It means that nowadays, admitting that "*no one dies of hunger*" in Europe - as it is often emerged from the answers of users – it is different from recognizing the right to food as a right of citizenship. If we interpret poverty and exclusion as a social deprivation and not simply as material injustices, it is clear the difficulty of charity structures or welfare state, which may create a material safety net for its poorer citizens but fail to grant them the gift of «recognition» (Habermas, Taylor 2002). This dilemma reminds us to the poor struggle with developing what Appadurai (2012) calls «the capacity to aspire», where and how they have access to the symbolic comforts of food consumption may be as important as their access to food itself.

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