



## *In Digestion:* **Processing Self in a Cycle of Consumption**

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**Abstract:** Ignorance is bliss, as the old saying goes and it is hard to imagine in today's world that one could possibly remain ignorant for long. We are inundated with information and media at every turn. From magazines to newspapers, from television to music, from the internet to PDAs, the availability of knowledge and resources has never been greater. And yet, when it comes to our consumption choices, especially those which involve the food we eat, many people are tuned out, uninformed or worse, misinformed by the magic of advertising. Drawing on the Marxist concept of alienation, I argue in this article that we as a society have perverted our relationship to the food we buy and eat and that this current trend in consumption separates us not only from the food but also from each other and our selves. I have been actively fighting this battle myself over the past few years. As Morgan Spurlock (2005:6) notes in *Don't Eat This Book*, "the epidemic of overconsumption that's plaguing the nation begins with the things we put in our mouths." I want to have a better understanding of the choices I make and at the very least, be aware of my own consumption patterns and how they impact my life.

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*The quality of food that we're eating is degrading so rapidly...We're eating more of it, because it's advertised so massively and it's so convenient...So we're always wanting to eat more and more and more, because there's something inside us that's saying we're not getting what we need and want...We lose touch with that inner compass by which we sense food is good for us. Instead, we give up control over what we eat to the corporations and the fast-food companies. (Robbins, as quoted in Spurlock, 2005:24)*

*Eating is never a simple matter of fueling the physical body; eating habits are*

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*reflective of interpersonal conduct, the pursuit of pleasure and a variety of social expectations. They indicate levels of social understanding and thresholds of tolerance for differences; they also have provided entertainment for individuals who cultivate their own tastes and knowledge of cuisines. (Finkelstein, 2003:198)*

*Food exists in transition, forever moving from the raw to the cooked, from the eye to the mouth, from the bare minimum necessary for survival to egregiously conspicuous consumption. (Ferguson and Zukin, 1995:196)*

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Drawing on the Marxist concept of **alienation**, I argue that we as a society have perverted our relationship to the food we buy and eat and that this current trend in consumption separates us not only from the food but also from each other and our selves.

I have been actively fighting this battle myself over the past few years. As Morgan Spurlock (2005:6) notes in *Don't Eat This Book*, "the epidemic of overconsumption that's plaguing the nation begins with the things we put in our mouths." I want to have a better understanding of the choices I make and at the very least, be aware of my own consumption patterns and how they impact my life.

My personal interest in this area began about three years ago, when my husband and I became members of a local farm through a program called Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). We actively sought to reduce our alienation from food and those who produce it. In "*I Only Thought I Knew It All: Society and The Individual*," author Cohen meditates on disconnection: "There is a way to overcome alienation. An effort must be made to become connected, and to know. To get past my feelings of alienation, people needed to get to know me" (2002:10). This same concept can be applied to our consumption habits. Rather than passively consuming whatever products had the most eye-popping packaging or catchiest jingle, we made an effort to get to know our food. We had been making a conscious effort to eat more fruits and vegetables and joining a CSA seemed to be a win-win situation. Marx would say that this arrangement is a **relation of production**, in that it involves associations that people have with each other to satisfy their needs. Through our membership, we bought a share of the farm's produce at the beginning of their growing season, which gives the farm much needed capital, and we reaped the benefits of having freshly picked, locally grown, food delivered to

our town each week as well as seeing the family who actually worked the land to yield such a wonderful harvest.

The sociologist James S. Coleman would argue that I was exercising a **rational choice decision** through my relationship with the CSA, in which I "act[ed] purposely toward a goal, with the goal (and thus the actions) shaped by values or preferences" (Ritzer and Goodman, 2004:429). My desire, or my preference, to try to eat more organically or at least eat food that was sustainably produced directed my actions so that I was moving toward that goal. We were trying to consume fewer overly processed foods that contained ingredients whose impacts on our bodies were questionable. By supporting a local farm, we not only moved closer to these goals but we became more invested in the foods we were eating. During that time, I became more educated about who the producers of my food were and what philosophies they held toward chemical additives as well as the environment. As stated earlier, information is everywhere and to be an educated consumer, one must make an effort to wade through the propaganda and reconnect.

Although I was unaware of the concept at the time, I was taking a **phenomenological approach** to my diet and nutritional choices. I began problematizing the basic routines of my life and questioning underlying assumptions that propped up these habits. I wanted to increase my consciousness of the choices I was making. I wanted to understand how those choices impacted me and my relationships with others and on what levels. Above all, I wanted to learn why I was making those choices. I was especially concerned with what I was eating and why. Was I eating because I was hungry for food or for something else? Was I using food to fill a void? Was I using food as a measure of self-control? Was I regulating my eating behavior to conform to the expectations of people around me? While "Why?" may seem like a simple question to

answer, in reality it took (and continues to take) a vast amount of soul searching. There are so many variables that impact each decision we make. To come to an honest answer, I must be willing to patiently observe the factors that influence the response, beginning with myself.

The definition of **self** has been of significant concern to **symbolic interactionists**, who focus on the dynamic interaction between actors and the social world, with a special focus on the actor's ability to think and communicate. George Herbert Mead's ideas on the **self** are a good place to begin this understanding. The self is the ability to be both subject (I) and object (me). The self is a social process that requires **reflexivity**, which allows us to put ourselves into someone's position. Ritzer and Goodman (2004:346) explain,

In order to have selves, individuals must be able to get "outside themselves" so that they can evaluate themselves, so that they can be objects to themselves. To do this, people basically put themselves in the same experiential field as they put everyone else. Everyone is an important part of that experiential situation, and people must take themselves into account if they are to be able to act rationally in a given situation. Having done this, they seek to examine themselves impersonally, objectively, and without emotion.

Charles Horton Cooley expands on the idea of reflexivity with the notion of the **looking-glass self**, which involves three elements. An individual imagines how s/he appears to others, then s/he imagine the others' judgment of her/his appearance, and finally s/he develops a self-feeling based on what her/his perception of what the others' assessment is.

Mead also emphasized the idea of the

duality of selves, the "I" versus the "me," which somewhat parallels the notion that a person can be both a subject and an object of reference. However, this dualism is a limited way of looking at the self. This is problematic because it fails to acknowledge the multiple selves within each individual. There are other conceptions of self that are more thorough and approach the idea of reflexivity among one's multiple selves, and not just between a singular self in relation to the social world.

The mystic G. I. Gurdjieff developed an understanding of humans as a three-brained being, wherein each brain controls a different center within the "master" self. According to Gurdjieff, our three brains, or centers, are the physical, the intellectual, and the emotional and each is equally important. However, most energy is expended on the relationship between the physical and intellection centers, at the expense of relationship between the intellect and the emotional and between the emotional and the physical. This leads to disharmony and fragmentation of the organism, making possible the arising of multiple fragmented selves. Fontana (1999:32) notes in *Learn to Meditate* that, "The Russian mystic Georgei Guridieff [sic] frequently pointed out that much of human misery is caused by the fact that we live our lives mechanically, never properly attending to what it is to be alive." By hurrying through experiences, our different selves do not have an opportunity to acclimate or comprehend what is happening and instead, the intellectual self takes over.

As demonstrated in the documentary, *Multiple Personalities*, even a conscious refusal to acknowledge our different selves does not prevent their existence. *Multiple Personalities* presented the stories of three individuals afflicted with multiple personality disorder. The thread that linked the individuals together was the inability to acknowledge painful events in each of their pasts and a total breakdown of communi-

cation among the selves which resulted in extreme cases of self alienation. Although there was a lack of conscious communication among the selves as well as awareness of various forms of self oppression, it was clearly demonstrated that the mind is able to live in multiplicity regardless. In order to understand why I make the choices that I do, I need to review and problematize the relationships among my different selves instead of using a model that unproblematically attributes singularity to the self.

To further examine my selves, I must take a **dialectical** approach to not only my intrapersonal relationships, but my external social interaction as well.

For the dialectical thinker, social influences never simply flow in one direction as they often do for cause-and-effect thinkers. To the dialectician, one factor may have an effect on another, but it is just as likely that the latter will have a simultaneous effect on the former...[dialectical thinkers] are always attuned to **reciprocal relationships** among social factors as well as to the dialectical totality of social life in which they are embedded. (Ritzer and Goodman, 2004:44)

Additionally, I should cultivate a greater understanding of my historical roots as well as current social trends that interest me and consider where they intersect and where there are points of conflict. It is important to bear in mind that reciprocal relations occur not just between actors and social structures, but within and across our selves. Examining contradictions within our selves can help solve the riddle of why we make the choices that we do.

Taking a **feminist** perspective, I wondered if I were subconsciously making changes to my diet in order to conform to the prevailing standard of beauty. As Jacobs

notes, "We need to have a certain type of body so that we can buy what we see in the magazines and on television, so that we can fit in the consumer society that we live in" (2003/2004:67). Additionally, in the article, "Re-embedding Trust: Unravelling [sic] the Construction of Modern Diets," Dixon and Banwell (2004:119) note that, "Consumer sovereignty results from consumers constructing, or adding, values not intended by the product creator. Foods and fashions are used, for example, by consumers to position themselves in the world." A **radical feminist** would argue that the standard of beauty is a form of violence perpetuated by the **patriarchy**, which maintains social inequality through domination and control. "Violence exists whenever one group controls in its own interests the life chances, environments, actions, and perceptions of another group, as men do to women" (Ritzer and Goodman, 2004:453). Since it is impossible to realistically escape from the torrent of images of women's bodies, to what extent were my eating habits influenced by this distorted iconography? Was I succumbing to **informal social control**, which regulates behavior through social pressure and customs? Taking the **structural functionalist** perspective of Talcott Parsons, had I, as an actor, fully integrated the norms and values of the social system in order to maintain the social equilibrium or in this case, status quo? Was I secretly longing for a visible rib cage and protruding hipbones that were sported by models and celebrities? Did I unconsciously aspire to waifish proportions because it was the social expectation? Had I **internalized** these norms as a part of my consciousness and if so, to what extent?

When I was younger, I think I allowed myself to be more easily influenced by the standard of beauty. I bought into the fantasy of feminine beauty and used it as a shield. When feeling overwhelmed in the face of adult responsibilities and decisions, the standard of beauty gave me a resound-

ing answer of what a woman “should” be everywhere I looked. At the time, contrary to being a cage that restrained me, the standard of beauty was an escape that allowed me to be free to assume different **roles**, which are “sets of behaviors, expectations, and obligations associated with a particular social position” (Steele, 2004:23). Conforming to the promoted **norm**, or social rule, required little critical thinking and allowed me to explore who I wanted to be. Moreover, conforming permitted me to hide in plain sight. At a time when I was unsure as to who I was as a person and as a woman, being able to blend in gave me time to develop my ideas and thoughts so that I could stand out when I wanted to and on my own terms. Today, however, the desire to live up to the standard of beauty plays a much smaller role in my life. It may have to do with being more mature or with having a stronger sense of self that I no longer have to comply so closely with others’ expectations. Being more comfortable with my **self-identity**, with my own notion of myself, has afforded me the ability to place less value on conformity. I realize that while I do make a conscious effort to not become overweight, I also recognize that I may never be a “perfect” woman according to current standards and that I am okay with that.

More than appearances, my curiosity about why I choose my particular eating habits is fueled by the possible health ramifications of those choices. As someone with some concern about her genetic history, I try to control for potential looming illnesses and diseases through conscious diet and exercise, especially since what I do know is quite alarming. While I have always tried to maintain a balanced and nutritious diet, it comes as no surprise to me that my increased focus on my health came to the foreground on the verge of my twenty-seventh birthday; 27 was the age of my mother when she lost her battle with leukemia. Additionally, my maternal family is plagued with serious health problems and disease,

which reads like a laundry list of ailments: hypertension, diabetes, high cholesterol, cancer, stroke, atherosclerosis and so on. However, it remains unclear if these diseases that afflict my family are strictly genetic or influenced by lifestyle habits or a combination of the two. Because I have a strong internal health locus of control, I feel that my actions and my choices have a direct influence on my health and well-being. My grandmother, Dorothea, on the other hand, has a strong external health locus of control, meaning that she believes her health and well-being are primarily influenced by outlying factors over which she has no power. To me, my lifestyle, including my diet, is inseparable from my health and yet, to my grandmother, her lifestyle and her health are entirely separate spheres, where neither influences the other.

Because of our different points of view and varying awarenesses of ourselves as “three-brained” beings, our perspectives of what a meal is (or should be) are vastly dissimilar. My grandmother and I have a disconnection over food as **symbol** since we cannot seem to agree on what it represents. According to Finkelstein,

Food is both an empty and overdetermined signifier that functions as a text through which much of modern social life becomes intelligible. For instance, where and what we eat, with whom, and at what time of day or night are directly influenced by a variety of everyday factors such as age, gender, social status and income. Bell and Valentine (1997) have noted that “every mouthful, every meal, can tell us something about our selves, and about our place in the world.” (Finkelstein 2003:191)

While I am eager to establish the connection between each of my inner selves, my grandmother is less interested. One

could argue that our personal life histories color the way we interact with food. Despite being family, our individual biographies, including our historical contexts, our socioeconomic statuses, and our education levels, influence how we digest food, not only physically, but culturally, emotionally and intellectually. Finkelstein adds,

When an individual classified food items as either appealing or repulsive, he or she was exercising a sense of self. Choices in food, and the decision to maintain certain taboos and prohibitions, enabled the individual to prevent the dissolution of the self by controlling ingestion. (Finkelstein, 2003:192)

Because of our differences, a meal that should bring us closer together exposes an existing rift and driving us apart. This is clearly an instance of the **alienating** property of food. Our perspectives are **culturally relative**, meaning that our “way of life, its meanings, attitudes, values, and behaviors are relative to the context of that culture” (Steele, 2004:23). In order to develop a greater appreciation for my grandmother’s choices, I must **take the role of the other**, which is “the process through which people see the world through another person or another group’s perspective or position” (Steele, 2004:60).

My grandmother was a middle child of a **working class** family of thirteen and her early life was shaped by the struggles associated with growing up during the Great Depression. Her formal education came to an end shortly before she was to enter high school, when she became a maid at a local hospital. However, even though my grandmother may lack a high school diploma, she quickly learned the skills she needed to survive and to adapt to the adult working world. Throughout her life, she worked a variety of **pink-collar jobs**, which, besides being physically demanding, low paying

and providing few benefits, offered little status or **power**—i.e., “the social resource of having control over other people’s attitudes, beliefs, values, behaviors and experiences” (Steele, 2004:79). After spending years serving food to others and cleaning up after their lives, my grandmother takes solace in convenience foods. To her, prepared foods are a blessing: little time or effort is required to enjoy a tasty meal and there are few dishes to clean. Here, the disconnection between my grandmother’s physical, intellectual and emotional selves becomes apparent. For my grandmother, food is not necessarily about nutritional value or social ramifications but about rewarding herself with food she enjoys eating. Although she acknowledges that some of her prepared favorites, which are high in sodium and fat, are detrimental to her physical health and should be eaten sparingly in her diet, my grandmother rationalizes her behavior. She believes that, despite her current health problems and recommendations from her doctor, she is entitled to eat whatever she pleases simply because she is seventy-five years old and has outwitted the grim reaper thus far. She understands that her remaining time in this world is growing ever shorter and she feels that she deserves to indulge in satisfying her emotional needs.

Additionally, my grandmother came of age at a time when convenience foods were all the rage and were heralded as the way of the future. Moreover, the message associated with these convenience foods was that economic prosperity had arrived. From the vibrant packaging to the seductive advertisements, prepared foods were a symbol that life was good, especially when contrasted with the soup lines of the Great Depression or the rationing of food during World War II. As Finkelstein (2003:192) notes,

By 1914, large corporations were transforming the food industry in

America by introducing new technologies in food processing and distribution. Alongside these changes, World War I and the Great Depression also galvanized government bodies into exerting more control over domestic economic markets. Food businesses became more industrialized and more regulated through government interventions (such as taxation, revenue sourcing, and trade agreements) and the dietary habits and tastes of a vast population began undergoing change in a relatively short period of time.

Many Americans, not just my grandmother, bought these food products and the associated dream of a better, prosperous future. Spurlock (2005:107) cynically writes, “The American housewife was encouraged to simplify her chores and feed her family frozen OJ, frozen TV dinners, the Chicken-of-Tomorrow, “Potato salad from a package!,” Cheese Whiz, Jell-O Salads, Jet Puffed Marshmallows and all that other crap.” Food had become just another **commodity** to be bought and sold. This period of time also marks the beginning of the rampant consumption noted in the documentary *Affluenza*, which detailed the harmful effects of advertising and the consumerist lifestyle prevalent in America that is threatening to become a global issue.

Personally, I would love to **resocialize** or transform my grandmother’s beliefs and attitudes about food, which would result in her making more health conscious choices and improving her concept of self as well as her quality of life, because I would like to have her in my life for as long as possible. However, it would almost take a miracle for that to occur. Because as much as my grandmother may love me, my lone voice of opposition gets drowned out from the roar of advertising. As Eric Schlosser, author of *Fast Food Nation*, remarked in his in-

terview with Morgan Spurlock, the mastermind behind *Super Size Me*, food has become a processed industrial commodity which is scientifically designed to taste good.

It’s not food, at least not like [how] food used to be. We’ve gone from old-fashioned farming, ranching, chicken-raising, food handling and food preparation—in short, real ways to make real food—to mass-produced, mass-marketed, chemically enhanced processed food. Today, Americans spend about 90 percent of their food budget on processed food. And processed food isn’t really food, it’s chemicals. It’s like a huge science experiment. (Spurlock, 2005: 106-107)

Industrialized commodities, especially food, have undergone the process of **reification**, which tends to view “humanly created social forms...[as] natural, universal, and absolute things and as a result...people believe that social structures are beyond their control and unchangeable” (Ritzer and Goodman, 2004:55). People can barely remember a time when food wasn’t bought in a supermarket, but rather from the butcher, the baker, or the greengrocer. The act of shopping for food itself has been distorted and is now viewed as just another item on the to-do list. In Spurlock’s words,

Food shopping should be a pleasant, richly sensual experience, engaging all our senses—sight, touch, taste, smell. The way we used to “go to market” generations ago. The way many people in the world still do. But for us, “going to market” means a drive to some giant supermarket, where we rush our squeaky cart down mile-long aisles past endless rows of branded products, most of which are so her-

metically sealed in boxes, cans or plastic wrap you can't even tell there's food inside. (2005:229)

Harrison and Marske (2005) note that, "advertisements for even nutrient-poor items often feature messages implying that the advertised products are beneficial. The implication that such foods possess health benefits, although not technically false (e.g. one company's claim that its chocolate syrup is a fat-free food is legitimate), may nonetheless confuse children and their parents about what makes a food 'healthy.'" Moreover, advertisers with large marketing budgets work diligently to create nostalgia surrounding their product, which creates warm, happy memories and other positive feelings, which in turn will induce consumers to buy more of said product. While this disconnect of the food product from reality should be startling to most people, many consumers turn a blind eye and continue to buy into the fantasy. Spurlock believes that,

This is the power of advertising at work, of billions of hooks that've been cast into our heads in the last thirty years, billions of messages telling us what we want, what we need and what we should do to feel happy. We all buy into it to some degree, because none of us is as young as we'd like to be, or as thin, or as strong. (Spurlock, 2005:6-7)

There is little incentive for consumers "to look behind the counter" and see where their food actually comes from or how it is processed.

The documentary, *The Corporation*, explored how companies employ perception management, in which a specific view of life or thinking is communicated through advertising. Unfortunately, the image presented rarely coincides with the true corporate agenda of **capitalism**, whereby corpo-

rations in a free-market environment control the means of production and consistently place the interests of their bottom line above those of the public good. Companies repeatedly focus on increasing their profits and will use any dubious means to do so. This relentless message in the film was very upsetting, especially when one realizes that the corporations are not putting a gun to our heads to get our money. We are complicit in their cycle of greed. We become mindless consumers of goods, wrapped up in fashionable consumption and craving the created wants set forth by the corporations. We imbue corporations with **traditional authority**, which Weber defined as establishing a "belief in the sanctity of immemorial traditions and the legitimacy of those exercising authority under them" (Ritzer and Goodman, 2003:125). Corporations have been accepted as the new rulers and rarely is their power challenged or questioned. As Dixon and Banwell (2004:128) note, "Corporate power therefore becomes allied with technical-rational power of science to shape our core understandings of what is 'good for us'...to paraphrase Marx, people choose and make their identities and their diets, but not in conditions of their own choosing."

As Noam Chomsky said, "The ideal is individuals who are totally disassociated from one another, whose conceptions of themselves, sense of value is how many created wants can I satisfy." By blindly following slick marketing, consumers have fallen into the trap that Marx called the **fetishization of commodities**, where we assign a mystical reality to objects and worshipping them as though they were gods. How many of the goods that I purchase are from a genuine need and how many are from a created want? In capitalist America, it is unrealistic to assume that one can end their consuming entirely. Yet, developing one's awareness and being mindful can have an enormous impact. Consuming with purpose and being aware of what our

dollars are buying is a good start. I remain hopeful that mindless consumption can be **ameliorated**, even if the social problem is addressed by reforming one individual at a time.

As I have mentioned, I have been struggling with my own consumption habits and like my grandmother, I am a product of my circumstance. I grew up in a small middle-class family that made education a priority. I was able to graduate from high school unimpeded. Furthermore, when I began working to support myself, I worked in a **white-collar** office environment, which, although stressful, had none of the physical burdens associated with the work my grandmother performed. Although I did not have a college-degree, I was able to demonstrate my abilities as well as my eagerness to learn and was rewarded with several promotions, which culminated in a key position as an assistant vice president and manager of operations of a financial investment firm. Because I do not share my grandmother's experience of preparing and serving food as a vocation, when I get home at the end of a day's work, I enjoy cooking. Food is a source of creativity and an expression of the affection I feel for those for whom I cook.

Additionally, when I cook and eat at home, I have the most control over what I consume, which allows me to better monitor my consumption habits. As Kelly D. Brownell (2004:36) notes in *Food Fight*, "Eating out often means eating a lot and eating poorly, for both adults and children. The frequency of eating out is associated with higher calorie and fat intake and increased body weight, while eating meals at home is associated with better calorie intake." Being aware of my choices and taking responsibility for them allows me to acknowledge the different selves within me that are directing my decisions. There is an emotional urge to give in and gorge on cheap and tasty fast food or to indulge in salty snacks and sugary sodas. However, my intellectu-

al self reminds me that making such choices on a regular basis would be detrimental to my physical self due to the health problems and weight gain associated with nutrient poor food. Additionally, my emotional self would feel guilty and may turn to eating more food to make myself feel better, which would lead to more health problems and so on. Drawing on Robert Merton's concept of **anomie**, "where there is an acute disjunction between the cultural norms and goals and the socially structured capacities of members of the group to act in accord with them" (Merton, cited in Ritzer and Goodman, 2004:246), I believe it is possible to experience anomie within oneself as well and that the conflict experienced among the selves can cause stress which is manifested in behaviors deemed undesirable to one self, but which are highly coveted by another self. What is essential for me is not to entirely ignore the emotional need to be nutritionally **deviant** because it serves important internal functions. My nutritional deviance can remind me of why I deem certain eating behaviors acceptable and can also help promote change within the self that longs to stray from my "normal" behavior. In order to meet the goals that I have for myself, I must practice the art of moderation within the stratification of my selves. Happiness and self-fulfillment come from harmony and balance, not from avoidance. Allowing myself the pleasure of cooking a healthy, nutritious meal is something that satisfies my selves on most days and when the instance arises that I feel compelled to deviate, so be it.

Nevertheless, from time to time, the **feminist voice** in the back of my head ponders if I am doing this because a woman's place is presumed to be in the kitchen. Was I falling into the trap of the **second shift**, "the work that begins when a woman, who works outside the home for pay, returns home and provides all, or most, of the domestic labor in the home such as cooking, cleaning, and child care" (Steele, 2004:54)? I

am not alone in this concern. In "Beyond Bifurcation: Femininity and Professional Success in a Changing World," Rebecca Tink cites Dorothy Smith's theory of **bifurcation of consciousness**,

In which women are forced to maintain a dual consciousness in today's changing world. Women have to constantly worry about how to manage the household while also, now being expected to maintain an intelligent, thoughtful role in the larger society, are expected to devote attention to their careers and jobs. (2004/2005:35)

However, because I am fortunate to have a solidly egalitarian relationship with my husband, I can take comfort in the knowledge that our home is my castle as well as his and that I can leave societal expectations of what a woman "ought to do" at the door. We eschew the archaic notion of a wife as a man's **property**, in which my husband would "own" me and my labor, and instead come to a consensus about all important decisions that impact our life together.

Such important decisions definitely include our lifestyle, our habits, and our consumption. We have embarked on a journey together to be more mindful in our eating habits and to be more in touch with nature. To that end, we began a vegetable garden this summer and although it may seem cliché, there is really something wonderful and special about eating food that you nurtured yourself, from seed to harvest. It was exciting to come home each day and watch as tiny green sprouts developed into blooming plants that bore actual fruit! Putting forth the effort ourselves has given me a greater appreciation for the hard work required to keep an actual farm running. Additionally, I feel more responsible for food that goes to waste, which is why we compost any vegetables whose time slips away

from us so that we can replenish and give back to the soil that has given us so much. This ongoing consumption experiment has changed the way I view food. I no longer simply view food in terms of its **exchange value**, which Marx defines as objects that are exchanged in the market for money or other objects instead of being used immediately. Growing my own food has really opened my eyes to the **use value** of food, which is "produced for use by oneself or by others in the immediate environment; connected to the intimate relation between human needs and the actual objects that can satisfy those needs" (Ritzer and Goodman, 2004:54). In the fast moving modern world, being able to slow down and enjoy the process of growing produce has really been a gift.

While some theorists argue that we are now living in a post-modern world, I tend to agree with Anthony Giddens' idea of the **juggernaut** of modernity, in that we are in an advanced stage of modernity and that post-modernism is a future possibility. Furthermore, Giddens' **structuration theory** can be applied to food consumption:

With increased efficiency of global markets, not only is food abundant, but a diversity of foodstuffs is available for the consumer all the year round. In these circumstances, what one eats is a lifestyle choice, influenced by, and constructed through, vast numbers of cookbooks, popular medical tracts, nutritional guides and so forth. (Giddens, cited in Dixon and Banwell 2004:121)

The abundance and globalization of food provide examples of **distanciation**, or the separation of time and space. Whereas cuisine was once linked with a certain location, the industrialization of food allows it to transcend the time/space connection. For example, McDonald's offers the same

Americanized fast food, whether it is in the continental United States or Beijing or Paris. Another point highlighted by Giddens' structuration theory is **disembedding**, which is defined as, "the 'lifting out' of social relations from local contexts of interaction and restructuring across indefinite spans of time-space" (Ritzer and Goodman, 2004:546). Our food choices are no longer solely impacted by our families or our immediate environments. Other factors, especially those affiliated with mass media, have infiltrated our eating habits. Lastly, Giddens argues that **reflexivity** is a characteristic of modernity, in which "social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character" (Ritzer and Goodman, 2004:547). To me, reflexivity is especially important because I continually need to reevaluate my choices in light of the new information that I receive. It is through this exercise in reflexivity that I have become more aware of my consumption habits.

My consumption of food and my eating habits are not my only tendencies whose assumptions have been shaken through my phenomenological experiment. I am trying to take a step back from the capitalist consumption cycle and buy fewer things for which I do not have a legitimate need as well as cultivate a greater appreciation for the non-material things I have. I am trying to stop identifying myself with the things I *buy* and instead identify myself for who I *am*.

We are taught to consume. And that's what we do. But if we realized that there really is no reason to consume, that it's just a mind set, that it's just an addiction, then we wouldn't be out there stepping on people's hands climbing the corporate ladder of success. (River Phoenix)

I will question why I want to buy something, instead of mindlessly handing over a credit card. I will think about how commodities are produced and examine whether or not such practices are in line with my beliefs. I will draw inspiration from the film, *Brother Son, Sister Moon*, in which Francesco of Assisi shuns consumption and material wealth in order to regain purity in his spirit. I can only hope to emulate Francesco's courage when speaking for my own convictions, even if I were to be labeled mad in the process. I will continue to connect with nature and show Mother Earth the respect and honor she well deserves. I will continue to support local farms who share my values and I will seek out news ways to give back to the planet.

In order to break the cycle of consumption, being mindful of external habits is just the beginning. I must actively set aside time to meditate and listen to all of my inner selves, not just the dominant personality.

Self comes to be something to be reflected upon, altered, even molded...the self is a product of both self-exploration and of the development of intimate social relationships. (Ritzer and Goodman, 2004:548-9)

Instead of turning to "retail therapy" when feeling anxious or bored, I can go for a walk, or a hike, or practice yoga. I can turn the focus inward to observe why I feel the way I do and to not pass judgment on that feeling. Rather than rushing to be "happy" all of the time, which is impossible if the methods of attainment are consumption, I will just be. I want to develop an understanding, across all my selves, that I am who I am meant to be and that no amount of shopping will make me a better person. The only path to happiness and harmony is to accept and love oneself in all its divine imperfection.

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