

Bourgeois Consumption: Food, Space and Identity in London and Paris, 1850-1914

Review Number:

1198

Publish date:

Sunday, 1 January, 2012

Author:

Rachel Rich

ISBN:

9780719081125

Date of Publication:

2011

Price:

£55.00

Pages:

240pp.

Publisher:

Manchester University Press

Place of Publication:

Manchester

Reviewer:

Jennifer Davis

Over the past generation of scholarship, the history of consumption and material culture has emerged as a rich subfield of European history. From Victoria de Grazia and Ellen Furlough's groundbreaking anthology, *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective* (1997) to Daniel Roche's monumental *History of Everyday Things* (1997 French ed., 2000 English trans.), scholars of consumption have deepened our understanding of modern European law, politics, art, and culture through detailed attention to the goods that mediated social relationships. Consumption history unites insights from anthropology, sociology and economics with careful historical analysis to reveal what objects mean in cultural context.

Rachel Rich's book contributes to this growing field, and promises to investigate what, where and how people ate in 19th-century Paris and London. This is a worthwhile text for specialists in the field of consumption history and the history of foodways. Uniting a wide array of published and archival sources, Rich advances an argument that architectural design, class and gender identities shaped culinary consumption choices in the western European capital cities. As the title makes clear, the author strives to focus firmly on the urban middle classes. Her approach raised several questions for this reader. Who constituted the middle classes? Is middle class the same as bourgeois? According to Rich, the terms 'bourgeois' and 'middle class' function as synonyms, facilitating her comparison of similar types of people and their ideals in both London and Paris.

Rich explores five important eating 'sites' that defined the dining experiences of the urban middle classes:

family dinners, dinner parties, restaurants, social clubs, and the imaginative spaces found within prescriptive literature. In all five arenas, Rich proposes to mediate between culinary ideals and individuals' lived experience. Her research demonstrates that 'eating was a central element in the construction of both class and gender identities' (p. 17). This argument, while hardly controversial in the historiography of consumption, promises to attend more systematically to these categories of analysis than has previous scholarship. Furthermore, Rich contributes to the literature on consumption by providing a comparative context for her analysis. How did the meaning of food vary for middle-class men and women in London versus Paris in the last half of the 19th century?

Rich employs both published and archival sources from France and Britain to recreate dining practices. Prescriptive literature – including etiquette manuals, cookbooks, medical advice texts, and guidebooks – figures prominently throughout this analysis. Additionally, Rich incorporates manuscript correspondence and cookbooks, national surveys on food commerce, notarial archives, and social club records. Occasionally, it becomes clear that ideals of food preparation and exchange did not always reflect social practice.

The first chapter orients readers to the genre of prescriptive literature and the commonly acknowledged rules of eating. Rich positions her study within the historiography of conduct manuals, noting particularly the influence of Norbert Elias and Anna Bryson in her own reading of this genre.⁽¹⁾ However, Rich also integrates medical advice manuals and architectural treatises alongside etiquette manuals and cookbooks to comment more broadly on dining cultures. 19th-century prescriptive literature in Britain and France reflected remarkably similar ideals for dining within middle-class homes. First, gluttony was to be avoided while moderation was embraced. Of course, what constituted 'gluttony' varied depending on one's sex, age, and social position. Furthermore, injunctions against gluttony were undermined by the celebration of 'gastronomy' or knowledgeable, scientific dining.

Second, medical and etiquette authors advocated that their readers attend to food's nutritional value, again highlighting the age, class, and gender differences that required tailored nutritional advice. Finally, prescriptive literature recommended spatial divisions within the home to maximize privacy, segregate cooking from dining, and arrange the dining room and table. Rich notes that 'the expertise proffered in advice books published in London and Paris might differ in, for example, describing a house or an apartment as the ideal dwelling place, but were easily recognizable as proffering advice that stemmed from a transnational bourgeois culture of respectability and restraint' (p. 52). The minor differences between French and British definitions of 'gluttony' or 'dining rooms' may merit closer attention than Rich has provided here. Moreover, examination of these variations might reveal other ideals at work than restraint and respectability.

Rich moves in the second chapter from general ideals of dining to a specific inquiry into family dinners. Relying heavily on prescriptive literature again, the author identifies the family dinner as one of the defining practices of middle-class families in Paris and London. Both an emblem of domestic privacy, and a testament to the family's interaction with urban networks, the family dinner provided a daily opportunity to 'perform the rituals of domestic harmony' (p. 61). Two factors directly contributed to successful family dinners, according to Rich's reading of the sources: timekeeping and women's culinary knowledge. Both etiquette manuals and individuals' diaries testify to the importance of household schedules and regular times for meals. Women orchestrated their domestic schedule to harmonize with male family members' public obligations of work or leisure. Furthermore, women were expected to supervise or perform culinary production economically in accordance with the latest developments in nutrition science, food preservation. Enhancing women's culinary knowledge constituted a central objective of prescriptive literature. This reader would have appreciated more attention to the food served in family dinners. Were some dishes appropriate in such intimate gatherings, but not suitable for more public celebrations? Were certain dishes deemed essential to make a meal – perhaps soup, bread, or meat? A few more lines devoted to the food consumed at family dinners would have concretized Rich's social analysis.

Dinner parties constituted a key site of urban sociability in 19th-century London and Paris, and Rich dedicates her third chapter to an analysis of such gatherings' form and function. Again, she finds more

similarities than differences in the ways in which people organized and participated in dinner parties in both cities. Rich notes a few minor differences, such as architectural variations that resulted in more austere dining rooms in France, the better to focus diners' attention on the food. Moreover, Rich notes that Parisian prescriptive literature regularly admonished readers against engaging in political discussions at dinner parties. Rich speculates that this reservation might be attributed to the recent French experience of political revolution, although other scholars have noted that such injunctions proscribing politics from polite conversation topics are common in French etiquette manuals in the 17th and 18th centuries.⁽²⁾ Memoirs and correspondence supplement prescriptive literature in this chapter, yielding some genuine insights in terms of how lawyers, doctors, and journalists organized their dinner parties. Rich explains the rituals surrounding dinner invitations, providing examples of divergent levels of formality depending on the relationships between host and guest. Again, this reader would have appreciated greater discussion of the particular foods consumed at dinner parties, and dining practices. Rich's analysis fully explicates the invitation process, and details practices of gendered socializing after dinner, but it does seem that the actual dinner itself gets short shrift.

If hosts chose not to entertain in their own homes, they could invite guests to join them at a restaurant, the latest fad in public dining in 19th-century Paris and London. Rich investigates the restaurant as a site of bourgeois consumption in the fourth chapter. However, examples drawn from Auguste Escoffier's memoirs of directing the kitchen at the Savoy hotel where princes, bankers, and actresses came to dine, reveal that culinary consumption in this century cannot be limited to the middle classes alone. Rich combines architectural analysis of restaurants with memoirs, prescriptive literature, guidebooks, advertisements and municipal records on commerce to comment on the clientele and sociable practices at a range of public dining establishments. In addition to the new opportunities afforded by these businesses, Rich investigates contemporary discourse that articulated gendered anxieties regarding restaurants' peculiar position between public and private spaces. Women dining in public, men and women dining together, men dining alone or in groups of friends all potentially threatened social order.

Finally, Rich turns her attention to more exclusive dining options available via urban social clubs and public banquets in her sixth chapter. Rich's use of club records preserved in the London Metropolitan Archive makes a great contribution to the field. Rich is able to document menus provided by several clubs, as well as membership criteria, social practices, and contemporary commentary on the clubs. The clubs were bastions of male and class privilege, which Rich capably analyzes while she simultaneously highlights the ways in which women gained limited access to some clubs at some times. Rich effectively demonstrates the ways in which some of the clubs' most appealing factors of exclusivity and homosociality also dramatically limited the appeal of clubs for many men, and seem to have doomed the clubs to inferior food compared to other public dining options.

Rich has crafted a careful comparative history of dining in late 19th-century Paris and London, and makes genuine contributions to the field at several points. However, I had some reservations about the author's organizing assumptions regarding class analysis. For Rich, the essential feature of a bourgeois consumer is 'the ability to make choices about what to eat' (p. 13). This definition conceivably includes all humans and many animals and ignores decades of anthropological and historical research on consumption decisions. Workers in 18th-century Paris chose to eat white bread rather than rye, even as the price of wheat rose, making the cost of a loaf of bread equal to a day's wages.⁽³⁾ But these workers were not bourgeois. Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of taste within late 20th-century French social classes emphasizes the degree to which all people choose certain foods for a wide array of social, nutritive, and economic functions.⁽⁴⁾ It was not just the middle classes that had the liberty of choice in food. Rich's definition of bourgeois is too expansive to be analytically useful.

Furthermore, Rich's class analysis does not adequately distinguish between social classes. Do the ideals of the 'middling sort' really differ so much from their aristocratic or wealthy neighbors? In the realm of fashion, David Kuchta would contend that the sober dress we associate with bourgeois ideals of modesty and respectability was actually embedded in a 17th-century aristocratic ideology.⁽⁵⁾ Kuchta demonstrates the degree to which these ideals were shared among social elites and the more middling classes. It seems

plausible that social elites play a more important role in Rich's study than her categories of analysis reveal. On the other hand, did the 'bourgeoisie' actually impose alien ideals upon the working classes? E. P. Thompson has argued that the working classes adopted ideologies of time management or piety for purposes other than those imagined by their employers.⁽⁶⁾ Rich might have exploited the vast contemporary literature on social reform to investigate how employers attempted to impose values such as privacy, timekeeping, and female domesticity through the architecture of workers' dwellings, kitchens, and dining facilities. Finally, what is the purpose of class analysis extricated from its social fabric? Unfortunately, a more nuanced analysis, so ably explored in the past decade by Dror Wahrman, Sarah Maza, and Leora Auslander, among others, is absent from this study.⁽⁷⁾

The manuscript could also have benefitted from a more thorough editing process. Rich quotes Anna Bryson on page 25 and repeats both the quote and her larger point on page 30. The author helpfully provides a list of abbreviations used in her citations of archival materials; however, the abbreviations do not consistently match usage in the footnotes. Rather than using 'LMA' to refer to all records from the London Metropolitan Archives, Rich's footnotes cite 'ACC' and sometimes 'AC', to refer to the series of club records under discussion here (see for example, chapter five, fn. 23–5, 35–7, 78–80). She explains neither of these short forms in the introductory list of abbreviations. While the correct location of these archival records is ultimately revealed through a triangulation between text, note, and bibliography, such confusion potentially limits the text's usefulness for both scholars and students.

Rich has crafted a careful study of dining ideals in late 19th-century London and Paris. Unlike many previous volumes on the subject, her book endeavors to juxtapose analysis of ideals with an investigation of practice. By assembling a wide array of primary sources from the national and municipal archives of both cities, Rich offers substantive comparisons between the two leading capital cities of western Europe. Ultimately, Rich's comparative framework leads her to conclude that the middle classes of London and Paris shared a common dining culture represented by 'ideals and behaviours that transcended national borders' (p. 211). This is an important observation, but it ignores the ways in which people within France and Britain defined their dining cultures against those of the nation across the Channel. I hoped to see more commentary on the development of nationalist ideology within culinary discourse and practice. If these cultures were so similar, why did so many French diners consider their cuisine to be obviously superior to that of the British? Why did many British diners agree that the French ate better, and how could they take lacklustre cuisine to be evidence of British national superiority? ⁽⁸⁾ Rich concludes her study with a call for more comparative histories, attentive to varieties of class, region, and gender. Such comparative work is essential to trace broad trends in the history of consumption and material culture over time and across national boundaries.

Notes

1. Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, trans. E. Jephcott (London, 1994) and Anna Bryson, *From Courtesy to Civility: Changing Codes of Conduct in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1998).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca, NY, 1994), p. 111.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Steven Kaplan, *The Bakers of Paris and the Bread Question, 1700–1775* (Durham, NC, 1996), p. 34. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA, 1984).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. David Kuchta, *The Three-Piece Suit and Modern Masculinity: England, 1550–1850* (Berkeley, CA, 2002).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York, NY, 1970).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Dror Wahrman, *Imagining the Middle Class: The Political Representation of Class in Britain, 1780–1840* (Cambridge, 1995); Sarah Maza, *The Myth of the French Bourgeoisie: An Essay on the Social Imaginary, 1750–1850* (Cambridge, MA, 2003); Leora Auslander, *Cultural Revolutions: Everyday Life and Politics in England, North America and France* (Oxford, 2008).[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. On these points, Stephen Mennell's comparative analysis of French and English culinary ideals

remains an important guide. *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present* (London, 1985).[Back to \(8\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1198>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/7855>