

The well-fed consumer

Sustainable and healthy food

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1 Introduction

In this text I would like to answer the question of why it is difficult to eat both sustainably and healthily. Therefore, I must consider the history of human beings in terms of the way they eat. I will discuss the affluent society and the consequences of obesity. In this context it is inevitable to remember the model of society that Plato introduced. Still today, our attitude to how we see obesity is strongly influenced by Plato. Furthermore, what are the causes of obesity? One main cause lies in the structure of the limbic system. However, obesity is not just caused by human nature. We realise that in Germany we are determined by two cultural traditions of eating, one of which demands eating as much as you can! At the end of the text I will summarise the following question: What might sustainable and healthy food and eating be?

2 History of human beings

Concerning the history of human food intake we can summarise that it is often a history of hunger, of being threatened by hunger, of famines. Our ancestors, except for the elite of society, such as the noblemen and noblewomen, knew exactly what hunger means.

In contrast, today, we have a unique situation: we are living in an affluent society. We have been living in the land of milk and honey, particularly for the last 70 years in Germany. It is not difficult to determine the reason for this. An affluent society has been caused by the food industry dominating food production for approximately 150 years—with the consequence that human beings have had so much to eat that they can resist most of the communicable diseases, so that life expectancy has increased dramatically in the last 100 years, roughly doubling. And it is still growing.

It is not difficult to explore the interrelation between affluent society and the well-fed consumer. Beyond other reasons, it is evident that an affluent society is the condition for the well-fed human being.

Moreover, we are living in the land of milk and honey, but we don't complain. We are feeling poisoned, for instance, by artificial food, by convenience products, and by the food industry in general. We should be happy but we are unhappy. The well-fed consumer is depressive. The conclusion is that we are not able to realise which epoch we are living in.

3 Affluent society and obesity

An affluent society means that we have high rates of overweight people and obesity, compared with the history of human beings. In contrast to today, in nearly the whole history of human beings, being overweight represented power, well-being and a very high socio-economic status. Today, everybody has enough income for there to be overweight, unemployed people too.

If obesity and being overweight are no longer symbols of power and well-being, people with a high socio-economic status use different tools for social distinction (Bourdieu) than being overweight. Slimness has become the new instrument for social distinction. Slimness represents attractiveness and professional success.

The reputation of obese people, therefore, has become very bad. They seem to be lazy and not gifted with self-control—our most important virtue and value. The well-fed consumer therefore has another reason to be unhappy.

4 Further causes of obesity

We have seen that an affluent society is a condition for an overweight population. But it is more a condition than a reason.

A *true* cause of obesity and being overweight is our genetic programme. It demands relentlessly: eat as much as you can, especially fatty and sweet foods. Without this programme we would not have survived as a species. If our ancestors had obeyed the rules of the DGE (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Ernährung—the German society for nutrition), we would not have survived. Thus, it is not surprising that in an affluent society there are high rates of obese people.

In contrast to official opinion, being overweight (BMI 25–30) is correlated with the lowest mortality risk, and obesity (a BMI of between 30–35) means nearly the same (Flegal et al. 2013). Thus, it becomes obvious that we see being overweight and obesity as risk factors for health because of cultural determination, because we live in a culture of slimness as a means of social distinction.

For a long time it was a commonplace that being overweight was simply a result of eating too much, and as I said, an affluent society allows over-eating. It allows us to follow our genetic programme.

However, human beings are very different in how they metabolise. Therefore, some become obese and others not. This is also based on the various individual genetic programmes.

And we should not forget that, in addition to the genetic programme, one main cause of obesity is socio-economic status—when this is high, people are generally slim, and when it is low, they tend to be obese. People with low socio-economic status can buy fewer fruits and vegetables. Moreover, Bourdieu (1987) explained that different circumstances produce different attitudes concerning life. Unemployed people, for instance, try to enjoy the moment, the cigarettes they can smoke and the beer they can drink. Employed people with an interesting and well-paid job are looking to their future, and they avoid consuming nicotine because they intend to be healthy 20 years later.

Still today, many health experts argue that obesity is a result of a positive balance of energy. Thus, they ignore the findings of the research of the last 30 years. However, this position is in accordance with our cultural beliefs. Assuming that the cause of obesity is eating too much we believe that obese people do not follow one of the most important virtues of Europe: the ideal of moderation.

A civilisation is held together not with buildings such as churches or castles but with a collection of values and virtues that have clearly existed over thousands of years. They guarantee the identity and continuity of a certain civilisation, such as the Western one. In the middle of our values stands moderation.

The well-fed consumer represents the counterpoint to the ideal of slimness. He or she seems to be the natural enemy of our civilisation. However, this awareness is only possible by ignoring the *true* causes of obesity.

Before we take a look at the history of slimness, a further cause of obesity must be mentioned. The well-fed consumer is also a product of two historic traditions: Mediterranean versus 'barbaric' food. These traditions have a history of more than two thousand years. However, because our nutritional behaviour is based on history, we must look back to understand how we eat today and why the well-fed consumer is a result of history.

'Agriculture and arboriculture were the basis of the Greek and Roman economy and culture ... Grain, vine and olive trees were the food resources, a triad of productive and cultural values which this civilisation had chosen as symbols of its identity' (Montanari 1993, 32).

But this was no affluent society. In the Mediterranean world it was very difficult to survive. Food was naturally ascetic. Christian culture transformed this reality of life into an ideal of ascetic life. However, with the invasion of the barbarian, another style of food intake conquered Europe.

'The Celtic and ancient Germanic people...preferred the use of unspoilt nature... Hunting and fishing, picking uncultivated fruits and breeding undomesticated animals in the forest (especially pigs) were typical of their way of life' (Montanari 1993, 17).

The Germanic people are our ancestors. Christian religion was originally our belief. Thus, we must consider that both traditions influence our behaviour. We are obliged to integrate these conflicting traditions. They still determine our food intake. On the one hand, ‘No meal without meat’ and ‘Eat as much as you can’; and, on the other hand, the ascetic rules of health experts. If health experts dominate the public discourse, the barbaric tradition continues in obesity, in the well-fed consumer.

5 The ideal of slimness

The value or virtue of moderation was created in Athene, 2,500 years ago. Moderation means that human beings are not ruled by bodily impulses. Thus, reason and will dominate human behaviour. Being able to control our inner nature is not a value in itself. To control this nature means to be a sensible citizen in a democracy. Human beings who seem not to be able to control their nature are suspected of tending to dictatorship, to blind violence, to terrible passion.

Christianity learnt a lot of Greek philosophy. The value of moderation was transformed into the idea of sin. Not being moderate means to commit a sin. Thus, moderation remained a very important value in Europe. This did not change with the Protestant Church. On the contrary, the Protestant ethic radicalised moderation in rigid ascetism (Weber 1993). Indeed, the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestants have lost their influence over the population in the last 200 years, but the value of moderation has remained an important idea, changed into the ideal of slimness. Furthermore, in the last hundred years this ideal has changed dramatically. Everybody has to be slimmer to have an ideal body (Klotter 1990). Today, we do not talk about moderation but we live it, with a very slim body. Moderation and slimness are still (hidden) political concepts. The slim body represents self-control—as in Athene 2,500 years ago.

To all appearances the well-fed consumer has no competence in self-control.

6 Plato and the well-fed consumer

Why does Plato's name appear in a text about the well-fed consumer? He lived thousands of years ago. But still his thinking determines our thinking.

For instance, he created, following Pythagoras a little, the so-called dualism between soul and body. For him, the soul is immortal and the unclean body is the domicile of the soul. The body is the prison of the soul (Kratylos). Thus, we must feed the soul and not the body. The soul is everything, the body nothing. Moreover, it is a danger to the soul. Human beings who are happy and satisfied in *this* life tend to choke the immortal soul.

Still, after 2,500 years, we are not able to leave this dualism. It is still our thinking. The *thick* body appears to be the *real* prison of the soul. Therefore, we despise overweight and obese people—with a good feeling and peace of conscience. These are bad times for the well-fed consumer.

We have already seen many reasons to declare war against obesity. Now, we have a new one, with support from Plato, which I want to explain now. With Plato we try to combat, to fight. The first question is: Against what do we fight? Why is the well-fed consumer our enemy? The second question is: Who are 'we'? The entire population? Plato would say so. This 'we' means the health experts.

Plato had a vision of an ideal society: that it should be led by a wise philosopher. Below the philosopher there is a group of special guardians who have the task of controlling the population, which is not able to control itself and which simply wants pleasure and to eat as much as it can. It lives in the status of demoralisation. The special guardians have the task and the duty to fight demoralisation. All means should be used by the guardians to control the population. The guardians are not peaceful. The intention of this grasp is to have a healthy population, which enables a strong nation. The central goal for Plato was not the happiness of individuals but the happiness of a state or a polis like Athene.

Plato recorded the dialogues of Socrates. However, Socrates had a totally different approach to Plato. For him the individual did not have to think like the polis did; it did not have to knuckle down to the state but it had to work on the following topics: What is a good life? What is a good life for me?

Is the well-fed consumer of our days confronted with Plato or Socrates? I suppose that the spirit of nutritional recommendations is based on Plato. Still today, the health experts as guardians expect the population to follow their rules, and they become angry and disappointed if the population disregards their rules. The health experts take on the role of guardians without any doubt, and without an idea of reflection. Thus, they cannot be surprised that they provoke resistance among the population, that they produce a reaction. If the well-fed consumer does not develop a reaction, he or she simply submits to the rules of the guardians. And in an individualised society this is not an option. Otherwise, the well-fed consumer would commit suicide—psychic suicide.

Thus, the well-fed consumer is confronted by a wall of stigmatisation, but if she or he insists on being an individual, this individual tends to bear stigmatisation instead of losing identity. This is not a tragedy, because tragedy means that all possibilities are bad. The well-fed consumer can decide—against the health experts.

7 Healthy and sustainable food

As outlined earlier, many reasons for being overweight and obese exist. Although it is impossible to identify being overweight and obesity with an unhealthy lifestyle (see above), we cannot say that obesity represents health in general. For some people it is healthy to be overweight, and for others it is healthy to have a *normal* weight. Thus, healthy food cannot be organised by normative rules, but rather through exploring the individual specific way to health.

Healthy and sustainable food is not supported by genes. We have no instinct for this. It is not natural. Thus, we need alternative approaches to healthy and sustainable food.

We change to individual, specific healthy food only if we obtain a direct benefit, and not if we expect to live longer—in thirty years. In other words, our well-being must improve straight away.

And we change to a healthy lifestyle if our limbic system gets the same amount of reward. Thus, we can substitute quantity with quality. We eat less but better. We consume food that has a better taste—for us. Or we explore new tastes. We discover food from foreign countries. Therefore, we have to explore which kind of gratification we need and love. Everybody must find his or her good-tasting healthy food. It is a kind of trial and error process.

And this is only possible if we change from an unconscious to a conscious approach to food. Usually, buying and eating is up to 80 per cent emotional and unconscious. This means that we buy and eat how we have done in recent years, in the last decade. We eat what our ancestors consumed. A conscious approach to food, however, means taking care over what I buy and eat. I start to think about food, where it comes from and who the producers are.

With food I develop a new lifestyle, my own lifestyle. This is part of my identity. Then, ethical ideas can influence my food intake, and also political credo. However, I must take care that my consumption of food does not change into a system of compulsions. Composure is an important virtue.

With the same principles for changing behaviour, such as for healthy food, we can develop sustainable food. Traditionally, sustainable food seems to be just a duty, an ethical imperative. However, usually a duty does not change our behaviour. People should not be aggressive, but they are aggressive. Nearly everybody thinks that it is good to behave sustainably, but nearly nobody implements this in daily life. Thus, we connect sustainability with reward, with a pleasing exploration of and in daily life, with an adventure changing both life and lifestyle, with a part of mastery. Sustainable food becomes a new competence, which creates more self-confidence.

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