

BREAKFAST: GENDER, POLITICS AND THE ECONOMICS OF FOOD

There is little research done in construction of sociological and political practises on food, even though the politics surrounding food is so closely linked with gender relations in the eighteenth century family, gender relations in private and public sphere, food with relation to economics and commerce, sexual politics and the whole sociological and psychological spectrum. I have chosen to work on the theme of the English breakfast from an interdisciplinary viewpoint as I am personally fascinated by its evolving history.

The role and importance of breakfast in eighteenth century Britain differs from class to class. The foods they ate depended on the income they earned and the availability. The upper class, despite their spending power, did not place much importance on breakfast, since dinner and supper tended to be heavier and it was in the latter two that guests were usually invited to join the family at the table (though there were records of guests invited to breakfast). According to Derek Jarrett, the upper class in the country house tended to have very informal breakfasts before they set off a-hunting, hunting being a sport permitted only of the landed gentry. The more modest folk would go for long walks, which usually took place between the hours of six to seven o'clock in the morning, as we seen from Fanny Burney's journal¹. Some might and would go out later, as Evelina herself did too. In towns like London, calls would be made before breakfast or long walks would be taken in one of the famous parks before the infamous breakfast parties.

In 1743, there were comments in The Gentleman's Magazine on the habit of public breakfast parties, the most popular places being Ranelagh, Ruckholt near Stratford, Marylebone Gardens and Cox's at the Green Man, Dulwich. Sometimes such parties consumed the greater part of the morning... The morning was considered to extend until dinner-time, so that Moritz in 1782 noted that it was 'usual to walk out in a sort of negligee, or morning dress, your hair not dressed but merely rolled up in rollers, and in a frock and boots'. (Marshall 344)

In Bath, as in other spa towns around England, mornings would be spent walking around the pump room, taking a bath or drinking the waters. Most breakfasts did not usually take place until after 10 am, if not later, though Bayne-Powell opines that it could start as early as 9:30 am. The labouring class most certainly would have had their breakfasts much earlier than the leisurely class. Marshall argues that the breakfasts (for the upper class) usually consist of rolls and tea (most English would drink weak tea for breakfast in those days). As they were not obliged to observe strict routine due to fixed working hours, unlike today, the mornings (except on a Sunday or special occasions) are mostly for them to do as they please. The middle class, however, did not have the luxury of time, as they still need to earn their keep. Since the middle class consist mostly of professionals and tradesmen, they needed not observe the same long and strict working hours as that of the working/lower class, though it was not uncommon for them to do so. However, there was still a need for them to go into office or get on with work. Therefore, breakfast tended to be a more substantial meal for them, though it might not go beyond tea or coffee, bread and butter, eggs and some preserved meat (like salted and cold tongue). The women, if they were not helping their husbands and fathers in the business, would be busy with housekeeping, study, and letter-writing, among other things. This tended to take place before breakfast, as we can see from the depictions in eighteenth century novels by Jane Austen, Charlotte Smith, Fanny Burney, and Oliver Goldsmith). This is a scene taken from the beginning pages of The Vicar of Wakefield.

We were generally awaked in the morning by music, and one fine day rode a-hunting. The hours between breakfast and dinner the ladies devoted to dress and study; they usually read a page, and then gaze at themselves in the glass, which, even philosophers might own, often presented the page of greatest beauty. ²

Evelina would be spending it either on walking, letter writing, in the pump houses or generally attending to her hostesses (she attended Mrs. Duval's levee). This was during the century before the concept of the "domestic woman" and "lady of leisure" (a euphemism for sitting around and doing nothing except to look pretty) took its stranglehold, as it did in the late eighteenth century and the dawning of the Victorian age.

If breakfasts were light affairs for the upper class, dinners were the heavier ones. Hungered by their exertions in hunting and shooting, they would settle down to a dinner that seemed to go on forever. Dinner was usually served between three to four pm (though as the century progressed, it got earlier and earlier and earlier). “the meal would be long and stately and one traveler said that an English dinner was like eternity-it had no beginning and no end. There was in fact an end, but it was often lost to sight in the haze of drinking that followed the meal, after the ladies had left the table”(Jarrett 60). “Both dinner and supper heavy meals were taken to counterbalance a breakfast of rolls and a slight tea, and a list of the dishes served helps to explain the broad and comfortable faces so often seen in eighteenth-century portraits” (Marshall 347).

However, in her book Housekeeping in the Eighteenth Century, Bayne-Powell gives us a very different picture of breakfast. I quote her here

Entertaining might begin quite early in the day, for as luncheon consisted only of a drink and a snack friends were not asked to partake of it, nor was there any afternoon tea. Breakfast parties were the fashion in London and other large towns and even in the country if the distance were not too great [this fact is supported by various other history books that I had consulted]. Lady Cave speaks of having had fifteen or sixteen guests to breakfast [though I perceive this would be more of the norm when one had visitors over at the country house or during breakfast parties, than on a usual morning]. ‘A very genteel breakfast indeed’, Woodforde declares, ‘Coffee, Tea, Bread and Butter, cold Tongue etc.’ When his nephew stayed with him the parson gave him pork and beer as the young man was setting out on a journey. He himself had mutton broth. Hunting breakfasts were substantial meals with cold meats, wine and ale. (100)

However, she admits that usually and invariably in London, breakfast consisted of tea and coffee or chocolate with bread and butter, toast, or occasionally muffins. This is basically the fare agreed upon by most historians I had consulted.

The working class, more because of lack of choice than anything else, would usually settle for bread and cheese, and occasionally bits of ham and bacon. However,

dairy farm- workers might be able to get some milk for themselves. Though the labouring class tended to be the ones with a greater need for good breakfasts, it tended not to be the case among them. Even the kind of bread they eat differed from county to county, as it depends on the grain consumption of that particular county or borough. According to Cole and Postgate, not the entire population of England ate wheat, contrary to popular belief.

It is common among modern investigators, and it was common among many contemporary writers; who were apt to think mainly of conditions in the South of England, to describe eighteenth-century England as pre-eminently a nation of wheat-eaters. But even at the end of the century there was a considerable part of the population that did not eat wheat at all, or ate it at most only on rare occasions and as a peculiar luxury. About 1760 it was estimated, on the basis of figures of the sale of grain all over England, that about 3,750,000 people ate wheat, as against about 860,000 who ate rye, 710,000 who ate barley, and nearly 600,000 who ate mainly oatmeal. The consumption of oatmeal, as the staple article of diet, was confined to the North and the North Midlands; and in these areas taken together the number of oatmeal eaters exceeded the wheat eaters. In the North, wheat, rye, and oats were consumed in about equal quantities, but much less barley was used. In Lancashire and the North Midlands oats came first and wheat a good way behind, with barley and rye about equal one half of the consumption of wheat. Wales ate mainly barley and rye, with a little wheat and practically no oats. Over the rest of the country wheat easily led all the rest. Barley was also consumed to a fair extent in the south Midlands and the south-east, but not in the West. Oatmeal was hardly eaten at all, save as a supplementary article of diet, except in the North.³

Limited in their purchasing powers, the lower and working class tended to go for that which is more easily obtainable from their counties or towns. The prices of the products also determined their (the working class people's) ability to purchase them. They hardly

ate meat as it cost too much. What they could only afford, other than bits of bacon and ham, would be offal. They lived mostly on cereals. Agricultural workers ate oatmeal, rye and barley.

In 1771 in the course of one of his tours, Young declared that the average price for bread was 1 ¼ d. a pound, butter was 6d., butcher's meat 3d., and cheese the same, but that these figures fluctuate according to the distance from the capital. At this time, the average rent per year was £1 8s.2d., and for firing £1 3s. 11d. (Marshall 349)

Bayne-Powell tells us that a writer on the Corn Trade in the mid-eighteenth century mentioned that wheaten bread was becoming more popular. He (the writer) noted that half of the population might still be eating black bread, bread which were made of barley and rye, though those mixed with wheaten flour were called meslin or maslin bread. However, the poor much preferred the white bread and would generally buy that if they could afford it, as they considered meslin or maslin bread to be indigestible. However, we are told by Bayne-Powell that the "so-called white bread was, however, only white by comparison; it was more like wholemeal bread unless it had been adulterated with chalk or alum" (76). While the poor used to be able to make their own bread, the enclosing of corn land and rise of fuel price forced them to buy their bread from the baker.

For the upper class on a normal day, breakfast was not a family event. The head or male of the house would sometimes rise early to read the newspapers, as what the Captain did in Evelina, to sort through their papers, consulted with their valets or assistants and then set off to sort out their estate businesses or go out hunting. The ladies usually rose later, of which they would then had a late breakfast, spent the morning in their boudoir dressing, answering their correspondences or consulting with the housekeeper or cook regarding dinner and supper. Children, until their mid teens, or until they debuted into the society, tended to be separated from their parents, having all their meals supervised in the nurseries. However, there was a growing sentiment among the aristocratic mothers to actually breast-feed their babies, as opposed to farming them out to wet-nurse. However, that mostly happened towards the later part of the century.

For the middle class, they tended to have more family togetherness as children had breakfasts with their parents before they separated out into their various activities. Governesses and tutors were employed to teach the children and to drill them on their studies, as were music masters, dancing masters and drawing masters hired for both the upper and middle class children. The middle-class family, in wanting to achieve similar breeding as that of the upper class, aspired for a better education for their children, especially their sons. Whilst the adult males in the family (including unmarried sons who are either back for holidays or staying at home until marriage at the very least) go off to their various businesses, the women would stay home to attend to the housekeeping, the callers, correspondences or to their personal study, as we had noted from the scene from The Vicar of Wakefield. The lower and working class usually had both parents working. In the pre-industrial age, both parents tended to work closer to home and were thus able to look after their young children. The rural working class was the mainstay of the cottage industry while those in mining towns and urban areas would be involved in various trades as employers or employees or with the tin mines. Getting continuous work was vital to their survival, as Jarrett would observe:

In bad times these things might make the difference between starvation and subsistence, while in good times they could make men sufficiently sure of themselves to bargain for higher wages-eighteenth century employers frequently found that cheap food put wages up instead of bringing them down. (336)

It was a custom then to have a levee, where the fashionable people would receive their friends or visitors upon rising, either during or before breakfast. This was practiced from the royal family down to the minor nobility. The King would consult with his advisors and ministers from his chamber, while reading and signing papers brought to him. Since most of the politicians of the eighteenth century usually came from landed gentry and aristocrats, it would therefore not be uncommon for political discussions and consultations to take place during the levee. Victoria, herself, was known to have had a consultation, over breakfast, with the Prime Minister, William Lamb, on the morning of her coronation, where she was given advice on matters of her duties.⁴

Even among the servant class, food, especially breakfast, played an important role in dividing the upper and lower servants. As Hecht argues

The disparity in diet that existed between the steward's or housekeeper's room and the servants' hall is vividly depicted by a pamphleteer, supposedly a servant, who excoriates upper domestics as a class. Among other charges, he accuses them of starving their subordinates both in order to gorge themselves and to have food to give friends and relatives.⁵

It was not uncommon for stewards and housekeepers of the greater houses to actually have their own Breakfast Room in which they could receive their visitors, or visitors of the master or mistress of the home (especially if it is a visitor of a rank inferior to the master or mistress of the home). These 'breakfast' rooms also acted as the ante-room where visitors were placed while awaiting lord or lady of the house. This was especially so in town houses. Hecht also observes that:

An important discrepancy also existed between the diet of upper and lower domestics. In the simpler homes, where the staff was relatively small, all dined together in the kitchen or servants' hall, those of superior rank merely enjoying the distinction of sitting at the head of the table. The food was usually much the same as that prepared for the master; the remains from his table constituted its staples. In the more elaborate establishment, however, the upper domestics took their meals in the steward or housekeeper's room, at what was termed the second table, and while their inferiors ate in the servants' hall. The meals provided in such households for upper domestics, as a rule, surpassed in quality those served to the lower staff. The former were based on the cuisine of the first table; the latter were specially cooked plain fare to which were added the leftovers from the second. (109)

Post-breakfast activities were also divided between the genders. In an upper-class household, in the towns especially, the men would usually retire to their studies or go to one of the many clubs that towns like London had to offer. If they had seats in the Parliament, it would also be another post-breakfast or post-dinner activity. The women

did not hold public offices, yet they were not prohibited from appearing in public, should they decided to take a drive or walk through town, but usually chaperoned or accompanied. What really would be classified as private or public activities? Klein is of the opinion that: -

women in the eighteenth century had public dimensions to their lives. Moreover, engaging in those public practices involved a consciousness that they were behaving publicly and that their behavior implied its own sanction. The question is then how to get closer to this behavior and this consciousness. It seems to me that a more precise account of gender in relation to publicity and privacy can be achieved by closer examination of both space and *language*. Although the household has been a touchstone in this debate and John Locke and Samuel Richardson have been quoted endlessly, neither space nor language has been sufficiently attended to. ⁶

Klein went on to elaborate more on that point

For all the interpretations of "public" and "private," there has been little work done on what these words meant and how they were used in the eighteenth century. ³⁵ Perhaps the most egregious aspect of treatments of the gendering of public and private is simple anachronism. There was, of course, the magisterial public sphere--the State and its related agencies and the world of office-holding they circumscribed. Contrasted to this public sphere, the private sphere referred to all that was not related to or sponsored by the State. This public sphere and this private sphere constituted the opposition between public and private, between the State and society, in a classic version of liberalism: here, the "public" equaled "the State" and "private" equaled everything else. Women (except for royalty and courtiers) were explicitly excluded from this public sphere (though gender played an important role in conceptualizing aspects of this arena). ³⁸ (103-4)

However, the discussion of gender in relation to the various space and spheres of existence are not of concern to me in this paper. The above arguments I have employed

of Klein serve to illustrate that one could not categorise gendered activities of the eighteenth century, strictly into public/private affairs. However, all the activities illustrated in the preceding analysis served as post and pre breakfast activities of the two sexes. While the women might not be able to accompany the men about their 'serious' business, men were able to accompany a woman out for a drive, to call on friends and relatives or to go shopping. Discourse into the double standard of conduct and activities are best left alone for now.

While there are still various issues that could be explored in relation to breakfast of the long eighteenth century, I would have to end here as we are constrained by time. However, I hope that by using the English breakfast as a focal point, more would be motivated to research further into the historical details surrounding its activity. In conclusion, we could perhaps establish that an activity that is usually taken for granted serves as a take-off point for various discourse, whether literary, historical, cultural, theoretical, economical, political or all of the above.

Notes

¹ Marshall, Dorothy. "Manners, Meals, and Domestic Pastimes". Johnson's England: An account of the Life and Manners of his Age. Ed. A.S. Turberville. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933. 343.

² Goldsmith, Oliver. The Vicar of Wakefield. London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1908. 7-8.

³ Cole, G.D.H. and Raymond Postgate. The British People: 1746-1946. London: Methuen, 1961. 78.

⁴ Schama, Simon. A History of Britain. London: BBC World Ltd, 2002.157.

⁵ Hecht, J. Jean. The Domestic Servant Class in Eighteenth Century England. Routledge & Kegan Paul: London, 1956.110.

⁶ Klein, Lawrence E. "Gender and the Public/Private Distinction in the Eighteenth Century: Some Questions about Evidence and Analytic Procedure". *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 29.1 (1996) :102

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<<http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/burney/evelina/evelina.html>>
3. Cole, G.D.H. and Raymond Postgate. The British People: 1746-1946. London: Methuen, 1961.
4. Goldsmith, Oliver. The Vicar of Wakefield. London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1908.
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8. Schama, Simon. A History of Britain. London: BBC World Ltd, 2002.