Eating in the streets of Maracaibo: public space, social visibility and urban experience*

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Abstract

In Maracaibo, street food has a remarkable presence and a great importance as a distinctive urban and cultural practice. This article aims at a phenomenological characterization of street-food activities in this Venezuelan city, focusing in the outlining and analysis of the experience and appropriation of public space by the institutions, subjects and practices involved in *eating in the streets*, and especially through a brief examination of the diverse meanings attributed to street food and its consumption. Hence, rather than to bring conclusive statements, it points to the formulation of a set of questions and hypothesis which could lead to further discussion.

Key words: Maracaibo, street food, public space, eating practices, social visibility.

Comida en la calle en la ciudad de Maracaibo: espacio público, visibilidad social y experiencia urbana

Resumen

En Maracaibo, comer en la calle es una práctica frecuente que reviste una gran importancia como experiencia urbana y como rasgo cultural distintivo. En este artículo se propone una caracterización fenomenológica de la comida de la calle en esta ciudad venezolana. Se focaliza la descripción y análisis de la experiencia del espacio público y de su apropiación por parte de las instituciones, los sujetos y las prácticas que implica, especialmente a través del examen sucinto de diversos significados atribuidos a estas prácticas. En consecuencia, más que presentar conclusiones, se presentan interrogantes e hipótesis para orientar y estimular la discusión en futuras investigaciones.

Palabras claves: Maracaibo, comida de la calle, espacio público, prácticas alimentarias, visibilidad social.

INTRODUCTION

At present, food and eating studies in the field of social sciences are experiencing an exponential development, caused by important contributions in countries such as the United States, France, UK, Spain, Canada, Australia and Mexico, among others. This growing interest is oriented by some facts. In the First place, there is an increasing awareness, in the scientific-academic field, of eating as a "total social fact" that requires to be considered in all its complexity. This awareness leads to highlight the importance of socio-cultural factors that affect eating, factors that have been underestimated and sometimes completely ignored in the design of social and health policies, as well as in the treatment of certain pathologies where the nutritional factor seems to play a crucial role. Second, the social, economic and cultural transformations at a global scale that have had great impact, since the beginning of the past century, over the world food system as a whole as well as over the local food systems and cultures worldwide. Third, there is an growing concern about food security and food safety, that is, about food availability and sanitary risk.

In our country, the subject begins to attract the interest of social scientists. Among them are Rafael Cartay and other researchers, members of the Centro de Investigaciones Agro-Alimentarias (Food and Agriculture Research Center) of the Universidad de Los Andes (Mérida, Venezuela) (Ágreda and Bellorín, 1999; Abreu Olivo and Ablan, 1997; Abreu *et ál,* 2000; Cartay, 1995, 2005; Cartay and Chuecos, 1994; Cartay, and Ablan, 1997; Dehoallin, 1993), José Rafael Lovera (1998), and also M. C. Ferreira de Almeida (2004) and some other authors that, we have to say, usually privilege a historical or an anecdotic approach. The sociological, anthropological and semiotic approaches are usually absent from the study of food and eating in Venezuela.

An attractive subject to social scientists and one of the most eloquent aspects regarding food and eating is *eating out*. It is an important way for social organizations to express themselves, which offers a sort of ritualized set for social display, cultural reproduction and innovation, as well as power negotiation.

Eating out —but not in somebody else's household— is an outstanding practice shaping urban environments, especially in modernity. This practice is linked to the experience of being far from home and in public settings, and also it is about offering food on a commercial basis, rather than by reciprocity based on kinship or social status, or by charity or any other religious principles (Beardsworth & Keil, 1997:104).

Although in the beginning of western urban settings eating out could have been based merely on the need to provide food for pilgrims and travelers (officers or merchants), and later on, for modern urban workers, other purposes were soon disclosed, for instance, leisure, courting, celebration, negotiation of economic or political agreements, at the same time, it began to serve as a promoter of social distinction and as a social setting for the construction and the negotiation of cultural identities.

People became willing to go out to have meals looking for something that might have had little to do with hunger and that couldn't be accomplished at home, at least not so well. These purposes that claimed to be accomplished were shaped in a myriad of social situations around food and eating, which correspond to an equally vast assortment of suitable places. For example, there are places for having breakfast with a friend, but inadequate for a romantic dinner, or lunch with the whole family. There are places frequented by young people

but not by older ones; places for men; places for a business lunch or for blue-collar workers; places to taste specialties that can hardly be prepared at home and to show off knowledge about it, and also places to see and to be seen by others.

As public settings that hold social situations, indeed, food outlets adopt different sets of behavior rules, including but not limited to table manners, different kinds of relationship between consumers and servers, different furniture, decoration and other environmental attributes, and different kinds of menu at different prices. All those attributes mean to create particular settings that would serve to express and negotiate social and cultural identities and to build and make visible social distinction.

In the city of Maracaibo (1), the most remarkable and visited places for eating out seem to be the street-food outlets. This city is known in the rest of the country by many particular features, being one set of them the vast quantity, the reputed *good* quality and the huge variety of street food, and also, the high frequency with which the average inhabitant of this city seems to eat street food, a practice that has a strong presence in its everyday life.

The ethnographical research about street food in Maracaibo that is being carried out (and from which this article derives) (2) is mainly oriented to the social, cultural and semiotic aspects involved in it and its practices, aiming, at the same time, to the broader context of alimentary culture in the city.

The interest followed by this article is to carry out a phenomenological characterization of street food in Maracaibo focusing in the outlining and analysis of the experience and appropriation of public space by the institutions and practices involved in *eating in the streets*, and especially through the diverse meanings attributed to street food and its consumption. Hence, rather than to bring conclusive statements, it points to the formulation of a set of questions and hypothesis which could lead to further discussion.

WHAT IS *STREET FOOD*?

Due to the wide range of experiences and situations that exist around eating in the streets, the answer to this question needs to be complex, in order to arrive to a useful definition that accounts on the phenomenon in contemporary Maracaibo. In this operative definition, that

have been achieved through a preliminary analysis (and so, subjected to revision), we will consider two key aspects, such as the use of public space and the accessibility of food.

The first and most obvious condition that shall be recalled in this attempt to define street food is the use *and production* of public space. According to this aspect, *street food* is the one that is prepared and/or sold in places which spaces for consumption —at least— are located in the public thoroughfare or contiguous to them; generally, these are unenclosed, frequently open-sky spaces to where the access of the public is wide, or, more exactly, poorly restricted. As it will be explained later, this condition of *accessibility* of the social space where the eating practices are performed (that is, its *social accessibility*) is a central element around which the sense of such practices is configured.

The second element points to the fact that street food is a *kind* of food, no matter if it is a very assorted one. The principle that rules this food category is its accessibility, in many senses. There is an *economic (material) accessibility* of street food, measured not only in terms of its relatively low price but also in terms of convenience (fast to be served and easily handle). This order seems to be no more important than the *symbolic accessibility*, related to the connection or easiness toward integration of plates to the local culinary tradition, as well as to the homogenizing (3) simplification of table manners.

This article focuses in the main aspect of the first element, that is, the relationship between public space and street food. The second aspect itself deserves an extended consideration that would be impossible to achieve in this article and that will be the subject of future writings.

Before going further, it is necessary to state a first distinction in street-eating practices. There are three main moments in which street food is consumed: In the morning as breakfast, in the evening as dinner and late night as after dinner. This distinction corresponds to two different types of food, to different ways to use or to appropriate the space and also to distinct dynamics and senses implied in its consumption (4). It is not possible to deepen in these elements, due to the short extension we are limited to, but, it is necessary to point out the qualitative differences between the morning and the nocturnal activities in terms of their dynamics and of the sense the subjects attribute to them, that perhaps might justify even to consider them as different social situations.

Morning street-food is linked mainly to the notion of "fueling" the body. There is usually less room to take a sit and more room at a counter (that separates consumers from vendors, since the facility commonly has the shape of a kiosk), so people frequently eat standing up or buy the food to take away. In the nocturnal activity, the facility is usually a cart (vendors-cooks are not inside the facility but around it, nothing separates them from the consumers, but an imaginary boundary) and the privileged space is the open-air refectory, where the clients come in and sit, waiting to be served, as in a restaurant (although it is possible and common to order directly to cooks in the cart or from the client's car window). These features are related to the time of permanence, which is longer in the nocturnal places.

The type of food sold in morning places is mostly not prepared at the moment but ready to serve, so the serving is much faster, the attendance is more individual than in groups and commonly, it happens as a stop to fill the children's lunchbox before taking them to school or to take breakfast before reaching work. It is also frequent to order food from the workplace.

The morning activity is, then, subordinated to the work rhythms and not to senses of leisure and sociality that are attributed as primaries —over the sense of convenience— to the nocturnal street-food activity. In the latter, therefore, people are willing to wait for their order, which needs to be prepared at the moment. People who visit these places expect to sit together as they usually come in couples, with family or friends to spend time together, chatting or simply looking at others in the place or at passers-by.

In the following exposition, I will refer mainly to the dynamics of nocturnal activity, as this one intertwines, more intensely and in a more complex way, sociality and public space.

STREET FOOD AND PUBLIC SPACE

The link between street food and public space derives from the informal origin of street-food as a commercial activity, but, in spite of the process of economic consolidation and formalization that these enterprises as a whole are experiencing, in many cases the use of public space prevails. There is a testimony of a successful entrepreneur —partner of a very popular "pastelitos" (5) outlet in Maracaibo—, who, after trying to

establish a food outlet inside a shopping center, decided to stay focused on his various outlets in the street, for being these, in his opinion, more profitable and more appealing to consumers (6).

In this process of consolidation and formalization occurring along the 50 years of development of modern street-food in Maracaibo, there have been —and still are being— changes in the outlets' infrastructure; changes that are related to a symbolic process of social differentiation. The vending facilities tend to be less precarious and improvised, showing better quality in their equipment and furniture (nowadays, it is characteristic the stainless-steel cart and plastic tables and chairs, for the nocturnal street-food outlets), bringing better conditions of light, adopting modern standards of hygiene similar to those seen in the fast-food chains, and performing a more thoughtful image, based in the use of graphic elements like logos, emblems and uniforms. Actually, all of these features confer a higher social status to the outlet that exhibits them.

Also, formerly consisting in carts, working tables or other kind of stands that were set on the sidewalk and then removed at the end of the journey each day, the outlets tend to become less transitory, showing signs of settling down in the space (7). For example, many have luminescent panels displaying the menu fixed in the place where the outlet is set at night. Others consist in 'hybrid' outlets that, besides the cart and the tables' setting in the (perceived) public space, have a private enclosed space or location, usually serving as a kitchen or, in some cases, as an air-conditioned refectory.

The existence of such hybrid places is a very interesting phenomenon, because it shows the symbolic importance of the public attribute of the space in the perception and popularity of street food, and also it allows us to affirm its importance as a defining feature. There are some experiences reported by informants (vendors) in which, after an attempt to "privatize" their outlet, that is, after trying to move it into a private location, they have had to reset the cart in order to keep the business running. Those hybrid places that add a more comfortable kitchen, must keep the cart operating as well, for its symbolic function representing street food seems to be more important for the consumer than the practical function it has as a kitchen. The most illustrative case of this symbolic role of the cart is a place with a cart embedded into the location, placed in such way that one of its long sides forms the front face of the outlet (8).

In the case of places with an air-conditioned private refectory, it never substitutes the open-air refectory set on (perceived) public space, and frequently its use is rather poor. This fact is paradoxical in Maracaibo, for its hot weather has made people very keen to air-conditioning at any time. Provided other situations, the people from Maracaibo almost always prefer to stay inside in a conditioned room. Undoubtedly, the experience of open-air, public space (which becomes bearable thanks to the shade and the slightly cooler air of the evening) is very important with regards to eating in the streets, as it is related to public visibility. We will come back over this aspect later.

Public space doesn't need to be "public" in a juridical sense, that is, in terms of property, but it shall be "perceived as" if it were. From a juridical perspective, public space can be defined as that which is not private (that is, which is not exclusive for the usage of its occupants or inhabitants) and which brings the possibility of a physical linkage between the different private spaces. It is the space in-between the private buildings, where the goods and services available for everyone are located and accessible for everyone (Duhau & Giglia, 2004). That is the case of sidewalks and squares, for example.

According to this definition, In Maracaibo there are many street-food vending places that are located on private spaces (for which the vendors usually pay a rent), for example, in parking spaces belonging to commercial facilities; however, these spaces are not separated from the public thoroughfare by physical barriers. Others are located in empty lots that have been totally or partially left without fences in order to promote the free access of people into them, thus creating the necessary contiguity with "real" public space. This feature is so attractive that some food outlets in private locations in small shopping centers, having a parking space between their front door and the sidewalk, prefer to sacrifice this space intended for their clients' vehicles placing there as much sets of plastic tables as they can, reproducing this way the street-food refectory. Therefore, it is necessary to adopt a concept of public space that allows surpassing the useless differentiation that the juridical notion imposes to the formulation of our object, that is, the opposition between *real* vs. *perceived* public space.

From a sociological perspective, public space shall be defined in terms of a certain relational atmosphere, deeply rooted to the urban experience if not shaping its very essence. As Duhau & Giglia (2004) expose,

it is a sociality that defines a certain way of being with others in the same space, where mutual respect is achieved by means of recognizing the other and, simultaneously, pretending his/her absence (Duhau & Giglia, 2004:173). A mixture, a constant tension between reserve and willingness towards others, between distance and conviviality, this attitude intrinsically ambivalent represents the basis of urban togetherness, with its distinctive ingredient of anonymity.

This anonymity implies a situation of equality where everyone has the potential right to come and go, to accept or reject the encounter with others, to recognize or to ignore each other. It is the condition for conviviality among those who are different, among those who don't know each other, and it is based on the "domestication of the street" (Baldwin, 1999, cited by Duhau &Giglia, 2004:173), which consists in the establishment and acceptance of certain rules, of an "order" which implies a dominant vision of the "legitimate ways of use" and public disciplining based on the mentioned rules (Duhau & Giglia, 2004:173) (9).

Of course, keeping this order is a conflictive process that constantly presses towards its transformation or towards the social transformation of space. As the cited authors refer, given the difficulty of keeping this only order, the modern cities experience, among other processes, a segmentation of space by its privatization or by collective property. In the words of Duhau and Giglia, a phenomenon that expresses this tendency is

> … la conversión del espacio público moderno del anonimato en artefactos que bajo la propiedad y la gestión privadas lo recrean a partir (de) condiciones de relativa homogeneidad social; de allí la proclividad de algunos analistas a considerar estos espacios como de simulacro, 'imitaciones del espacio público'… (Duhau & Giglia, 2004:174) (10).

Such referred artifacts are, for example and applied to our case, the food fairs in malls, where the exclusion of the "undesirables" (beggars, burglars or other potentially dangerous categories of individuals) is guaranteed at the cost of the monopolization of the economic space and the overregulation to which the consumer is subjected.

This difficulty to participate in shaping the rules that govern the interaction in these places (even deeper in our context where there is a high unawareness of consumer rights) is opposite to the constant negotiation that is characteristic of street-food outlets. In these, the clients usually feel prone to

openly express their likes and dislikes, to participate in shaping the menu or other features of the service by giving their opinion or suggestions, or even by claiming not proposed services or items. The vendors, on their side, feel free to show more proximity —less formality— in their relation to clients but, most of all, they are more willing —and even compelled— to negotiate the rules, not only with clients, but with other vendors with whom in many cases they must share the space, and also with ambulant retailers, beggars and other users of public space as well, including criminals and other menaces to the stability of their activity.

Therefore, it could be said that, in spite of the potential dangers that involve staying in these public places, they offer the possibility (scarce in other settings with a growing presence in contemporary cities) of exercising the political prerogatives of cultural citizenship in a remarkable field of expression of the "microphysics of power" (Foucault, 1976, 1979) such as the eating practices.

STREET FOOD, PERCEPTION OF RISK AND SOCIAL VISIBILITY

With regards to the issue of insecurity in the streets, street-food places offer, actually, a social laboratory from which some questions arise. One of them is related to the social perception of risk. Maracaibo is reputed as a dangerous city, with the highest rate of car theft in the country, and also with high incidence of pedestrian robbery and assault, kidnappings and even homicides. The high criminality in the streets is a condition that most of the inhabitants of the city take for granted. Given this fact, it is paradoxical that, while few people dare to take a walk after 8 or 9 pm., many people are willing to stay, enjoy and relax in street-food places at night. Most of these places open at 6 pm. and close at 12 am. weekdays and 3 or even 5 am. at weekends, depending on the festive season. Their peak of activity is around 9 pm. weekdays and from 8 pm. to 2 or 3 am. weekends.

People reach these places mainly by car, as public transportation at night in Maracaibo is null, in addition to the apprehension to walk in the street. But also, there are other motivations that support the use of car, motivations that correspond to the symbolic sphere. Here it appears one of the most important senses attributed to the practice of eating in the streets, according to our research, that is, "to see others and to be seen".

As Ferreira (2004) affirms, eating practices in public spaces are strongly shaped by the exteriorization and negotiation of social identities.

In Maracaibo, street-food places are gathered mostly along the main commercial avenues, so people and their cars are easily seen while passing by. Therefore, people can display, mainly trough their "look" and especially through their cars' look, symbols of social status or differentiation. Here emerges another important connection that calls to be examined in further discussions, that is, the link between street food and cars as both cultural artifacts that embody, in the urban everyday experience of the city of Maracaibo, key roles in the process implied in social visibility.

It is very common to see luxury cars parked at street-food outlets, an image that results strange to the foreigner coming from other places of the country. This fact leads to another remarkable characteristic of the practice of eating in the streets in Maracaibo: It is performed by subjects belonging to any social class and not just by people with a limited economy access, if any, to other forms of eating out.

This is a phenomenon that claims for a detailed examination, which will need to consider at least two aspects. On one side, the archaeology of modern street food as a cultural practice, that is, how, in its emergence and during its process of consolidation, the senses around social distinction and, at the same time, around cultural identities were constructed and negotiated, bringing out, from a mixture of *foreign* and *traditional* culinary elements, a practice that is representative of the way of being *Maracucho* (11). On the other side, the social mobility in the city and the emergence of new high social classes, which in their reluctance to abandon these practices, instead press towards their transformation, for example, by means of the incorporation of elements that confer distinction and that usually imitate key features of the fast-food chains, for instance.

Thus, according to the diverse unique, conflictive and even paradoxical features reported before, eating in the streets appears to be a complex phenomenon that resists reductionism in the attempt to explain the presence, use and production of public space by people in their everyday experience of the city.

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As a way to end this reflection, rather than showing any conclusion, here is a recount of the main links found, and of the hypothesis and

questions as well, statements that hopefully will trigger future discussion and research in their need to be supported theoretically.

a) A key notion to define street food appears to be its *accessibility*, that can be outlined in three different registries: *economy accessibility*, given its convenience and relatively low price; *symbolic accessibility*, for it simplifies table manners and also makes possible to assimilate ingredients and preparations coming from foreign culinary cultures —North American, Arab, Mexican— by their modification and integration to the local culture; and finally, *social accessibility*, which is experienced in a public space where social segregation is rather low.

b) There are qualitative differences between morning and nocturnal street-food activities in terms of their dynamics and of the sense that subjects attribute to each one; those differences might justify even to consider them as different social situations. Nocturnal street-food activities seem to intertwine sociality and public space in a more intense and complex way.

c) Nocturnal street-food outlets exhibit and are compelled to keep a set of material features that configure the public attribute of the space, features that are invested with symbolic importance towards the perception and popularity of street-food. This allows affirming the importance of public space as a defining attribute of street food outlets.

d) Given the precedent statement, in the study of street-food practices, it is necessary to adopt a definition of public space that privileges the relational nature of the social production of space rather than notions of juridical competence.

e) In the phenomenological characterization of street-food it emerges some dialectic complexities that deserve deep examination. Among this, there have been highlighted: In first place, the tension and apparent contradiction between social perception of risk (referred to criminality) and massive use of the public space produced around nocturnal street-food activities to exercise leisure and sociality; second, the trans-(social) class nature of these spaces and simultaneously the production of symbolic resources of social distinction, Third, the street-food places as cultural artifacts in the production of social visibility, in conjunction of other cultural artifacts such as cars, being both also greatly important as means of the everyday experience of Maracaibo as an urban setting.

Finally, it is possible to consider street-food outlets as public spaces for the production of cultural citizenship in the extent that they offer to the subjects the possibility (scarce in other settings with a growing presence in contemporary cities) of exercising their political prerogatives in a remarkable field of expression of the "microphysics of power", such as the eating practices.

Notes

1. Maracaibo (Coordinates 10°39'14?N 71°38'26?W) is the second-largest and most populated city in Venezuela after Caracas and is the capital of Zulia State, located in the western border of the country, next to Colombia. Maracaibo was founded in 1529 on the western side of Lake of Maracaibo, which is the dominant feature of the oil-rich Maracaibo Basin; its privileged geographical situation and resources made of this city, since the colonial times, the nucleus of an important economic pole. Based on the 2001 census information, the estimated population of Maracaibo in 2007 is 2,580,000 inhabitants; with a surface of 550 Km2 (212.4 sq mi), its demographic density is 4,690.9/Km2.

2. View foot reference in the first page of this article.

3. The simplification of table manners is homogenizing in a social sense, that is to say, it becomes a means of unifying the behavior codes of the "companions at table", thus minimizing the social differences.

4. There are places of the "nocturnal" kind that work during the day, but the dynamics of the practice in this case is more associated to the economy and convenience for working people, than to leisure and sociality, roles that are outstanding with regards to nocturnal activity.

5. A "pastelito" is made from two thin and round wheat-dough layers of about 4" diameter, stuffed with cheese, cheese and mashed potatoes, or with some kind of stewed preparation of chopped meat, chicken, fish, seafood, black beans or other ingredients. The stuff is placed in the center of one round layer and the other covers it. Both layers are stuck together by the edge, and then, the product is deep-fried. Pastelitos are very popular and mostly eaten for breakfast. Many other varieties of similar dishes (tequeños, empanadas, papitas, yoyos and mandocas) are also sold at pastelitos' outlets.

6. In-depth interview to an owner of a "pastelitos"' outlet, male, age 32, maracaibean. (07/17/2007). Further, other examples referred to the importance of public space in nocturnal activities are mentioned.

7. Besides the spatial settlement process, there is, as well, a process of settling down in time, since some street-food outlets' activity turn into more regular and extended along day and night. There are a growing number of places serving 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. This process is, in some extent, related to urban growth, which determines the higher difficulty of workers to reach home for meals.

8. This place is "Metropoli" located in 22nd Av., 50 meters off plaza Indio Mara, which is the most important reference of street-food in Maracaibo, gathering about 25 outlets; the most ancient one in the area has been opened for 50 years now.

9. Author's translation

10. … the conversion of modern public space of anonymity in artifacts that under the private property and management recreate it from conditions of relative social homogeneity; from this comes the inclination of many analysts to consider these spaces as simulation, as "imitations of public space" (translated by myself).

11. "Maracucho" is the commonly used patronymic to refer to the people from Maracaibo City.

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