In order to understand the place of consumption in early modern Europe, it is important to recognize that it is not simply a matter of what is consumed, but how and in what spaces. In fundamental texts such as Norbert Elias’ The Civilizing Process and Mikhail Bakhtin’s Rabelais and His World, the process of consumption at the table and its change over time, along with the culture of production and consumption in the marketplace is framed. These changes, accompanying the introduction of new commodities, resulted in significantly increased consumption and regulation of behaviors associated with it. Laws emerged to regulate both moral and physical pollution from meat and luxury goods, demonstrating fears about the corruption of the body and the soul from illness and excess. Both at the dinner table and the marketplace, the production and consumption of food became subject to newly developing rules, from the use of proper dining utensils to the introduction of food safety policies. Food also became an opportunity for the recently affluent middle class to display their social mobility and mastery of dining etiquette that differentiated themselves from the lower classes. As class boundaries became less clear-cut, public consumption and displaying goods became common methods of illustrating wealth and social currency. Beverages were also impacted by changing patterns of consumption. The introduction of colonial products like tea and coffee helped create new social spaces that allowed an escape from alcohol, which was associated with excess and immorality. These products also allowed for the exchange of new ideas within coffee houses. Food and beverages existed in a complex web of class, colonialism, and regulation, reflecting evolving social categories, emerging fears, and the reality that consumption was tied to the broader societal changes occurring in early modern Europe.


The Civilizing Process by Norbert Elias (translated by Edmund Jephcott) is a fundamental text to the understanding the development of manners and the idea of civilized behavior in Europe from the Middle Ages to the Early Modern period. Elias explores the idea of civilization through the lens of changing human behavior, particularly focusing on social conduct while eating or attitudes towards bodily functions. Arguing that when society is in transition, manners are also in transition, Elias gives special focus to social conduct while eating, viewing it as a broader extension of evolving social behavior. The Civilizing Process asserts that manners and etiquette seen as composing “civilized” society are not a natural development, but a construct that evolved over time and must be frequently enforced. Throughout The Civilizing Process, Elias uses manner guides to chart the development of behavior and attitudes in Europe. Arguing that literature on etiquette can provide insight into the development of social conduct, such as the spread of courtly manners to the bourgeois, Elias offers examples from literature on etiquette and behavior. Erasmus of Rotterdam’s 16th-century treatise on civility and manners is given special focus, as Elias sees it as particularly influential.

Two broad trends that Elias follows throughout these guides are the way that developing manners relegated natural functions to behind the scenes and how shame was used to enforce and condition human behavior. For instance, the popularizing of the fork at the dinner table was largely because it was seen as shameful to dirty one’s fingers, not primarily because of concerns surrounding hygiene. Ultimately, Elias draws connections between domestic changes at the dinner table and the broader evolution of social attitudes, illustrating that the modern European understanding of civilized behavior is not an innate aspect of society, but a construct that required lengthy development and constant enforcement.


In Rabelais and His World, Mikhail Bakhtin posits that the fair, which took place in the sixteenth century European marketplace, existed outside of the economic sphere and was instead a cultural outlet for debauchery and
consumption could be used to separate identity groups through socially growing interest in emulating the elite through public consumption. On the other hand, Lloyd through food. Mock luxury and class in England became less clear period. Rather than simply a symptom of overindulgence, luxury goods became a convenience.

sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, however, luxury goods came to be seen as an almost exclusively negative of sustenance, but as a marker of social classes and their evolution. Initially, Lloyd explains, the concept of “luxury” had an almost exclusively negative connotation, associated with excess, corruption, and vice, to the extent that the existence of luxury was seen as a threat that must be regulated by the state through sumptuary laws. Over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, however, luxury goods came to be seen as an indication of taste, utility, and convenience. Lloyd links this shifting understanding of luxury goods to evolving social classes during the same time period. Rather than simply a symptom of overindulgence, luxury goods became a marker of class. As social mobility and class in England became less clear-cut, the recently affluent middle class strove to indicate their elevated social class through food. Mock luxury goods, cookbooks, and etiquette guides aimed at the newly monied middle class indicate a growing interest in emulating the elite through public consumption. On the other hand, Lloyd notes that public consumption could be used to separate identity groups through socially segregated seating and the enforcement of


The fourth chapter of In Pursuit of a Healthy City by Janna Coomans entitled “Food, Health, and the Marketplace” details the ways in which the marketplace, as the economic and political center of medieval European towns and cities, was a site for urban governments to assert their biopower through regulating consumption as a means of placing cities in competition with one another and of proving the superiority of urbanity over the countryside. Coomans further brings together the ideas of public health and government regulation in order to make a broader point about the tension between those inspecting public goods and those producing and consuming them in urban settings — places where outbreaks of plague were particularly common as a result of population density, especially during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Meat and the butchers who sold it, for example, were regulated both spatially — through standards set related to the transportation of meat and where it could be sold in the marketplace so as not to pollute other goods — as well as through the inspection and monitoring of variables such as temperature and the amount of time that meat spent outside before being sold. Such standards were enforced both through fines and ecclesiastical punishments meant to humiliate and degrade the reputation of the offending butcher, and were meant to protect consumers from potential humiliation to their households were they to serve unsanitary meat or other foodstuffs. Thus, the pressure on the middling sort to consume according to a prescribed set of norms that were in this case related both to health and to ideas about sanitation and pollution, which drove the fears behind market regulation, existed both in the marketplace and at table.


Paul S. Lloyd’s chapter “Food and Identity” explores the relationship between food and social identity in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England. Lloyd gives special focus to shifting attitudes towards luxury goods and the ability of food to communicate messages about social positions and values, understanding food and consumption as not merely sustenance, but as a marker of social classes and their evolution. Initially, Lloyd explains, the concept of “luxury” had an almost exclusively negative connotation, associated with excess, corruption, and vice, to the extent that the existence of luxury was seen as a threat that must be regulated by the state through sumptuary laws. Over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, however, luxury goods came to be seen as an indication of taste, utility, and convenience. Lloyd links this shifting understanding of luxury goods to evolving social classes during the same time period. Rather than simply a symptom of overindulgence, luxury goods became a marker of class. As social mobility and class in England became less clear-cut, the recently affluent middle class strove to indicate their elevated social class through food. Mock luxury goods, cookbooks, and etiquette guides aimed at the newly monied middle class indicate a growing interest in emulating the elite through public consumption. On the other hand, Lloyd notes that public consumption could be used to separate identity groups through socially segregated seating and the enforcement of
etiquette associated with elite classes. Consumption, Lloyd argues, is not merely a matter of nourishment, but an opportunity for a public display of wealth and status.


Van Bruaene and Van Bourchaute’s article addresses coffee’s opposite: alcohol. The article examines the significance of drinking in early modern Dutch rederijkers (guildsmen who wrote literature) culture. Although these authors often included caricatures of drunkards, they were often heavy drinkers themselves. The article highlights the understanding of the importance of moderation and the associations of drunkenness with immorality, underscoring wider consumption patterns with alcohol. Alcohol was highly popular (Brian Cowan writes in The Social Life of Coffee that it was the unchallenged drug of choice for early modern Europeans) but it too carried immoral implications, creating a need for regulation. Despite these regulations and notions of moderation, many guildsmen continued to drink heavily, again speaking to the popularity of this commodity in early modern Europe.


“Coffee and Early Modern Drug Culture” examines the popularity of coffee as a respectable alternative to alcohol and other drugs in early modern England. Cowan investigates the stigmas attached to the consumption of various drugs including bongue (marijuana), opium, and alcohol, and then contrasts these associations with the social connotations of coffee and tea. While these drugs were associated with sexual immorality, thievery, and other bad behaviors, coffee was celebrated for its status as a social drug that could be consumed without the effects of intoxication. Cowan further notes that coffee was considered so anti-sexual that consuming too much could lead to infertility. Coffee was also unique because of its market history. Cowan traces the drink from its virtuosi circles to its widespread public consumption. Overall, coffee was a highly popular commodity because of its apparent “civilizing” psychotropic effects.


This anonymous book details both the popularity of and backlash to coffee in the 17th and 18th centuries in England. The book highlights the extent of England’s coffee consumption in the 1600s: the first coffee house opened in Oxford in 1650, and by 1698 there were over 2,000 in London alone. The book further notes that coffee houses occupied more retail space than any other trade. Despite its popularity, coffee experienced pushback during this period. The book contains a satirical petition against coffee as well as a response that illustrate anxieties about the social and pharmaceutical implications of coffee. Although this petition is exaggerated, it still provides insight into what people thought about the new commodity. Old English Coffee Houses ultimately demonstrate the popularity of the beverage as well as the anxieties surrounding its psychotropic effects.

For further study:

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