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CHAPTER ONE

Melding the Public and Private Spheres: Taking Commensality Seriously

I have argued recently that “at some point in one’s life, self-subversion may become the principal means to self-renewal” (Hirschman 1995, 92). I hope to subvert here a book I published in 1982, *Shifting Involvements: Private Interest and Public Action*. It explored the reasons modern societies may be “predisposed toward oscillation between periods of intense preoccupation with public issues and of almost total concentration on individual improvement and private welfare goals.” Many of the reasons I gave for such periodic shifts seem to me to be valid still. But I want to go back to one particular phase of the alleged “private / public cycle,” which I now view in a different light.

The principal motive force that drove my story was *disappointment*. Disappointment with the concentration on private consumption was for me a primary source of the subsequent turn toward action in the public interest, just as in the following phase disappointment with the turn toward action in the public interest would promote the return to private concerns. It so happened that during the post-World War II period with which I started my account, private consumption in the Western economies rose primarily in the area of durable goods—automobiles, refrigerators, washing machines, televisions, and so on. This “drive to high mass consumption” was celebrated by Walt W. Rostow in his highly successful work, *Stages of Economic Growth* (1960). I wrote my book some twenty years later, with

the benefit of hindsight, that is, *after* the world had passed through the violent student agitation and unrest of the late 1960s, which were widely interpreted as a protest against the latest Rostovian stage. By then that stage had come to be known as “consumerism,” a term that was often used in a derogatory vein.

Had Rostow been overenthusiastic about the massive expansion in consumer durables that had indeed marked the postwar prosperity in the United States, and had rapidly spread to Western Europe, Japan, and elsewhere? Had he failed to see some dangerous portents in this expansion?

Such was the opinion of a stimulating book that, without actually mentioning Rostow’s positive account of the consumer durables boom, offered a new and highly original analysis of consumer satisfaction and dissatisfaction. I am referring to Tibor Scitovsky’s *The Joyless Economy* (1976), which was written in the aftermath of the student revolts and influenced me strongly.

Right at the beginning of his book, Scitovsky refers starkly to its historical background: the downfall of American consumers from the brief (Rostovian) triumph they had celebrated at the middle of the twentieth century, when they spent “the world’s highest income on the world’s most copied and coveted life-style.” Within a decade, this self-image was to be largely destroyed, and Scitovsky asks: “Could it be that we seek our satisfaction in the wrong things, or in the wrong way, and are then dissatisfied with the outcome?” (Scitovsky 1976, 2–4). This question, of course, contradicted the traditional economic approach, according to which consumers know what is good for them and calculate expertly how to maximize their satisfactions. But Scitovsky protested against this simplistic and apologetic tradition and devoted his first chapters to various complications and illuminating explorations in individual psychology.

For me the most interesting distinction he developed was that between comfort and pleasure. The human drives to relieve discomfort and to achieve comfort do make for pleasure in two ways. First of all, pleasure is generated by repeated travel from varieties of

discomfort to *comfort* (e.g., from hunger to satiation). Second, pleasure occurs also as we move from inactivity or boredom to renewed activity, as a result of various types of *stimulation*. To the extent that countries become economically advanced and affluent, the first ingredient of pleasure — the journey from discomfort to comfort — is reduced or held at bay; hence stimulation should take over as a major source of pleasure. But with people being hardly conscious of the contrast between pleasure and comfort, they pursue the latter at the expense of stimulation and suffer a deficiency in overall pleasure. Thus they end up in Scitovsky's "joyless economy."

This description of the Scitovsky model leaves out many of its finer features; but even in this stripped-down form, it becomes clear how it enabled me to produce my own story of successive disappointments. Paradoxically, I made this story start out with the *expansion* of private consumption of durable goods, an expansion that, just a short while ago, had been considered the essence of various "economic miracles."

My main point was wholly inspired by Scitovsky. In comparison with conventional purchases, new durable goods were more weighted with comfort than with pleasure. As a result, the first massive appearance of durables in a consumer culture will produce an "initially disconcerting" change in the traditional balance of pleasure and comfort (Hirschman 1981, 33). I did mention some obvious qualifications: the generation that first experiences the new comfort / pleasure balance will no doubt be delighted with its new acquisitions and deeply grateful for the emancipator from work and fatigue it has achieved. But gratitude never lasts very long. As the new durables are increasingly taken for granted, the extra comfort and time they provide must be taken advantage of and be occupied by new forms of stimulation. In the absence of such stimulation, disappointment will set in. A large part of Scitovsky's book is devoted to these topics.

My principal argument against Scitovsky was his utter neglect of the *public* dimension. He did not conceive of politics, participation in public life, pursuit of the public interest (or of "public happiness,"

in the language of the eighteenth century) as alternative sources of stimulation. I still believe it is worthwhile to explore such alternatives to a predominantly private life. But my original critique along these lines remained imprisoned in the two mutually exclusive categories of the private and the public. I failed to realize that there are important occasions when the public and the private meld and merge.

In doing so I was perhaps merely following an ancient tradition. Take, for example, the biological function of filling one's stomach. This has long been considered a purely private activity that was contrasted with the pursuit of "higher," spiritual values and was often treated with disdain in comparison.

The Bible, Pascal, and Samuelson

Both the Old and the New Testaments laid down the rule that "man does not live by bread alone" (Deuteronomy 8:3; Matthew 4:4), and that it was far more important to follow the Lord's commands than to eat. These two activities were eventually taken to stand in opposition to one another, and during the later Middle Ages fasting became the essence of meritorious religious behavior. As Caroline Bynum pointed out in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, this was especially true for women: Raymond of Capua, the biographer of Saint Catherine of Siena, felt much guilt about his own difficulties in fasting and found Catherine to be a true model in this regard.¹

During the Renaissance, the pleasures of eating and the excitement over food and drink staged a vigorous comeback, a development exemplified by Rabelais and his characters Gargantua and Pantagruel. In contrast to the myth of the lost paradise, Rabelais knows of no punishment for gluttony or other cardinal sins. He celebrates even drink as that "ambrosial, delicious, precious, celestial, joyous and deific" liquor.² But his amoral and guiltless attitude toward food and drink did not last long. Already Montaigne qualified the endorsement of food by saying, "one must look out not so much at what one eats as with whom one eats" and he further downgraded the delights of eating by adding: "There is no dish so sweet to me, and no sauce

so appetizing as the pleasure derived from society” (Montaigne 1933, bk. 3, 13). As was to be pointed out much later by Georg Simmel, the social delights Montaigne talks about here are to be had primarily as a result of, and in conjunction with, the common meal and should therefore not be contrasted with it. But the intellectual tradition stemming from the Bible had long separated the consumption of food from the so-called higher activities. This separation was soon to be fully restored by Pascal.

In one of his longer *Pensées*, Pascal distinguishes two different ways of pursuing happiness and justice: One consists in following the commands of God, the other in acquiring instead a great variety of objects meant to take the place of God. Here Pascal compiles a long, intentionally incongruous list of objects: “stars, sky, land, elements, plants, cabbage, leeks, animals, insects, calves, snakes, fever, plague, war, famine, vices, adultery, incest.” Then he continues:

Since man has lost the true Good, all of these things will seem to be like the Good, including even man’s self-destruction which is so contrary to God, to reason and to nature . . . but those who have come close [to the truth] have concluded that the universal Good which all men desire . . . should not consist in any of the particular things which can be possessed only by an individual — but that this Good must be such that *all can possess it at the same time*, without diminution or envy, and that nobody can lose it against his own will. (Pascal 1969, 1185–86, emphasis added.)

Pascal then contrasts the belief in God, available to all those who believe in Him, with the partaking in tangible commodities, such as cabbage and leeks, which are necessarily appropriated and, in these cases, eaten by individual consumers. Economists will find Pascal’s contrast surprisingly close to the distinction they are used to making between public and private goods (or bads).³ Following Paul Samuelson’s classic formulation in the 1950s, private goods have been defined as those that are held and consumed individually, while public goods are those whose consumption and enjoyment by one citizen does not affect the quantity available to others (Samuelson 1954 and 1955).

Interestingly enough, the good that occurred to Samuelson to stand as a typical example of private goods was the loaf of bread (“whose total can be parceled out among two or more persons, with one man having a loaf less if another gets a loaf more” [Samuelson 1955, 350]), while the typical public goods were such “nonrival” services as police protection, national defense, and public education.

When this distinction was first clearly made, in the immediate postwar period, public opinion about the role of the state was on the whole quite positive and public goods were celebrated, in spite of the intrinsic difficulties of estimating the demand for them. A well-known article written in the 1960s by Robert Dorfman reflected this attitude:

Since [nobody] can be precluded from enjoying [public goods], it is in the interest of each [person] to avoid contributing to them if he can. Therefore the coercive power of the state must be enlisted to compel contributions. And when this is done *wisely* all benefit, for the goods desired by all (or virtually all) can be provided which would otherwise be unavailable to any. Goods of this nature, then, can be provided only by the state, by philanthropists, and as byproducts of certain private goods. (Dorfman 1969, 249, emphasis added.)

This passage looks at the distinction between public and private goods very much as the Bible had done. Bread was to be eaten by the individual consumer; but providing it “alone,” by itself, was far from enough: to assure the good life for all citizens, various *public* goods must be concurrently produced by the state.

The economist’s distinction between private and public goods thus retained and reinforced the basic dichotomy of the Bible and of Pascal. Little attention was paid to goods that would somehow be intermediate between the private and the public category or would belong to both.

Georg Simmel

In the meantime, however, a distinguished sociologist had called attention to situations where goods that seem to be wholly private

actually have important collective dimensions. In a short but penetrating article written in 1910, *Die Soziologie der Mahlzeit*, Simmel refers in this connection to the social institution of the meal. Almost at the beginning of the paper, a striking paragraph points to the function of the meal as a bridge between the private and public functions of food and drink when consumed in common by a group:

Let us take what is most common to men and women among all the things they have in common: the fact that they must eat and drink. This is precisely what is most self-centered about them, most unconditional, direct, and limited to the individual: What I think, I can let others know about; what I see, I can show to others; what I say can be heard by hundreds of others — but what is eaten by a single person can under no circumstances be eaten by anyone else. In none of the higher realms is it ever the case that what should be had by one person must be unconditionally renounced by others. But since this primitive physiological fact is an absolutely general human characteristic, it becomes precisely a communal action: thus arises the sociological construct of the meal — it turns the exclusive self-seeking of eating into the frequent experience of being together and into the habit of joining in a common purpose — something that is but rarely achieved by occasions of a higher, more spiritual order. Persons who do not share any interest can join in the common meal — in this possibility, mediated through the primitive and transparent character of material interest, *lies the immense sociological significance of the meal.*⁴

This basic point is then worked out by Simmel through the principal characteristics of the meal. The German language is helpful to Simmel's enterprise as *Mahlzeit*, the German word for meal, already refers, through the inclusion of the term *Zeit* (time) to some of the social features of the occasion. *Mahlzeit* denotes the regularity and simultaneity of the meal, or what is also known as its "commensality." A more common term today is *conviviality* but I shall use here the more technical term — which derives from *mensa* (table) — for eating together around a table.

Commensality includes friends and family, but excludes irreconcilable enemies. According to a French author, it brings with it

the *douceur* of having been included as well as the cruelty of being excluded (Morineau 1987). In German, moreover, the term *Mahlzeit* has long been used also as an exclamation celebrating commensality at the beginning of the joint meal, as a term of benediction when a group sits down together to eat. The exclamation served as an abbreviation for the more religious invocation “*Gesegnete Mahlzeit!*” (May this meal be blessed).

Simmel’s basic insight about the meal providing a connection between two very different spheres—those of the selfish individual and of the social collective—leads him to throw light on various other ways in which eating has been “civilized,” from the rules that were set for eating from the pot and later from plates, to the use and manner of holding knife, fork, and spoon, and even to the appropriate decoration of the dining room. It is odd that Norbert Elias should not have referred to the Simmel essay in his *The Civilizing Process* (1981), in spite of the fact that his famous work is obviously written with similar questions in mind (Elias’s book was once reviewed under the title “The Rise of the Fork”). But Elias wrote as an historical sociologist and was interested in the details of changing institutions and habits, whereas Simmel wrote as a social theorist and developed his ideas purely as deductions from general principles. Even the shape of the plate is thus deduced! Simmel derives its circular shape with a uniform radius from the principle that an identical portion of food is normally meant to be distributed to each participant in the meal and exclaims: “The plates of a table do not tolerate any individuality.”

Toward the end of his essay, Simmel characteristically moves in an unexpected direction. His story rises first from the natural-physical to the social-aesthetic. But in a final twist, Simmel interrupts or qualifies this ascent by noting that the basic need to eat does not permit a wholly free flow of conversation. Thus he defends the “banality of normal table talk” and sets a definite ceiling to the lofty and possibly controversial sphere to which the meal was almost about to take us.

Simmel’s essay confirmed the positive light under which I had presented, in *Shifting Involvements*, the “truly nondurable” goods—that

is, those that, like food and fuel, are actually *used up* in the process of consumption. Influenced by Scitovsky's distinction between comfort and pleasure, I had thought that these goods would cause less disappointment than durables: food vanishes in the course of consumption and therefore permits the process of pleasure generation to start over again – with the next mouthful, once the travel from discomfort to comfort is resumed. But it now seems likely to me that in celebrating these “truly nondurable” goods, I followed a correct instinct, but invoked inadequate reasons: I continued to look at eating and food intake as purely private and self-centered activities. Like Scitovsky and most economists, I neglected their potential public dimension.

The superiority of food over what I called “possessions” is primarily rooted in Simmel's insight about the meal: it is the ease with which the private consumption of food is connected with collective or public endeavors, due to commensality. Implicitly, Simmel compares eating with other basic physiological drives, such as sleeping, and he finds that among them only the intake of food is performed in common and therefore will lead to “essential communal actions”: it is the “frequent experience of being together” and the “habit of joining in a common purpose” which make for the “immense sociological importance of the meal.”

It appears that in disregarding the Simmelian shift from the private to the public domain through the common meal, we have failed to recognize the substantial external benefits of this type of food consumption. Economists – Scitovsky figures importantly among them – often feel that the discovery of external benefits justifies the payment of subsidies to the activity responsible for such benefits. For example, the existence of external benefits is often cited as an argument for the provision of public subsidies to the arts (Throsby 1994; Baumol 1995). I have no intention of making a plea here for subsidies to public meals, in part because the external benefits can turn into losses, as will be noted toward the end of this essay. But it is instructive to point out that subsidies to common meals or banquets did in

fact exist and played a considerable role at one time in history—in ancient Greece, to cite one well-documented example.

The Banquet and Democracy

The venerable existence and importance of the Greek banquet with its religious sacrifices has long been known. It was already described in brief but glowing terms over a century ago by Fustel de Coulanges in *La Cité antique* (1864) and by Jakob Burckhardt in his *Griechische Kulturgeschichte* (1898). The topic has continued to be much studied by historians, iconographers, and epigraphers of the ancient Greek world, and during recent years these studies (of writings, vases, and inscriptions) have greatly expanded. A comprehensive treatise was published recently by the Hellenist Pauline Schmitt Pantel, under the title *La Cité au banquet: Histoire des repas publics dans les cités grecques* (1992; subsequent parenthetical citations refer to this book). This rich work presents the evolution, over a period of almost ten centuries, of the banquet among the Greeks.

Usually, archaic Greece is distinguished from the classical, principally Athenian period of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C., which is, in turn, marked off from the Hellenistic era. During the archaic period, Schmitt Pantel groups the banquets with various social practices that define the *koinon*, the common or public domain, in contrast to the *idion*, the particular or private sphere. *Koinon* practices include the bearing of arms and participation in collective hunting, religious rituals, and banquets (110); all of these activities concur in defining and enhancing citizenship in the polis. Archaic Greece sees no sharp distinction between political institutions proper, such as the assemblies at the Agora, and other elements of public life, such as the banquets (112).

The banquets have their origin in the religious sacrifice (*thusía*) of a bull or ox that is ritually killed, then cooked, and eventually divided among the participants. According to a detailed description of the ritual, “the group of citizens is not constituted upon the death of the animal . . . this happens rather with the commensality around the

pieces of beef. . . . All those who eat become citizens. . . . Eating is definitely the main event. . . . The city emerges because it eats beef.”⁵ In this manner, commensality is explicitly related to the birth of political community.

A slight change in the function of banquets occurs in Athens during the classical period (fifth century). A certain type of commensality is now reserved for specific occasions: the fifty citizens (*prytans*) who represent the city of Athens after the democratic reforms of Kleisthenes are strictly obliged to eat together at the Tholos, a central circular building near the Agora. But the classical period did not produce a real break in the forms and functions of the banquet in general; it retains and even reinforces its role as the principal place where sociability is being “fermented” (Fustel de Coulanges) and where various rituals are being performed. The common meal becomes institutionalized as a symbol of the permanence of political power in a democracy (170). Later on, during the Hellenistic period, the banquets are increasingly organized and financed by benefactors belonging to the most powerful and wealthy families (*évergètes*) in various Greek cities (410), as is attested by numerous inscriptions (Veyne 1976; also Gautier 1985, 147-66; Sartre 1991, 147-66; Andreau, Schmitt, and Schnapp 1978).

Throughout, Schmitt Pantel emphasizes the close connection between the commensality of the banquet and the resulting social and citizen relationships: “There is a direct tie between the practices of commensality and the functioning of power and the type of politics” (438). The banquet occupies a key position connecting what we would call today the religious, the public, and the private spheres (250). For the classical period Schmitt Pantel quotes writers from Euripides to Plato and Aristotle, showing that “commensality is the tie of friendship which is formed and becomes stronger during the practice of common banquets. Commensality in turn allows *philia* (friendship) which guarantees not so much the social order, but the consensus that is necessary to life in society. . . . Both Aristotle and Plato. . . show the considerable extent to which the forms of

commensality were in classical Athens an integral part of a reflection on the *politeia*" (488). The banquet was the preeminent expression of what we like to call today "civil society."

Schmitt Pantel asserts that the intriguing title of her own work, *La Cité au banquet* (The city at the banquet), is at least as justified in characterizing life in ancient Athens as the frequently used expression "The City at the Agora." For her title reflects perhaps more exactly the evolution of social relations in the city (490). Her final plea (*ibid.*) is "to take commensality seriously" (*prendre la commensalité au sérieux*) — as she places this passage in quotes, she may here be paraphrasing the title of Ronald Dworkin's *Taking Rights Seriously* (1978).

In this spirit, I am tempted to suggest that a direct link exists between the banquet and the emergence of Athenian democracy, that towering political invention of the Greeks. Schmitt Pantel does not quite venture this thought, but other prominent members of the modern French classical school have done so squarely. In a long preface to a dissertation dealing in detail with the ritual sacrifice and slaughter of oxen during the banquets in ancient Greece, Marcel Detienne (1982) writes: "After the sacrifice, the animal is carved up through egalitarian division: the isonomic model is applied and commensality takes place through a procedure which makes for portions of equal size and weight being distributed by means of sortition" (Berthiaume 1982). And Nicole Loraux (1981), another prominent Hellenist, contends in a well-known review article: "To eat equal portions means to produce and to reproduce political equality; in the communal meal arises the isonomic figure of the city." Yet another French scholar, referring to Plutarch's *Table Talks*, writes similarly that "we know that the essentially democratic procedure of sortition (i.e., lottery) was utilized to assure that the portions of beef were distributed equitably" (Durand 1997, 154).⁶

"Isonomy" is the classical Greek term for equality before the law. It also refers to equal distribution of various political offices by lottery or sortition rather than through elections. Sortition was the crucial

mechanism for the selection (and regular rotation) of the principal polis officials and magistrates (except for military leaders) in the Athenian democracy, as Bernard Manin (1995, 19–61) emphasizes. Apparently, equal division of the ritually sacrificed oxen among banquet members led in Athens, through a remarkable association of ideas, to the equal distribution of offices among the citizens through lottery.

One might object at this point that there is a substantial difference between the equitable carving up of an ox among the members of a banquet and the distribution of a limited number of polis offices among the citizens by means of a lottery: there were always many more citizens than offices, while the number of meat portions was necessarily equal to that of the participants in a banquet. Yet the task of dividing an ox into approximately equal pieces among the participants required a highly skilled operation on the part of the butcher; in a way, this division was more complex than the outright elimination from public office through lottery of a given number of polis members, especially if the selection for such offices was made for relatively short periods (say, one year) and if the principle of periodic rotation was strictly applied, as came to be the case in Athens. In this manner, “isonomy” came to be the rule of the polity as much as of the banquet.

I agree with Manin (1995, 41–42) that the designation of polis officials through lottery did not have a religious, sacerdotal origin or function, as had been held by Fustel de Coulanges and Gustave Glotz. But the use and importance of lottery in Athenian democracy owes much to its similarity with the banquet procedure. It would seem that Simmel was right: if Athenian democracy was one of its externalities or side-effects, the sociological-political significance of the meal or banquet was truly immense.

Symposium, Männerbund, and Beer Drinking in German Student Corporations

In a book on development projects (Hirschman 1968, ch. 5), I have made much of the “centrality of side-effects.” The story I have just told about Greek banquets illustrates this concept: a bloody religious

sacrifice had a remarkable and remarkably positive outcome in the field of politics. But this relationship cannot be expected to have been the rule. A rather different story seems to be in the offing in a paper by the well-known Oxford University Hellenist Oswyn Murray (1982). Under the title “Symposium and Männerbund,” he would surely describe, one might think, the sharp contrast between the Greek banquet and the Germanic *Männerbund*. In fact, Murray does nothing of the kind. Rather, he adverts to the undoubted structural similarity between the two institutions: both are associations of young men outside of kinship groups, both practice homosexuality and engage in communal eating and drinking, and both have religious origins and perform religious and warlike functions. Strangely, Murray does not mention the spectacular contrast between the sociopolitical connotations and characteristics of symposium and *Männerbund*: the dawn of democracy in classical Greece, on the one hand, and the raging (*wütig*) fury of wild, plundering bands of young men (*Berserker*) in ancient Germany and Scandinavia, on the other (see Dumézil 1939, 91; Weiser 1927; Hofler 1934). One cannot help thinking of the *Männerbund* as foreboding some of the worst aspects of Germany’s later political developments, such as the murderous activities of the post-1918 “Free Corps” and the subsequent SA and SS movements of the Nazi period.⁷

Such perhaps fanciful, yet irresistible historical connections aside, the social psychology of communal drinking (rather than eating) is penetratingly explored in Heinrich Mann’s best-known novel, *Der Untertan* (The Subject).⁸ This story takes place in Imperial Germany just before World War I. Its key turning point occurs early in the novel when the principal character, the weak, mendacious, craven, and all-round contemptible Diederich Hessling joins a group of students, the “Neoteutonic Corporation,” and engages with them in frequent, ritualized beer drinking. This activity does not stop him from being utterly contemptible, but he now manages to hide his self-doubts and numerous other vices and weaknesses, becomes remarkably assertive, and eventually achieves worldly “success.”

Here is how Heinrich Mann describes the transformation of his antihero:

[He] had become a “Konkneipant” [member of a group going regularly to a *Kneipe*, or bar]—he felt predestined for this task. He now belonged to a large group of people where nobody . . . demanded anything from him except drinking. Full of gratitude and benevolence he raised his glass to anyone who did the same. To drink, not to drink, to sit, to stand, to talk or to sing did no longer depend on him. All of these activities were loudly ordered and properly carried out and thus one lived in peace with oneself and the world . . . Diederich was immersed in the corporation which did his thinking and desiring for him. As a member of the corporation he now became a man with self-respect—and because he belonged to it he also turned into a man of honor . . .

Beer! Alcohol! There one sat and could always have more. Beer was not like those coquettish, demanding women, it was faithful (*treu*) and cozy (*gemütlich*). With beer there was no need to act, to achieve, as with women. Everything happened of its own accord: one swallowed and with that one already had achieved something, one felt transported to the heights of existence, felt like a free man, free from the inner point of view (*innerlich frei*)—the beer one swallowed was transformed into internal freedom. And one virtually had already passed one’s exams. One was “through,” was a doctor! (Mann 1918, 29-32.)

Once again, sociologically it was highly significant to gather together a social group that ate or, in this case, drank in common. Obviously, those who did so did not truly acquire self-respect, honor, and “inner freedom” in the process. Rather, by drinking beer with their fellow students, the likes of Diederich could *pretend* to have these desirable qualities, they could feign and fake them.

Here then is a case where commensality generates externalities of a socially negative kind, just as Simmel underlines the social *benefits* of joining in a common meal, Heinrich Mann describes the opposite phenomenon, the lamentable result of becoming a “Konkneipant.” In their own ways, however, and at about the same time, both Simmel and Heinrich Mann converged on the impact, positive or negative, of the joint consumption of food or drink.

Actually, the difference between Simmel and Mann is not as wide as one might think. True, at the beginning of his essay, Simmel emphasizes the tendency of the meal to rise from its “physiological primitiveness” to the complex and noble sphere of “social interactions.” But, as already noted, he later places ceilings on this upward movement as he stresses and vindicates the “banality of table conversation” with its “generality and lack of intimacy.” Here Simmel suddenly accepts and even advocates a narrow boundary to the fine human and social relations that are apt to arise during the *Mahlzeit*—a boundary drawn against the hypocrisy and vulgarity characteristic of human relations in the Wilhelmine Kneipe of Heinrich Mann.

Economists (including both Scitovsky and myself) have often looked at the consumption of food as a purely private and self-centered activity, with the ensuing relief of hunger and enjoyment of nourishment being a positive but decreasing function of spending on food. In the middle of the nineteenth century the German statistician Ernst Engel (1821-96) demonstrated this functional relationship, and it seemed so reliable that it soon became known and celebrated as “Engel’s Law.” But to confire the consequences of food intake solely to the concurrent biological process of satiation means overlooking the considerable public dimension of commensality.

While they are consuming food and drink, people gathering for the *Mahlzeit* engage in conversation and discussion, exchange information and points of view, tell stories, perform religious services, and so on. From the purely biological point of view, there is no doubt that eating has a straightforward relationship to individual welfare. But once they are done *in common*, eating and drinking normally go hand in hand with a remarkably diverse set of public or collective activities. That is why “taking commensality seriously”—as Pauline Schmitt Pantel has urged—is easier said than done. The social, political, and cultural consequences of the common meal are extraordinarily varied; moreover, their outcome can turn out to be positive or

negative. The common meal or banquet contributed to the “invention” of democracy in the age of classical Athens, on the one hand; in the Imperial Germany of Heinrich Mann, on the other, commensality could lead to the degradation of human relations and political life.

NOTES

The author thanks Pauline Schmitt Pantel, Marcel Detienne, and Bernard Manin for numerous discussions.

1. See also Bell 1985 and Feeley-Harnik 1981.
2. Rabelais, *Pantagruel*, I. See also Jeanneret 1991, 27.
3. I briefly noted the similarity between Pascal’s argument and the economist’s definition of public goods in Hirschman 1971.
4. My emphasis. The original German version of this essay has been reprinted as Simmel 1984. An English translation was recently published as an annex to Symons 1994 (333–51). I came across this article in German and was much taken by it several years ago. Thinking it had still not been translated, I decided to undertake this job in the spring of 1995 in Berlin. I am using my unpublished translation here.
5. Schmitt Pantel 444, quoting Durand 1926, 64–65.
6. See also *Plutarch’s Table Talks*, II, 10,642 e–f.
7. On the ferocity of the “Free Corps,” the SA, and the SS, see Waite 1952 and Theweleit 1977. The connection between the archaic Germanic Männerbund and the extreme right-wing movements in Germany during the 1920s and 1930s has been made explicitly in Dumézil 1939. In 1985 Carlo Ginzburg criticized this book for its pro-Nazi sympathies. Dumézil replied briefly (1985). After Dumézil’s death in 1986, the journalist Didier Eribon (1992) wrote at length in Dumézil’s defense. A brief rejoinder by Ginzburg appeared in *Le Monde des Débats* in September 1993, and a further rejoinder by Eribon in the same magazine in October 1993.
8. Mann 1918 was completed shortly before the outbreak of World War I. See also Gilot 1992.

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