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## One hundred years of solitude and commensality

### A study of cooking and meals in Swedish households

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# **One Hundred Years of Solitude and Commensality – A Study of Cooking and Meals in Swedish Households**

**Håkan Jonsson**

## ***Abstract***

*This article aims to unwrap changing practices and attitudes to meals and cooking in Sweden through a comparative study of open ended questionnaires. The most prominent changes are the re-gendering of cooking, and the new forms of commensality created by meals and cooking. It is argued that kitchens should be seen as living labs where societal changes such as globalization are handled and incorporated into everyday life.*

*Keywords: Cooking, meals, commensality, Swedish households*

## **Introduction**

From sourcing food to the meal itself, the preparation and intake of meals in Swedish households have undergone significant changes in recent decades. The transitions which are taking place in meals and cooking in these households are affecting, not only the food intake of individuals, but can also to be seen as an important part of emerging cultural processes involving views on gender, family and social positions. This paper aims to shed some light on these processes by combining material concerning them collected from the 1970s until the present day. A comparison made between the different periods in this time frame is used in order to unwrap changing practices and attitudes to meals and cooking during the periods in question. The food ingredients, as well as the beverages, and the cooking and the meal situations, are described and analysed. Special emphasis is put on issues of eating and community. The title, playing with the title of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's famous novel, refers to the dialectics between solitude and commensality that cooking and meals imply. Generally, meals have been commensal, while cooking is carried out in solitude. This article tries to explain, and, at the same time, to give a more nuanced picture of this phenomenon, than what has hitherto been provided. The reverse situation – the fact of communal cooking and the taking of meals in solitude is also evident in the empirical material used in this paper.

The article starts by considering the actual food and drinks consumed according to the source material. Three things are highlighted by most of the informants: an increasing consumption of (fresh) vegetables, an increasing amount, and larger variety of, spices being used, and changing habits with regard to the kind of beverages consumed. After describing and discussing the new consumption habits evident in the empirical material, the article moves on to deal with the cooking practices involved. It asks, for example, about who does the cooking, and when the cooking tasks are performed in the kitchens. In this context, gender divisions and their relation to power are regarded as central issues to be discussed. Finally, the article concludes with a comparison being made between cooking and eating, and between how solitude and commensality were, and are, lived out in the Swedish households.

### **Notes on Material and Methodology**

The empirical basis of this article consists of responses to three questionnaires issued to respondents by Folklife Archives in Sweden. In 1972, 1988 and 2016, similar open-ended questionnaires about cooking practices, household appliances, and meal structure and content, were sent out by these archives. Those from 1972 and 1988 were issued from the Uppsala Folklife Archive, while the later questionnaire, dating from 2016, which I composed, was sent out from Lund. The issuing of open-ended questionnaires has a long tradition in Swedish ethnological research. Such questionnaires have been used for collection, documentation, and research purposes by Folklife archives there since 1932. They have been, and are, distributed to the archives' network of so-called solid respondents – those who tend to reply on a fairly regular basis to requests for information on various ethnological topics – and this means of gathering reliable data has been shown to be an effective qualitative method of research.<sup>1</sup> The lists of questions on different topics are sent out three to four times a year. At present, there are 130 respondents connected to the Folklife Archive in Lund, and each questionnaire usually generate between 60 to 80 responses, each being in essay form and each averaging between four to six pages in length. For the 2016 questionnaire on cooking and meals (LUF 244), 59 answers have been registered to date. In addition to the full-length questionnaire, a shorter-web based questionnaire has been issued and has received 72 responses so far. The questionnaire from 1972 (S 27) on diet changes and that from 1988 (M 239) about the kitchen and its artifacts, have been used both as primary source material for this study and also for

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<sup>1</sup> Hagström, Charlotte, "Questions and Answers in the Archives: Knowledge Production through Open-ended Questionnaires" Abstract from SIEF Congress, Zagreb, Croatia. (Zagreb: SIEF, 2015).

developing LUF 244. Many of the questions from the early questionnaires have been reused in order to allow comparisons in time to be made.<sup>2</sup> Since many of the older informants who responded to the early questionnaires were referring back to their youth in the first decades of the 1900s, the responses in total from the three questionnaires cover a period of, and deal with, one hundred years of cooking and eating in Sweden.<sup>3</sup>

The use of the term “Swedish” in this article is not intended to mean that there is but a single Swedish meal-order or food-culture. There are certainly differences observable in the questionnaire replies between the various informants’ practices, ideals, and experiences, related to social position, gender, ethnicity, generation, health status, regional variations, and so on. Having said that, I would also like to stress the fact that the period under investigation here is one in which cooking practices and meals had specific national evident throughout the country. It was a time in which the food-producing companies in Sweden, and, to an even larger extent, the period also when the distribution and retail companies, developed into national enterprises and created national standards for the range and variety of goods available in retail stores. The rapid development of meals in the public sector (especially school lunches) established national standards for meals, and national television and radio were important communication channels for the provision of information about cooking and meal provision. The very fact of cooking and eating in Sweden means that one has shared, and still shares, experiences and practices with other cooks and eaters in Sweden. Therefore I argue that it is fruitful to speak about cooking and meals in national terms, and also for using the results of aforementioned questionnaires sent out from both the Lund (Southern Sweden) and Uppsala (Central Sweden) archives in this context.

### **Vegetables and the Death of the Proper Meal**

The statement that “I/we eat much more vegetables these days”, is the most common first answer to the question: “If you look at the food / ingredients you use in your cooking, what

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<sup>2</sup> The questionnaire deals with a large number of questions related to food, cooking and the household. Several questions deal with the kitchen, and the artifacts within it, and with the meal order. These questions are being left out in this article, which focuses on other aspects of the material.

<sup>3</sup> In addition to the questionnaires, interviews and participant observations complement the contemporary material. 27 interviews and 5 observations have been conducted as part of the project. Since there is a bias towards older people with families living in Sweden for generations among the solid respondents, interviews have been collected in order to get material that covers a broader diversity of life experiences. Younger people with a family background from other countries are better represented in the interview category.

are the key differences that these have undergone during your time as cook, and what do you believe has contributed to these changes?” A large number of informants stated that they had started to eat vegetarian meals on a regular basis. Some are indeed fully committed vegetarians, but most of the respondents who mention these meals are in fact referring to something, that adds variety to their eating habits, and that also provides them with a way in which to live up to values involved for living a healthy and sustainable life, rather than to a vegetarian diet.

If the respondents’ view of how their eating habits have changed is compared to the statistical data available in this regard, it is noticeable that the consumption of fresh fruit and vegetables has indeed increased in Sweden; in fact it has almost tripled since 1970. Another striking feature evident in the statistics is the overall increase in the consumption of meat (especially of poultry, pork and beef), which has more than doubled since 1970.<sup>4</sup> But none of the informants say that they themselves consume more meat than formerly. On the contrary, they highlight how they believe that they eat less meat-based meals nowadays. But the stories from the statistics, and those from the informants, are not as incompatible as they may seem at first sight. The situation is related to what I would like to call “the death of the proper meal”, with reference to Mary Douglas’s investigation of meal components.<sup>5</sup> The proper meal, as defined in British studies,<sup>6</sup> was substantially similar to its counterpart in the Nordic countries for much of the twentieth century. A proper meal should consist of potatoes (normally boiled), meat or fish, gravy, and supplements (boiled or pickled vegetables, jam, jelly, etc.). But not even the older generation sticks to this meal concept any longer. A woman, aged 79 years, described the situation in this regard as follows:

The former classical alimentation with meat or fish, gravy and potatoes changed significantly some years ago. I would say that now I always have some vegetables on the plate, and very often neither gravy nor potatoes, but definitely vegetables in some format.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Statistics from the Swedish Board of Agriculture, Report 2013:04*, (Stockholm: Swedish Board of Agriculture, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Douglas, Mary, ‘Deciphering a Meal’, *Daedalus* 101 (1972), p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> See Murcott, Anne, “‘It’s a Pleasure to Cook for Him’: Food, Mealtimes and Gender in Some South Wales Households”, in S. Jackson, and S. Moore, eds., *The Politics of Domestic Consumption* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1995); and Charles, Nickie and Marion Kerr, *Women, Food and Families: Power, Status, Love, Anger* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988).

<sup>7</sup> LUF 244/ M27474. The references to the responses to the open ended questionnaires are written as follows: Name of the questionnaire (e g LUF 244)/number of the specific answer (e g M27474)

The reasons that many informants think that meat has more or less disappeared from meals, when in fact more meat is actually being consumed, are most likely due to a combination of factors. Firstly, there does not appear to be a realisation that when meat is actually served the portions have become larger; or that products such as sausages have a higher meat content than formerly; or that meatloaves and meat balls served at home also contain more meat nowadays as there are less fillers such as bread crumbs, mashed potatoes, or rice, included. Another reason for this view is probably the decrease in the consumption of what are actually vegetarian meals though not considered as such. Porridge, for example, which was until quite recently (the 1980s) a common dish both for breakfast and as an evening meal, is now quite unusual in these contexts. When replaced by sandwiches with ham or salami, or by a full meal in the evening, meat consumption was actually increasing without being noticed.

Another disruption of norms related to the idea of proper meals concerns the serving of specific dishes on specific days. In the early questionnaires, the meals followed a weekly rhythm. Among the frequently-mentioned dishes that marked a distinction between the weekdays were salted herring being served on Mondays, pea soup on Thursdays, and steak on Sundays. Although the tradition to serve pea soup on Thursdays is not totally abolished, it is clear that the previous rather strict norms in this regard are now easily ignored. A woman, aged 70 years, related a striking example of this:

The other day I asked my partner: Can one have pork pancake (a typical simple mid-week dish) on a Sunday? I was hungry for it, and the partner caught on.<sup>8</sup>

The disruption of norms concerning what a proper meal is, and when it should be served, could potentially evoke sentiments of nostalgia in this regard. But none of the informants expressed such views. On the contrary, if they touched upon the subject at all, they did so in positive terms, invoking a sense of freedom from customary meal systems rather than having a sense of a loss of traditions.

### **Spices – The Domestic Kitchen as a Melting Pot**

Until quite recently, one of the main characteristics of food in Sweden was, apart from its high salt content, the absence or low degree of spices used. “We use salt. And (white)

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<sup>8</sup> LUF 244/ M27473

pepper”, is the brief comment from an informant to the 1988 questionnaire, in response to the question about what spices they used in his household. Although other informants mention spices such as thyme, marjoram, savory, lovage, bay leaf, and allspice, the regular use of spices was limited in the preparation of everyday meals in Swedish households. When it comes to baking, the story is a bit different, however. Bread with caraway, fennel (kernels) and anise, and buns and cookies with cinnamon, saffron, ginger, cardamom and cloves, were commonly baked in these households during the 20th century.

The diversity of spices mentioned in the answers from the informants to the 2016 questionnaire, is considerably greater than in the earlier questionnaire responses. Many of respondent mention how they really enjoy spicy food, and how the introduction of spices such as chili, garlic, and fresh ginger, as well as dried spices and mixtures, has changed their cooking habits. Garlic is one of the spices that has made a long journey from being exotic and strange to being an everyday staple item in Swedish culinary culture. As a restaurant chef during the 1980s, I was instructed not to include garlic in food prepared for staff, since the guests should not be met by the unpleasant breath of a garlic-eating waiter. Nowadays garlic is considered to be both commonly used and to be unproblematic by the informants. The use of spices was often brought up when the introduction of dishes originating from other countries were mentioned. An 80-year-old woman, stated:

Lots of new dishes have come over the years; in my youth there was no pasta apart from macaroni, which was stewed and served with sausage. Now, there are lots of pasta varieties, both dried and fresh. I buy mostly tagliatelle or papardelle, I like the wide bands.

Osso, bucco, Thai food, and tacos, are some examples of other dishes mentioned by the informants that has been included in their standard repertoire.

The international influences involved when it comes to food and eating is a worldwide phenomenon since few areas have been so affected by globalisation as eating habits have. The interesting thing here is the degree to which dishes originating in other countries have become part of a standard repertoire in domestic cooking in Sweden. The most common dish cooked in a Swedish household today is Spaghetti Bolognese. Although a visitor from Bologna is unlikely to recognise the dish bearing the name of his or her home town, it says something about the transformation of Swedish domestic cooking during recent decades. The most popular dish for Friday night dinner among families with children is tacos,

to mention another example in this context. Since the 1960s, cookery-book authors, as well as radio and television programmes, have successfully introduced dishes and cooking techniques (wokking, steaming, stir frying) from other countries and adapting them to ingredients available in Sweden.

It may look as if this situation has come about as a result of a weak sense of national identity. But one has to take into account, that one of the main characteristics of Swedish (middle class) identity, which developed during the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was the embracing of modernity. Being Swedish was not necessarily about guarding traditions. On the contrary, the ideal Swedish citizen should be open to new influences, whether introduced by means of new technologies or through international inspiration.<sup>9</sup> The domestic kitchen became a melting pot, where international aspects were introduced, negotiated, and domesticated, and where they became what they are today: an unproblematic part of everyday kitchen practice in Sweden.

### **Becoming “European” – New Drinking Habits**

The kinds of beverages consumed in Sweden have also undergone quite dramatic changes. Most notable in this regard is the introduction of wine as a regular beverage during meals. Until the 1950s, wine drinking was uncommon in Sweden, with an average consumption of not more than 1 to 5 litres per person per year.<sup>10</sup> In 2015, the consumption had increased dramatically to more than 20 litres per year, which means that Sweden is somewhere around 15<sup>th</sup> place in the world when it comes to wine consumption per individual. One informant, a former military officer in his late 70s, wrote in 2016: “Wine has become a beverage used several times a week. Bottled water has replaced other drinks.”<sup>11</sup>

This quote also points to the other most prominent change in relation to beverages: the drinking of water. In the earlier questionnaires, water was said to be rare as a drink taken with meals. The common beverages included in meals at this time were, milk, (light) beer and sometimes drinks based on berries, principally lingonberries. The absence of references to water being included as a beverage in the early questionnaires does not necessarily mean that it was not consumed during meals, as it could have been considered as

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<sup>9</sup> Löfgren, Orvar, “Modernizing the nation – nationalizing modernity”, *Etnol. Trib.* 15 (1992), 91–115.

<sup>10</sup> Sundström, Å., and J. Ekström, *Dryckeskonsumtionen i Sverige* (“Beverage Consumption in Sweden”) (Stockholm: Industriens utredningsinstitut, 1962).

<sup>11</sup> LUF 244/ M27446



not being a “real beverage” and could, therefore, have been excluded from the answers. Another reason that it might not have been mentioned was the existing common association between being poor and the drinking of water; in other words, milk or beer could not be afforded. People who preferred water for different reasons may have been unwilling to mention it, so as not to be considered poor or stingy. From the 1970s onwards, however, taking water as a beverage became more and more associated with having a healthy lifestyle. The massive introduction of bottled carbonated water in the 1990s, and the availability of carbonators for domestic use, established water consumption as something positive and healthy.

Until the 1980s, milk was essentially the standard beverage taken with an everyday meal, but its use decreased almost at the same pace as water and wine consumption with meals increased. The consumption of milk, which was 160 litres per person per year in 1960, had dropped to just over 80 litres in 2015.<sup>12</sup> Taking into account that a large portion of the milk bought nowadays is consumed as a part of coffee drinking, or taken with cereals, or used in cooking, it is clear that the drinking of milk as a beverage is no longer common.

The scale of international influences evident in household beverage consumption has been just as dramatic as in food change. From the 1980s onwards, a deliberate attempt to break away from norms and habits considered to be “typically Swedish” – that is boring, modest and non-hedonistic – can be seen. In some cases, the decision to drink water instead of milk for lunch or dinner may be due to something as simple as having an idea that milk was not a fit accompaniment for Thai or Mexican food, for example. But the abandonment of milk as a typical beverage during meals had more to it than this. Milk had special status as a “Swedish” beverage. In earlier works I have interpreted the changing status of milk in Swedish eating habits as being part of Sweden’s transition from being an industrial society to an experience economy.<sup>13</sup> The drinking of water and wine has become a means by which to perform an identity linked to being an outward-looking and tolerant person with a lifestyle that leaves room for both healthy practices and indulgence. The term “continental”, referring to the European continent south of Scandinavia, achieved very positive overtones in

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<sup>12</sup> *Statistics from the Swedish Board of Agriculture, Report 2013:4.*

<sup>13</sup> Jönsson, Håkan, “A Land of Milk and Money. The Dairy Counter in an Economy of Added Values”, in Löfgren, Orvar, and Robert Willim, et. al., eds., *Magic, Culture and the New Economy* (Oxford: Berg, 2005). Jönsson, Håkan, “Wholesome Milk”, Rykönen, P., G. Hernandez, and U. Jonsson, eds., *From Local Champions to Global Players: Essays on the History of the Dairy Sector.* (Stockholm: Stockholm University, 2013).

the Swedish context, and the copying of some of the eating and drinking habits of Southern Europe has become part of the cultural capital of the Swedish middle class.

### **Who's cooking? – Towards a Re-gendering of Cooking**

Cooking has always been an important part of gender relations and the division of labour among men and women.<sup>14</sup> Critical feminist research has argued that the traditional female role of feeding the family has been an important part of the reason why women have tended to be excluded from public power.<sup>15</sup> However, it can be argued, that there is also a dimension of power in the act of cooking as it determines what kind of food other members of the family should eat.<sup>16</sup> The person who controls food intake can affect not only bodily functions, but can also thereby imprint values and virtues onto other members of the household. In most societies, changing gender norms, when it comes to cooking, can be noted. The transformation of the labour market, new ideals with regard to family relationships and the rearing of children, as well as the upgrading of professional cooking and male chefs becoming stars of the television era, are all factors that have led to more and more men taking an active part in domestic cooking.

This development is certainly notable in the source material used in this article. Some of the male respondents to the early questionnaires found it hard to answer questions about cooking. A few even let their wives answer the specific questionnaire although it was the man who was the regular respondent, with the excuse that he did not have much to say about the topic. No such dilemma is evident in the contemporary material, however. There are still examples of relationships where the woman performs most of the cooking tasks, but there are also plenty of examples of the opposite situation. Some women state that they have learned to cook with the assistance of their more skilled male partner. The ideal of seeing cooking as a joint task that should be (fairly) equally distributed between partners is a common aspect of the questionnaire replies.

Of special interest here is the long process of emancipation in Sweden. The traditional gender roles had already started to crack in the early 1960s. Among the 2016

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<sup>14</sup> See Adams, Carol, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1990); and Counihan, Carole, *The Anthropology of Food and Body. Gender, Meaning and Power* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>15</sup> DeVault Marjorie, *Feeding the Family: The Social Organisation of Caring as Gendered Work* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

<sup>16</sup> Avakian, Arlene Voski, ed., *Through the Kitchen Window. Women Writers Explore the Intimate Meanings Food and Cooking* (Oxford: Berg, 2006).

questionnaire informants was an 80 year old man who is doing all the cooking in the household, although his wife is in good health. Plenty of others describe, not only their own households as one in which cooking is a shared activity or even a male-dominant task, but they also indicate that their parents' households were ones in which the father took responsibility for cooking. The development is further supported by recent quantitative research which shows that more than one third of all meals in Sweden is cooked by a man, and that the proportion is even larger among the younger generation.<sup>17</sup> Domestic cooking in Sweden is about to lose its role as a female practice.

The term “mothering” used to describe the female role of cooking in families has proven to be a fruitful concept for gaining an understanding of the negotiations and practices that women perform in relation to cooking.<sup>18</sup> Cooking is certainly still an important part of the caring for and the raising of families. But the contemporary material poses some important questions for future research. When fathers have the main responsibility for domestic cooking, is the food served any different to mothers' home-cooked food? There has been a lot of pressure on women to foreground health and household aspects when it comes to cooking, while men are allowed to have more of sensory and hedonistic perspectives on cooking. If this is still true, the re-gendering of cooking may potentially have a large impact on views on domestic cooking, and eventually on the health status of the population. This is related to another question – what happens to cooking as form of caring? Or to put it differently: how is *fathering* performed in cooking?

### **Our Meals but My Cooking – Some Notes on Commensality, Knowledge Transformation, and the Power of Cooking**

The idea of a decline in commensal eating, especially as regards the family meal, leading to individualised eating and constant nibbling, with harmful effects on public health, is something that has been highly debated in recent years. However, the empirical research that has been done on the subject, has established a more nuanced picture in this regard.<sup>19</sup> Most people still want to eat together, and most families devote a lot of time and energy to the

<sup>17</sup> Holm, Lotte, Marianne Pipping Ekström, Sara Hach, and Thomas Bøker Lund, “Who is Cooking Dinner?”, *Food, Culture & Society* 18, 4 (2015), 589–610. Among the interesting conclusions of the study is that there are no longer any significant differences between social classes. While middle class men in 1997 were more likely to cook than men from other social groups, no such differences could be found in 2012.

<sup>18</sup> Molander, S., *Mat, kärlek och metapraktik. En studie i vardagsmiddagskonsumtion bland ensamstående mödrar* (“Food, Love and Meta-practices. A Study of Everyday Dinner Consumption among Single Mothers”) (Stockholm: Stockholm University, 2011). Dissertation.

<sup>19</sup> See Short, Frances, *Kitchen Secrets: The Meaning of Cooking in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Berg, 2006); Kjærnes, U. (ed.) *Eating Patterns. A Day in the Lives of Nordic Peoples*. Report no. 7-2001 (Oslo: SIFO, 2001).

establishment of commensal eating patterns. However, there are other factors, such as demographic changes, that certainly make it more difficult to eat together with others. Even though there are still cultural values creating normative pressures towards commensal eating, there is also a form of structural individualisation related to changing living conditions, which lead to a kind of dietary individualisation.<sup>20</sup> The high level of single households and of divorce among married couples with children, are factors that make it difficult for many people to eat together with the family, no matter how strong the ideal of a proper family meal might still be for them. This picture is confirmed by the material in this study. While the actual number of meals eaten with others have decreased, the ideal of the family meal is still attractive for many people. Although most informants mention conflicts related to meals in the household, they still (with few exceptions) highlight the joys of communal eating.

When it comes to cooking, the picture is different. As Frances Short has noticed in her study about what cooking means “in everyday life”, cooking is normally an individual task.<sup>21</sup> Most cooks want to cook alone, and if others are involved, their task should preferably be to take over the cooking on specific days or occasions (thereby allowing for leisure activities), or to help out with simple tasks, such as peeling potatoes or setting the table.

The individualistic character of cooking may explain why many of the informants claim that cooking skills have not been transferred from one generation to the next. The informants from 1970s, 1980s and the present day have, with some exceptions, the same story to tell in this regard. They learned to cook after they had left the family household, either by “practice and my own mistakes”, by using cookery books, or by picking up skills from a partner with more cooking ability than themselves. Stories about how the respondents’ mothers did not want them in the kitchen while cooking are quite common in the source material. Some mention how they discuss housework with friends, but that is not without its problems, either. There is a certain fear about admitting ignorance about cooking: “I rarely discuss housework with anyone. I feel inferior with wives talking about making cakes and puddings and such.”<sup>22</sup>

Having inferiority feelings in relation to cooking is certainly a good enough reason for not discussing it, and for avoiding cooking, with others. But most parents would

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<sup>20</sup> Sobal, Jeffery, and Mary K. Nelson, “Commensal Eating Patterns: A Community Study”, *Appetite* 41, 2 (2003), 181–189.

<sup>21</sup> Short, *Kitchen Secrets: The Meaning of Cooking in Everyday Life*.

<sup>22</sup> M239/35015

probably not feel inferior to their children in terms of their cooking abilities. Still, many informants claim that they were never involved in the cooking process at home. This could be related to the power aspect of cooking, as described by David Bell and Gill Valentine,<sup>23</sup> which suggests that having control over cooking is to have control over one's position in the family, thereby ensuring that one is vital for its existence. Thus, to give up space in the kitchen is to give up domestic power, no matter how many other benefits are to be gained thereby, such as having more leisure-time for oneself or preparing children for the management of their own households.

In the earlier questionnaires, there are common references to a pre-history of communal cooking. These refer to certain kinds of cooking connected with special events, such as hunting, harvest, or festive occasions which, traditionally, have involved a group of people cooking together. Informants answering the questionnaire in 1972 tell of practices connected with their early years in the first decades of the 1900s, when such cooking took place at events like slaughtering, but also when baking, and the taking care of fruit and apples, involved several people. The reasons suggested by the respondents for the decline of communal cooking, vary. Some relate it to the urbanisation, other to the small kitchens in modern apartments, and one informant says it has to do with the cost of the household appliances. She did not dare to borrow equipment or go to her friends when she had apples to press, since she was afraid that she would break the machine, which would be impossible for her to replace. It was different when she was young when they gathered together at the farm that had a large manually-driven apple press which she could use.

Thus, individualisation is evident not just in the eating practices of Swedish households. Shared meals are still highly appreciated and are a strong norm, but this ideal is often difficult to live up to. The individualisation of cooking, on the contrary, is not normally seen as a problem. The sharing of this specific household task has more to do with dividing

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<sup>23</sup> Bell David, and Valentine Gill, *Consuming Geographies. We Are What We Eat*. (London: Routledge, 1997), 63ff.

the days for cooking purposes between the partners, than to actually do the cooking together.<sup>24</sup>

However, it should also be said that there are exceptions to this. Some of the informants refer to cooking as a joint enterprise, something they enjoy doing with their partner. Especially in situations where there are no children, or, at least, no small children, present, cooking can be a kind of floating practice that is both necessary domestic work and a hobby. The changing gender dimension of cooking therefore, has not necessarily led to friction in terms of the balance of power, with men taking over the kitchens, because, at least in some households, cooking has become a kind of bonding practice between partners. In terms of social relations, this is one of the more promising developments in contemporary cooking, and is far from the stories of decline, social positioning, conflicts and frustration, that are regularly brought up when it comes to discussion of domestic cooking.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Kitchens are more than rooms for the preparation of food. They are also living laboratories where societal changes are handled and incorporated into everyday life. This comparative study of meals and cooking in Swedish households during the last century has tried to highlight three such processes. One relates to the globalisation of everyday life. Domestic kitchens are melting pots, where international influences have changed daily cooking practices. Most informants embrace these developments, although some critical remarks about effects on the environment can be noted. Another relates to the re-gendering of cooking. Cooking is no longer a distinct female practice in Swedish households. Finally, the commensality element of meals and cooking is undergoing fundamental change. There is ongoing individualization in this regard, but also a constant struggle to uphold commensal meals when possible. The period investigated will, in retrospect, probably be seen as the peak of individualised cooking practices. From the 1940s onwards, cooking has been mostly an individual task. It will be interesting for future research to see if the current tendencies towards a remaking of communal cooking will evolve into a new form of cooking commensality.

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<sup>24</sup> Which makes cooking different from other kinds of domestic labour. Jean Claude Kaufmann and Tim Putnam, in study of laundry practices, pointed to the importance that young couples, who wanted to have an equal relationship, afforded the idea that laundry should be a joint task. See Kaufmann, Jean-Claude and Tim Putnam, *Dirty Linen. Couples as Seen Through Their Laundry* (London: Middlesex University Press, 1998).

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