

As a graduate student in the Sociology Department at Columbia University, I had the privilege to work with Priscilla on her course “Food and Social Order.” The class was not only insightful but also highly creative and, above all, fun. Priscilla’s reading list included extracts from the Old Testament and the Quran, which revealed how foods and food preparations become part of a belief system, and in doing so, change social behavior. These readings complemented the classics of Sociology, such as Emile Durkheim’s comprehensive study of religion, through which students learned how food was moved from mundane to sacred spaces, and how that shaped everyday life, starting from the most elemental forms of social life. Georg Simmel and Pierre Bourdieu’s theories were also discussed, including their ideas of food as a form of distinction in modern society. We learned about the role of food in stratifying society, segregating individuals across class and gender, about the role of food in creating social identities and movements, and in confronting cultures. Towards the end of the course, and building on the theories we have learned, Priscilla would encourage students to analyze movies - ranging from the food classic “Babette’s Feast” to the contemporary animated movies “Kung Fu Panda” and “Ratatouille” - through the conceptual framework we learned in class.

In her lectures, Priscilla would repeatedly point out: “Food is much more than food. Food has a social meaning and significance beyond the physiological act of eating.” The class was run as a dialogue. Priscilla would ask students questions about their shopping experiences, their food preferences, “food fears,” and culinary backgrounds. In one of our most fascinating classes we engaged in a discussion about the Thanksgiving meals we have enjoyed and how those revealed part of our identities. Priscilla was always fascinated to hear students’ stories and incorporate them into the class.

Priscilla embodied Bourdieu’s notion of distinction, in the most elegant way. For each class, she was wearing a new, stylish and beautiful outfit. Leather jackets, purple hats, red coats all matching — from top to bottom — with beautiful earrings, necklaces and shoes.

I had the privilege of being Priscilla’s last PhD student. I remember the day I knocked on her door to tell her about my dissertation project on modernist cuisine — which deviated from the classic culinary tradition she so much admired. She immediately believed in my project and saw value in my work. She worked with me in identifying the connections of my findings to cultural sociology. She told me that she would almost “jump off of her chair” while reading my field notes. In our meetings, she showed me how much she enjoyed learning from my work, just as I had enjoyed learning from her research and classes.

When I defended my dissertation, Priscilla and Diane Vaughan, my two female mentors, invited me to celebrate at one of the best restaurants in New York (and in the world) - Jean Georges. Priscilla knew the restaurant well and had interviewed the chef years earlier in her work with Sharon Zukin. We had a wonderful meal, looking at the Central Park. Food, indeed, was much more than food.

A year before her passing we were working on an article on the subject of “play.” Priscilla had the idea to work on this topic after a seminar organized at the Sociology Department at Columbia to pay tribute to her work, before her retirement in December of 2015. While coding the interviews, we were both fascinated to learn how chefs incorporated play in their craft and the joyful, fun, and ironic creations that resulted from their work. The process of working together on this project resembled our previous interactions: filled with good conversations at Cafe Le Monde (a French Brasserie, close to the Columbia University campus). We would talk for hours about potential theoretical avenues and also about our findings, trying to establish connections between the two. This collaborative process might explain why we decided to conclude our first draft with the following sentence: “for scholars interested in the subject — and based on our own experience — studying play may turn out to be not only illuminating for sociological research but also lots of fun.”

Priscilla marked my life as a scholar, in a very simple but profound way. She studied novels, food, chefs, and roses because she loved them. She taught me that I could study something that brought me joy, and that in doing so - with care and dedication - I might bring joy to others and learn a great deal in the process.

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