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Nutrition in the Relations between Society and Government and its Evolution

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Introduction & Goals

Public actions on nutrition (which involve both food and physical activity) having a different nature, extent and scope have been identified in France and Europe from the Middle Ages.

We tried to understand how the relations of power have been rationalized and evolved in the European and particularly French public nutritional actions, from the Medieval West until the beginning of the 21th century.

The first objective of our research is to look back in time to show that current nutrition policies have a history; we try to identify, interpret and trace their evolution. The second objective is to put into perspective the reasons for authorities and influential people to take an interest in food supply and consumption, as well as the characteristics and scope of individual and collective nutritional practices existing among populations. Finally, we try to reveal the evolution of the rationalization of public interventions and private practices concerning nutrition.

Material and Methods

This empirical research adopts a qualitative approach based on a longitudinal analysis of both works carried out by historians and data gathered from interviews and original documents. Our analysis is built on a Foucauldian-inspired genealogy of governmentality.

In view of the components of governmentality (figure 1) we have chosen the following four entries for our analysis grid: “the food situation of the population: food production, food availability and demography”; "public intervention in food matters"; "diet and physical exercise" and finally "aesthetic criteria related to physical build”.

We have mobilized some one hundred works – academic and grey literature- produced by historians and, for the more recent time period (end of the 20th century-beginning of the 21st century), around thirty semi-structured interviews with public and private players involved in food policy and agri-food sectors as well as written and audio sources such as official documents and nutritional communication supports.

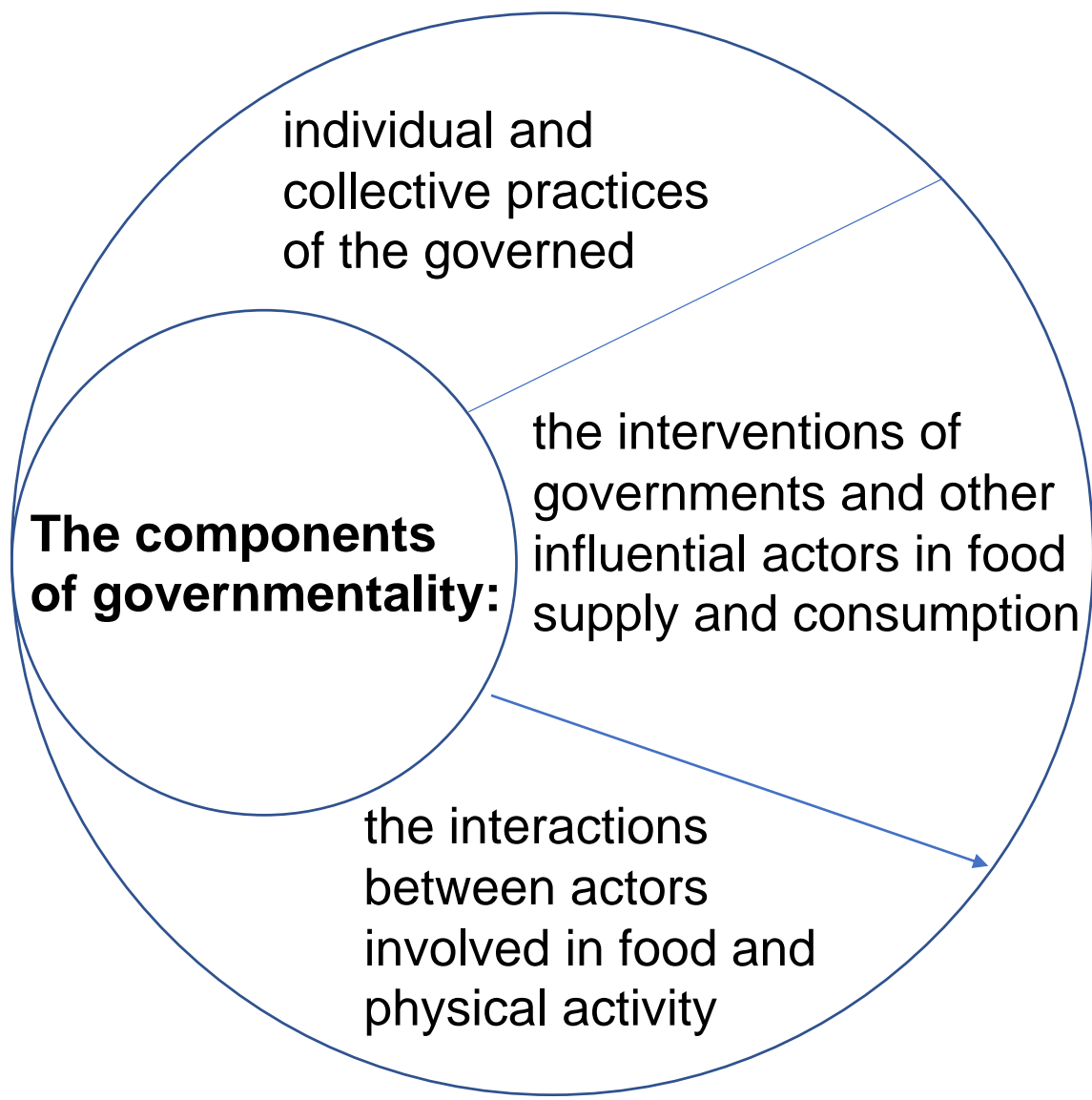


Figure 1. The components of governmentality

Results

Since the Middle Ages, in France and Europe, government intervention on food issues has not always been motivated by the effects it can have on the population’s health: the first motivation was to preserve public order and the second was probably to maintain economic discipline. Our work allows us to deconstruct the seemingly obvious relationship between health and food when it comes to intervening politically on food issues. It is new at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century to think that collective health and well-being can motivate government’s intervention on nutritional matters. In the evolution of nutritional public action, we also note: the key role of knowledge; the intervention of multiple actors (government, church, merchants, doctors, etc.); the relationship between social position and food; the gradual dissolution of the relationship between large physical build and wealth-health-respectability as well as the presence of multiple tensions (frugality-opulence, economy-health, excess weight-extreme thinness, etc.) (Table1).

Table 1. Evolution of public action on nutrition (France, Europe)

Period	Main problems	Public Actions	Motivations
18 th century and before	Food in insufficient quantity and quality (fraud, adulteration).	Hunger policies, market supply, grain storage, organized charity, interference in private consumption, quality control (delegated to merchants associations).	Avoiding civil disorder which can destabilize power; motivations linked to values and beliefs.
19 th century	Insufficient food quality due to an explosion of fraud. The quantity problem got under control.	Legislative treatment of falsifications and fraud, the government finds support in scientific and lay expertise. Introducing laws to preserve competition and purchasing power.	Priority to economic issues over health Implications.
The first half of 20 th century	Food in insufficient quantity and deficiencies because of world armed conflicts.	Governments organize supplies for troops and population during armed conflicts. Independent private scientific associations advise the government and act as nutritional prescribers for society. In firms, studies carried out on the relationship between malnutrition of workers and level of production, nutritional measures to improve production.	Putting protection from vice, patriotic motives and productivity over health motivations.
The second half of 20 th century and beginning of 21 th century	Food in insufficient quantity and deficiencies after world armed conflicts. Then health crises and excess availability of food (population overfed).	Agricultural policy for food self-sufficiency. Transferring responsibilities to private actors during health crises. Controlling over-feeding by specific measures on the population for better nutrition.	Health motivations start to be considered alongside other motivations (e.g. economic, social peace).

Conclusion

According to our findings, food has been used in public actions as a target to government's changing objects since the Middle Ages. The rationalization of public interventions and private practices on the question of nutrition have been evolving over time. Furthermore the variation of policy intensity and its supporting factors is neither linear nor cumulative.

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