Mixing sociology, politics and food

SEVERAL years have passed since Stephen Mennell learned that his father was unable to read his son's first book, a text on sociological theory, without the aid of a dictionary.

Like many academics before him, the novice author thought he had avoided using specialised language. But unlike many, today the new professor of sociology at Monash eschews jargon.

"There is no reason whatsoever why academics should write in a turgid way. If something is worth saying, it is worth saying in plain English," said Professor Mennell, who is also chairman of the department of Anthropology and Sociology.

"It seems that a lot of sociological ideas, if they are to be accepted, have to be expressed pompously. In fact, some sociologists won't take any writing seriously unless it contains a high proportion of obsolete polysyllabic words."

Professor Mennell opposes the mystification of sociology as much as he supports its simplification. Three months after leaving his native Exeter in England, he expresses the need for sociologists to write for what he says used to be described as the "general educated public."

"I really think it's very important that sociologists write on subjects of interest to people. They shouldn't just talk to each other," he said.

A self-described generalist, Professor Mennell's own work suggests his audience lies within and beyond the campus gates. For instance, while a senior lecturer at the University of Exeter he wrote the well-received *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present.*

In the book, which won the Grand Prix International de Litterature Gastronomique in 1986, he compares the eating habits and attitudes to food of the inhabitants of England and France.

As part of his research, he "looked at everything from medieval cookbooks to contemporary women's magazines." But instead of debunking myths — which is what sociologists normally do — Professor Mennell found himself confirming them.

"There seems to be a large measure of truth in the stereotypes of the French enjoyment of cooking and the 'Maginot Line' of British cookery, such as meat and two veg," he said.

"Essentially, the French trend grew out of the aristocrats' enthusiasm for eating which permeated the rest of society. English cooking, on the other hand, has always had a kind of thrift mentality.

"Summed up, food for the British is like their attitude towards sex: it's all very well and necessary as long as you don't enjoy it."

At present Professor Mennell is toying with the possibility of writing a slightly more popular edition of the work. He also is considering a joint research project on how modern food technology has affected the home and eating habits, and how the manufacturing of food has contributed to its internationalisation.

The study of dietary practices, however, was the last thing on Professor Mennell's mind when in the 1970s he was commissioned by the Council of Europe to look at the provision of arts and leisure facilities to European towns.

The research for "Cultural Policy of Towns" involved Professor Mennell and a team of sociologists trying to measure the comparative cultural needs of 14 towns in 13 countries.

Although not a failure — the resultant study was published in seven languages — as an exercise in applied sociology it struck a few methodological snags.

"The real problem is that in a benighted town with poor facilities, people will want the kind of things they are most familiar with, such as a better municipal swimming pool," Professor Mennell said.

"So there's this dilemma. By asking them what they want or enjoy, they'll more or less tell you what they've already got. But expose them to other possibilities and you come across as a bunch of paternalistic middle-class intellectuals telling them what they need.

Professor Stephen Mennell: "If something is worth saying it is worth saying in plain English."

"At least it proved useful in telling town councils about what not to do."

An unsuccessful Social Democratic Party candidate for Exeter in the 1983 election ("If the UK used the Australian preferential system of voting, I wouldn't be a professor of sociology at Monash right now"), Professor Mennell is turning his political skills to the reorganisation of the department.

Although he claims no credit for it, the output of the department's research has increased since his arrival. Among the topics presently under investigation by its 25 full- and part-time staff are Australia's population and immigration by Dr Bob Birrell, women's studies by Dr Anne Edwards and Dr Jan Van Bommel, information technology by Dr Belinda Probert, and the anthropology of Southeast Asia.

One of the staff's most recent publications is *Dining Out: A Sociology of Modern Manners*, by lecturer Dr Joanne Finkelstein. Like Professor Mennell's favorite work, it looks at cuisine from a social scientist's point of view, this time the restaurant life of Melbourne and other major cities.

Next year the department will add comparative sociology to its present majors of sociology and anthropology. "We hope the new major, which will be linked to existing courses, will give students more of a world perspective by presenting a whole range of human societies from an historical perspective."

As for his own study — away from food, that is — Professor Mennell hopes to develop some Australian research interests, in particular historical sociology.

"There's a lot to be written about Australian history from the sociological point of view. For example, I am very interested in getting to grips with the notion of mateship."

Nor was the fear of indigestion wholly irrational. Jane Grigson hit upon a valuable insight linking this fear both with typical English diets of the past and with fears of social embarrassment. She was wondering why the leek fell out of favour in polite society for 300 years, and happened to look up what Mrs Beeton had to say about leeks. That lady gives only two leek soups, one the traditional Scots cockie-leekie, but adds a note that leeks should be "well-boiled" — which in this historical context means thoroughly overcooked by modern standards — "to prevent its tainting the breath" (1861:71). This fear of bad breath — and the fear, Mrs Grigson could have added, of gaseous emissions from the other end of the alimentary canal — seems to have been behind many fussy nineteenth-century recipes for onions.

It seems to have been a major nightmare at the time, not just a silly refinement. I remember my grandmother's obsession with her digestive system, her purges and peppermint tablets; I remember too, how constipation hung over some families like a mushroom cloud. If digestions were as bad as all this suggests, and they probably were when diets were stodgy without fruit or many vegetables, the breath must often have been bad. Anything that could have added to the social fear — leek, onion, above all garlic — was prudently avoided, or subdued by strong-arm water treatment. (Grigson, 1978:291).

From *All Manners of Food* by Stephen Mennell, Basil Blackwell, 1985.