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Views about food prejudice and stereotypes

***Abstract.** Food is a social marker. Used positively, it demonstrates belonging to a group, and negatively it provides a justification for discrimination. Chauvinism and xenophobia express themselves through attitudes and stereotypes which are not necessarily grounded on facts but which may influence behaviour. Discrimination ranges from mild ridicule to harsh rejection and racism (for instance, against black people or Jews). It may apply to philosophico-religious beliefs, kinship, ethnic origins, social class and national identity. These attitudes still operate in the globalization process and possibly are not without economic consequences.*

***Key words.** Anti-Semitism – Attitudes – Chauvinism – Discrimination – Distinction – Food – Identity – Racism – Stereotypes*

In the late 19th century Brillat-Savarin (1885: 3) wrote “Tell me what you eat, I will tell you who you are”. Food is a social marker, as has been abundantly demonstrated. Human beings have a tendency to believe that they symbolically become what they eat. Individuals and human groups use the food domain to demonstrate their identity and their ethnicity, and this differentiation is made by expressing positive or negative views.

Food prohibitions

This is most often done through food prohibitions. A very abundant literature is available on food taboos (Douglas, 1966; Levi-

Makarius, 1974; Simoons, 1994). Identity, uniqueness of a specific human group, usually based on kinship, are expressed by adopting a negative attitude towards food. Food avoidances can be classified according to two aspects: (1) their duration, permanent or temporary: only the latter leads to discrimination; (2) the size of the human group they encompass: a particular individual, a kinship group, social groups according to various criteria, whole populations according to philosophico-religious beliefs, such as those operating in Judaism, Buddhism and Hinduism. Those who respect these prohibitions consider themselves as being apart, the chosen ones who are better than the other groups, the “Barbarians”, who consume foods which are considered despicable and against whom prejudice is the rule.

In the Western civilization of Europe, humanity is conceived as abstaining from the consumption of human flesh. Conversely, those outside civilization, the savages, may be cannibals. They are not considered quite human (cf. Morgan, 1964). The shock incurred by the conquistadors, who were no angels themselves, on encountering human leftovers among the Carib (Métraux, 1967; Stegagno Piccio, 1988) and coming across sacrificial sites among the Aztecs, gave credence to the idea that Indians were man-eaters and that human flesh was common fare (Tannahill, 1976). Numerous descriptions of anthropophagic feasts have been made (Staden, 1929; Monestier, 2000). A debate was opened as to whether or not Indians were true human beings, endowed with a soul. South American Indians, whether Carib, Tupi or Aztecs, were defined by cannibalistic food habits or, if we prefer, by not respecting the taboo on human flesh that any decent human being observes.

A number of societies on the basis of religious and philosophical beliefs

I shall not elaborate on these aspects. Populations practising Buddhism and Hinduism recognize to various extents *ahimsa*, respect for life, not harming any living animal and not consuming its flesh. Muslims and Jews observe remarkably similar avoidances towards pork (Douglas, 1966; Grivetti and Pangborn, 1974; Kahwaji, 1998).

Kinship groups

In Northern Cameroon, the Masa belonging to the Béré clan in the county of Bugudum do not consume a small antelope, the oribi (*Ourebia ourebi*). The Muzey of the clan of Dangi, in the county of Guizey, respect a taboo on the consumption of the red-fronted gazella (*Gazella rufirons*). Since Mary Douglas's work in 1966 there is no need to insist on the emblematic value of food taboos rather than on their nutritional soundness.

Ethnocentrism

Human groups, whether we consider cultures or social classes, are not charitable to each other. Xenophobia and chauvinism, rather than mutual appreciation, are the rule. Food is a good field to demonstrate ethnicity, often ethnocentrism, through praise or depreciation ranging from derision to contempt and disgust. Simoons (1994: 319) writes:

It is a simple step to refer, usually in a derogatory sense, to other groups in terms of a food they consume. Strabo, in a manner common among Greek classical writers, makes repeated use of foods . . . in identifying people living south of Egypt or along the Red Sea, among them: *chelanophagii* (turtle eaters), *elephantophagii* (elephant eaters), *rhizophagii* (root eaters), *spermophagii* (seed eaters).

Today Italians are still called "macaroni eaters" by the French and the problem of food stereotypes remains pertinent in a European community still in the making. Various factors contribute to the building of these attitudes. According to Bromberger (1988: 90) differential factors defining ethnic groups are based on three types of data: objective facts; emblematic features which are recognized by the in-group to be markers of its specificity; and stereotypes, that is, value judgments made by the members of the group as well as outsiders of the in- and out-groups. Duncan-Mitchell (1968: 207), in her *Dictionary of Sociology*, writes: "Stereotype denotes the over-simplification of a belief in regard to its content together with a tendency for the belief to be resistant to factual evidence to the contrary. It goes hand-in-hand with prejudice."

Needless to say that there are no clear-cut limits between these three aspects (Seymour-Smith, 1986: 230).

The French say “Il n’y a pas de fumée sans feu”, and the English “There’s no smoke without fire”, and it is true that, to be viable, stereotypes need some reference, even incomplete or distorted from reality. Stereotypes may operate from in-groups towards out-groups – Us towards Them. Negative and positive views can also operate inside a group – opinions and attitudes of Us about Us.

Positive stereotypes

They are usually chauvinistic. The French, who have a long-established reputation in the field of gastronomy and have recently been termed “eating beasts” (Méchin, 1992), are a good example. They believe they have the lead on this issue. In 1977 a poll of the French Institute of Public Opinion (IPSOS) showed that 84 percent of the French considered their cuisine the best in the world (Pitte, 1991: 15). At the same time, however, Guérard (1976), a well-known French chef, considers that, although his compatriots believe they have an extraordinary palate with which to savour wines and food, fewer than 10 percent of the professional cooks are able to taste wine and fewer than 15 percent can be considered gourmets. A 1989 IPSOS survey (Pitte, 1991) confirms the ignorance and the lack of interest of the French for their food. Whom should one believe (de Garine, 1998: 262)?

The same overevaluation of one’s traditional diet is also found among the Chinese in Malaya. Tremayne (1993: 82) writes:

At a symbolic level, food is used by the Chinese as a reference point to reinforce cultural identity. “We Chinese are eating a lot” refers to a dream and a myth, conveying a sense of belongingness to China, of security provided by the abundance of food and a message of success . . . The reality does not accord to this statement, since the majority of migrants were people pushed out a few generations ago by the scarcity of food and the hardship of life in China.

Negative auto-evaluation

Negative auto-evaluation of culture is also present. Cultures and subcultures may display an inferiority complex according to the economically and politically dominant ones. There are self-deprecating stereotypes internal to a culture which may be influenced by the dominant group’s views. For instance, according to a Mexican

aphorism, which is likely to be a stereotype itself, “Indians refer to themselves as being small, dirty and ugly – ‘Nosotros Indios somos pequeños, sucios y feos’”. This depreciation can also cover the food field. Speaking of Spain, Camba (1962: 131) describes in an ironical way the Spaniards as “chick-pea eaters” and as “devotees of garlic”, which used to frighten away the witches as well as the foreigners. In a similar fashion, Marañón (1965: 7) refers to the “black legend of Spanish cooking”, submitted to broiling and to the smell of low-quality oil. Both these authors are Spanish.

During our field work in Cameroon, we also found clues about self-depreciation in the area of food. Most of the groups we have been working with (Masa, Muzey, Mvae, Yasa and Koma) make jokes about the feeding habits of their neighbours. It is interesting to remark that those who are at the bottom of the ethnic scale, the Pygmies in the rain forest of Cameroon, and the Koma in the arid mountains, do not have (or maybe only do not remember) food jokes about their neighbours. They are at the tail end of the pecking order between groups. Discrimination of cultures and groups in the food field may derive from real facts.

The cherished staple

Traditional societies may be characterized objectively by their staple food, their cherished “daily bread”. Every day the Masa consume porridge and loaves made from red sorghum (*Sorghum caudatum*). Living is described as “*ti fuma*” – “eating the sorghum loaf” – which unfortunately gives a red colour to their faeces, providing a motive for mockery from all their neighbours. Calling Italians “macaroni eaters” or the Germans “kraut and potato eaters” is grounded on facts. So is the mutual depreciation between the traditional societies of Northern Cameroon who use cereals as a staple (sorghum and millet) and the southern Cameroonian cultures which consume tubers (cassava, arrowroot and yams). As Farb and Armelagos (1980: 115) wrote “The name explorers gave to the Eskimos – who proudly refer to themselves as ‘Inuit’, ‘the true people’, is a variant of Eskimantsik, a derisive word applied to them by neighbouring Indians, meaning ‘eaters of raw meat’”, which they are to a certain extent.

The same discriminations can operate within a country. In the 15th and 16th centuries, the inhabitants of Sicily and Genoa, where

the pasta industry developed, were called “mangiamaccheroni”, whereas the people of Naples were named “mangiafoglia” because of the greens they consume with their meals. Today the people of the Mezzogiorno are still called “macaroni eaters” but they call those of Northern Italy “polenta eaters”. The same general term is used about the Romanians, “eaters of *mamaliga*” (corn maize porridge), by the Ukrainians. Delamont (1995: 4), writing about appetites and identities in Western Europe, goes one step further: “If you grow up in a traditional Yorkshire home where the Yorkshire pudding was served with the gravy as a separate course before the roast beef and vegetables, then you would find it odd to have them served together”.

This is venial. Each human group possesses its Barbarians. The Romans described the Barbarians surrounding them as “milk drinkers” (Montanari, 1993) because they fed on simple products such as wild fruits, game and curdled milk. The Roman and Greek cultures did not prize very much the uncultivated land and its products (Expeitx-Bernat, 1999: 453).

Drinking and smelling

In this article I have limited myself to food stereotypes. It should be pointed out that drinks, especially alcoholic ones, are an important criterion to distinguish drinkers from non-drinkers (i.e. moral as opposed to immoral people), between cultures and within the same society.

Odour is a major aspect to be considered in food prejudice and stereotypes referring to foreign food systems. In Marseilles in 1955 a number of Algerians worked in the dockyards and had to eat at their place of work with the Frenchmen. The latter objected outspokenly to the smell of the Algerian foods (Burgess and Dean, 1962: 78). In Cameroon the inhabitants of the northern savannah, who consume cereals and milk, mock the forest southerners because of the smell of rotting cassava they exhale, but the southerners express the same scorn in relation to the northerners’ odour of rancid milk. Body odour, which is largely due to the food ingested, is a powerful element in tracing the limit between human groups and may come as an argument for racial prejudice – “they don’t smell like us” (or just plainly “they stink!”). It can be a deterrent to sexual intercourse between partners exhaling different smells.

Garlic and onion and the smell of cooking oil have been for a long time an obstacle to the enjoyment of southern European cooking by the people of the North. My experience as a Frenchman having married an English girl is that I'd better be careful not to ingest garlic without my wife doing the same!

The stereotype about southerners being smelly people in the material and figurative sense is still alive, although not all southern dishes and southern peoples necessarily smell of garlic. It is possible to go one step further. The Chinese, who view milk as a disgusting, unclean bodily excretion, say that Europeans have a buttery smell about them. The Japanese in turn add that people influenced by foreigners have the same smell (Simoons, 1994: 320). The barrier created by condimentation, especially by chili ("peperoncino", *Capsicum*), in Southern Europe, North Africa and Central America operates in the same way, although not all dishes in these countries are "hot". Here again we are facing an abusive generalization in relation to food.

Geographical lifestyles – herders and farmers

Whole food systems can motivate prejudice. In Iran, Bromberger (1988: 99) observes an acute discrimination based, among other things, on food habits between the population of the Iranian plateau (Araki) and those of the Caspian plains (Rasti). For the latter, the mountaineers are poor barley-bread eaters. An Araki husband who is angry with his wife may tell her: "Go and eat some bread and die!". Conversely, the Araki consider that the Rasti have revolting food habits because of their taste for olives and beef, but most of all for their fancy for fish, due to which they are nicknamed "fish-head eaters". The geographical/ecological factors in discriminating between the mountain herders and the plains agriculturists, contrasting two lifestyles reaching different results in terms of economy (and today wealth), are very common. We should remember that Morgan (1964), in evolutionary terms, contrasted Barbarians with civilized societies on the basis that the latter practised agriculture whereas the others reached only the herding stage. In the United States, the hillbillies from the South are seldom credited with a higher social status and a more refined diet than lowland farmers. There are, of course, exceptions, as is the case in Europe, in the Béarnese Pyrenees, where the herders of the Ossau valley dominated

the flatland peasants. Delamont (1995: 49) mentions the low opinion held in northern Spain about the *pasiegos* (pastors) living inland from Santander. They inhabit marginal land suitable only for maize, rye and barley, not wheat; they raise livestock and historically used chestnuts as a staple. It would be easy to multiply the examples.

The opposition between the two lifestyles and food systems goes back to Sumer. Bread- and wine-making were criteria of humanness. The Annunaki, primitive children of the deity An, did not know these techniques: “They ate wild plants with their mouth like sheep, they drank the water of the ditches and remained unsatiated in their beautiful sheep sheds” (Goody, 1984: 168 quoting Kramer, 1956).

In Cameroon, the Yasa, who are mostly marine fishermen, are made fun of by their agriculturist neighbours, the Mvae, because they consume coconuts and breadfruit, two products which do not imply farming knowledge and work. Toiling or not toiling to obtain one’s staple is probably a general criterion. Respectable human beings earn their daily bread with the sweat of their brow.

Abusive generalizations

Needless to say, in many cases a specific aspect, ridiculous or revolting, is picked out as representative of the general food system (itself a yardstick of the level of civilization of the group considered, according to ethnocentric views).

The French are laughed at for consuming snails, frogs and horse-meat, although it is a rather episodic aspect of their behaviour. Here we are touching on true stereotypes and the expression of social prejudice. Theophile Gauthier (1981: 50) objected to the “red saffron” colour of the soup in Spain; so did the Marshal de Gramont in 1659 when he was entertained by the Admiral of Castille:

The feast was magnificent in Spanish fashion, that is to say prodigious and nobody could eat it all. I saw seven hundred dishes being served, everything in them was the colour of saffron or golden; then I saw them taken back as they had come. (Revel, 1985: 254; author’s translation)

Colour was a discriminating factor, but it could also have been the pungency or the smell of the condiments, with some objective reasons. We could refer here to the dismay of Lady Miller, travelling in Italy (1775), when served at supper:

A hog's head with the eye (lashes, eyes and nose on), the very food the wretched animal had last eaten of before he made his exit remained sticking about the teeth . . . this soup was removed by a dish of boiled house sparrows. Need I say we went to bed supperless . . . (Chard, 1993: 95)

These remarks are anecdotal. If they do not reflect the objective truth, they are not meant to harm. They amuse with a bit of oddity or backwardness, they are involved in folklore and have little importance. Of course, mild attitudes towards the food habits of strangers can be sharpened by historic events. Stereotypes may be strengthened, as was the case during the First World War by the French naming the Germans "boches" but also "krauts" and "potato eaters" without much sympathy. I remember from my childhood, just before the Second World War, a children's book, *Les Patapouf et les Filifer*, which featured the French as fat, red and pink epicureans and the Germans as thin, yellow and green belligerent people.

Mildness about exotic strangers

Generally speaking, the strangeness of foreigners, especially if it only involves food habits, is of little consequence, no competition is involved. Travelling flourished in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries and many voyagers gave credit to what they saw, including in the field of food in the Orient, Persia, Turkey. In the 17th century, the Reverend Robert de Dreux (1925: 71) praised the "great temperance of the Turks in relation to drinking and eating". Similar views are apparent in Gontaut-Biron (1888) and Trobayre (1935) who mentioned, however, "bad table manners".

Voltaire, in his letters of Amabed, described the perversion of two young and innocent Indians introduced to the temptations of the sinful European court society (Mervaud, 1998: 159). Nostalgia about the way of life of the Greeks, the Romans or the Indians of the New World nourished the classical and romantic literature. The notion of the "noble savage, close to Nature", praised by Jean-Jacques Rousseau around 1755, initiated a current of thought in relation to natural food which has continued until the present day and fed the ecological thinking in relation to food and nutrition. Amazingly enough I have not been able to find documents containing mutual condemnation or scorn about the food habits of the Christians and the Muslims. I have been told that the explicit

expression of this type of concern was not in line with Muslim thinking and its sense of modesty (see Tremayne, 1993: 83 on the Malays).

What I gleaned on the side of the Christians were rather positive comments (see above), except that today, in France, Muslims are said, among other things, to slaughter sheep in their bathtubs. Foreigners' odd ways, especially regarding food, do not elicit strong rejections; they are outside the orbit of daily life. There is not much in common between the Christian and Muslim lifestyles.

The commensal Jews

By comparison, the food style of the Jews arouses more concern. Is it because they are accused of having crucified the Son of God, or because they have dealt with money matters in the European society for many centuries? The Muslims and the Jews are both called unbelievers by the Christians and share a common avoidance of pork, but only among the latter does it elicit strong derogatory comments and stereotypes. Mary Douglas (1971: 72–4) underlines the emblematic function of the avoidances listed in Leviticus, which refers to the need for the Jews to be holy and their food habits to demonstrate their separateness. This segregation was also believed by prejudiced Christians to be founded on horrible food habits. According to Fabre-Vassas (1985: 60) the origin of the prohibition was initiated by the obligation made by Antiochos, the king of the Greeks, for the Jews to sacrifice pigs to the Greek gods. Refusing to do so was interpreted as refusing the domination of the Greeks and incurred condemnation to death. Disobedience was also an act of faith towards Judaism. But the Christian abomination of the Jews suggested also that the Jews were porcine themselves. By avoiding pork, they were avoiding endocannibalism, and especially eating the flesh of their own children. Working in the Hispanic region, Fabre-Vassas (1985: 66) mentions that the term to designate the converted Jews in Majorca is “*xijeta*”, which means “small lard”, and among the Maranos of Spain and Portugal “*marano*” is the name of a recently weaned piglet. The same author (1985: 76) mentions “naming *ghioudeme* (Jew) in Romania the fattest salami consumed on Maundy Thursday”. She also refers to a Souabe version of the following malevolent myth (Daehnhardt, 1909: 280):

Our Lord Jesus and Peter, taking a walk, came across a Pharisean sitting in front of his house. He asked them: "What have I got under this bucket?". Our Lord answered: "Your children are under there". The Pharisean burst into laughter and replied: "No, my hogs are under there". Jesus replied: "Let them be pigs". The children, who had hidden under the bucket, came out transformed into piglets. This is why the Jews do not eat pigs, pigs have the same entrails as human beings and the pigs possess since then a vertebra in the shape of a bucket in which is seated a small feminine figure called the "hog damzel".

According to Fabre-Vassas (1985: 68), further along the same line of prejudice, popular European tradition contended that Jews made up for their deprivation of pork by consuming the blood and the flesh of Christian children (Strack, 1909). This was illustrated by the case of Simon of Trente during the 15th century, and popular images reproduced this episode (Arens, 1979: 20). Anti-Semitism is not the only example. It is in a similar way that the Romans accused the emerging Christian sect of ritually using human blood and flesh (Arens, 1979), a common attitude among dominant populations who expressed their rejection of alien, secret minorities on the grounds of food abomination.

Social stereotypes

Prejudice and stereotypes relating to food habits operate in a much harsher way within the framework of a society: here social groups are competing. Food habits can therefore be considered as playing a stronger part as a social marker than as a cultural marker. They underline basic differences and even barriers between social classes. They reinforce stereotypes grounded on a variety of criteria: birth, wealth, education, ability and even intelligence. In the southern USA, where the blacks and the poor whites are economic competitors, the blacks can be distinguished by their consumption of a number of foods considered to be disgusting by the lower white socio-economic strata, such as "pork products such as neckbones, fat back, feet, ears and tails, chicken necks, giblets and backs, black-eyed peas and dried beans. They are occasionally consumed by the lower white economic group but they consider them as black people's food – 'niggers' food'" (Whitehead, 1984: 115–16). Today, making derisive remarks in the UK about Froggies and the smelly cheeses they devour does not carry much of a practical purpose. The French oddity is no threat to the British established social order. There is no operational reason to downgrade them.

The poor and the rich

On the contrary, since immemorial times, contempt from the elite towards the ways of life and feeding habits of the lower strata of the society has been a rule. Their “bestly behaviour” is a justification for their domination. Goody (1984: 167), quoting M. Murray (1963: 56–87) in her monograph on the Egyptian Mastaba of Saqqara, enumerated 15 kinds of breads and cakes. She wrote: “An abyss separated the frugal meal of the peasants consisting of dates, vegetables, sometimes of fish, and the refined table of the ruling classes”. Materially it was not only a question of quantity but of quality. On conceptual grounds, the Sumerian tablets already point to this culinary discrepancy:

For the poor man, death is better than life
 If he has bread, he has no salt
 If he has salt, he has no bread
 If he has meat, he has no lamb
 If he has lamb, he has no meat. (Goody, 1984: 168, quoting Kramer, 1956: 154)

So there are the food habits of the poor and those of the rich. References to fundamental differences in kind and mentality are implied as well as stark economic discrepancies. In his analysis of the civilizing process in the Western world, Elias (1978: 77–8) insists upon table manners and touches, of course, on the food field. The *gentilhomme* with civilized behaviour is distinguished from the conduct of peasants and their rustic, vulgar and coarse manners. The author advocates (p. 78) “Do not fall greedily upon the food . . . do not eat bread before the meal is served for this would appear greedy”.

The difference between the yokel and the gentleman is that the latter is not hungry, the poor stuff themselves with *nourritures de nécessité* (Bourdieu, 1979) if they get a chance. It is in their uncouth nature.

Cultural differences – the English and the French

Attitudes towards the food system of the lower strata of the population differ from culture to culture. This is quite notable between England and France. In France in the 18th century the common people were considered to be coarse; it was not worth changing

their food system, they simply could not understand the *finesse* of the gastronomic diet of the upper classes. The commoner devoured, the *nouveaux-riches* were gluttons, only gentlemen (if they had the money) could become connoisseurs:

Money alone is not sufficient to ensure a good table. Everything depends on the ease, knowledge and studies one has made concerning all the aspects of the art of food . . . one must add to a good education as deep a knowledge of men as of good food . . . Moral qualities are no less necessary . . . (Grimod de la Reynière, 1965: 8–11; author's translation)

The attitude of the upper class was quite undemocratic and elitist. Money was not enough, although the rich bourgeois and politicians were progressively becoming those able to afford the *haute cuisine*. Brillat-Savarin (1885: 158–69) invented a series of tests which he called “gastronomical test tubes”, which were graduated according to the financial income of the upper social strata:

The strength of the tests should take into account the faculties and habits of the various social classes . . . within each class the presentation of a set of gastronomic meals should evoke from the subject such signs of appreciation as to enable his classification as a guest worthy of an invitation or not. (Author's translation)

In the 19th century in France the appeal of gastronomy, which J. P. Aron (1973) coined aptly a *folie bourgeoise*, was so strong that in town the lower classes attempted to eat in a similar fashion, although they did not have the means to do so. The waiters and dishwashers at the best restaurants used to collect the leftovers of gastronomic meals in a large basket covered with a black cloth, named *le drapeau noir* (the black flag) (Aron, 1973: 241), and sold them at cheap prices. These remains were called *bijoux* (jewels). The leftovers of these leftovers were again sold under the name of “Arlequin” in reference to the patchwork costume of this character and their own diversity (Montagné, 1967: 88). In France food has a high cultural value and the door remains ajar for the lower strata to progress towards gastronomy.

In England the concern was more social – how to feed the poor in the rural as well as in the industrialized areas. Concern was expressed by the administrative authorities about the bad conditions of the lower classes (Labourers' Wages Act, 1824; the Poor Law, 1834), letters and articles appeared in the press from 1843 onwards (Burnett, 1966: 42). The poor should be given enough to eat in order to work (but “not to rebel”, as the Shogun Tokugawa would have added, see Mitra, 1982). Burnett (1966: 56, quoting Brown, 1832)

reports the extreme case of pauper apprentices in the care of the parish authorities:

The store pigs and the apprentices used to fare very much alike . . . the fattening pigs fared luxuriously compared with the apprentices. They were often regaled with meat balls made into dough and given the shape of dumplings . . . Pedigreed pigs were better treated than poor children.

As the same author writes (1966: 37): “Contemporary writers are unanimous in blaming in the 19th century the labourer for his extravagant diet, and tireless in demonstrating that by better management he might have more meat and more variety in his meals”.

Cobbett and Copley (1830, 1849, both quoted in Burnett, 1966: 35–7), gave recommendations for providing a cheap diet for the poor which was not likely to provoke excitement. It certainly was not very stimulating. Cobbett mentioned “slovenly and beastly habits among the labouring classes” (Burnett, 1966: 37). Drinking habits were, of course, of central interest to Victorian morality, which was not totally off the point. According to Samuel Smiles (cf. Burnett, 1966: 199), beer consumption reached a peak of 34 gallons per capita per year in 1876 and remained at 30 gallons until 1900. Tea was considered an improvement. Poverty is not the only factor in the improper diet of the worker. Owen tried to improve the conditions in the cotton mill he managed from 1799 to 1824. His “great underlying purpose was to improve human character, to change the labour force . . . – poor, ignorant, given to the vice of drunkenness – into an efficient, honest and happy community” where income would not be “squandered on expensive foods and drinks” (Burnett, 1966: 59).

Quality versus quantity – *la distinction*

Thomas Wood (1822, quoted by Burnett, 1966: 179) referred to the quest for quantity among successful workmates working with the new Widworth machines at Platts Bros. He found them: “Wicked and reckless, most of them gambled freely on horse or dog races . . . Flesh meat as they call it must be on the table twice or thrice a day. A rough and rude plenty alone satisfied them.” Thus, “rough and rude plenty” was supposed to characterize the food habits of the lower classes, and variety and civility those of the elite.

Bourdieu (1979: 196–8) has popularized the opposition between the necessity foods – abundant, nourishing, not very imaginative – of the working class and the luxury foods of the Establishment, where quality and rarity predominate over quantity. Innovation according to a multiplicity of criteria – exoticism, philosophical principles and, above all, taste expertise (which is the ultimate criterion of distinction and supremacy in the field of food) – is also the prerogative of the *bourgeoisie*. We could add chauvinism to the list, as each dominant group fixes the rules of the game, establishing the hierarchy of the criteria which are to be accepted.

Proficiency in food appreciation has become a notable aspect of class differentiation. The taste for good food is not innate. According to the French, it has to be learned in the most proficient culture in the field of gastronomy – the Gallic one. This proposition is a magnificent example of contemporary ethnocentrism, cf. the French Institute for Taste and the recently-created European Centre for the Sciences of Taste, in Dijon, France. Is French taste the right taste (de Garine, 1998: 262)? We are actually witnessing a dynamic process as new criteria for distinction, influenced by the latest fashion and fads, are constantly creating new in-groups looking down at those who are not initiated. In the field of food as well as in the field of art, it is important to a Frenchman, preferably from Paris, to be *branché* (plugged in)! Does it mean that self-promoting attitudes towards gastronomy have become exclusive? Certainly not!

Et la Nature? Wisdom and dietetics

Praising Nature, natural people, natural food and advocating temperance occurred in all ancient civilizations. It was part of the *sentiment de la Nature*. Epicurus himself recommended “simple foods” which bring as much pleasure as a sumptuous meal. Democritus cut out something from his meals every day . . . until he died (Blond and Blond, 1976: 54). Cato and Ovid were also on the abstinent side. This *sentiment de la Nature* extended to food products, and Marie-Antoinette planned to milk her ewes in the Trianon. It reached a climax in the mid-19th century, during the European Romantic period. Rousseau contributed to rehabilitating the simple and wholesome foods obtained in the countryside. Simultaneously, in England and Germany, in connection with the industrialization process and the Puritan ideology (Mennel, 1985:

104) a concern grew about providing an optimal diet for the worker, intended primarily to meet his nutritional needs, but not to indulge in any decadent sensual gastronomic pleasure.

Hufeland wrote the first book about macrobiotic food in 1796 (Kuhnau, 1970: 60); at the same time the *littérature gourmande* began to flourish in France. The opposition between the two viewpoints has been expertly documented (see Mennel, 1985: 105; Flandrin and Montanari, 1996). It nourished cultural and social stereotypes. English cooking is not as plain as the French think it is, and many ingredients escape boiling. French cooking is not as unsanitary as Americans believe it to be. The views of the pure vegetarians versus the plump carnivores-who-get-fat-at-Third-World's-expense and vice versa are not free from prejudice (OSSIPow, 1995: 139) It would be possible to elaborate on this last aspect.

Knowledge: pleasure and health

Travel and communication of people and ideas have contributed to modifying food stereotypes and prejudices. A certain awareness of foreign, even strange, cuisine is a new world trend. The Indonesian *nasi goreng* has become part of the daily fare of the Dutch, as has Indian food for the British and North African food for the French. Chinese and Italian cooking rates high in many countries, including France (Pitte, 1991: 15). The cookery book by E. Rozin (1973) called “The Flavor Principle” is a valuable effort to diminish prejudice against alien foods and rehabilitate foreign cuisines. Being an expert on foreign and exotic cooking has become a token of distinction.

A general trend can be established, rating food systems according to their ability to procure good nutrition, beneficial to health and longevity. The “French Paradox”, allowing one to rejoice in food and wine and benefit from a long life, is one more recent asset promoting the French food culture.

Globalization: stereotypes and economic competition

It is 34 years since Trémolières and Baquet (1967: 761) drew attention to the existence in French society of two trends in relation to

food appreciation, first, those who put the Golden Age ahead and favour manufactured foodstuffs, nicely presented with vitamins added, benefiting from the latest biochemical findings and, second, those who put it in the past and are keen on wholesome farm products cooked as Grandma used to do. It is a balanced fight! However, concern for nutritional adequacy and fear of pollution are two factors which foster food prejudice and stereotypes. With the globalization process, they operate worldwide. At micro level, in Northern Cameroon, the Masa refused to adopt from their Tupuri neighbours a variety of pricked sorghum (*Sorghum durrah*) which would have solved their seasonal shortage problem, on the grounds that it is not good food, it is bitter and plays a prominent part in the culture of a society they dislike (“they are dirty, they are not reliable”). This attitude, which is biologically counter-adaptive, concerned a population of 200,000 people. Today, under the influence of modernization and the disappearance of the Masa’s cultural identity, this prohibition is vanishing.

The EEC has refused to import cattle from the UK because of mad cow disease (BSE – bovine spongiform encephalopathy), poultry from Belgium because of dioxin pollution, and beef from the US because of its hormonal treatment. Millions of people and millions of dollars are involved. There is no doubt that, besides objective facts, the evaluation of the possible health damages and the measures to counteract them reflect cultural views and are not necessarily impartial. Anyway, this episode contributes to creating a lasting prejudice towards importing meat from these countries and is likely to influence trade for some time to come. Food prejudices and stereotypes have become an important aspect of the politico-economic rivalry opposing countries and, more specifically, Europe to the US and the multinational agro business it fosters. In America many organizations and authorities concerned with food insist on the fact that the US is a country of plenty and its citizens are the best-fed people in the world. Duncan Hines, the eminent US gastronomical critic, after his first trip to Europe in 1948, declared that American cooking was the best in the world (Levenstein, 1996: 854). This may be an overstatement.

On this side of the Atlantic, in a recent interview a French Minister of Agriculture, reacting to the customs retaliation of the US on the European embargo on the hormone-fed beef they want to export, declared that the “Americans are the worst fed people in the world and that their food products are very unsafe in terms

of biological and chemical pollution”. What belongs to objective observation and to stereotypes in this matter? It is clear that rumours about the nature of food products, introduced consciously or not, can be a very powerful weapon in the politico-economic field. The recent reports on the pollution of Coca-Cola and, earlier, Perrier water could also have been influenced by unfair manoeuvring in the field of food marketing.

Long-run perspectives

Although man is biologically an omnivorous animal, each culture selects the food potentialities at hand and values them, while depreciating those of out-groups. This tendency towards food ethnocentrism and xenophobia may not permit the optimal satisfaction of nutritional needs in the human group considered. Prejudice from the Masa against adopting a new crop from their neighbours for cultural reasons is biologically counter-adaptive. In line with the above, Calvin Schwabe in his *Unmentionable Cuisine* (1979: 1) points to the spreading of the overly restrictive eating habits of Americans and the need to counteract this tendency. After describing weird food (according to American standards), he points to the need to go beyond nutritional and social food prejudices in order to broaden as much as possible the range of foods consumed – a sane precaution in order to cope with the world demographic explosion (1979: 410) and biological hazards such as the BSE we are witnessing. Referring to this aspect among the African populations in which I work, it might be useful to fight against the diminution of the food ranges of children who utilize in the bush many wild resources spurned by adults, and then progressively abandon them as backward and dirty under the pressure of outside modern models.

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