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978-0-521-28696-1 - Cooking, Cuisine and Class: A Study in Comparative Sociology
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1

Intentions and remarks

This essay started life as an inaugural lecture, at least in contemplation. That is to say, while I had little intention of delivering such a discourse, I did have a general audience in mind, one that would not only want to hear the details of a distant culture in which I had worked over many years, but would wish to know something of the general trends of recent work, including my own, and how these discussions took their place in the wider field of social anthropology and the social sciences. I took as my topic one that was receiving attention from a variety of scholars and approaches, that of food, mainly the cooked but also the raw. The subject linked up with the broad contrast between the domestic economies of Europe and Asia on the one hand and Africa on the other, which I had previously tried to examine in terms of the relationships between family systems and modes of production, as well as between oral and literate cultures, that is, in terms of modes of communication. I have tried to present this contrast in as direct a way as I can, perhaps over-simply. Today so much writing in the humanities and social sciences consists in unnecessary obfuscation that is often a way of disguising intellectual problems rather than illuminating them. Subtlety is not a function of obscurity.

The question behind the present essay can be stated in a few words. Why are traditional African cultures largely lacking a differentiated cuisine, even in great states with differentiated political structures? What are the conditions for the emergence of a high and a low cuisine? These questions are neither frivolous nor yet of purely historical interest. The answer bears upon the differences between African and Eurasian societies today and upon the strategies to be used to change or to preserve them.

The form this essay takes can be seen as an expression of anthropological experience, both my own and that of others. It begins with a discussion of general approaches to the subject, those that have dominated the area of interest and have shaped my own enquiry. Here I argue for the contextualisation of social theory, which needs to be linked more closely with the methods and the ends of the enquiry; the potential contribution of apparently alternative approaches has to be assessed in

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terms of the analysis in hand. Then I look at cooking in two African societies in which I myself have lived and worked, since my understanding of those cultures provides the point of departure for the empirical questioning. It was dissatisfaction with one formal account of the 'African cuisine' that led me to realise the need, first, to analyse cooking in the context of the total process of production, preparation and consumption of food, and, secondly, to set this analysis within a comparative perspective. Contextualisation is especially important in looking at the African cuisine comparatively, because it raises the question of hierarchical, regional and temporal variations. But, comparative analysis apart, these considerations are relevant even in understanding the meaning of a mode of cooking to the people concerned, since at one level its characterisation involves 'placing' oneself in relation to others, as the English do in referring to 'mother's cooking', to 'Yorkshire recipes' and to the 'English cuisine'; for the actor's context itself is not limited to the set of internal relations of a particular culture, even where that culture can be considered as relatively undifferentiated. The smaller the group, the greater the boundary problems and the less one can ignore the cuisine of one's neighbours. In any case, even in Africa, ingredients have been imported and exported for centuries, especially low-volume, high-priced items like salt, spices and medicines of various kinds. And over the last hundred years the food of that continent has influenced and been influenced by the modes of consumption in industrialised countries. From Ghana cocoa is imported into Europe, America and the Soviet Union; in turn French cube sugar, Portuguese sardines, Italian tomato paste, American corn, are virtually 'staples' of the Ghanaian urban diet, while Yugoslav tractors, Bulgarian wine, Chinese bicycles and Polish conserves have been prominent elements in the recent repertoire of imported consumer goods.

After looking at the wider context of the consumption in northern Ghana, I turn for comparison and contrast to some major Eurasian societies. Here, I narrow down the enquiry to one aspect of the phase of consumption, that is, the cuisine itself. In doing so I try to bring out the relevance of the nature of the system of stratification, its link with the productive processes and the role of the means of communication in formulating and formalising a cuisine. The central contrast is between a social system, even a state (a hieratic one), with minimal cultural differentiation, and one comprising a hierarchy of estates, castes or classes, with differences in styles of life of such significance as to produce sub-cultures.

In the two following chapters I outline the development of the industrial production of food that now bears so forcefully upon the Third World both as producers of the raw materials and as receivers of the

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finished product. In advanced countries the industrial process and its related modes of communication, such as mass newspapers, radio and, especially, television, have almost erased many of the external boundaries defining areas of food consumption, as well as rubbing out some of the internal differences between classes and regions. The large-scale importation of foreign produce enables the masses of today to enjoy the luxuries of yesterday's rich. These products are the fruits of the labour of individuals located in poorer countries, and the internal differences in the living standards of the inhabitants of industrial countries have decreased, at least in the initial phases, at the expense of the growth of the gap in consumption between regions and nations, and within those of the Third World. This gap is now beginning to make its appearance even in northern Ghana. For here too the local rich are shifting to international standards while the bulk of the people live at a quite different level of existence, certainly more adequate than in pre-colonial times but far removed from that of their better-off compatriots. Up to the present such differences have not greatly affected the daily meal, even though the social environment of eating varies very greatly.

I look at these contemporary problems before returning to the general question of the differences in cuisine in pre-colonial times, by which I mean the period covering the expansion of Europe over the last five hundred years. The progression is important. For I do not see anthropology as concerned only with the pre-literate or with pre-industrial societies, either by design or by default. For me it is the comparative study of socio-cultural systems in which Nottingham is as relevant as the Nuer. Even confining the field to 'other cultures', we would still no longer be dealing with pre-industrial societies when we are carrying out observational studies. Communities of human beings are not like groups of monkeys; there are no societies in the world today that remain uninfluenced by the world system, that is, by the industrial economy and by the political developments of colonial empires and the independent or quasi-independent nations that succeeded them. If we want to observe or experience the 'simpler societies', we have to study the Third World, whether we like it or not. A scholar who undertakes a field study, even in the most remote area and among the most exotic peoples, needs to acquire some knowledge of how the local relationships articulate with the wider network if he is to understand his data.

On the other hand, in order to understand pre-industrial societies, as distinct from (though the distinction is never absolute) the non-industrial segments of the larger world that we now tend to observe, it is becoming increasingly necessary to turn to evidence of a different kind. You cannot do fieldwork in the past; and 'oral history' needs to be weighed against

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documentary, archaeological and linguistic research. Immersion in fieldwork becomes of less immediate relevance for the reconstruction of earlier social systems, whether of the Inca, the Ashanti or the Rajputs, though, as Marc Bloch insisted, the walk over the fields should always remain part of the work of the social historian, even the historian of the distant past.

I do not see these various kinds of enquiry, traditional or modern, past or present, documentary or observational, as radical alternatives. After all, they are fields or methods of enquiry rather than modes of understanding. Nor do I see either fields or methods as attached in any exclusive way to particular academic disciplines. Social anthropology is committed to a combination of intensive and extensive approaches. Extensive, because to understand any particular society, one needs to have some understanding of the social structure of that type of society in general. But there is also a direct benefit to be derived from intensive sociological experience of a society other than one's own, and even enquiry into past structures (the dying if not the dead) needs to be comparative and analytic, an undertaking that involves the study of 'other cultures'. But the contemporary situation, here or in Africa, is also the proper subject of our study, one that may need to be pursued by extensive as well as intensive methods. Once again such an enquiry needs to be set within a comparative framework, both of a spatial and a temporal kind, a task that social anthropology should be one of the most qualified of the social sciences to undertake.

If the form of this essay retraces the life experiences of many anthropologists, from the general studies of the university student, to the particularities of fieldwork as a graduate, to the subsequent effort at a wider synthesis, the general approach reflects my understanding of social anthropology as a branch of comparative sociology. Hence the significance of the title I gave, not only to this 'lecture' but much earlier to my first dissertation at Oxford, 'The sociology of the Lobi'. To put the point in another way, I regard both sociology and social anthropology as falling under the heading of comparative sociology. Few of my colleagues, here or elsewhere, would agree. The Americans among them often see themselves as studying 'culture' rather than 'society', a forced choice that I see as either 'polemical' or else irrelevant, but certainly not as substantive.[1] The British among them often regard their field as 'other cultures' or 'other societies', especially 'simple', 'tribal', 'rural' ones. The French, who regard most Anglo-Saxon endeavours as overly 'empiricist' and insufficiently 'theoretical', avoid a direct confrontation with this particular issue, having at their backs the range and the depth of the *Année Sociologique* and the School of Durkheim.

The widespread idea that the field of social anthropology lies in the

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study of *other* cultures is bolstered by various practical considerations, such as the myopia that often accompanies an enquiry into one's own kind, a myopia that derives from self-identification, the constraints of one's linguistic concepts, and the reluctance to undertake intensive fieldwork ('we know it already'). But such talk may also conceal a plain love of the exotic, the different, even though the exploration of the other is in some sense an exploration of self, cultural and individual, through an investigation of alternative possibilities, the functional equivalents in human living; in another way, of course, it can also be a flight from the realities into which one was born and raised. Whatever gains this particular process of understanding may provide, and useful as many find the technique of participant observation, neither the limitation to one set of societies nor to one set of techniques seems to be an adequate way of defining a specific field of study. This is especially true of today's world. The logical extension of these limitations would mean modes of enquiry different in essence (not just in particulars) for each nation or for each continent. For we Europeans are what Africans see as 'other cultures', their exotic societies; we are (from one viewpoint) their 'primitives', their 'ethnics'. Nor does an attachment to the technique of intensive research, in a world of increasing differentiation, offer any solution in the long term. The problem is not one for anthropology alone but for all those fields of study (theology, history, literature and the like) whose roots lay in the period when the world system was marked by the intellectual as well as the politico-economic domination of the West. The rationale for sociology's field of interest is equally in doubt, a function of its western past and its indecisive present.

It may be that the separation of sociology from anthropology will continue to exist in those western countries where the pre-industrial components were either totally annihilated (as was effectively the case with hunters and simple agriculturalists in America and Australia) or else thoroughly incorporated at a much earlier period (as with 'peasants' in England and the Low Countries). It seems unlikely that this dissociation of academic sensibility will become established in Africa or Asia, and it seems unhealthy that it should exist at all. While we can profit from specialisation, there can hardly be different *logoi* (logics) for societies of the same (human) species – as if we had different psychologies or anatomies for blacks and for whites, or for developed and underdeveloped, for men and for women.

It is true that another possible line of differentiation exists, based not upon the 'relativity' of the 'other cultures' view but upon the 'absolute' character of long-term development. In the USSR, anthropology (or rather ethnology) was defined as the study of pre-capitalist social formations.[2] And it is a view, phrased in terms of pre-industrial societies,

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that is commonly held elsewhere. But a *purely* 'historical' definition is unlikely to find much favour with those who see themselves primarily as social scientists involved in a process of enquiry based upon fieldwork, a process that includes the observation, analysis and explanation of behaviour. Even those who see the study of past societies as an essential part of anthropo-sociology would be unhappy at the idea of the subject as a kind of generalising, comparative history (whether this be 'ethnohistory' or 'graphohistory'), without any direct observational component. In some areas of enquiry the concentration on secondary, written sources (what the historian refers to as 'primary sources' or the sociologist 'questionnaires') is a poor substitute for watching, participating and asking. Moreover this 'ethological' experience (with the linguistic and participant supplements that turn it into an 'ethnological' one) is valuable in making judgements even about quite different societies, in getting a sense of the 'social system', of the nature of 'social relations', quite apart from any more specific advantages it may have.

The ability to place abstract concepts in a particular empirical context, to offer a non-western perspective, to formulate an initial hypothesis linking this with that – these are useful (if not essential) attributes to bring to any study with wider comparative implications. At the same time such studies cannot be restricted to a specific range of 'dead' societies because some problems inevitably point in another direction and require the collection of data in the field. For a comparative sociology we need to consider both the present and the past, and to elaborate appropriate hypotheses, concepts and techniques for their study. These must obviously vary according to the problem in hand, so that we cannot be satisfied with any approach that attempts to limit the range of the society or technique at our disposal. We must reject definitions that predetermine the scope of the analysis by placing societies in simplistic binary categories, whether of European and 'other' cultures, savage and advanced, simple and complex, traditional and modern, industrial and pre-industrial, anthropological and sociological. And we must reject a definition that prevents us from combining intensive, extensive, historical and comparative techniques of research in the investigation of a single problem.

With these preliminary remarks in mind I want briefly to review some aspects of the sociology of cooking as a way of sketching certain developments that have taken place in social anthropology over the last half-century, developments that in Britain are sometimes seen in terms of a movement from the functionalism of Malinowski through to the structuralism (1) (or functional-structuralism) of Radcliffe-Brown to the structuralism (2) of Lévi-Strauss.[3]

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Let us briefly consider how we should view these particular lexemes, these 'isms', these single words offered as descriptions of approaches to the social sciences and which are taken by some as denoting 'theories'. The prospectus for a recent journal on 'theory' in the social sciences expresses the founders' hopes

> to present the vital front of sociological theory, across the range of dialectical and critical sociologies, neo-Marxism and conflict theory, social phenomenology and ethnomethodology, linguistic sociology, historical sociology, structuralism, mathematical and positivistic sociology, and the new departures that continually appear.

It is difficult to see these terms as designating 'theories' in the more usual sense in which this word is employed. We are dealing with general orientations (or even with topics of study) which require some more inclusive description than the word 'theory', so often used only for its prestigious associations. 'Approaches', perhaps, might be a more accurate designation, since we are not dealing with any testable assertions, nor even general paradigms, but rather with a variety of modes of attack which each have their gains and their costs but which rarely constitute analytic alternatives. Gellner's comment on functionalism is appropriate here: '"Functionalism" is only a theory in a very loose sense, of a formal rather than a substantive paradigm.' And again: 'the importance of functionalism lay not in its doctrine, which was quite unspecific in its failure to locate that mysterious mid-point, but in summarising and conveying a certain state of mind and research strategy – *look for* the way in which institutions reinforce each other and favour stability!' (Gellner 1974: 1166–7). At this level a new theory often takes the general shape of an earlier one. Gestalt theory appears in a different garb as systems theory; aspects of Marxist theory re-emerge once more in various forms of neo-Marxism; evolutionary theory goes out with structural–functionalism and comes back in the framework of comparative analysis. There is indeed a feeling of *déjà-vu*, a perception in the field of ideology (or theory) of the cycles that were distinguished by the philosopher Spengler and the historian Toynbee among the great civilisations, by the anthropologists Leach and Gluckman among the Kachin hills of Burma and the flood plains of the Zambesi, and by Fortes and others among humbler domestic groups throughout the world. The continuous creation of 'theories' implied in the prospectus displays some of the characteristics of a merry-go-round, defining 'new directions' more precisely than 'new achievements'.

Cycles are by definition non-cumulative, except in a purely quantitative sense. Are we right to observe a lack of theoretical progression? On the most inclusive level the answer is probably that little cumulative

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advance can be perceived, only change, a revolving world of non-revolutionary movement. It is on a less general level that advances have been made. To take a restricted area, no one familiar with the development of the study of, say, kin groups, prescriptive marriage or the development cycle would deny that advances had been made over the past thirty years, whatever detailed criticism they may have of the present state of play. Such advances have been associated with individuals identified in their turn as functionalists or structuralists. But the relationship between the general 'theory' on the one hand and more substantive interest or specific hypothesis on the other is rarely clear; especially since a new approach is almost invariably stated (and if not stated, seen) in terms of its opposition to previous ones. That of course is understandable; a new path has to branch off an existing track, and by doing so proclaims its independence or its individuality.

The fact that one element in the emergence of new sociological theory consists of the statement of opposition to the present establishment, and that this process is often cyclical, 'repetitive' in Max Gluckman's characterisation of rebellions contrasted with revolutions (1955: 46), suggests a rather different function for such theory than the paradigmatic changes or gestalt shifts discussed by the historian of science Thomas Kuhn in his book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962). Instead of the revolutions of natural science, we find the rebellions of the social sciences. Rather than crystallising existing knowledge and offering a model for future experimental and intellectual work, such changes indicate a shift of emphasis between possibilities that lie permanently embedded in the analysis of sociological material, e.g. between the actor's or observer's point of view,[4] between qualitative and quantitative methods,[5] between synchronic and diachronic analysis, between the study of surface and deep structure, and so forth. In other words, these polemical shifts may serve to redirect research energy into neglected channels, but in very different ways from the paradigm shifts discussed by Kuhn (as indeed he himself recognises). For they affect 'normal science' in a highly generalised way; they act as signposts, often pointing out a vague direction, rather than serving as a constraining model, a map for new discoveries, a reformulation of past knowledge.

We could, then, easily reduce recent developments in social anthropology to an absurd caricature by thinking of three dominant paradigms as functionalist, structuralist and Marxist. Numerous qualifications would need to be made. There are after all structural-functionalists, post-structuralists, structural-Marxists, as well as 'Marxisant' functionalists and cultural materialists. But while Kuhn's notion of the predominant paradigm is hardly satisfactory for discussing the social sciences, one can point to modes of analysis and explanation that are *influenced* by these

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three main approaches, even though at the level of theoretical practice there are many continuities. These trends are discernable in the sociology of cooking as well as in the larger fields of the sociology of food and of modes of consumption, and it is to a discussion of the specific contributions to this topic that I now turn.

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2

State of play

The intention of this chapter is not to provide a synopsis of anthropological thought but to sketch out the kinds of attention that anthropologists have given to the study of 'food' over the years, partly as a guide to the general reader, partly to spell out the background to my own interest. After looking briefly at the contributions of nineteenth-century scholars I comment upon work done in the functionalist and structural-functional traditions of British anthropology. But it is the work of the structuralists, and particularly of Lévi-Strauss, that demands more detailed attention, since notions of the 'cooked' and the 'raw' play such a central part in his analysis; more generally the domain of cooking itself has been used to demonstrate the validity of an approach modelled on linguistic binarism.

THE PRECURSORS

In the nineteenth century anthropological interest in food centred largely upon questions of taboo, totemism, sacrifice and communion, that is, essentially on religious aspects of the process of consumption. Typical of this concern was the work of that famous Cambridge figure, Sir James Frazer (1854–1941), who was induced to write articles on taboo and totemism for the ninth edition of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* when its distinguished editor, Robertson Smith, joined him at Trinity High Table after his career in Scotland had been cut short by the appearance of his notorious article under the heading 'Bible'. In 1907, following the successful publication of *The Golden Bough* in 1890, Frazer's desire to produce more reliable evidence for his comparative purposes led him to issue a little pamphlet (based on an earlier document that had been privately circulated) which he entitled *Questions on the Customs, Beliefs and Languages of Savages*, and of which at least three editions were printed by Cambridge University Press. The section on Food begins with the questions 'Do they eat everything edible? Or are certain foods forbidden?' The catechism continues, though on a mundane level, until we reach section 138. 'Is cannibalism practised? Do they eat their enemies or

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