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REVIEW ARTICLE

CULTURED FOOD

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PIERO CAMPORESI, *The Magic Harvest: Food, Folklore and Society* (transl. Joan Krakover Hall), Cambridge, Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Polity Press 1993 [1989]. vii, 253 pp., Bibliography, Glossary, Index. £39.50.

SIMON R. CHARSLEY, *Wedding Cakes and Cultural History*, London: Routledge 1992. 162 pp., Bibliography, Index, Illustrations. £30.00/£9.99.

NICK FIDDES, *Meat: A Natural Symbol*, London and New York: Routledge 1991. x, 233 pp., Bibliography, Indexes, Figures. £35.00.

ELISABETH L. FURST, *et al.* (eds.), *Palatable Worlds: Sociocultural Food Studies*, Oslo: Forlag 1991. 206 pp., Bibliographies, Figures. £19.95.

STEPHEN MENNELL, ANNE MURCOTT and ANNEKE H. VAN OTTERLOO, *The Sociology of Food: Eating, Diet and Culture*, London: Sage 1992. vii, 150 pp., Bibliography, Index. £10.95.

UNTIL very recently, *our* food was considered something fit to eat or to reject, not to study. It was professionally correct to examine the use of edibles in exotic settings, but not at home. The attitudes of Westerners, especially the urban classes, to what they eat was not considered worthy of sustained investigation. Like several other topics that could be included within 'an anthropology of modern Europe', food was considered to be such an already understood part of our common lives that research into its meaning and uses could not turn up anything new. Only the more exotic practices within our modern societies were studied in a serious manner, and even then only sporadically. But, as all bar one of the

books under review reveals, these ignorant attitudes are at last becoming curios of the past.

A major problem for anthropologists of modern Europe is that the societies they study contain a high proportion of educated people who, if they can be bothered, may criticize all but the most incisive of ethnographers' reports as trivial and platitudinous. And if these intellectuals of their own society compare their anthropologists with their novelists, they may well find the books of the former superficial, pretentious and poorly written. Compared to the ethnographers of distant and little-known areas, those who study ourselves face a harsh and well-informed jury. The criteria of acceptability are jacked up, and an anthropologist of Western food who dares to tell us something we already know shouldn't even make it into print.

For instance, some members of this extra-academic public found Mary Douglas's structuralist analyses of British eating patterns (e.g. Douglas 1972; Douglas and Nicod 1974) inconsequential. Indeed, questions were asked in Parliament about whether the taxpayer should be funding research whose major 'discovery' was that the biscuit served as a coda to the main daily meal. Perhaps even worse, the distinguished psychologist who reviewed for the *TLS* the book Douglas edited on the anthropology of drink (Douglas (ed.) 1987) thought it platitudinous, if not just plain silly:

> Much of it reads like a parody of sociology and anthropology. It is, unintentionally, the only one of the five books [under review] that is consistently humorous. Consider for example...'In emphasizing the meal as an occasion of social relationships, the bourgeoisie deny the primary, material function of eating and maintain the integration of familial with the more disciplined areas of life'—in other words people like talking as well as eating. (Sutherland 1988: 880)

Non-structuralist academics, who had their own worries about Douglas's work, criticized the synchronic strictures and strongly over-systematizing tendencies of her approach. As they perceived, she was not scared to invent meanings for the culinary patterns she witnessed, especially when the consumers she was studying were resolutely silent about the connotations of mealtimes and their contents. Douglas, it became clear, was also happy to isolate what she considered to be a 'system', to lay down its boundaries, and to outline its structure, without referring to the ideas and attitudes of the users of the supposed 'system'. She was at the same time charged with disregarding history, with ignoring politics, with failing to acknowledge the structural constraints on ingestion, and with being so arrogant as to be prepared to generalize, on the basis of one brief study of four working-class families, about the gastronomic behaviour of the whole of Britain (see, for example, Goody 1982: 29-32; Mennell 1985: 13-15; and the book by Charsley under review). As one of her critics, Sydney Mintz (1985: 200), put it, 'the relation [she claimed] of so-called grammar to eating is only a cute artifact of description'.

Today her deeply formalized and at times counter-intuitive method seems suitable only for a history of the anthropology of food, not for its contemporary study. It seems that it once had intellectual weight only because structuralism was then in vogue, and because it was thought that any further work by an academic capable of producing *Purity and Danger* had to be of interest. All the more depressing then, that several of the contributors to Furst's otherwise interesting collection of essays have resuscitated her ideas. But as *Jurassic Park* has reminded us, bringing dinosaurs back to life doesn't make them any more attractive, it just shows how out of date they are.

Charsley doesn't wish to beetle off after brontosauri. He is too concerned with theoretical innovation for that. While investigating the Scots wedding industry, he realized that the symbolic centrepiece of the feast had never been properly studied. Though the attention of any extra-terrestrial ethnographer would immediately be drawn to the extraordinary structure, cost, and cutting of this tiered confection, no anthropologist, whether of Britain or of food, had so far bothered to analyse in any depth the traditions surrounding the wedding cake. The anthropological result of Charsley's research into the cultural history of this material item is a tentative model of change. He wishes to suggest that an established object is more likely to condition use and meaning rather than vice versa, and that object and use normally condition meaning. He shows that the sorts of symbolic interpretations which anthropologists like to make are extraneous to cultural development, while folk historical explanations are but *post hoc* rationalizations couched in a historicist mode.

While admitting there are exceptions to his generalizations, he submits that 'objects come first, their uses follow, and human imagination playing around both occasionally proposes meanings' (p. 132). To anthropologists used to dealing with less rapidly developing societies, Charsley's thesis may appear highly provocative, if not edging on the nonsensical. Of course, his 'model' of cultural change makes most sense when referring to objects in a malleable society with a highly competitive market economy that values innovation. But even when dealing with this sort of society, Charsley seems to be taking too little account of the way already established, socially recognized contexts may influence the uses to which a novel object is put and the meanings it is given. It is true that people may create new contexts for new objects, but these novel frames for action and meaning are themselves embedded in other, pre-existing contexts.

It is very tempting to think that Charsley's thesis is, more than anything, a consequence of the nature of his sources. Though he has been scrupulous in his documentation of the development of the cake, his account of its history is constantly dogged by the lack of contemporary commentary about its possible meanings. Given this paucity of relevant evidence about the history of British baking, challenge to, or confirmation of, his thesis will have to await more richly documented histories of other items of native culture.

Camporesi has the opposite problem. A distinguished social historian of food, Camporesi is excellent when discussing the social symbolism of edibles and its

associated rituals in preindustrial Italy, showing how the act of eating at weddings and seasonal feasts was regarded metaphorically as a form of copulation; how bread was viewed as a magic talisman against the forces of darkness; how peasant rituals centred, regardless of the time of year, around a great cooking-pot suspended over the hearth; and how a nationwide bourgeois cuisine developed in the last century. Where he falls down in this collection of essays (some of which are unnecessarily repetitious) is in his acccounts of modern eating practices; he seems to think that a sharp eye and a sharper style are sufficient qualifications for discoursing in an authoratative manner on the way Italians eat today. They are not sufficient, as the systematic study of contemporary foodways evidenced in the other books under review suggests. If good historians wish to wax anthropological about present society, they need to be good anthropologists as well.

The blurb on the cover of the book by Mennell *et al.* accurately states that it is 'a comprehensive overview of the sociology of food'. The topics covered range from eating disorders to studies of famine, from home economics to the impact of colonialism on food, from the use of food in total institutions to restaurant-going. There are further chapters dealing with nutritional trends, the development of culinary cultures, lay beliefs and practices about food and health, differential patterns of food consumption according to age, sex, and class, as well as with the world of waiters and with food technology and its impact.

It is, however, nothing but an overview, little more than a bird's-eye glance at the terrain already covered by food researchers: whole sections of various chapters read like lists of the relevant literature; in many parts, researchers' work is mentioned briefly but not assessed. Thus a newcomer to the sociology of food could only use the book as a pointer to the papers published on the topic rather than as a critical guide to them. The only exception is the chapter on food in the sexual division of domestic labour where the authors, for once, are prepared to write whole paragraphs evaluating in an informed manner the work that has been done within this sub-field.

With all the best will in the world, I find it very difficult to avoid the feeling that this book originated as a report designed to fit a certain brief. And since the authors twice refer to 'this report' in their text, it is hard not to think one's suspicions are well-grounded. If they had only expanded their text and given more space to constructive judgements of the work they were listing, this book could have been recommended to people who wished to gain a critical understanding of the field. As it stands, it is of most use for those who wish to know what sort of work has *not* been done and needs to be done.

Fiddes's initial query is why we have made meat the king of all foods. His answer is that eating the flesh of other animals is conventionally taken to symbolize our domination of the natural world. Carnal consumption is a gastronomic manner of expressing our superiority over all other animals. It is a daily way of asserting our apical position in the food pyramid: we eat others, others don't eat us. Since domination is the key term in this culinary logic, it

should not be surprising that, as Fiddes details, sexual chauvinism is often expressed in meaty terms.

For some, the implicit authoritarian anthropocentricism of meat-eating is too much to bear. Rejecting the idea that God made animals for our purposes they prefer to regard *Homo sapiens* as merely one particular species which shares this planet with so many million others. Indeed, as the American poet Gary Synder has argued, perhaps we should regard Man as an 'entertaining animal', put on this earth to amuse and delight his fellow inhabitants. Either way, the point is clear: some people become vegetarians in reaction to the bloodthirsty arrogance of human carnivores.

Fiddes fills out this frame of meat-eaters versus vegetarians by discussing the history of carnivorism, its cross-cultural incidence, our attitudes to eating others (cannibalism), and our attitudes to eating pets (pseudo-cannibalism). He concludes by detailing the different sorts of arguments—economical, nutritional, ethical, and ecological—that meat-eaters and their enemies use to defend their culinary habits. Like any good ethnographer of a complex society such as our own, Fiddes does not restrict himself to relying on a clutch of prized 'informants'. Besides interviewing farmers, butchers, vegetarian campaigners, and 'members of the general public' (I should like to know how he chose those), he has plumbed trade journals, checked out advertisements and the popular press, looked at recent novels and films, and even read the relevant academic literature. To think it was only ten years ago I heard a respected don saying at the seminar he was chairing, 'We tried working on novels but found there was nothing to get out of them'! We have to thank imaginative anthropologists like Fiddes that the ethnography of Britain now being published is no longer so hidebound in its methods. If *Meat* is indicative of what we can say about our own society, then I look forward to more.

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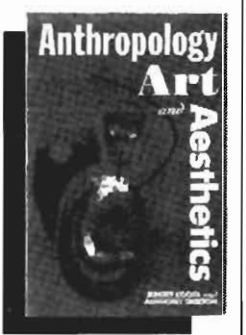

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