



Edibility and other possible worlds

Ana Claudia de Sá Teles Minnaert¹

¹ PhD student in the Post-Graduate Program in Anthropology of the College of Philosophy and Human Sciences of the Federal University of Bahia. Salvador, BA, Brasil.

Correspondence

Ana Claudia de Sá Teles Minnaert
E-mail: venegeroles@yahoo.com

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to discuss the idea of edibility from an ontological conception of worlds inhabited by bodies that relate to each other and to the surrounding world in different ways. I will start the discussion by contextualizing the theme of edibility in Cultural Anthropology. Next, I will describe what can be referred to as an ontological change, as anthropology changes its epistemological approach to the world for an ontological apprehension of other possible worlds. The discussion will be grounded in understanding the terms *worldview*, associated with the notion of culture, and *Weltbild*, associated with the notion of ontology. This work is also backgrounded by the ideas of Viveiros de Castro, about Amerindian perspectivism, and Roy Wagner, with his process of “invention of culture”.

Key words: Anthropology. Cultural Anthropology. Culture.

The ontological turn in edibility

Cultural anthropology considers edibility as a symbolic process developed by a set of signs and meanings that interweave food, eating and the relationship between individuals and food. In this perspective, the distinction between what is edible from what is not edible is based on an epistemic distinction, rather than on an ontological basis associated with the relationship between the individual and the surrounding world. Food and eating are understood as a representation, a world view tied to how each “people” sees the world, and relates to such world and the other beings that inhabit it.

Eating is a complex issue because it involves biological, social, physiological and imaginary aspects. The book *A história da alimentação* (“The History of Eating”), edited by Flandrin & Montanari¹, starts with the following questions:

When and how did the eating behavior of human beings diverge from that of other animal species? Did humans distinguish themselves by the type or variety of foods they ate? By the fact that they prepared their food before eating it? By the ceremonial forms with which they surrounded the act of eating? Or by the conviviality of dining and its characteristic social forms?

As a theoretical construct, food systems are used to shed light on great social processes, e.g. the political-economical process,² the symbolic process,³ and the process of social construction of memory.⁴ Studies of food are a key scenario for the debate between cultural materialism and structuralism, or for providing symbolic explanations for human behavior^{5,6} or refining theories about the relationship between biological evolution and cultural evolution.⁷

According to Geertz,⁸ culture involves a web of meanings, spun by man, where he is suspended. Based on Geertz’s ideas, food practices can be understood as a historical and cultural construction, directly associated with the shaping of a people.

But is there a single way to see the world, or are there several worlds seen by the beings that live in it? Does the world itself vary, or the way we see it?

For us, westerners, it is the worldviews that differ, whereas the world remains identical to itself. However, in approaches such as that of Viveiros de Castro, the way to see the world is always the same, even if it shifts from one type to another, because what changes is the world itself.

For indigenous people, many diseases that affect them are caused by the revenge of the animals whose flesh was eaten. When the body of an animal is eaten without the proper care to avoid offending its spirit, such animal can take revenge and devour us (from within, in a kind of terrifying endocannibalism). We should be very cautious, thus, when it comes down to eating.⁹

Thus, I wonder, is eating apprehended the same way by everyone? Does every being have the same relationship with such action when ingesting something? As an articulation of biology, society, physiology and the imaginary, isn't eating a construction of the world as I know it? Do we have freedom of choice in a wide range of options when determining whether or not something is edible?

Inspired by Viveiros de Castro, some anthropologists started to question whether there is only one real world, "culturally" constructed, or several worlds inhabited by distinct bodies. They believed that anthropology, which had been based on an epistemic rather than ontological view, was now focusing on the quest for other people's representations of the real world, and observed the world as something unique, seen from distinct worldviews.⁹

This way, modern anthropology, by involving the self and others in the same path towards understanding, not in the quest for differences or similarities, but in the attempt to understand the social conditions where thought materializes, advances ontologically, for it no longer aims to describe notions but rather point out what notions underpin and how they are used in social life.¹⁰

The term ontology is introduced in the anthropological discourse as opposed to culture, although some authors doubt whether or not it is actually a new term or just the use of another word with the same meaning. Candea¹¹ says that both culture and ontology are understood narrowly and associated with mere representation, with the study of culture being considered as merely the study of meaning and interpretation, of people's episteme.

What this author calls "the ontological turn in anthropology" emerges at the moment when we avoid restricting culture to mere signification and acknowledge the issue of difference, of otherness and the existence of others, evoked by both terms: culture and ontology. For, at this moment, we restore the full anthropological potential of such terms, established not only from a plethora of worldviews, but by acknowledging the existence of a multitude of real worlds.¹¹

In this perspective, there is not a world ready to be seen, a world prior to view, or prior to the distinction between the visible (or thinkable) and the invisible (or assumption) that creates the horizon of thought. This is not about proposing an interpretation of edibility to those who eat, but experimenting with such being, as put by Roy Wagner: "[...] every understanding of another culture is an experiment with our own".¹²

The purpose of this paper is to propose new theoretical concepts for edibility, not by defining representations or ways of thinking about the world, eating and food, that is, not from a worldview, but by means of an ontological concept of distinct worlds, inhabited by distinct bodies, in the quest for the image of these worlds (*weltbild*) by those who experience them.

Worldview and *weltbild*: otherness in anthropology

For Heidegger,¹³ the term *worldview* only makes sense after Descartes, when the subject starts to mean the essence of man and the nonhuman being is rendered as an object for the human subject, in that being is reduced to representativeness. *Worldview* is a tentative translation of the German word *Weltanschauung* – *welt* (world) and *anschauung* (view) – and simply means world perspective, worldview, view of life, based on where we stand in the world. It is, thus, associated with experience and representation.

In anthropology, *worldview* is tied to the notion of culture, and it considers the world epistemologically as unique and inhabited by beings that realize and see it differently. The *worldview* analyses were predominant in the studies of anthropology of religion, symbolic anthropology and cultural anthropology.

This notion assumes that the mind is structured in a uniform manner and that the diversity of cultures is associated with different historical moments, experiences, ideas and feelings that affect the way individuals act and relate to the world and to one another.

Beine¹⁴ observed that the term *worldview* is still very recurrent, although it has been very criticized by post-modernists. The use of this term is now limited to common sense, without an analytical conception, referring to the way people see the world.

The Amerindian perspectivism of Viveiros de Castro¹⁵ challenges the use of the term *worldview*, showing that it is not our worldview that differs from that of the so-called “natives”, but it is the world itself that changes. For the author, it is the world of others that changes, and understanding it requires leaving the self and going towards others. He rejects an epistemological explanation of the world and seeks to apprehend the other at the level of immanence, in an attempt not to restrict anthropology to “a series of etnosociological essays on *worldviews*.”¹⁵

Prado Jr.¹⁶ says that, for Wittgenstein, *weltbild* and *worldview* are completely different instances. Based on Wittgenstein, Prado Jr. defines *weltbild* as the “amalgam of pseudo-propositions crystallized [sic] on the basis of a language game that foregoes the alternative between true and false while opening space for its advent, or put another way, the level where the concepts intersect and interweave.” Thus, *weltbild* lies at the level of immanence and helps us experience chaos, defining a life plan or lifestyle, whereby we experience the world that multiplies as *worldviews*.

The moment when man, as a subject, enjoys the privilege of being the center of all relationships, the term “worldview” becomes the name for the position of man in the midst of beings, which is only legitimate in experience (*erlebnis*). According to Wittgenstein, it is crucial for modern man that everything can become acquired experience, so that he can take ownership of his essence,

and *worldview* can turn into an image (*weltbild*). When the world turns into an image, the position of man becomes worldview.¹⁶

Weltbild is a word very frequently used in German philosophical tradition (Kant, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Wittgenstein) for reflecting upon ontology or, particularly, the relationship between “being” and the “world” or the construction of worlds.¹⁶

For Heidegger,¹³ the term arises from the relationship between the experience of being with his idea about life, and it is associated with science, a theoretical view of the outside world, with the literal meaning of image of the world. For this philosopher, modern time is *weltbild* time, because at this time, there happens what he calls degodification that is, the relationship of gods turns from world view into religious experience.

The image of the world (*weltbild*) is not a representation, as *worldview*; it is the world itself. Conceiving the world as an image does not mean only the representation of being, but especially that it is before us, in all that belongs to it and in all its connections, as a system.¹³ As pointed out by Drucker,¹⁷ “image is the a priori representation which has always conceived, defined and reduced all novelty to the previously known and conceived”.

But how does edibility take shape from the concepts of *worldview* and *weltbild*?

Edibility of the other

The ontological approach of edibility leads us to no longer look at eating from a worldview, as a representation of a concept constructed, but it takes us to apprehend the world of others in order to realize what their idea of eating and food is like in this world. Such an approach does not focus on edibility from previous oppositions, but it seeks associations or links that different contexts, viewed as nature-culture, produce through their practices and their categories.

Viveiros de Castro¹⁸ stresses that the anthropologist is “someone who talks about the discourse of a ‘native’”, with discourse being any practice of meaning, whose essence is the relationship of meaning between the words of the anthropologist (the “observer”) and the discourse of the native (the “observed”). The anthropologist overcomes the dichotomy between being and nature and says that they are not different understandings, viewpoints or worldviews about a single world, but they are distinct bodies that inhabit different worlds, with images of worlds, i.e., *weltbild*, distinct for each entity.

He analyzes food, the edible and the inedible for the Yawalapiti, by outlining their cosmology, in which “we are what we eat, but we are also the opposite of what we eat”.¹⁸

[...] The quintessential human food is fish. Monkeys and fish are directly opposed to monkeys and jaguars: fish are the most different from humans, so they are the characteristic food of the latter; monkeys, the animals most similar to us, are food in “pre-feeding” situations; what you eat when you cannot eat fish yet.¹⁸

In contrast, spirits are a sign of inedibility because they cause diseases. They

impose various forms of food abstinence to the patient and his family, as well as require a ceremonial distribution of food to the community, undertaken by the abstinent. Instead of making themselves eaten, the spirits stop us from eating, and then require that we feed so that we are not, perhaps, eaten by them.¹⁸

In Yawalapiti cooking,

the order, from the most to the least dangerous; from roasted, to smoked to stewed, that is, as the distance from the fire increases. Cooked food is associated with women who carry water; a woman’s period spoils all the food stewed in her home, but not the roasted one.¹⁸

Viveiros de Castro¹⁸ analyzes the classification of the Yawalapiti for categorizing food according to method of preparation. For the author, it is not possible to reduce the Yawalapiti food system, as other dimensions of their cosmology, to a nature-culture dualism.

In *O mármore e a murta: sobre a inconstância da alma selvagem*¹⁹ (“The marble and the myrtle: on the fickleness of the wild soul”), the author says that the Portuguese considered the Indians to be cannibals, while for the Indians, “the practice of cannibalism was weighted differently in the warrior system of the Tupi and the Guarani from the coast”. He discusses the importance of understanding cannibalism from various perspectives: that of the victim, the Indians and the devourers. Thus, cannibalism (construct) should be analyzed from the various worlds where it occurs.

The author makes us transcend from the self to others, a journey to other worlds, in order to apprehend the percepts of the world, accepting them as symmetrical to ours, without any appreciation or hierarchy, so that we can understand the concepts where they are constructed, and then apply them.

For Deleuze²⁰, we are not just in the world but we become a part of the world, while contemplating it. For him, we will not learn about anything upon concepts if we do not initially create them in a field, a soil that will house their germs, their characters.

For this philosopher, otherness is the condition of all perception, “the condition for our passing from one world to another”, both for others and for us.

*In fact, if the other person is identified with a special object, it is now only the other subject as it appears to me; and if we identify it with another subject, it is me who is the other person as I appear to that subject.*²⁰

Thus, considering the difference between the worlds as a cultural difference is something very superficial; it is the reduction of culture to mere signification. To understand the Yawalapiti cosmology, Viveiros de Castro¹⁸ traced an outline of that cosmology, so that the world can be then understood from the perspective of those who experience it.

Edibility is a concept seen from a worldview in which it is associated with feeding, nutrition, pleasure. But observing the native, based on that idea, is to limit it to a worldview, as if my world were unique and real. I must free myself from the concepts and reflect on the meaning of being, with the possibility of multiple existences. I must transcend into a sphere where other worlds coexist, inhabited by other bodies that relate to each other and to the world in different ways. As Viveiros de Castro says, I seek intersections between everyday experience and the sphere of things.¹⁹

In my worldview, a cat is a cat, a dog is a dog, edible is what feeds my body and it follows a classification that removes food from my emotional field and from what I define as humanity. In the world where I live, that I experience, in my worldview, cats and dogs are companions, close to mankind, that I can have an affective relationship with, and eating them is almost an act of cannibalism. A fish is food, but the fish that I have in an aquarium, that I feed and talk to, thus, “humanize”, is no longer food. The food is what nourishes my body, sharpens my senses, gives me pleasure, health or illness and what differs from my sense of humanity.

When trying to understand edibility, I try to understand something experienced from my perspective, the edible and the inedible; I keep a binary world view. However, there are other worlds where edibility itself may be associated with distinct ideas and occurs as a quite different construction from the one that I use for understanding the edible for the ill, for the weak, for ceremonies, for labor.

As stated by Oliveira²¹, “instead of the self, it is others that shapes perception and makes it possible, as a true *a priori* principle of organization of the whole perceptual field.” And such others should be understood as a condition for possibly passing from one world to another.

The anthropological invention of other worlds

Roy Wagner¹² says that anthropology “studies the phenomenon of man, not simply man’s mind, his body, evolution, origins, tools, art or groups alone, but as parts or aspects of a general pattern, or whole.”

For the author, “an anthropologist *experiences*, in one way or another, the subject of his study; he does so through the world of his own meanings, and then uses this meaningful experience to communicate an understanding to those of his own culture¹²”. Thus, his knowledge is deep and he understands the culture under study, and this culture becomes visible as it becomes known, or, as put by the author, invented.

He¹² says that in the act of inventing another culture, the anthropologist invents not only their own culture but also reinvents the very notion of culture. The perception and understanding of others comes from a kind of analogy, an extension of what is familiar to me for understanding others. Thus, to understand what is edible for a given group, I use my understanding of edibility, analyze things and behaviors from that understanding, my worldview.

Wagner says that “plausibility is a function of the researcher’s viewpoint, the ‘culture’ that he imagines for the native is bound to bear a distinct relation to that which he claims for himself.”.¹²

By inventing the Chinese culture, for example, where eating dogs is something culturally explained, I keep a distinction between the self and others, and I devise a culture, as a plausible thing to be done, symbolizing social relations, such as the act of eating, and then I try to understand it. I invent a culture, from a base of communication in shared conventions, to make others intelligible, understandable, in my worldview.

My “possible world” - where edible and inedible are related, among other factors, to my association with humanity - is supported by scientific bases for concepts that help me organize the chaos and prevent me from noticing other logical or unsuspected situations in this world of mine. By analyzing “the other” anthropologically, taking for granted my conception of the world, I run the risk of limiting possibilities for apprehending other worlds.

For Viveiros de Castro¹⁹, in this context, others emerge as “the condition for the perceptual field”, rather than a part of this field.

[...] others, therefore, is not a particular viewpoint relative to the subject (“the viewpoint of others” relative to my viewpoint or vice versa), but the possibility that there is a viewpoint - that is, it is the concept of viewpoint. It is the viewpoint that allows the self and others to ascend to one viewpoint.

Thus, studies on edibility should give others their position of others, not apprehending him like a “robot”, someone who lives in the world without thinking about it, without building theories that can explain chaos without an order that makes sense of its existence, without an understanding of the self and others, someone who lives thoughtlessly. The anthropologist, like the shaman, should see the worlds that permeate from the perspective of the beings that cohabit in it.

I agree with the authors when they introduce and acknowledge the native speech on the world as having the same scientific value of the anthropological discourse and acknowledge, in native categories, the status of analytical categories, because it is only from such understanding that anthropologists will in fact establish a relationship of meaning between their discourse and the discourse of the native.

Edibility is not restricted to cultural patterns, stacked and sorted by significant symbols, in which individuals seek meaning for the events they experience, but it involves reflection about the comprehensive meaning of being in its multiple existences. Understanding food and eating as a mere representation fails to recognize others (the one who eats) in their status as subjects, their condition of others, as an expression of a possible world.

References

1. Flandrin JL, Montanari M. História da Alimentação. 6 ed. São Paulo: Estação Liberdade; 1998. 885 p.
2. Mintz WS. Sweetness and power: the place of sugar in Modern History. New York: Penguin Books; 1986. 274 p.
3. Munn ND. The fame of Gawa: a symbolic study of value transformation in a Massin (Papa New Guinea) Society. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press; 1986. 333 p.
4. Sutton D, Beriss D. Restaurants, ideal Postmodern institutions. In: Sutton D, Beriss D. The restaurants book: ethnographies of where we eat. Oxford; New York: Berg; 2007. 1-23 p.
5. Harris M. Bueno para comer: enigmas de alimentación y cultura. 3. ed. Madrid: Alianza Editorial; 2011. 390 p.
6. Gade DW. Nature and culture in the Andes. Madison: Univ. Wis. Press; 1999. 312 p.
7. Mintz SW, Du Bois CM. The Anthropology of food and eating. In: Annual Review Anthropology; 2002. V. 31, p. 99-119.
8. Geertz C. A interpretação das culturas. Rio de Janeiro: LTC; 1989. 214 p.
9. Sztutman R (orgs.). Viveiros de Castro. Rio de Janeiro: Beco do Azougue Editorial; 2007. 263 p. (Encontros).
10. Giumbelli E. Os azande e nós: experimento de antropologia simérica. Horiz. Antropol. 2006 jun-dez;12(26):261-397.
11. Candea M et al. Ontology is just another word for culture: motion table at 2008. Meeting of the Group for Debates in Anthropological Theory (GDAT), University of Manchester; 2008. Disponível em: <http://www.socialsciences.manchester.ac.uk/disciplines/socialanthropology/research/gdat/documents/2008%20Ontology%20just%20another%20word%20for%20culture.pdf>
12. Wagner R. A invenção da Cultura. São Paulo: Cosac Naify; 2010. 253 p.
13. Inwood M A. Heidegger dictionary. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publisher; 1999. 283 p.

14. Beine D. The end of worldview in Anthropology? SIL Eletronic Workers Papers; 2010. Disponível em: <http://www-01.sil.org/silewp/2010/silewp2010-004.pdf>
15. Viveiros de Castro E. O Nativo relativo. *Mana*. 2002 abr;8:113-48.
16. Prado Jr B. Erro, ilusão, loucura: ensaios. São Paulo: Ed. 34; 2004. 280 p.
17. Drucker C. Tarde demais para os deuses: três características de uma perspectiva *ser-* historial sobre a religião. *Nat hum*. 2009 fev;11(2). Disponível em: http://pepsic.bvsalud.org/scielo.php?pid=S151724302009000200006&script=sci_arttext
18. Viveiros de Casto E. A inconstância da alma selvagem: e outros ensaios de antropologia. São Paulo: Cosac Naif; 2002. 552 p.
19. Viveiros de Castro E. O mármore e a murta: sobre a inconstância da alma selvagem. *Rev Antropol*. 1992;35:21-74.
20. Deleuze G, Guattari F. O que é Filosofia. 2. ed. Rio de Janeiro: Ed. 34; 1996. 279 p.
21. Oliveira FCB de. A estrutura outrem no processo de conhecimento de outros mundos possíveis. *RBSE*. 2007 abr;6(16):156-83. Disponível em: <http://www.cchla.ufpb.br/rbse/RBSE206%2816%29%20Abril%20de%202007.pdf>

Received: 5/25/2013

Approved: 8/15/2013