Food and culture: change and continuity

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It is the author's choice that the writing is not in conformance with the Spelling Agreement

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Previous thought

I start by asking authors and readers to forgive my boldness in accepting the challenge to enter on this debate. In the first place, my academic relationship and friendship with Maria Claudia has moved me, from the moment she crossed the path of my life years ago in the seminary of Madel Luz The prospect of exchanging ideas on the social matter of eating habits represents a movement of intellectual approach that we have outlined.

I must apologize to Cesar Sabino, whom I have also run over on the friendly "convention halls" previously mentioned, but it is especially with Maria Claudia that I'll have a dialog. In fact, only in the subject of social science of eating habits I feel confident to propose some thought. The anthropological theory is not a matter of my expertize, thus I am not able to contribute with a creative reasoning.

The structure of the article

Sabino and Carvalho present in the introduction of their article a structural functionalism perspective, leaning over to the field of nutrition. They begin by reviewing the works of Durkheim as "Founding Father", as well as the works of two of the greatest representatives of the British social anthropology, Radcliffe -Brown and Mary Douglas. Next, they introduce the works of Monga on commensality in an African society and culture. And finally, they conclude by summarizing the concept of the approach of social change through the structural-functionalist school of thought.

I will begin with a brief analysis of the text structure based on the perspective of its lines of thought. Indeed, I had to build an outline for myself before organizing my thoughts about what I had read. According to my interpretation, this article focuses on the topic of social change in structural functionalism, aiming to show that the writers of this school have commented on the change, contravening the criticism that claims the opposite, pointed out as a limitation to this school.

Moreover, the aim of relating the social science of eating habits is also associated, mainly the sociological science, considering the knowledge of anthropological theory brought to attention. Social change as line of thought is not clearly announced in the Introduction, which hindered me on my first reading. But change is the line of thought of every writing.

From the perspective of introductions about eating habits, I confess that every time they surprised me when reading, because they appeared unexpectedly as inputs that interrupted the central idea of the text (on the structural functionalist anthropology). Not that they are inappropriate or uninteresting, it is quite the contrary. However, from a more academic standpoint - with defects and bad habits, but with the advantage of being more clear - I would have preferred to find the topic of eating habits in an exclusive chapter, where the implications related to both topics would have been included. Regarding content, it also seems to me that this "tidier" manner would make more sense, since it would favor an integrated thinking on the issues raised.

The subject of writing: social change in focus

From the first chapter on Durkheim, where social structure and functioning in modern society is reviewed, the article centrilizes the topic of social change, by the manner which it moves towards the notion of anomie.

It is in this context that the authors introduce the first question addressing commensality, by convening the author (Fischler), who has associated anomie with contemporary eating habits. In the article, this reference is summarized within the ideas of this author, and no comments from the authors of the article are included. The authors make comments later on, only after the work of Radcliffe-Brown is presented and after their (the authors) thought regarding the matter of social

change in the structural-functional approach is depicted - again, the focus is on change. Actually, "Balance and Change" is the title of this new chapter.

The text brings next two chapters devoted to the thought of Mary Douglas, "Symbolic Structure" and "Structural Change among the Leles of Kasai". Overall, the workpiece of Mary Douglas also leans towards the target of the understanding social change. It starts by addressing the relationship between logical thinking and the logic of social organization, analyzed in light of the symbolic dimension in which the purity / impurity pair is relieved as cultural resolution to the danger that societies ascribe to disorder. And it continues by the analysis of social change caused by the rupture of the symbolic system derived from the adoption of Christianity by the Leles.

The last chapter, 'Inventing Tradition', features the work of Célestin Monga on the commensality in an African society and culture, pointing out its encoding character of symbolic violence and the adaptation of the system to creation and re-creation. Again, it is clear that the structural functionalism is the discussing matter in focus, in terms of how it treats social change.

The surroundings of eating habits

Gastro-anomie, a misunderstood meaning?

While agreeing with the idea of the article on new senses and meanings that, in contemporary societies, resurface commensality as a key element of social cohesion, and thus, assuming that the concept of gastro-anomie may be considered "somewhat misplaced", I intend to slightly extend this matter for what it seems to me to appear more contextualized in time.

The concept of anomie - proposed by Durkheim to refer to the cult of the individual with no moral rules, characteristic of modern societies - is undoubtedly a concept situated in time, the end of the nineteenth century, when modernity was beginning to become visible as sociology literature, that is, in all its implications to social relations. Not coincidentally, this was the time period that gave birth to sociology, and Durkheim was the first author, along with Marx and Weber.

The use of the concept of the present days needs to be adapted to the reality of contemporary social behavior, in which modernity has radicalized - identity , reflexivity , risk , liquidity (1-3) - and off the moral vision understandably suggested on the initial proposal. Sociology has developed many other perspectives and insights, and society itself has evolved around intensive and extensive changes. Thus , when we use the term anomie, which I consider to be a useful reference from the standpoint of the imagery speech on modern social behavior (such as working class or bureaucracy , in the works of Marx and Weber), we should explain what we mean.

Thus, I have no objection to the concept of gastro-anomie, from the perspective of the author that proposes it(4): loss of contact with the productive cycle, chemical hazard and other (addition of sugar, etc.), individualized nutrition, end of family rituals, industrialized restoration, freedom to eat anytime and everywhere. In other words, the de-regulation of the traditional eating structure. Meanwhile, from the perspective of new developments in sociology, I I agree that the use of this concept should be constrained, once it appeals to the loss of moral rules (in the words of Durkheim: we now prefer to speak of social relations and values) underpinning cohesion, considering that it is (currently) acknowledged that the relations of commensality continue to foster social cohesion. But does this means that contemporary eating habits are not anomic, or that the whole society is, and the eating habits, in structure and practice, have adapted to / adopted anomie throughout the process of continuously re-building, to which the text refers when addressing Radcliffe-Brown?

Food Hygiene Rules - Continuity that underlies change

Still on the subject of social change, the text exemplifies the fact that "by gradually altering the function of certain institutions, society would eventually change its structure", considering the changes occurring to food hygiene and health rules: based on the concept of preventing diseases, the eating discussion has been oriented towards the provision of healthy habits.

In this review, it is unclear whether the authors interpret this change in the eating discussion as an alteration of the function that will cause changes in the eating structure, or whether they understand such changes as an alteration in structure. It is to clarify such point that I propose my writing.

The rules of food hygiene are a manifestation of biopower, that adds to the knowledge of medical discipline the power to adjust human bodies, shaping them according to the desired fitting to meet the demands of society functioning (5). The determinations of biopower are insidious, nothing requiring the individual decision. They act in a "microphysics" manner, seducing the individual in such a way that they will perceive it as obeying their own choices made due to the benefits they expect to achieve (aesthetic, performance, health, longevity, etc.).

Biopower is a structural feature that cannot be altered by changing the rules of health and hygiene. Rather, the adaptation of the rules is due to new learnings on the body (nutritional science) and new learnings about the individuals (psychology and sociology), ie, it is an enhanced expression of biopower. It is a change that is driven towards a more effective domestication and submission to the hegemonic vision of science and capitalist power that dominates the current societies worldwide.

Social science cannot be mistaken by considering the apparent modifications as structural or functional changes. I remember the authors who wrote that fom a social cohesion perspective, the role of power has not been changed, despite the appearance of anomie.

An absence: the heart of nutrition as culture

I refer myself to get started on the chapter "Symbolic Structure" and to the lack of what I consider to be "classic" contribution, because somehow as a foundation, about the symbolism in which all eating cultures are imbued, by defining now that each of them decides on what food is, ie, what is edible and what is not (6). In the world of advanced modernity, does our contemporary world, in which the access to different types of food has been globalized, with a flare of the immense variety of food, which, if not the symbolic dimension, explain the restrictive food choices of different cultural identities (not eating beef, pork, dog, monkey, snake, etc., among many other examples)?

Mary Douglas has repeatedly used the behavior of eating habits to analyze the symbolic dimension of social structure, particularly in "Deciphering a Meal" (7), Beyond the definition of edible, social boundaries are discovered during meal time, at each food composition and organization of meals . Whether throughout every day, throughout the week, or on the eventful days of the year, meals follow a standardized order. To escape this order means to enter into disorder, a danger zone that shock structures, and to be contaminated by impurity.

Previously, Lévi-Strauss (6) had established the "culinary triangle" of raw, cooked and roasted food, symbolizing the opposition of natural and cultural.

After Douglas, other authors have studied the meanings of food and have developed an understanding of the intertwined relationships that the eating culture has with social organization, whether on the reproduction of hierarchies (8-10), as a factor of identity, (11, 12), as a signifier of the risk society (13), or on relations that it keeps with the concept of being "healthy"(14-16). In all these areas we find the symbolism of pure / impure, in a way that what is proper to each social class is limited (not eating with your hands when you're at the table and eating small amounts at a time, in a meaning of secondarization of food in relation to good manners, versus, for instance, cleaning one's mouth on the back of the hand, or eating up large amounts as a way to express knowing how to taste well what you eat), it defines what is in fact food (food that immigrants bring with them, and the traditional dishes that remain in the host country), a relationship of trust is established with the outside world (resume the consumption of some food that has been announced to be contaminated, for instance when the media announced that the "mad cows" issue was under control according to experts) or a choice is made for healthy foods (I can only trust healthy food because it is produced by a family member or neighbor).

The facetious facts and subversion of the scientific food rules

In the article, the input on eating habits and symbolism arises for the topic of facetious relationships as paradoxical opportunities to strengthen social order to relieve some energy spent on the self-controlling experience of living in society. The authors of this article associate this social fact with "the eventual subversion of eating rules" (p.19), looking at it as an "emergency exit" from the normativity of nutritional rules that is simultaneously strengthening their recommendations.

Accordingly with the idea of considering some eating subversion attitudes in daily life to be facetious practices, I must stress, however, that not all eating subversion refers to this scheme of reading. In the eating matter, the facetious ritual - and it is a ritual alright, not just facetiousness - is manifested in moments of festive meals, sporadically, such as on Christmas or Easter, or at wedding ceremonies, and so on, where, because it is a celebration, "anything" is allowed and one should not think of eating rules.

In everyday life, we can understand as facetious facts of "scientific healthy eating" the ironic attitude of consciously devalue risk with openly fallacious arguments that one may even laugh at themselves for noticing how fragile their arguments are, such as "I know I should not eat this, but I can not starve".

However, I do not think that the non-submission of everyday eating choices to the recommendations of medical science and nutrition, which are so widespread in the population, can be considered in this facetious perspective as a structured ritual to ease tensions with the social function of strengthening the eating rule in concern. Let's put it in a different way, we should not consider the "rules" of medical science to be "social rules", in the sense of the set of rules governing a society, deeply rooted in its culture (the symbolism).

From my point of view, the non-submission of the daily eating choices to the recommendations of medical science and nutrition, generally not consciously perceived (in the sense that they are not perceived as being non-submission), refers to the symbolism of the individual and the individual's right to freedom of choice as a value that directs and organizes the consumer society (17, 18). In this principle of individual choice that structures individuals in modern societies and also structures societies themselves, the constructed need of consumption (industry and advertising) stands up before scientific recommendations. Articulated with traditional knowledge about food and nutrition, such non-submission does not set up a resistance to the increasingly extensive and intensive biopower as a matter of surveillance and control.

In terms of eating habits, the interpretation alignment that can be established with the facetious ritual reinforcing social regulation, in my opinion, should be referred to the traditional eating

rules (*I eat what looks tasty to me, junk food, trashy food, right? And I just keep on eating what I can get with my own effort. (Woman, 30 years old, university level of education, doctor)* cited by (19). Homemade food made from full meals at regular times is the social representation of what is contrary to the modern eating style, which consists of frequent non-eventful meals (eating alone at the counter of a cafeteria, in ten minutes, for instance); the person eats, but there is neither social interaction nor cultural reproduction (19). It is with it that individuals identify healthy eating habits, even when at a cognitive level they agree that healthy food is defined by science and affirm that in public conversations (when talking to others). Lahire theorized this apparent contradiction between what is believed and what is actually done, or among contradictory beliefs in individual willingness (20) .

Eating habits and simbolic violence

The last chapter, "Inventing Tradition", is referred to Bourdieu. I am not familiar with the works of C. Monga, to which the text refers, but I realize that his work is an applied extension of Bourdieu's theory on the symbolic violence. Indeed, in Bourdieu's works on the distinction among social groups, eating is one of the core topics in which the practice of symbolic violence is acknowledged. Eating manners, sitting at the table, picking food, can differ based on *habitus* or incorporated willingness, through which, along with all other *practical knowledge* (discipline, visits to museums, what one wears, etc), the ruling classes impose their supremacy over the dominated classes, as well as the mimetic desire of the dominated classes to copy them.

The article does not address this aspect of modern societies, which would be very interesting as a counterpoint to the African society that presented. I am not certain that the symbolic violence involved in eating habits is "more remarkable in societies where hunger and poverty are seen in extreme conditions". Perhaps it will be more impressive and more evident to those observing from outside of them. But isn't this just an effect of "optical illusion"? For beyond the writings of Bourdieu, it would be interesting to conduct a survey in our society, or research, if it has not yet been done, on the contours that take over the practices of power through eating habits. Re-appropriation of unrelated cultural elements (globalized, imported and even locally produced food), rituals and traditional cosmogony (the eating practices of profane and religious parties, the food offerings to the saints), ostentation (banquets and restaurants associated with formal situations like professional conferences, political meetings, invitations for executives, etc.) , features found in the Cameroonian society are undoubtedly present in our societies that are more advanced into modernization, also with specific meanings, suitable to local hierarchical customs and sometimes subverting them.

Final remarks

Again, I am sorry to insist, but I consider important to note: "the change in the addressed theoretical framework" (p.27) appears as the core element that binds the text. I stress this point to suggest that the authors reconsider their Introduction, in order to pass on an appropriate framework to guide the reading and to make it easier for the reader to follow their line of thought.

Similarly, it would be interesting if the Introduction could bring a more clarifying explanation of the work that is done regarding the matter of the relatedness of the topic of eating habits with the anthropological theory, whose purpose, I would say, is not only to encourage interdisciplinarity, as they have stated. This is just a means to create an informative dialog between food sociology and the anthropological theory.

Finally, I am thankful for the opportunity you have given me to think about this matter and congratulate you for the initiative. Proposing a text for discussion is a good way to encourage a constructive dialog in favor of learning.

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