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Food, Self and Identity

Claude Fischler

Food is central to our sense of identity. The way any given human group eats helps it assert its diversity, hierarchy and organisation, but also, at the same time, both its oneness and the otherness of whoever eats differently. Food is also central to individual identity, in that any given human individual is constructed, biologically, psychologically and socially by the foods he/she chooses to incorporate. This paper is intended as a speculative survey of the ways in which food is related to identity formation*.

The approach it adopts, however, is based on the realization that the human relationship to food obviously is a complex one. It combines at least two different dimensions. The first runs from the biological to the cultural, from the nutritional function to the symbolic function. The second links the individual to the collective, the psychological to the social. Yet a rapid overview of the abundant literature on human food suggests that few of the salient works on the subject have directly addressed this multi-dimensional character.

After long neglecting the area of food and eating, the social sciences first and quite naturally concerned themselves with analysis of practices and collective representations. Claude Lévi-Strauss (1968) and Mary Douglas (1966 ; 1979) focussed on the networks of meanings underlying cultures and cuisines. Sociologists of culture (Grignon & Grignon, 1980 ; Bourdieu, 1979) analyse the social norms governing eating and work at showing that "tastes" can be understood as socially constructed and differentiated, normative sets of practices ("popular" taste, "bourgeois" taste, etc.). Other works are concerned with the social and cultural conditions for emergence of elaborate forms of culinary art (Goody, 1982). With a few exceptions, in particular that of Audrey Richards in the 1930s (Richards, 1932 ; 1939), the social sciences have rarely if ever tried to relate meanings and practices to biological constraints or determinisms.

Meanwhile, researchers in experimental psychology, physiology, physical anthropology and nutrition were busy analysing the human relationship to food in terms of behaviour, metabolic regulation, nutritional requirements. What the social scientists saw as "practices", they thought of as "behaviour". Where sociologists or anthropologists spoke of "representations" or "meanings", they saw "wants" and "beliefs". Any given eating practice tended to be assessed in terms of its consistency with nutritional "needs". Thus, any "habit" deemed sound in those terms was seen as an instance of "wisdom of the body", while dietary traits devoid of any visible biological relevance or "counter-productive" were described in often judgmental terms as "irrational prejudice", "superstitions" or ultimately manifestations of "ignorance".

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In the view of the "hard" sciences, anthropology, social psychology and sociology could be put to only one, practical, use: help nutrition and medicine rationalise food habits, help shape wants in accordance to "scientifically" defined needs. At the time of World War II, the US government typically set up a "Committee on Food Habits" composed of social scientists. Its stated purpose was to "get people to wish what they need". Defining the "needs" was the task of another committee, the Food and Nutrition Board (Spang, in press).

Thus, on either side, the "Great Wall" between the social and the natural sciences (Morin, 1973) remained the sole horizon of knowledge and inquiry. The biologists and behavioural scientists showed little interest in the fact that in *Homo sapiens* food not only nourishes but also signifies. They scarcely noticed that human organisms are conscious and that they share representations. The sociologists and ethnologists, on the other hand, rightly endeavoured to show that biological organisms and individuals are immersed in, and constructed by, social forces. But conversely, following the Durkheimian principle that the social can only be explained in social terms and complying to the authority of cultural relativism, they no doubt often failed to consider that groups and societies are made up of individuals generally endowed with a biological organism...

As a consequence, on both sides certain "naive" yet fundamental questions have been little addressed, if at all: How do organisms and representations, biological individuals and their culture, interact with each other and with their environment? How do socially constructed norms and representations become internalized - inscribed, so to speak, in taste-buds and metabolisms? Do not these norms and representations also have a biological side? How do they tie into the ecosystems in which subjects and societies experience them? How do they reproduce and/or modify themselves? And first of all, how are they constituted?

I would like to demonstrate here that it does seem legitimate to address the question of the relationship between identity and food from such a point of view. Major theoretical problems are raised, if only because the notion of identity is itself somewhat problematic. Without tackling these problems directly, and without for a moment claiming to resolve the whole set of questions that is raised, I shall simply try to adopt an "integrative" approach, integrative in the sense that there is a need to bring together the scattered images of biological man and social man.

To endeavour to clarify how and why food is so closely linked to identity, one first needs to recall certain basic characteristics of *Homo sapiens*' relationship to his/her food in its multidimensional character - behavioural and cognitive, psychological and cultural, individual and collective.

I shall start out from two aspects of the human relationship to food which seem to be particularly important: first, the omnivorous nature of man and its multiple implications (the "omnivore's paradox"); and secondly, the nature of the process of incorporation and the associated representations (the "incorporation principle"). In doing so, I shall draw heavily on concepts and ideas presented by one researcher, Paul Rozin, whose work, in my view, provides the to-date most comprehensive approach to human food selection. It will then become easier to define the culinary phenomenon and to endeavour to grasp some of its essential functions. In particular, I shall seek to analyse and interrelate, on the one hand, the processes or procedures of food identification and, on the other hand, the construction of the eater's identity. The following, I hope, will become clear: Because we are omnivores, incorporation is an act laden with meaning. Because of the principle of incorporation, identification of foods is a key-element in the

construction of our identity. Finally, because identity and identification are of both vital and symbolic importance man has "invented" cuisine.

I. The omnivore's paradox

The first aspect is a founding paradox, at the physiological, behavioural and cognitive levels, which has been presented in a particularly stimulating way by Rozin (1976). It results from the fact that man is an omnivore, a condition which implies a fundamental ambivalence.

Omnivorousness first implies autonomy, freedom, adaptability. Unlike specialized eaters, an omnivore has the invaluable ability to thrive on a multitude of different foodstuffs and diets, and so to adapt to changes in its environment. To confirm this, one only has to consider the remarkable diversity of human diets, from that of the Inuits ("Eskimos"), consisting almost exclusively of meat and fats, to that of the peasant farmers of South-East Asia, which contains almost no animal proteins (Stini, 1980). In all cases, the human omnivore is able to live on the available foods. He can survive the disappearance of the species on which he previously fed; he can move about, change his ecosystem.

But this liberty also implies dependence and a constraint - that of variety. An omnivore, unlike specialized eaters, cannot obtain all the nutrients it needs from one food. The koala bear subsists on a single food, the leaves of a particular variety of Australian eucalyptus. If it is deprived of this food, it cannot survive. But its specific competence, like that of other herbivores or the specialized carnivores, is that it can derive all the nutrients its body needs from a single food. Man, by contrast, has an absolute need of a minimum of variety. He needs sources of proteins, such as meat or leguminous plants, but also carbohydrates, vitamins, minerals, etc.

These two contradictory characteristics entail equally contradictory consequences; hence the omnivore's paradox. On the one hand, needing variety, the omnivore is inclined towards diversification, innovation, exploration and change, which can be vital to its survival; but on the other hand, it has to be careful, mistrustful, "conservative" in its eating: any new, unknown food is a potential danger. The omnivore's paradox lies in the tension, the oscillation between the two poles of neophobia (prudence, fear of the unknown, resistance to change) and neophilia (the tendency to explore, the need for change, novelty, variety). Every omnivore, and man in particular, is subject to a kind of Batesonian double bind between the familiar and the unknown, monotony and change, security and variety. There is perhaps a fundamental anxiety in man's relationship to his foods, resulting not only from the need to distrust new or unknown foods, but also and more importantly from the tension between the two contradictory and equally constraining imperatives of the omnivore's double bind.

Let us consider the experimental data available regarding omnivores other than man. The rat, in particular, has quite extraordinary capacity for learning about food. It was in rats that the capacity for aversion learning, an apparently quite unique form of learning through conditioning, was first demonstrated. A single experience is sufficient to provoke in rats durable aversion to a food associated with gastro-intestinal upset, even if this occurs several hours after ingestion (Garcia, Ervin & Koelling, 1966). Rats are also found to have a remarkable capacity for innovative prudence. When confronted with several new foods, a rat behaves in fact like the most careful scientific experimenter, varying only one parameter at a time: it tries only one unknown food at a time, and in a small quantity (see Rozin, 1976). In a sense, therefore, the rat resolves the omnivore's paradox through its remarkable learning capacities, and more generally through its

high behavioural flexibility. It is capable of minimizing the risks of nutritional innovation, particularly by acquiring aversions.

In man, the situation is clearly even more complex. Certain data suggest that aversion learning can also occur in man (Garb & Stunkard, 1974; Pelchat and Rozin, 1982). Whether or not this is the case, man's developed cerebral cortex, language and culture change the nature of the problem. To resolve the omnivore's paradox and to overcome the associated anxiety (or to exploit it, as a kind of drive), man has not only biological programmings or regulating mechanisms but also highly sophisticated cognitive competences and culturally constructed practices and representations. A human group's cuisine can, as we shall see, be understood as a body of practices, representations, rules and norms based on classifications (Douglas, 1966; 1974; 1979), one of whose essential functions is precisely to resolve the omnivore's paradox (Rozin, 1976; Fischler, 1980; 1983).

II. The principle of incorporation

The fundamental element on which the "omnivore's anxiety" (as I have defined it) is focussed, is the act of incorporation, i.e. the action in which we send a food across the frontier between the world and the self, between "outside" and "inside" our body (Rozin and Fallon, 1981). This action is both banal and fraught with potentially irreversible consequences. To incorporate a food is, in both real and imaginary terms, to incorporate all or some of its properties: we become what we eat. Incorporation is a foundation for identity. The German saying, "Man ist, was man isst" is literally, biologically true; the food we absorb provides not only the energy our body consumes but the very substance of the body, inasmuch as it helps to maintain the biochemical composition of the organism.

It is equally true in terms of our beliefs and representations. The food that one absorbs is, universally it seems, supposed to act either on the state of the organism or on its very nature (essence, identity?), by analogical contamination, integration or impregnation. Popular wisdom often takes it for granted that absorption, especially when repeated, of a particular food tends to transfer certain characteristics of the food analogically to the eater: thus, red meat, blood, gives strength and, to French eaters for instance, turnips induce "spinelessness" (*sang de navet* - "turnip blood"). Cannibalism provides another set of good examples. A great deal of literature, mainly anthropological or psychoanalytic, has emphasized the meanings associated with cannibalism in its endo- and exo- forms: taking on one or more of the characteristics of the victim (especially in the latter case); giving new life, through oneself, to the devoured body (in the former case) (cf. esp. *Revue Française de Psychanalyse*, 1972).

As a representation, the principle of incorporation underlies to a great extent human attempts at control over the body, the mind and therefore over identity. It could be said that every food is reckoned to have an effect on the body. In this sense, the principle of incorporation is consubstantial with the very notion of medicine. Any food has medical significance. In the form of a medically defined regimen, it is the first and probably the main means of intervening in the body, the favoured instrument of control over the self. It is essentially different from the medical drug approach, which is based on controlled use of poisons, not foods.

Incorporation is also the basis of collective identity and, by the same token, of otherness. Food and cuisine are a quite central component of the sense of collective belonging. In some situations

of migration or of minority cultures, it has been observed that certain features of cuisine are sometimes retained even when the language itself has been forgotten (Calvo, 1982). Application of the rules of the Kashrut has probably been one of the cohesive factors in Judaism over the millenia and a protection against acculturation or even outside contacts. Human beings mark their membership of a culture or a group by asserting the specificity of what they eat, or more precisely - but it amounts to the same thing - by defining the otherness, the difference of others. Endless examples can be found to illustrate the fact that we define a people or a human group by what it eats or is imagined to eat (which generally arouses our irony or disgust): for the French, the Italians are "Macaronis", the English "Roastbeefs" and the Belgians "chip-eaters"; for the English, the French are "Frogs"; the Americans call the Germans "Krauts", and so on. Within the same culture a group often defines the neighbouring group as "...-eaters". Simoons, for example, reports that, in Ethiopia, the Amhara and other cereal cultivators of the north refer disparagingly to their Cushitic counterparts of the southern highlands as "*ensete* eaters"¹ (Simoons, 1982).

Thus, not only does the eater incorporate the properties of food, but, symmetrically, it can be said that the absorption of a food incorporates the eater into a culinary system and therefore into the group which practises it, unless it irremediably excludes him. But this is not all: any culinary system is attached to, or part of, a world-view, a cosmology (Douglas, 1966). Man eats, so to speak, within a culture, and this culture orders the world in a way that is specific to itself. It operates a kind of generalized implicit taxonomy, in which food classifications have an important place (Douglas, 1966, 1979). this point will be considered later in more detail.

A given human group generally shares these classifications and the associated practices and representations. Basic taxonomies incorporate the individual into the group, situate the whole group in relation to the universe and in turn incorporate it into the universe. They thus have a fundamentally religious dimension, in the strict etymological sense of *re-ligare*, to bind together. In representations, they are part of the fundamental bond between the self and the world, the individual and society, microcosm and macrocosm. It is clear therefore that culinary systems play a part in giving a meaning to man and the universe, by situating them in relation to each other in an overall continuity and contiguity.

Because the act of incorporation entails vital and symbolic concerns, it is associated with fundamental gravity and deeply rooted anxiety. Psychoanalysis has accustomed us to the use of Melanie Klein's term: incorporation of the bad object. The fantasy entails the fear of a series of essential risks. Clearly, the eaters life and health are at stake whenever the decision is taken to incorporate; but so too are his place in the universe, his essence, his nature, in short his identity. An object inadvisedly incorporated may contaminate him, insidiously transform him from within, possess him or rather depossess him of himself.

To illustrate this fear as seen in its present-day collective manifestations, one might consider the example of certain recent mass-scares among western consumers. In the seventies, for instance, following the realization that veal contained antibiotics and synthetic hormones, French consumers increasingly avoided the meat. Hormones are an ill-defined category in collective perception, but with strong connotations. They are used to make the contraceptive pill, to produce

¹ *Ensete edule* is a banana-like plant of which the false stem and young shoots only are consumed.

changes in certain sexual characteristics, etc. Consumers, one speculates, might have become concerned that veal hormones could insidiously work on them, transforming them in ways they could not understand.

Actually, each act of incorporation implies not only a risk but also a chance and a hope - of becoming more what one is, or what one would like to be. Food makes the eater: it is therefore natural that the eater should try to make himself by eating. From this principle of the making of the eater by his food stems the vital necessity of identifying foods, again in both the literal and figurative senses. This is the clear consequence of the principle of incorporation: if we do not know what we eat, how can we know what we are ?

III. Disgust: a socially (re)constructed biological safeguard

The mouth is often seen in our representations as the gateway of the organism, an orifice opening onto the inner depths of the body, the viscera. In fact, it functions much more like a safety chamber and, as Paul Rozin puts it (Rozin and Fallon, 1981), as the guardian of the organism. Food passes through it and is transformed in it, but is also examined and analysed in every respect before being allowed to cross the crucial threshold of swallowing and, literally, of incorporation, i.e. the complex biological and psychological process of integrating nutritional matter into the self.

Actually, food entering this antichamber has already undergone some very stringent preliminary tests. Let us look at the eater's behaviour in certain circumstances through the eyes of the ethologist: the subject scrutinizes the food proposed for incorporation from all angles. He sniffs it and smells it even before touching it. Only after this inspection will he lift it with the tip of the fork or knife, turn it over, separate the component parts, testing the texture and consistency. If this initial scrutiny proves satisfactory, a sample is brought to the mouth and subjected to further sensory analysis. If this too proves positive, it is swallowed. These precautionary examinations are generally disapproved of by the etiquette of our cultures as expressing distrust, which, in the social context, means antagonism. They are nonetheless commonly observed in certain situations.

Such is particularly the case with children. In the psychology of eating behaviour, the term neophobia is used to define a young child's tendency to accept only a limited range of familiar foods and to refuse foods which lie outside it, whether they be unknown, unusual, ill-identified or simply mixed with others. The behaviour which has just been described is associated with neophobia, as most parents will confirm. It has been demonstrated that children's neophobic behaviour follows a phase of much less "prudent" exploratory behaviour during which the repertoire of familiar foods (those which subsequently escape neophobia) is established. Neophobia seems to appear only after the age of two and then declines only very slowly after the age of five or sometimes much later (Fischler, 1985b; Fischler & Chiva, 1986). This gradual decline seems to occur under the influence of essentially social factors including education, the most important influence being that of the peer group (Birch, 1980).

However, this "distrustful" behaviour can also be observed in adults when the usual social constraints are partially lifted (e.g. in a self-service restaurant) or when the subject is in unknown territory. I observed such behaviour recently in a Paris airport restaurant when a Muslim Pakistani passenger was served with steak garnished with a slice of beef bone marrow (a common delicacy in France). Puzzled by this unidentified trimming, he examined it carefully,

turning his plate to get a better view but not daring even to prod it with his knife or fork. He then consulted the waiter who could only repeat in French that it was "bone marrow". I intervened with the English translation, but this did not reassure the eater. Might it not be some form of pork (he was probably thinking of lard)? "No, it's bone marrow, sir", the waiter insisted. I did my best to persuade him that it was indeed beef, that no one in France would think of garnishing beef with pork fat. Would the suspicious diner accept our explanations or push the offending slice to the side of his plate? In the end he did neither. After much reflexion he asked the waiter to take the dish away and bring him something else. Seemingly he could literally not overcome his distrust, which condemned not only the marrow but also the meat which had been in contact with it, as if even the remote possibility of the impurity of the former necessarily contaminated the latter. He even avoided ordering the same dish without marrow, perhaps fearing that the kitchen staff would be content to remove it and send the same meat back. The fact that we had named, described and identified the mysterious ingredient was not sufficient for him to be able to overcome his distrust and no doubt the disgust which the mere thought of possible pollution aroused in him. Doubt, suspicion, not conviction, condemned the bone marrow and the beef. The man's doubt raised quite insurmountable obstacles: what appeared was a "biological" resistance, probably situated at a very low level in the central nervous system. And yet this revulsion was provoked by a suspicion which sprang from purely cultural phenomena.

The problem in fact arises from a strictly cultural difficulty of identification and classification. The unknown food is suspected to belong to a category of substances defined as impure and taboo in the culture of the subject, which he has learned to recognize as such. What is at stake is not objectively vital: pork is not poisonous and the eater knows this; it is simply impure. But this taxonomic doubt triggers off extremely "primitive" behaviours (examining, sniffing, avoidance of touch), and there is no doubt that a deep disgust, an undeniable psychobiological reaction (discomfort, anxiety, possibly nausea), is provoked by the unknown. In other words, it has to be acknowledged that a simple difficulty encountered in identifying a foodstuff in terms of a culturally learned reference grid induces in the human omnivore sensations and behaviours which tend to prevent him from incorporating it or even bringing it to his mouth. These sensations are the same ones which are triggered off by disagreeable sensory stimuli (e.g. a nauseating smell) and are somewhat similar to those which, after ingestion, can arise from gastrointestinal disturbance.

IV. The culinary order

Human identification of foods thus involves complex cognitive processes. As Lévi-Strauss puts it, food "must not only be good to eat, but also good to think". To identify a food, one has to "think" it, to understand its place in the world and therefore understand the world, and in particular to distinguish, order and classify the elements of which it consists. A culinary system provides criteria that can be used in these mental operations or provides, as it were, a prefabricated matrix.

Cuisine can, of course, first be taken to mean the process whereby man transforms raw materials before, and with a view to, eating them. It would then be regarded as a material, practical process - performing certain physical and chemical modifications, by applying heat, for example - which changes the flavour, texture and digestibility of foodstuffs, and which, like other techniques, can also reduce or neutralize some potential toxins, i.e. some of the material dangers which food may contain. But this definition of cooking is quite clearly inadequate, for at least two reasons.

First, the transformations undergone by foodstuffs are not purely material. A cuisine also, and perhaps mainly, operates in the register of the imagination. At the risk of over-simplifying, one might say that it transfers nutritional raw materials from the state of Nature to the state of Culture. It conjures and tames the dangerous forces of nature, but also of the supernatural. It is an act so magical that one remembers the strange kinship between cookery and witchcraft. Verdier (1969) pointed out that the witch is a cook, or rather an anti-cook, with her cauldron and her repulsive ingredients which actually mimic cookery while inverting it (the process which the novelist Michel Tournier, in *Le Roi des Aulnes*, calls "malign inversion"). In sort, cookery also serves to tame the wild, threatening forces that inhabit nature and the universe, the same ones that the witch's anti-cookery is able to unleash.

Secondly, as we shall see, cuisine is not so much a matter of ingredients, transformed or not, as of classifications and rules ordering the world and giving it meaning. The foremost classification is of course the one which divides the universe into what is food and what is not. This dichotomy is not self-evident. In western cultures, insects are not food; nor, to take another example, cited by Mary Douglas (1979), is the fox. Why are insects and foxes not regarded as edible? Probably not for nutritional reasons. The proteins of either are of as good quality as those of veal or beef. They contain no toxic substances, so far as we know. The classification of species that is applied here apparently is based on other criteria, perhaps "arbitrary" ones in the sense in which a code is arbitrary.

A second level of classification, sometimes called religious, is applied to foodstuffs already classified as such. Food taboos, a favourite theme in anthropology, operate at this level: in order for a species to be defined as taboo, it must have been already implicitly classified as food. If the forbidden food were not edible, there would be no point in forbidding it.

Foodstuffs classified as both edible and right to eat are then subject to rules of propriety and context. No food is appropriate for everyone, at all times, in all circumstances, in any quantity. A Frenchman would think it odd to drink white coffee with dinner and an Italian probably would resent being served spaghetti for breakfast. Among the criteria which govern these implicit or explicit rules, the clearest and most frequently applied concern the persons who eat: their age, sex, rank, status and social role. In many western countries, spices are not thought appropriate for children and sweets are incongruous for adult males. Other criteria relate to the social circumstances of the meal - a family supper or an act of hospitality, ordinary or extra-ordinary, festive or everyday, etc. Still others are chronological: time of day, day of the week, season, etc.

The relations between foods constantly intervene, for example in the form of rules of association and exclusion, principles of compatibility and incompatibility which might be called specifically culinary: a slice of bread, in a particular cultural context - our own - calls for butter, and oil goes with vinegar; but sugar, in the same context, generally excludes salt and meat excludes fish. Meals are structured in accordance with a complex grammar and syntax, the best illustration of which is found in Nicod's study, presented by Mary Douglas (1979), of English working-class meals and in the analysis by Verdier (1966) on meals in Lower Normandy.

Systems of representations regarding health are another important criterion organizing food. Many cultures classify foods according to their essential virtues, which take their place in a larger

system of more or less complex interactions. So many different cultures oppose "hot" foods to "cold" foods (although the variety of actual foods placed in these categories is practically unlimited) (Anderson, 1984) that there are no doubt good grounds for questioning the diffusionist model, which is too often taken for granted. In any case, the good and the healthy are often intimately associated in culinary discourses. Frequently in this literature dietary concerns prevail over pleasure or justify it. The medicinal properties are then emphasized, and the order underlying the recommendations is that of the medical system (Flandrin, 1982).

Thus we can understand cuisines as sets of classifications of this type performed by a given culture and the rules associated with them, both those which regulate the combination of the elements thus defined and, more generally, those which govern the whole set of practices and representations connected with the production, gathering, preparation, attribution and consumption of food. "A society's cookery", writes Lévi-Strauss, "is a language into which it translates its structure, unless it reluctantly and no less unwittingly reveals there its contradictions" (Lévi-Strauss, 1968). Mary Douglas (1984) sees it more in aesthetic terms, suggesting that the dividing-lines laid down by a culture (or by the individuals who enact it) between children's food and adults' food, or between women's food and men's are analogous to those between literary genres or artistic styles and that individuals situate themselves - identify themselves - in this framework by their tastes and distastes.

V. Cooking, the world and the eater: the identificatory function of cuisine.

Thus, cookery helps to give food and its eaters a place in the world, a meaning. The order it constructs and applies is inseparable from the order of the world which culture as a whole constructs. The culinary act, as we have seen, sanctions the passage of food from Nature to Culture. It thereby helps to resolve the omnivore's paradox or to make it manageable and to regulate the anxiety of incorporation. Here we see the fundamentally identificatory virtue of cooking: once cooked, "cuisined" as we put it in French, adapted to the conventional rules of a particular cuisine, food is marked with a stamp, labelled, recognized - in a nutshell, identified. "Raw" food is fraught with danger, a "wildness" that is tamed by culinary treatment. Once marked in this way, it is seen as less dangerous. It can safely take its place in the plate and then in the eater's body. It sets all these things in the order of the world and so confirms that the world is still in order. A cuisine enables neophile innovation to be reconciled with neophobic "conservatism" or distrust. Novelty, the unknown, can be steeped in the sauce of tradition; originality is tempered by familiarity and monotony relieved by variety.

E. and P. Rozin have detected this function of culinary practices, locating it in what they call "flavour principles", certain olfactory and gustatory complexes typical of a given cuisine, such as the garlic--tomato--olive-oil complex in some Mediterranean cuisines. They see the flavour principles as markers, taste motifs, making a dish recognizable and therefore acceptable even if some of the other ingredients are alien to the system. Their hypothesis is of broad heuristic value even if the notion to which it is applied is somewhat insufficient.

It is firstly insufficient because the "flavour principles" in question are sometimes so variable, at national, regional, local or even domestic and individual level, that it soon becomes difficult or even impossible to draw the line between unity and discontinuity, between culinary "dialects" and "idiolects", and to isolate them. It is true that the condiment used by the Vietnamese, based on nioc-mam, lemon juice, pimienta and grated carrot, seems at first sight to be a very uniform

and universally used marker. But we find that certain combinations of spices (in India, for example) are varied to a greater or lesser extent from one household to another. They depend on the cook's concern for uniqueness and are meant to mark the irreducible maternal singularity of her work. Similarly, in the regional culinary traditions of Europe, maternal intervention takes the form of a unique personal touch, which serves precisely to identify and highlight the cook as much as the dish (hence the importance of "knacks" and "secret ingredients", and the virtual impossibility of defining the mythical one "authentic" recipe for dishes like cassoulet or chili con carne).

In such cases there are variable elements within structural continuity. Here we come to the second insufficiency: if continuity is indicated by structure, then the omnivore's paradox is not resolved simply by the basic elements or complexes, the "flavour principles"; the whole culinary system, the whole "language", with its grammar and syntax, has to "make sense" and so contribute to the construction of familiarity, in other words the acceptability of dishes (Fischler, 1980).

We have already seen, in connection with the disgust provoked by the fear of incorporating a "bad object", that the behavioural and biological barriers to incorporation can be raised by cognitive as well as sensory factors. What I have called a "classification problem", arising in relation to a cultural taxonomy, can apparently trigger off neophobic behaviour. This observation is in my view crucial in understanding the nature and function of the cultural norms and classifications which shape human eating habits.

If we now follow the converse argument, the hypothesis emerges automatically: if, on the basis of belief or adherence to a religious and cultural system, the physiological manifestations of disgust can be triggered off, then conversely the cultural identification of a food, i.e. the fact that it can be seen as fitting harmoniously into one's culinary classifications, rules and norms, can no doubt help to relieve the anxiety associated with the omnivore's paradox and the fantasy of incorporating the "bad object". Culinary systems would thus provide reference criteria for use in making choices about food, tending to resolve or reduce the anxiety of the double bind and to authorize incorporation by giving it meaning.

VI. A counter-example: the disturbance of modern identity

Mary Douglas (1984) has very accurately observed that sociological thought since Durkheim has, for the most part, been unable to envisage personal identity other than in terms of its pathology, because it has not been able, or has not chosen, to see the individual as anything other than a passive social atom. The question of identity only arises when identity is disturbed. That is why, before briefly considering one manifestation of such disturbance, the one which seems to me to characterize some western industrial societies, I have sought to forward some bio-anthropological tools which may clarify analysis of the construction of identity. It has to be added that identity disturbances frequently have to be analysed in a global context, to which the notion of crisis may be applicable, referring not only to the break-up and end of an order but also, frequently, to the genesis of a new order.

I have analysed elsewhere (Fischler 1979; 1983; 1985) how, in the contemporary relation to food as it appears in industrialized societies, the two-fold identificatory function of cookery (identification of food and construction or sanctioning of the subject's identity) is disturbed by the

recent expansion of the agro-industry and industrialised food production. Food identification is now problematic, particularly for the following reasons, presented in summary form.

1. The modern eater has become a "pure consumer": an increasing proportion of the population consumes food of whose production, history and origins it knows nothing.
2. The work of preparing and concocting food is increasingly performed before it arrives in the household and the kitchen, particularly in factories, i.e. remote from the eyes and knowledge of the eater.
3. The socio-cultural frameworks (the culinary system in the sense in which I have previously defined it) which traditionally governed and constrained food have been considerably eroded by economic and technical changes and changes in life-style. This has opened up a gap or crisis in the socially recognized criteria regulating eating habits, which are increasingly abandoned to individual choice.
4. Modern food is less and less identifiable by its consistency, flavour, smell and texture. It is processed, packaged, "presented", as it were dematerialized, stripped of its sensory characters, reduced to appearances and signs.
5. Moreover, food technology is becoming increasingly powerful, in the sense that it now uses more and more sophisticated processes tending to mask, imitate and transform "natural" or "traditional" products: reconstituted proteins, artificial flavours, preserving techniques, etc. Quite literally, we know less and less what we are really eating.

To consumers, this situation can be extremely disquieting. Modern food has become in the eyes of the eater an "unidentified edible object", devoid of origin or history, with no respectable past - in short, without identity. A high proportion of the population - between 7 and 19 percent of the sample in French surveys - declares a radical distrust of industrially processed foods. Yet these respondents are found precisely in the categories which make most use of such products (see for instance SOFRES, 1980, quoted in Fischler, 1983), a contradiction or paradox which apparently expresses a degree of unease.

Various currents of anxiety or insecurity about food do indeed run through contemporary societies, manifesting themselves in a number of ways, including rumours, panics and apparently erratic behaviour. For example, an anti-additives movement in France in the early 1970s emerged almost simultaneously both as a consumer campaign and in the form of the "Villejuif leaflet"², a kind of written rumour which to this day continues to spread false information and, despite all official denials, still enjoys passive or militant credence even in sectors of the population generally regarded as well informed (schoolteachers, physicians) (Kapferer, 1984).

Clearly, it is not just the identification of food which raises problems. The situation also engenders difficulties which have to do with the identity of the eating subject himself. As we have already seen, if one does not know what one is eating, one is liable to lose the awareness or certainty of what one is oneself. How do modern foods transform us from inside? Are we in danger of losing control of ourselves through what we eat? In a food system (and a cultural system) that is in the process of being destructured and/or restructured, how do we situate

² The typed leaflets are named after the Villejuif hospital, which is famous in France for its cancer department. Under the heading of this institution, they list a series of colouring agents which they falsely claim to have been shown to be carcinogenic. The list includes items which are actually totally inoffensive, such as citric acid.

ourselves in relation to the universe and the cosmos³?

Modern uncertainty or insecurity about food thus induces movements of reaction or re-equilibrium. This is the sense in which, for example, I propose to understand the growing demand for "re-identification" of foods, with calls for more informative labelling, listing of ingredients, guarantees as to the purity and quality of products, all this being increasingly entrusted to a tutelary and quasi-totemic authority -- Government.

This reactive demand can also manifest itself in other ways, either individual or collective: preoccupation with diet or even interest in culinary art, more or less rigid food sectarianism (macrobiotic, for example), conversion to an individual food discipline (vegetarianism), etc. All these tendencies can be interpreted as heterogeneous endeavours nonetheless pointing in the same direction. Through recipes or diets the aim is to reintroduce a normative logic into everyday eating, a coherent system of reference, a rule, in short, an order. Modern French terminology states this with great clarity: one needs a *régime* (diet), a regimen, a term which, in its full meaning, implies complete control. The Latin *regimen*, the dictionary tells us, was "the act of directing". « Régime » thus designates a set of rules to be followed, a pattern of life. Its scope is thus coextensive with that of the traditional culinary system, in the sense that it exercises control over everyday living, the body and its behaviour, on the basis of a set of rules tending to "regiment" eating practices. The identity or identification of food is then not, or not only, sought through the demand for an individual label or guarantee but through its reinsertion in a comprehensive system, i.e. in a set of coherent rules of behaviour, whereby the food integrated into this regime (or this cuisine) recovers meaning and identity, and so also does the eater.

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³ We may note in passing that, etymologically, "cosmos" derives from a Greek term which denotes "order" and which has given us both "cosmic" and "cosmetic": the contemporary concern with the body takes on a new meaning in this light. The passion for fitness and "form" might have some relation with the religious aspiration - in the sense of re-ligio (see above) - harmony between the bodily/individual microcosm and the macrocosm, between the self and the order of the universe.

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