

psychology

Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption

ROLAND BARTHES

[Food Signifier]

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✓ The inhabitants of the United States consume almost twice as much sugar as the French.¹ Such a fact is usually a concern of economics and politics. But this is by no means all. One needs only to take the step from sugar as merchandise, an abstract item in accounts, to sugar as food, a concrete item that is "eaten" rather than "consumed," to get an inkling of the (probably unexplored) depth of the phenomenon. For the Americans must do something with all that sugar. And as a matter of fact, anyone who has spent time in the United States knows that sugar permeates a considerable part of American cooking; that it saturates ordinarily sweet foods, such as pastries; makes for a great variety of sweets served, such as ice creams, jellies, syrups; and is used in many dishes that French people do not sweeten, such as meats, fish, salads, and relishes. This is something that would be of interest to scholars in fields other than economics, to the psychosociologist, for example, who will have something to say about the presumably invariable relation between standard of living and sugar consumption. (But is this relation really invariable today? And if so, why?)² It could be of interest to the historian also, who might find it worthwhile to study the ways in which the use of sugar evolved as part of American culture (the influence of Dutch and German immigrants who were used to "sweet-salty" cooking?). Nor is this all. Sugar is not just a foodstuff, even when it is used in conjunction with other foods; it is, if you will, an "attitude," bound to certain usages, certain "protocols," that have to do with more than food. Serving a sweet relish or drinking a Coca-Cola with a meal are things that are confined to eating habits proper; but to go regularly to a dairy bar, where the absence of alcohol coincides with a great abundance of sweet beverages, means more than to consume sugar; through the sugar, it also means to experience the day, periods of rest, traveling, and leisure in a specific fashion that is certain to have its impact on the American. For who would claim that in France wine is only wine? Sugar or wine, these two superabundant substances are also institutions. And these institutions necessarily imply a set of images, dreams, tastes, choices, and values. I remember an American hit song: *Sugar Time*. Sugar is a time, a category of the world.³

X { I have started out with the example of the American use of sugar because it permits us to get outside of what we, as Frenchmen, consider "obvious." For we do not see our

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own food or, worse, we assume that it is insignificant. Even—or perhaps especially—to the scholar, the subject of food connotes triviality or guilt.⁴ This may explain in part why the psychosociology of French eating habits is still approached only indirectly and in passing when more weighty subjects, such as life-styles, budgets, and advertising, are under discussion. But at least the sociologists, the historians of the present—since we are talking only about contemporary eating habits here—and the economists are already aware that there is such a thing.

Thus P. H. Chombart de Lauve has made an excellent study of the behavior of French working-class families with respect to food. He was able to define areas of frustration and to outline some of the mechanisms by which needs are transformed into values, necessities into alibis.⁵ In her book *Le mode de vie des familles bourgeoises de 1873 à 1953*, M. Perrot came to the conclusion that economic factors played a less important role in the changes that have taken place in middle-class food habits in the last hundred years than changing tastes; and this really means ideas, especially about nutrition.⁶ Finally, the development of advertising has enabled the economists to become quite conscious of the ideal nature of consumer goods; by now everyone knows that the product as bought—that is, experienced—by the consumer is by no means the real product; between the former and the latter there is a considerable production of false perceptions and values. By being faithful to a certain brand and by justifying this loyalty with a set of “natural” reasons, the consumer gives diversity to products that are technically so identical that frequently even the manufacturer cannot find any differences. This is notably the case with most cooking oils.⁷

It is obvious that such deformations or reconstructions are not only the manifestation of individual, anomic prejudices, but also elements of a veritable collective imagination showing the outlines of a certain mental framework. All of this, we might say, points to the (necessary) widening of the very notion of food. For what is food? It is not only a collection of products that can be used for statistical or nutritional studies. It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior. Information about food must be gathered wherever it can be found: by direct observation in the economy, in techniques, usages, and advertising; and by indirect observation in the mental life of a given society.⁸ And once these data are assembled, they should no doubt be subjected to an internal analysis that should try to establish what is significant about the way in which they have been assembled before any economic or even ideological determinism is brought into play. I should like to give a brief outline of what such an analysis might be.

When he buys an item of food, consumes it, or serves it, modern man does not manipulate a simple object in a purely transitive fashion; this item of food sums up and transmits a situation; it constitutes an information; it signifies. That is to say that it is not just an indicator of a set of more or less conscious motivations, but that it is a real sign, perhaps the functional unit of a system of communication. By this I mean not only the elements of display in food, such as foods involved in rites of hospitality,⁹ for all food serves as a sign among the members of a given society. As soon as a need is satisfied by standardized production and consumption, in short, as soon as it takes on the characteristics of an institution, its function can no longer be dissociated from the sign of that function. This is true for clothing;¹⁰ it is also true for food. No doubt, food is, anthropologically speaking (though very much in the abstract), the first need; but ever since

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man has ceased living off wild berries, this need has been highly structured. Substances, techniques of preparation, habits, all become part of a system of differences in signification; and as soon as this happens, we have communication by way of food. For the fact that there is communication is proven, not by the more or less vague consciousness that its users may have of it, but by the ease with which all the facts concerning food form a structure analogous to other systems of communication.¹¹ People may very well continue to believe that food is an immediate reality (necessity or pleasure), but this does not prevent it from carrying a system of communication; it would not be the first thing that people continue to experience as a simple function at the very moment when they constitute it into a sign.

If food is a system, what might be its constituent units? In order to find out, it would obviously be necessary to start out with a complete inventory of all we know of the food in a given society (products, techniques, habits), and then to subject these facts to what the linguists call transformational analysis, that is, to observe whether the passage from one fact to another produces a difference in signification. Here is an example: the changeover from ordinary bread to *pain de mie* involves a difference in what is signified: the former signifies day-to-day life, the latter a party. Similarly, in contemporary terms, the changeover from white to brown bread corresponds to a change in what is signified in social terms, because, paradoxically, brown bread has become a sign of refinement. We are therefore justified in considering the varieties of bread as units of signification—at least these varieties—for the same test can also show that there are insignificant varieties as well, whose use has nothing to do with a collective institution, but simply with individual taste. In this manner, one could, proceeding step by step, make a compendium of the differences in signification regulating the system of our food. In other words, it would be a matter of separating the significant from the insignificant and then of reconstructing the differential system of signification by constructing, if I may be permitted to use such a metaphor, veritable grammar of foods.

It must be added that the units of our system would probably coincide only rarely with the products in current use in the economy. Within French society, for example, bread as such does not constitute a signifying unit: in order to find these we must go further and look for certain of its varieties. In other words, these signifying units are more subtle than the commercial units and, above all, they have to do with subdivisions with which production is not concerned, so that the sense of the subdivision can differentiate a single product. Thus it is not at the level of its cost that the sense of a food item is elaborated, but at the level of its preparation and use. There is perhaps no brute item of food that signifies anything in itself, except for a few deluxe items such as salmon, caviar, truffles, and so on, whose preparation is less important than their absolute cost.

If the units of our system of food are not the products of our economy, can we at least have some preliminary idea of what they might be? In the absence of a systematic inventory, we may risk a few hypotheses. A study by P. F. Lazarsfeld¹² (it is old, concerned with particulars, and I cite it only as an example) has shown that certain sensorial "tastes" can vary according to the income level of the social groups interviewed: lower-income persons like sweet chocolates, smooth materials, strong perfumes; the upper classes, on the other hand, prefer bitter substances, irregular materials, and light perfumes. To remain within the area of food, we can see that signification (which, itself, refers to a twofold social phenomenon: upper classes/lower classes) does not involve kinds of prod-

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ucts, but flavors: *sweet* and *bitter* make up the opposition in signification, so that we must place certain units of the system of food on that level. We can imagine other classes of units, for example, opposite substances such as dry, creamy, watery ones, which immediately show their great psychoanalytical potential (and it is obvious that if the subject of food had not been so trivialized and invested with guilt, it could easily be subjected to the kind of "poetic" analysis that G. Bachelard applied to language). As for what is considered tasty, C. Lévi-Strauss has already shown that this might very well constitute a class of oppositions that refers to national characters (French versus English cuisine, French versus Chinese or German cuisine, and so on).¹³

Finally, one can imagine opposites that are even more encompassing, but also more subtle. Why not speak, if the facts are sufficiently numerous and sufficiently clear, of a certain "spirit" of food, if I may be permitted to use this romantic term? By this I mean that a coherent set of food traits and habits can constitute a complex but homogeneous dominant feature useful for defining a general system of tastes and habits. This "spirit" brings together different units (such as flavor or substance), forming a composite unit with a single signification, somewhat analogous to the suprasegmental prosodic units of language. I should like to suggest here two very different examples. The ancient Greeks unified in a single (euphoric) notion the ideas of succulence, brightness, and moistness, and they called it *yávos*. Honey had *yávos*, and wine was the *yávos* of the vineyard.¹⁴ Now this would certainly be a signifying unit if we were to establish the system of food of the Greeks, even though it does not refer to any particular item. And here is another example, modern this time. In the United States, the Americans seem to oppose the category of sweet (and we have already seen to how many different varieties of foods this applies) with an equally general category that is not, however, that of salty—understandably so, since their food is salty and sweet to begin with—but that of *crisp* or *crispy*. *Crisp* designates everything that crunches, crackles, grates, sparkles, from potato chips to certain brands of beer; *crisp*—and this shows that the unit of food can overthrow logical categories—*crisp* may be applied to a product just because it is ice cold, to another because it is sour, to a third because it is brittle. Quite obviously, such a notion goes beyond the purely physical nature of the product; *crispness* in a food designates an almost magical quality, a certain briskness and sharpness, as opposed to the soft, soothing character of sweet foods.

Now then, how will we use the units established in this manner? We will use them to reconstruct systems, syntaxes ("menus"), and styles ("diets")¹⁵ no longer in an empirical but in a semantic way—in a way, that is, that will enable us to compare them to each other. We now must show, not that which is, but that which signifies. Why? Because we are interested in human communication and because communication always implies a system of signification, that is, a body of discrete signs standing out from a mass of indifferent materials. For this reason, sociology must, as soon as it deals with cultural "objects" such as clothing, food, and—not quite as clearly—housing, structure these objects before trying to find out what society does with them. For what society does with them is precisely to structure them in order to make use of them.

To what, then, can these significations of food refer? As I have already pointed out, they refer not only to display,¹⁶ but to a much larger set of themes and situations. One could say that an entire "world" (social environment) is present in and signified by food. Today we have a tool with which to isolate these themes and situations, namely, adver-

tising. There is no question that advertising provides only a projected image of reality; but the sociology of mass communication has become increasingly inclined to think that large-scale advertising, even though technically the work of a particular group, reflects the collective psychology much more than it shapes it. Furthermore, studies of motivation are now so advanced that it is possible to analyze cases in which the response of the public is negative. (I already mentioned the feelings of guilt fostered by an advertising for sugar which emphasized pure enjoyment. It was bad advertising, but the response of the public was nonetheless psychologically most interesting.)

Themes in
food society

A rapid glance at food advertising permits us rather easily, I think, to identify three groups of themes. The first of these assigns to food a function that is, in some sense,

① commemorative: food permits a person (and I am here speaking of French themes) to partake each day of the national past. In this case, this historical quality is obviously linked to food techniques (preparation and cooking). These have long roots, reaching back to the depth of the French past. They are, we are told, the repository of a whole experience, of the accumulated wisdom of our ancestors. French food is never supposed to be innovative, except when it rediscovers long-forgotten secrets. The historical theme, which was so often sounded in our advertising, mobilizes two different values: on the one hand, it implies an aristocratic tradition (dynasties of manufacturers, *moutarde du Roy*, the Brandy of Napoleon); on the other hand, food frequently carries notions of representing the flavorful survival of an old, rural society that is itself highly idealized.¹⁷ In this manner, food brings the memory of the soil into our very contemporary life; hence the paradoxical association of gastronomy and industrialization in the form of canned "gourmet dishes." No doubt the myth of French cooking abroad (or as expressed to foreigners) strengthens this "nostalgic" value of food considerably; but since the French themselves actively participate in this myth (especially when traveling), it is fair to say that through his food the Frenchman experiences a certain national continuity. By way of a thousand detours, food permits him to insert himself daily into his own past and to believe in a certain culinary "being" of France.¹⁸

② A second group of values concerns what we might call the anthropological situation of the French consumer. Motivation studies have shown that feelings of inferiority were attached to certain foods and that people therefore abstained from them.¹⁹ For example, there are supposed to be masculine and feminine kinds of food. Furthermore, visual advertising makes it possible to associate certain kinds of foods with images connoting a sublimated sexuality. In a certain sense, advertising eroticizes food and thereby transforms our consciousness of it, bringing it into a new sphere of situations by means of a pseudocausal relationship.

③ Finally, a third area of consciousness is constituted by a whole set of ambiguous values of a somatic as well as psychic nature, clustering around the concept of health. In a mythical way, health is indeed a simple relay midway between the body and the mind; it is the alibi food gives to itself in order to signify materially a pattern of immaterial realities. Health is thus experienced through food only in the form of "conditioning," which implies that the body is able to cope with a certain number of day-to-day situations. Conditioning originates with the body but goes beyond it. It produces energy (sugar, the "powerhouse of foods," at least in France, maintains an "uninterrupted flow of energy"; margarine "builds solid muscles"; coffee "dissolves fatigue"); alertness ("Be alert with Lustucru"), and relaxation (coffee, mineral water, fruit juices, Coca-Cola, and so on).

In this manner, food does indeed retain its physiological function by giving strength to the organism, but this strength is immediately sublimated and placed into a specific situation (I shall come back to this in a moment). This situation may be one of conquest (alertness, aggressiveness) or a response to the stress of modern life (relaxation). No doubt, the existence of such themes is related to the spectacular development of the science of nutrition, to which, as we have seen, one historian unequivocally attributes the evolution of food budgets over the last fifty years. It seems, then, that the acceptance of this new value by the masses has brought about a new phenomenon, which must be the first item of study in any psychosociology of food: it is what might be called nutritional consciousness. In the developed countries, food is henceforth thought out, not by specialists, but by the entire public, even if this thinking is done within a framework of highly mythical notions. Nor is this all. This nutritional rationalizing is aimed in a specific direction. Modern nutritional science (at least according to what can be observed in France) is not bound to any moral values, such as asceticism, wisdom, or purity,²⁰ but on the contrary, to values of power. The energy furnished by a consciously worked out diet is mythically directed, it seems, toward an adaptation of man to the modern world. In the final analysis, therefore, a representation of contemporary existence is implied in the consciousness we have of the function of our food.²¹

For, as we said before, food serves as a sign not only for themes, but also for situations; and this, all told, means for way of life that is emphasized, much more than expressed, by it. To eat is a behavior that develops beyond its own ends, replacing, summing up, and signaling other behaviors, and it is precisely for these reasons that it is a sign. What are these other behaviors? Today, we might say all of them: activity, work, sports, effort, leisure, celebration—every one of these situations is expressed through food. We might almost say that this "polysemia" of food characterizes modernity; in the past, only festive occasions were signaled by food in any positive and organized manner. But today, work also has its own kind of food (on the level of a sign, that is): energy-giving and light food is experienced as the very sign of, rather than only a help toward, participation in modern life. The snack bar not only responds to a new need, it also gives a certain dramatic expression to this need and shows those who frequent it to be modern men, managers who exercise power and control over the extreme rapidity of modern life. Let us say that there is an element of "Napoleonism" in this ritually condensed, light, and rapid kind of eating. On the level of institutions, there is also the business lunch, a very different kind of thing, which has become commercialized in the form of special menus: here, on the contrary, the emphasis is placed on comfort and long discussions; there even remains a trace of the mythical conciliatory power of conviviality. Hence, the business lunch emphasizes the gastronomic, and under certain circumstances traditional, value of the dishes served and uses this value to stimulate the euphoria needed to facilitate the transaction of business. Snack bar and business lunch are two very closely related work situations, yet the food connected with them signals their differences in a perfectly readable manner. We can imagine many others that should be catalogued.

This much can be said already: today, at least in France, we are witnessing an extraordinary expansion of the areas associated with food: food is becoming incorporated into an ever-lengthening list of situations. This adaptation is usually made in the name of hygiene and better living, but in reality, to stress this fact once more, food is also charged with signifying the situation in which it is used. It has a twofold value, being

nutrition as well as protocol, and its value as protocol becomes increasingly more important as soon as the basic needs are satisfied, as they are in France. In other words, we might say that in contemporary French society *food has a constant tendency to transform itself into situation.*

There is no better illustration for this trend than the advertising mythology about coffee. For centuries, coffee was considered a stimulant to the nervous system (recall that Michelet claimed that it led to the Revolution), but contemporary advertising, while not expressly denying this traditional function, paradoxically associates it more and more with images of "breaks," rest, and even relaxation. What is the reason for this shift? It is that coffee is felt to be not so much a substance²² as a circumstance. It is the recognized occasion for interrupting work and using this respite in a precise protocol of taking sustenance. It stands to reason that if this transferral of the food substance to its use becomes really all-encompassing, the power signification of food will be vastly increased. Food, in short, will lose in substance and gain in function; this function will be general and point to activity (such as the business lunch) or to times of rest (such as coffee); but since there is a very marked opposition between work and relaxation, the traditionally festive function of food is apt to disappear gradually, and society will arrange the signifying system of its food around two major focal points: on the one hand, activity (and no longer work), and on the other hand, leisure (no longer celebration). All of this goes to show, if indeed it needs to be shown, to what extent food is an organic system, organically integrated into its specific type of civilization.

NOTES

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1. Annual sugar consumption in the United States is 43 kg. per person; in France 25 kg. per person.
2. F. Charny, *Le sucre*, Collection "Que sais-je?" (Paris: P. U. F., 1950), p. 8.
3. I do not wish to deal here with the problem of sugar "metaphors" or paradoxes, such as the "sweet" rock singers or the sweet milk beverages of certain "toughs."
4. Motivation studies have shown that food advertisements openly based on enjoyment are apt to fail, since they make the reader feel guilty (J. Marcus-Steiff, *Les études de motivation* [Paris: Hermann, 1961], pp. 44-45).
5. P. H. Chombart de Lauve, *La vie quotidienne des familles ouvrières* (Paris: C.N.R.S., 1956).
6. Marguerite Perrot, *Le mode de vie des familles bourgeoises, 1873-1953* (Paris: Colin, 1961). "Since the end of the nineteenth century, there has been a very marked evolution in the dietary habits of the middle-class families we have investigated in this study. This evolution seems related, not to a change in the standard of living, but rather to a transformation of individual tastes under the influence of a greater awareness of the rules of nutrition" (p. 292).
7. J. Marcus-Steiff, *Les études de motivation*, p. 28.
8. On the latest techniques of investigation, see again J. Marcus-Steiff, *Les études de motivation*.
9. Yet on this point alone, there are many known facts that should be assembled and systematized: cocktail parties, formal dinners, degrees and kinds of display by way of food according to the different social groups.
10. R. Barthes, "Le bleu est à la mode cette année: Note sur la recherche des unités signifiantes dans le vêtement de mode," *Revue française de sociologie* 1 (1960): 147-162.
11. I am using the word *structure* in the sense that it has in linguistics: "an autonomous entity of internal dependencies" (L. Hjelmslev, *Essais linguistiques* [Copenhagen, 1959], p. 1).
12. P. F. Lazarsfeld, "The Psychological Aspect of Market Research," *Harvard Business Review* 13 (1934): 54-71.

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