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The Realm of Things Culinary. Anthropological Recipes

Abstract: The text is a presentation of an anthropological project of research on culinaries constructed in such a way to be accessible also to practitioners of other disciplines of the humanities. The proposed range of topics was embedded in four general discourses: the temporal discourse, the spatial discourse, the discourse of identity and the discourse of cultural trends. These discourses may fulfill the role of cultural categories (as interpreted by Gurevich), and thus be descriptive and interpretative tools. Investigation of the cultural phenomenon of things culinary does not pertain only to those them; it also reveals various “faces” of culture in the era of fluid modernity.

Key words: culinaries, discourse, cultural category, cultural trends, identity.

We anthropologists are aware that nowadays to speak of food while

avoiding banalities is nearly impossible, since the topic is discussed by everyone. We talk about food, we read about it, we make it the subject of reflective thought and scientific analysis, we advice one another and seek guidance as to what should be eaten and what should be avoided, how to prepare meals and how to serve them, where and from whom to buy foodstuffs. Food slowly ceases to serve as the means to appease hunger, and begins to fuel thought [Krajewski 2006: 69].

The post-modern era has shaped the realm of things culinary into one of the most powerful cultural trends. This has happened because, as Mircea Eliade asserts, the *Zeitgeist* always manifests itself in artistic and cultural fashions. Yet

for a particular theory or philosophy to become popular, to be *à la mode*, *en vogue*, implies neither that it is a remarkable creation nor that it is devoid of all value. One of the fascinating aspects of the “cultural fashion” is that it does not matter whether the facts in question and their interpretation are true or not. No amount of criticism can destroy a *vogue* [Eliade 1978: 3].

He also asserts that that various cultural fashions he mentions “are not to be considered equally significant. One of them, at least, may very soon become obsolete”. Nevertheless, concludes the phenomenologist, “[f]or our purposes, it does not matter” [Eliade 1978: 8]. This is fortunate indeed, because we, too, have fallen prey to the sin of submitting to fashion.

Polish ethnographers have repeatedly returned to the topic of food, especially in monographs [cf. Nowina-Sroczyńska 2009: 12]. Their accounts were primarily idiographic in character; they focused on presenting the fare of a given region, devoting the most attention to the taxonomy of the mundane vs. festive dishes. Following the lead of Kazimierz Moszyński, scholars adapted and utilised research methods and ways of presenting the results, and focused, in turn, on food acquisition, methods of preparing dishes, cooking utensils and the issues related to the availability of *co-mestibles*. Victuals were included in the category of the so-called material culture; hence, until the 1980s, the absence of research pertaining to food as a symbolic code. At the time of the political transformation in Poland, a new focus on the cultural significance of all things culinary caused the field of analysis to expand; today we may risk the statement that many topics have moved into popular culture, transforming food into a “folklore ornament” [*Od jadła chłopskiego...* 2014: 27].

We know that food is an ubiquitous social act which may become the core for the creation of many meta-languages related to history, sociology, cultural anthropology, political sciences, philosophy, cultural studies, geography, economy, medicine or biology. Discourse pertaining to all things culinary can be conducted on different levels, as it reveals much about human beings, their individual and group imagery, emotions and choices.

We, the anthropologists from Łódź, were approached with the proposal to construct a project of cyclic seminar meetings devoted to things culi-

nary.¹ We concluded that scholars in the humanities may find themselves confronted with intriguing cognitive prospects:

the tale of food may become the story of the development of certain images or ideas and thus reveal changes in meanings that constitute a function of the deep transformations of cultural paradigms, ways of interpreting the world and legitimising its appearance [Łeńska-Bąk 2007: 9].

Foodstuffs, as well as the manner of their preparation and consumption, are aspects of everyday life and festive occasions. They may act as symbols, *topoi* or allegories, or point to values and social stratification. The realm of cuisine used to, and still does, delimit worldviews and acquire an ontic, ethical and aesthetic significance.

The project we have proposed, entitled *Licking fingers? Cultural adventures of things culinary* [<http://palcelizac-spotkania.blogspot.com/>] is based on four types of discourse essential for understanding food as a cultural phenomenon, but also for understanding the modern interest in cuisine. Thus, the humanist perspective guiding us in planning the meetings would take into account the following types of discourse: the temporal and spatial discourse, the identity-related discourse and the discourse pertaining to cultural fashions, which should be regarded primarily as fields of research and subjects of critical analysis and interpretation. Creating the catalogue of issues, we selected those that reveal the potential of things culinary in expressing and shaping human identity, systems of values and modern aesthetic preferences. Time, space, identity and cultural trends are also **categories** that may compose a substantial part of the semantic “inventory” of contemporary culture. Preserved in language, art, science and religion,

1 For many months now, Professor Maciej Kokoszko, a specialist in Byzantine Studies, has been combining extracurricular lectures on food in Byzantium with the preparation and communal consumption of dishes made according to ancient recipes; time and again, these “tasty studies” would captivate the senses of both students and teachers of the Faculty of Philosophy and History of the University of Łódź. The idea that scholars representing various branches of the humanities interested in investigating culinary issues should join forces originated with Professor Kokoszko.

these universal concepts are interrelated in every culture, creating a specific “model of the world”, a kind of a “coordinate system” through which people perceive reality and construct an image of the world based on their identity [Gurevich 1985: 17].

The involvement of specialists in various fields of the humanities inevitably leads to differences in methodology, means and techniques of investigation used in various combinations depending on the space, time and nature of their research.

We do not aspire to follow the example of Roman Jacobson, who postulated the idea of writing a culinary history of various cultures and different epochs [cf. Łeńska-Bąk 2002: 27], but we nonetheless intend our analysis to be multiform and to reveal universal meanings, as well as cultural differences and the transformations of cultural meanings. The pleasure of participating in seminar debates and enquiring into the proposed fields of humanistic exploration will perhaps inspire detailed studies, such as, for instance, *The Anthropological Culinary Book* or *The Archaeological, Historical or Philological Culinary Books*.

The initial aim was modest: communal preparation and sharing of food-stuffs were to be accompanied by an analysis of these actions, reminiscent of a monastery refectory, where one member of the religious community reads to the others during meals. Our basic objectives included group integration, education and the popularisation of science. The widespread acceptance of this form of culinary meetings, the willingness to continue the discussion and the declarations of involvement coming from specialists in various fields of the humanities made us expand the project's goals to include documentation of, for instance, modern attitudes, views or actions, and investigation. Each of the proposed seminars may tackle a group of subjects encompassed by the given category, or alternatively focus on a chosen specific aspect (e.g. food as a spectacle; culinary tourism; the culinary realm vs. gender distinctions).

The culinary realm – the temporal discourse

- mundane/festive fare (daytime/night-time; annual festivities; celebrations related to the life cycle; state holidays);

- comestibles in relation to types of cultures; food in relation to the seasons of the year;
- raw/cooked food;
- the order of myth: mythical origins of foods and beverages; ritual “devouring” in mythical narratives; the metaphorical consumption of a deity; food and drink of the gods;
- the culinary realm and periods of passage (culinary prescriptions and proscriptions);
- food as a symbolic offering; sacrificial foods;
- food as a magical substance; food as medicine;
- taboos: fasts, religious ascetic practices, food-related aversions, the principles of purifying the body;
- feasts and their significance in culture and religion;
- hunger/overabundance of food (symbolic aspects);
- meat and the Polish issues; alcohol and the Polish issues;
- culinary traditions and knowledge (cook books, old advertisements);
- the culinary jargon (historical aspects, political discourse);
- the senses: history and modernity.

In this discourse, the basic research category is time. A potential starting point for the discussion may be the fundamental dichotomy of raw and cooked dishes described by anthropologists. As Piotr Kowalski put it,

In the most general terms, it is the juxtaposition of what is “wild”, unprocessed, and what is prepared and thus organised. There is a radically perceptible boundary between the two: eating cooked foodstuffs locates a person within the safe, orderly world of culture; raw foodstuffs send one back to the *orbis exterior*, to the realm of wildness, chaos and death [Kowalski 1998: 5],

and thus to the realm of ambivalence of the sacrum. Myths relate that the beginnings of all things were marked by great feasts: the first beings consumed the wind, water, earth, to spew it all in a new form, processed for the universe in the making. This birth is associated with consumption;

at the dawn of things there are gods who die so that plants may sprout on their bodies and gods who die tragically, dismembered, so that the world may be reborn. Myths teach us that the transformed divine bodies would then be consumed, in a symbolic and metaphorical gesture, and this act will carry a sacral significance.

Sustenance is the structure of “lasting existence”. This type of discourse refers to ancient existence – the magical, symbolic *imago mundi* subject to changes depending on the type of context. The category of time, and the experience of time in cultural terms, coexist with another highly significant phenomenon: space.

The culinary realm – the spatial discourse

- the category of a place (a house, a garden, a restaurant, an allotment garden, the street, the theatre, the cinema, the car, eating in front of the TV set, a prison, a cemetery);
- comestibles and the issue of open/closed spaces; private/public spaces; old/new spaces;
- around the table: mundane vs. festive foods, methods of preparation, recipes, foodstuffs, the etiquette, taboos, aesthetics, tableware, social stratification; Polish traditions associated with the table;
- feasting in dreams; feasting in the afterlife;
- religious/metaphorical foodstuffs (olive oil, bread, wine).

Spatial experiences may be analysed with a view to the following categories: the centre vs. the boundaries (being beyond the boundaries of our world; place vs. non-place; parts and/or vicinity). Locations may be understood as specific beings infused with collective and individual presence and marked by creative actions. The culinary spectacle may be played out in public or in intimate space; the changes in constructing the space for the culinary realm need to be noticed and analysed. Space, also the “space for eating” has always been filled with meanings and connotations specific to the era, and thus belongs to “us”, i.e. specific cultures [Buczyńska-Garewicz 2006: 13]. Space – also space subjected to humanist analysis – refers to a direct, existential experience; it is formed and remembered owing to sensations,

moods or actions. This is an existential relation. Both the discussed types, the temporal and spatial discourse, may be regarded as coexistent and mutually explanatory.

The third type of discourse should analyse the relations between the culinary realm and identity. The paradigm for this investigation is the opposition: familiar versus alien.

The culinary realm – the discourse of identity

- eating as a communal activity;
- national and regional culinary traditions;
- cuisine and ethnic stereotypes;
- cuisine as a quantifier of homeliness/alienness; familiar/alien food;
- accepted/ridiculed food;
- food and the contestation of tendencies towards globalisation;
- the culinary realm and religious systems;
- food and gender distinctions (a female, a male, a child);
- subcultures and culinary preferences;
- the culinary realm and ideology (political parties and culinary preferences);
- hunger and social mechanisms of integration/destruction.

The importance of the issue of familiarity and alienness was noted by Krzysztof Varga:

Walking the streets of Warsaw I also notice that the sushi bars are fewer in number and less populated, and I see more and more eateries serving *pierogi* or, most of all, a profusion of the increasingly fashionable establishments of the “pork jelly and a shot” kind, as if we were just witnessing another great Polish uprising, this time one culinary in its nature; we are observing a great counteroffensive of *pierogi*, steak tartare and jellied pigs’ feet; the gastronomic invaders from Japan are retreating in panic. This is all fascinating, since it is more than simply the matter of the cost; I suppose, or rather believe, that we are experiencing a cultural change, that it is increasingly a disgrace to gobble up raw fish with rice, that the nation is returning to what is familiar and making a fashion of it [Varga 2013: 3].

Feasting, once a symbolic and ritual action, has changed its function; it is now difficult to ascertain at what point in the history of Europe vanished the sacral experience associated with the preparation and consumption of food [Kowalski 1998: 6]. Desacralisation – one of the aspects of “dispersed systems” – extends to the realm of festive and everyday behaviour. According to many anthropologists, contemporary culture is no longer characterised by fear of breaking a taboo; the apprehension of breaking a social convention is enough. “Nowadays, the world is no longer experienced holistically, but divided into pieces and tasted bit by bit; currently, this is not even tasting, only consuming” [Łeńska-Bąk 2002: 17]. Fixed mealtimes which used to be strictly adhered to; the order of meals; the unbreakable rules of when to talk at the table and when to stay silent, when and how to render assistance to the ladies, which subjects are appropriate for conversation at the table – these cultural models are slowly forgotten; to modern people, the ritualisation of life is an element of social oppression.

These days, it is not shocking to see someone speak with their mouth full, drink from the bottle or reach for anything they fancy; it is not rude to sit at the table for less than half an hour. Modern people seem to have developed an impatience syndrome. Progress is identified with “taking shortcuts”, with the general availability of items we once had to make ourselves. Fast-food products for immediate, convenient consumption were invented to save time and effort [Bauman 2006: 89]. Caroline Mayer, a Washington Post journalist, discovered that a growing percentage of American children considers eating an apple to be an exertion, too great a strain for the jaws and teeth, and an action decidedly too time-consuming for the amount of pleasure it offers [Bauman 2006: 89].

Lifestyles created by the mechanisms of globalisation and Americanisation have brought many changes in various aspects of the culinary culture. Perhaps the most noticeable manifestation of Americanisation is the ubiquity of loanwords related to the culinary realm. The Polish language has adopted the names of foodstuffs (e.g. *popcorn*, *hot-dog*, *chips*, *ketchup*, *sandwich*), types of meals (e.g. *lunch*, *party*, *catering*, *grill*), places of purchasing or consuming food (e.g. *food court*, *pub*, *supermarket*), utensils

for food preparation (*mixer*) [Skowroński 2007: 369]. This trend goes hand in hand with certain culinary customs, such as chewing gum, eating in a hurry, consuming food in a standing position, including lunch breaks in the daily schedule.

Modern consumerism is about experiencing varied sensations; consumerist life is a “never-ending sequence of initiating novelties” [Bauman 2008: 33]. For instance, eating has become one of the most popular types of tourist attractions. Anthropologists suggest that after the grim era of the People’s Republic of Poland we are witnessing the birth, or rather the rebirth, of the phenomenon that may be labelled “culinary tourism”. Travellers expect to experience exotic flavours or blissful familiarity. Many tourists consider entering an inn to be tantamount with taking a step back in time. Inside, they see a regional display:

the eclectic interior décor and even the inn’s location and architecture are a compound of elements derived from various spatial arrangements – a shepherds’ hut, a highland cottage, a hunting lodge, an inn or a bar. All this is done in order to follow the principal trend in post-modernist tourism: to step “outside” history and thus to discover pristine nature and the authentic primitiveness of local culture [Golonka-Czajkowska 2007: 337].

In modern times, the notion of food has a number of fundamental aspects [Krajewski 2006: 69–70]. The first one is the obsession with safety. The appreciation of healthy food possessed of various certificates has almost become a form of worship, “we turn the naturalness of food into a fetish, we buy overpriced products grown using archaic, eco-friendly methods not so much to feel better, but to feel a degree of control over our fate” [Krajewski 2006: 70]. The second aspect is another obsession, this time related to the appearance of one’s own body. The various diets are, most of all, an expression of the ideals of the human body. What I eat defines me, “because today the body is the most important medium of our identity” [Krajewski 2006: 70]. The third aspect of food is the modern obsession with fulfilling one’s desires. We wish to know and try everything; what is experienced through eating is the diversity of the world.

What remains to be said is that in the currently predominant behavioural models and the spreading cultural trends the culinary realm is increasingly associated with the public domain, since food has become one of the most attractive aspects of popular culture and is over-utilised by its participants. Thus, the topic may also be presented in another type of discourse, depicting the culinary realm in relation to cultural trends. This perspective draws attention to new situations influencing culture, new models of behaviour, new meanings revealed by the changes in cultural, social, political and ideological contexts. This type of discourse may focus on the following topics.

The culinary realm in cultural trends

The culinary realm and fluid modernity

- globalisation, consumerism, McDonaldisation;
- the social differentiation of taste; the culinary realm and social status;
- the body within the culture of fluid modernity (gluttony, asceticism, hunger); eating disorders (anorexia, bulimia, orthorexia); diets, dietary norms, healthy lifestyle.

The culinary realm – the aesthetic discourse

- the aestheticisation of the culinary realm (press, advertising, other media);
- literature, theatre, painting, photography, film;
- aesthetic snobbism; culinary hedonism, ostentatious wastefulness;
- new interiors (kitchen, dining room), new tables; the rhetoric of interior design magazines;
- exotic cuisine; old and new spices; new beverages.

Culinary art as a spectacle (culture as a show)

- urban, local, regional, religious, national spectacles (e.g. the harvest festival); open-air events, culinary festivals; television programmes; the internet;
- the culinary realm in visual representation (advertising, photography, installation art, performances);
- an inn as a stage (food as a regional spectacle).

The culinary realm and tourism

- exotic tourism;
- the rhetoric of guidebooks;
- culinary stereotypes, reinforcing and overcoming (?) them;
- global folklorism; the folklorisation of urban food; traditional fare vs. regional fare; menus as texts of culture.

The culinary realm – the discourse of contestation

- ideologies (vegetarianism, veganism);
- dietary habits in relation to worldviews;
- subcultures – taboos, food-related aversions;
- the cultural trend for culinary art as a remedy against the communist era;
- nostalgic returns to ancient traditions; the revitalisation of ceremonies, tastes, dishes etc. as acts of the remonstrance of McDonaldisation and globalisation.

The first two seminars were dedicated to the issue of cultural trends, the third was related to the topic of Christmas – the discussion focused on holiday foods from various countries and religious systems. We are living in a time of fluid modernity; in a fragmentary, episodic and variable time that refuses to be limited to a specific shape. a considerable instability of cultural forms and a fragmentation of identity are accompanied by an increase in the significance of visibility, aestheticisation of the everyday, and ludicity [Dzięcielski 2014: 6]. For this reason the meetings focusing on the modern-day aestheticisation of things culinary and on the perception of the culinary realm as a spectacle or the culinary issues as a peculiar identity marker of the counter-culture groups will be particularly important to us, the anthropologists. Developing the project and proposing the fields for humanistic analyses, we have attempted, on the one hand, to consider the most important cultural categories, i.e. those of time, space and identity, and on the other to proceed to universalise the range of problems under consideration. We are aware that, despite our best efforts, the project bears the stamp of anthropology; in our place, archaeologists, historians, philosophers or philologists would have referred to concepts

from their own fields as the principal ones and would have left their own authorial signature on the project. Our proposal is based on the key concept of ethnology/anthropology, i.e. the concept of **culture**, with its claim to universality and to a supra-individual, unifying, systematic and typifying dimension [Czaja 2002: 6].

We are aware that our meetings follow the current trends in culture and that we run the risk of being reprehensibly banal. The culinary madness has indeed reached our country: many Poles – sneers Krzysztof Varga – are fascinated with *Kitchen Nightmares*, adore cooks, obsessively bombard the Internet with “photos of the dishes they have just prepared or are just eating in a momentarily fashionable establishment” [Varga 2013: 3]. I am personally inclined to agree with Varga’s perceptive comment that the subject is, in itself, endless and that describing all food-related emanations in culture is a task simply impossible to achieve.

For a time now I have devoted more and more thought to this culinary madness, this fashion for sophistication, for gastronomic peregrinations; I am pondering whether this is a question of compulsive compensation for our former culinary poverty, or perhaps a symptom of normality; in any case, I suppose that at the moment nothing is quite as fashionable as food and writing about it; gastronomy has fully replaced culture. There are no great ideas, no groundbreaking debates, no mutinous counter-culture, no spates of literary masterpieces – what we are having instead is a cosy sybaritism which evokes some unpleasant associations with all the epochs preceding revolutions.

Further on, Varga conveys a sarcastic warning:

I remind you that a great number of historical disasters and revolutions was preceded by a spectacular efflorescence of hedonism, and when culture focuses primarily on consuming, it is a clear sign that something terrible is about to happen. [...] In a nutshell: excessive interest in gastronomy always had disastrous results for the civilisation in question, since a focus on food usually signifies ideological decline and degeneration [Varga 2013: 3].

In my estimation, however, Varga's witty remarks do not undermine the relevance of the issues outlined above; the ironic poetics of the talented columnist should not obscure the significance of the issues discussed during our seminars.

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