Food and beans

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A detail from a painting of Odysseus by Jacob Jordaeus (1593-1678)

Food history is a relatively youthful strand of cultural history, whose annus mirabilis came as recently as 1966. That year saw the publication of the two most influential essays ever written on food and society, Claude Lévi-Strauss’s “The Culinary Triangle” and Mary Douglas’s study of dietary prohibitions in the Pentateuch (the third chapter of her Par ty and Danger).

Douglas took her cue from the list of “abominable” animals in Leviticus: camels, hares, rock badgers, pigs, water-creatures without fins or scales. Rejecting explanations for these various food prohibitions based on desert hygiene, Douglas instead argued that the forbidden animals all represent anomalies in a wider Israelite system of classification of living things. In Jewish thought, mammals that chew the cud and have cloven hooves (oxen, sheep, goats) are regarded as “perfect” members of the class of land animals; hence anomalous beasts like pigs and camels, which have cloven hooves but do not chew the cud, are ipso facto unclean. For the Israelites, pigs and camels—like flying squirrels among the Lele of the Congo, neither flesh nor fowl—did not “fit”, and so were treated as abominable. Jewish dietary rules do not just reflect trivial concerns over pigs’ dirty habits, but are part of a whole system for mapping the world.

Lévi-Strauss, still more boldly, extended these sorts of ideas to the study of human cuisine in general. For him, humans tend to think of food in three distinct categories: the raw, the cooked and the rotten. Different kinds of preparation (roasting, boiling, smoking) have different social resonances: roasted meat, for example, is usually seen as more “aristocratic” than boiled meat because it generally involves selecting the prime cuts of meat and discarding the rest (and hence connotes prodigality). In short, “the cooking of a society is a language in which it unconsciously translates its structure

—or else remains itself, still unconsciously, to revealing its contradictions”.

Today, few would buy into all the claims of these two extraordinary essays. But their basic insight—food is not just good to eat but, in Lévi-Strauss’s words, “good to think”—remains the foundation of any serious cultural history of human cuisine. Take, for example, the humble bean. Fava beans have served as a highly nutritious peasant staple in many Mediterranean societies, including modern Egypt (in their scrumptious form as ful medames). Not, one might have thought, a promising starting point for ancient social history. But here is Aristotle, trying to explain why broad beans were a taboo food for the aristocratic Pythagorean sect of classical Greece:

Pythagoras ordered his followers not to touch fava beans, either because they are like the genitals, or because they are like the gates of Hades (for they alone have no hinges), or because they are harmful, or because they are like the shape of the universe, or because he was an oligarch, for democratic states use beans in drawing lots.

In Aristotle’s account, fava beans, the poor man’s staple, are abominable to the rich because they embody democratic voting-practice; they are also rejected for their slight toxicity (they cause wind), and they even transgress an obscure bit of Douglas-style food classification (no “hinge”). Seen in this light, the comic poet Aristophanes’ endless jokes about bean-soup—“Hast thou ever felt a sudden longing for bean-soup?”—take on a new social meaning: beans were a quintessentially “demotic” food, with some of the resonances of (say) the modern British turnip. What is so splendid about this passage is the way that the fava bean clearly represents (in Lévi-Strauss’s terms) an “unconscious translation” of all sorts of disparate elements of Greek thought— a miniature window into the ancient Greek mind.

Cuisine reflects a whole complex of ideas about the material world, gods, society and the human body. Since these ideas vary from one society to another, it seems to make intuitive sense to study the food and diet of different cultures separately. But societies are not neatly bounded wholes. Ideas travel, and so do plants, animals and styles of cooking. Imperial cuisines—Roman wheat bread, Anglo-Indian curry, the American burger—can sweep around the globe with startling speed. In practice, every cuisine of the past 3,000 years is “fusion cooking” of some sort. At any given point in history, the human race can be grouped into half a dozen very broad culinary “families”, overlapping with (if not quite reducible to) the major world religions and empires. But a truly global food history would also be a story of constant change and adaptation, as these families exchanged foods (tea, potatoes, cocoa) and cooking styles (tortillas, pasta, sushi) with bewildering flexibility.

This, in a nutshell, is the argument of Rachel Laudan’s magnificent Cuisine and Empire: Cooking in world history. Across a vast span of time (roughly 1000 BC to the present), Laudan describes how regional cooking practices have adapted to changes in global configurations of state power. She offers a compelling narrative of the rise and fall of these various culinary philosophies, driven by the movement of people and (at least in more recent history) material changes in food technology. Some of Laudan’s “diffusion maps” of particular styles of cuisine are miniature masterpieces of cul
tural history. In one particularly eye-stretching example, she maps the modern distribution of stuffed, boiled dumplings (Polish pierogi, Siberian pelmeni, Korean mandu) onto the thirteenth-century Mongol empire, with possible outliers as far afield as Italy (ravioi) and India (the samosa).

This world-systems approach enables Laudan to make bold and suggestive connections between far-flung parts of the globe. In 1962, Octavio Paz arrived in Delhi as Mexico’s Ambassador to India. He was struck by the similarities between the spicy brown sauces of central America (mole) and the curries of the Indian subcontinent: “Is mole an ingenious Mexican version of curry, or is curry a Hindu adaptation of a Mexican sauce?” For Laudan, the answer lies in the successive waves of Islamic imperial expansion westwards and eastwards between the eighth and sixteenth centuries. In the West, the cuisine of Catholic Europe, exported by the Spanish and Portuguese empires to the Americas, had been shaped by Perso-Islamic culinary practices in al-Andalus; in the East, the Mughal Empire brought similar cooking styles to much of the subcontinent. Modern Catholic cuisine in Mexico and Hindu cuisine in North India are both distant descendants of “an overlapping and interconnected chain of traditional or theocratic cuisines between ten and fifteen degrees north that had been created by 1650”.

At an even broader level of generality, Laudan argues that the past 3,000 years of food history follow one grand narrative arc. Ever since the invention of grain cookery, societies have distinguished between high and humble cuisines (wheat for the rich, barley for the poor). This culinary gap finally began to close in the twentieth century, with the emergence of a single “middling” cuisine across large parts of the developed world. Four hours after the birth of Prince George of Cambridge on July 22, 2013, two takeaway pizzas were seen arriving at the Lindo Wing of St Mary’s Hospital, Paddington. The history of all historical societies is the history of culinary dimorphism, then a new golden age is well and truly upon us.

No single lifetime would be enough to master all the fields. Laudan touches on: Buddhist tea-symbolism, the origins of French high cuisine, the impact of canned milk on global patterns of dairy farming. Like Ernest Gellner’s Plough, Sword and Book or Michael Mann’s The Sources of Social Power, Laudan’s Cuisine and Empire is a model example of “tertiary” history, drawing together a vast range of specialized studies into a single story about global culinary geography. Not all of her sweeping generalizations hold up: the notion of a widespread transition from “sacri-
ficial cuisine” to “theocratic cuisine” in the first millennium AD struck me as the wrong way of framing the problem. But if ancient historians have failed to think through the culinary consequences of the “end of sacrifice” in late antiquity, then that is our problem, not hers.

Perhaps the most startling part of Cuisine and Empire is Laudan’s sunny assessment of “culinary modernism”, the world of processed foods and the mass-produced Quarter Pounder with cheese. Western middle-class fetishization of “fresh” and “local” food has, she argues, no serious intellectual or historical basis. A hundred years ago, most people’s diets were monotonous, tasteless, and not especially nutritious; colourful and varied “national” cuisines are largely a myth invented by the young nation-states of the early twentieth century. (Think of the near-identical “national” cuisines of Turkey, Greece and Lebanon, all modern rebrandings of a single high-to-middling Ottoman style of cooking.) Industrial food production, from Dutch herring-packaging plants to UHT milk, has improved rural and urban health, saved countless millions from lives of back-breaking agricultural labour, and allowed a third of the world’s population to enjoy a varied diet with plentiful meat, fat and sugar. In a quiet way, this is a radically counter-cultural vision of modern food politics. As Laudan puts it, “if our vision of the way to have better food is to have less processing, more natural food, more home cooking, and more local food, we will cut ourselves off from the most likely hope for better food in the future”.

“Readers who love food”, says the blurb on the dust jacket, “will find Cuisine and Empire both informative and entertaining.” It is as if Fernand Braudel’s The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II were sold as a page-turner for anyone who enjoys holidaying on the Costa del Sol.