

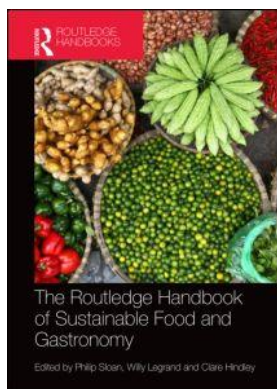
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2

SPIRITUALITY, SOCIAL IDENTITY, AND SUSTAINABILITY

Peter Varga

Conventional versus sustainable consumerism

Mega food stores, in general, enjoy a steady growth all over the world (Stoeckel, 2008; Agence Bio, 2012). According to Agence Bio, a French organization, today 71 percent of French people opt for sustainably produced food as opposed to only 64 percent in 2011. Eight percent of French people consume organic food on a daily basis and 21 percent occasionally. In fact, around 80 percent of consumers consider that organic food is better for health and the environment. In 2012, 80 percent of “sustainable” consumers preferred to purchase their food in mega food stores rather than in specialized stores or directly from farmers compared to 63 percent in 2011 (Agence Bio, 2012).

Mass-produced conventional food, also called industrial food, has been part of our everyday life in Western societies since the mid-twentieth century, when mass production gradually replaced small-scale businesses through economies of scale. One of the major outcomes of the postwar period was that the production capacities of the food industry, among others, have been growing in quantity and certainly in quality all over the world, too. As a consequence, consumerism as social and economic phenomena appeared where meeting basic alimentary needs is not the major challenge anymore (Smart, 2010). Levine criticized consumerism-related materialism in the twenty-first century as “a shift away from values of community, spirituality, and integrity, and toward competition, materialism and disconnection” (Levine, 2007).

In today’s postmodern societies where established social norms, values, and institutions are changing rapidly, we often associate health with our eating habits. Nevertheless, we should not forget that the correlation between food and health was already part of the social and medical thinking of the past. “Dis-moi ce que tu manges, je te dirai ce que tu es” (Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you who you are) said nineteenth-century food scientist Anthelme Brillat-Savarin (Rosen, 2011: 64). A few decades later, Ludwig Andreas von Feuerbach (1863/1864) also believed that “Der Mensch ist, was er isst” (Man is what he eats), referring not only to the nutritional but also the spiritual meaning of our relationship to food (Rosen, 2011: 64).

Generally speaking, today’s food consumerism is a result of a strong economic progress and active commercial relationships between countries and regions. Globalization appears in all

spheres of human life. According to Giddens (1991: 64), “globalization can thus be defined as the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa.” Therefore, in relation to food consumerism, we should be reminded that coffee is not originally from Latin America and cocoa did not exist in the Ivory Coast, neither was the potato part of the Indian “traditional cuisine.” These are all results of geopolitical and economic influences decided by the political and economic elite of the Western world (Fumey and Guyau, 2012).

As a consequence, we can say that our eating habits and the symbolical interpretation of the food we consume have been shaped by global dynamics. Therefore, in our quest for understanding spirituality in today’s paradoxical association of *sustainable food consumerism*, one should focus on the historical and social dynamics of past societies. In this manner, we can explore the driving forces behind cultural and also individual preferences for particular food items.

Food and spirituality of the past

Religious food taboos of the past explain how the spiritual relationships between food and humans characterized our connection to the natural and social environments which surrounded us. According to Lévi-Strauss (2013) cooking techniques and consumed food in general demarcate cultures and human interactions in society. In his “culinary triangle” concept, Lévi-Strauss explains that cooking techniques such as roasted, grilled, smoked, and boiled correspond to certain structural developments of the studied culture. In this sense, as a continuation of Strauss’ structural approach, postmodern societies can also be analyzed from their current eating habits, such as, for instance, fast food, frozen, and organic products. In fact, the food we consume allows us to understand our cultural materials, social interactions, and symbols that organize the different visions of the world through space and time (Garabau-Moussaoui, in Duhart, 2005).

Past examples of food spirituality described by Western discourses can be drawn from Marvin Harris, who evoked the idea that spiritual approaches to taboos and eating restrictions always have a materialistic interpretation. In his book *Cows, Pigs, Wars and Witches* (1989) Harris explained that besides the religious/spiritual prohibition of beef in the Indian caste system there was a pragmatic, very much economic-based logic behind it in order to sustain Indian agriculture. Similarly, religious pork prohibition in Muslim and Jewish diets probably correlated both with an environmental incompatibility between man and animal and also with the establishment of social identities that led to an ecological equilibrium among humans and nature in a specific climate (Harris, 1989).

From a sociological perspective, the food that we consume is linked to our social classes, which reflect our tastes, values, and identities (Bourdieu, 1986). In ancient Rome, for example, the passion for some spices such as pepper characterized upper classes that had access to this exotic and expensive delicacy (Gibbon, 2003). Later, in the late Middle Ages, initial social stratification can be explained, among other reasons, by the physical interconnectedness with the East that was brought into European reach by the Silk Road. Exotic spices such as saffron, cinnamon, cloves, ginger, and nutmeg were popular among medieval lords because they showed prestige and social status (Hobhouse, 1986). The more spices a feudal lord could manifest in the meal in front of his guests, the more his social status was approved by the upper society.

Spices not only meant prestige and social status but also a form of spiritual connection with the new and idealized world where people lived differently from the people in the late

European Middle Ages (eleventh–thirteenth centuries). Therefore, many items and rituals that originated in the East (the American continent was unknown at the time) fulfilled a rather latent ceremonial function in the ideological and spiritual openings of the European aristocrats. Consuming spices and exotic items was considered luxurious and only accessible to rich people who deliberately maintained their social and economic privileges through these exotic items. It is not without reason that it was the Spanish royal family who financed Christopher Columbus' first voyage to discover new trade routes to the Far East where the exotic and treasured spices originated (Schivelbusch, 1992).

As Schivelbusch (1992) pointed out in his book *Tastes of Paradise*, the growing spice trade with Asia resulted in a saturated market in Europe in the seventeenth century. As a consequence, European upper classes started to search for new tastes and rituals to sustain social differences. During the eighteenth-century Enlightenment period, cocoa, coffee, and tea were some of the food items that served not only to distinguish social classes but also as a spiritual and intellectual boost for social change in general in European societies. Coffee, for instance, "served" as a spiritual panacea for all kinds of medical problems in the seventeenth century, despite the fact that it was not approved by the medical sciences of the time. Notwithstanding, this previously unknown drink in Europe became a major foodstuff of the future upper and upper-middle classes due to its manifest and also latent functions. Coffee not only kept people awake, but it also meant discipline and success in contrast to the laziness, illiteracy, and poverty of the masses. Thus, coffee contributed to the intellectual and social emergence of the bourgeoisie by symbolically establishing social distinction. To a certain extent, it also triggered the gender struggle for equal rights among women who previously did not have the right to consume it (Fernández-Armesto, 2004).

Nevertheless, the spiritual depreciation of formerly cherished exotic spices and food items was unavoidable. The very expensive chocolate, for example, as a solely religious and upper-class beverage of the seventeenth century has become a morning drink for today's children. The function of traditional British tea-time as a social ritual among upper-class members, which can be associated with Asian spirituality, has been gradually replaced by another popular drink: coffee. Today's coffee-drinking lifestyle is endlessly reinterpreted in society through the media. Coffee symbolizes harmony, seduction, romanticism, semi-individuality, self-identity, meditation, efficiency, and friendship, among others. In fact, coffee is appreciated in any situation and in any moment, exactly as it was perceived during its initial phase in the seventeenth-century European societies (Schivelbusch, 1992).

As a result, coffee is living its renaissance from a spiritual and also from an economic perspective today because it fulfills a practical and symbolic role in today's societies. It does not only help us in our daily routine tasks, but it also provides us with a fashionable touch, due to the multitude of varieties, to find the most pertinent reason behind one's choice to consume it. Today's famous coffee advertisements hint that personality, identity, and even spirituality are shaped by the type of coffee one consumes. To a certain extent it is similar to people's preference for organic food nowadays. Since conventional food production has been broadly criticized in Western societies, people look for answers and solutions that meet their expectations regarding health, morality, and identity.

Spirituality of sustainable food

The question of why individuals and, in a larger context, particular social groups in society favor certain foodstuffs today seems interesting to evoke. Indeed, neo-diffusionist theory would interpret it in a way that Western eating habits, among other cultural manifestations,

have infiltrated most of the world's cultures. As a consequence, concerning the "McDonaldization of society" (Ritzer, 2012), global Western foods such as fast food and Coca-Cola symbolize a West-centric progress and belonging. The cultural discourse theory would criticize the unequal diffusion of scientific knowledge about today's Western food consumerism in the world (Shi-xu, 2012). From this perspective, the tendency to buy and consume sustainable and organic food seems to be mainly part of Western urban societies due to their increasing health concerns and their decreasing physical connection with food production and farming in general (Macleod and Carrier, 2010).

Ironically, in developing economies, low-scale, non-certified organic food production is basically accessible for an important part of the rural population due to farmers' familiarity with traditional growing methods and also due to the lack of financial incentives to obtain economies of scale through advanced technologies (FAO, 2013). In this context, sustainable food does not seem to attract the same interest in the developing world as in the developed economies. In Western countries, it seems to be a sustainable movement, while in developing societies, mainly in traditional agrarian societies, it seems to be a standard aspect of human subsistence.

The concepts of sustainability and sustainable development in general have become a strong discourse in Western societies since the late 1980s when they were first defined by the Brundtland Report (United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). As a consequence, economic and political decisions started to pay attention to sustainable issues that affect humans' social actions. For example, the question of the growing number and varieties of available food on supermarket shelves opened discussions about the origin and reliability of our consumed food (Agence Bio, 2012; Watson and Caldwell, 2005).

Reconsidering Harris' cultural materialistic perspective, which was evoked previously, in today's postmodern societies, one can uphold the notion that sustainable discourses are comparable to religious food taboos. The food people consume symbolizes the individual's striving for survival and social identification, such as it did in the past. In today's Western societies, sustainable food production and consumption has undoubtedly attracted a growing interest in the past decades; nonetheless, sustainable and organic food in general, often imported and not subsidized, is still rather expensive compared to conventional food in Western societies (Kittler et al., 2011).

From these perspectives, today's sustainable/organic food dynamics could remind us of the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance when the European social transformation was strongly influenced by imported food items, such as spices and vegetables. Today's sustainable trend for healthy food in Western societies is comparable to the search for exotic products by the aristocrats of the European Renaissance because many of today's organic foods have their origins in the developing and exotic world. Therefore, Delia Chiaro's expression "taste of otherness" can also be interpreted in the way that sustainability and spirituality are tied together, thus prestige that determines social status also continues to depend on our choices and eating behaviors, exactly as occurred in the Renaissance (Chiaro, 2008).

Postmodern sustainability?

Denison Nash (2001) defends the idea that the Western cultural influence in developing countries goes beyond physical borders. One of the major agents of this cultural "neo-colonization" is tourism, which allows values and norms of Western societies to invade visited cultures and overtake traditions and authenticity. Part of this unidirectional social phenomenon is the Western extension of eating customs. Even though there is less fascination for exotic and

faraway foodstuff in Western societies, as opposed to past centuries, consumers are still influenced by the fact that certain foodstuffs can only have exotic origins. Most of the tropical fruits for instance cannot be harvested in the European continental climate. As a consequence, many of the food items we have on the market spiritually connect us with other cultures and regions of the world.

According to food historian Fernández-Armesto (2004: 19), postmodern individuals strive for narcissism and “romantic primitivism [that] allies with ecological anxiety.” Certainly, today’s Western food-related sustainable discourses mainly rest on health and environmental awareness due to the fact that religious food taboos do not guide us anymore. Instead, our individual choices enable us to interpret food in an imagined way such as, for instance, a guarantee of a long and healthy existence. In this sense, our individualized eating habits replace supernatural divinities to influence our human experience. As a consequence, contemporary spirituality can also be characterized as a holistic New Age movement that seeks a complete human experience where mind, body and spirit are all interconnected (Spring, 2004). Food can be considered as one of the basic elements of this quest in Western societies.

Borrowing from the French philosopher Roland Barthes’ psycho-sociological approach to food consumption (Counihan and Van Esterik, 2008), one of the elements one should consider when trying to understand the growing interest in sustainable food is the previously discussed economic and technological progress that enables us to consume basically whatever we want, whenever we wish. The exoticism of the past remains in today’s Western societies but it is progressively experiencing the same path as any other previously mentioned items that were facing a symbolic depreciation. Former luxurious food items and substances became available on a daily basis to everyone in today’s societies. On the other hand, as mentioned previously, labeled, organic, and—in this case—sustainable food is often more expensive than its conventional counterpart. Accordingly, labeled/sustainable food is not easily available for all social classes on a daily basis in Western societies, which justifies past dynamics on social status and symbolic separation of urban upper-middle classes even in postmodern societies where people build their identities through the perception that others have of them.

Barthes also applies the concept of communication that connects us with the food we consume to the society we live in. By choosing sustainable food, people may also express a form of intellectual and spiritual distinction that is based on financial and cultural capitals (Bourdieu, 1986). The individual or collective identity that is created by a sustainable choice might attract approval or disapproval from our fellow citizens; nevertheless it demarcates the social relationships and the expectations of people with sustainable preferences. If we connect this dimension with the previously mentioned idea of “neo-colonization” (Nash, 2001), we can correlate spiritual and also internal colonization of new segments in Western societies, based on economic and/or cultural capitals, which tend to differentiate their identity from other segments and justify this difference through their eating habits and choices.

From the anthropological perspective of embodiment, consuming sustainable and, in this context, probably healthier food guarantees one a daily interconnectedness with nature that seems to be increasingly appreciated by the upper-middle classes of postmodern, urban populations (Macleod and Carrier, 2010). This spiritual quest for natural and healthier food can be connected to eighteenth-century Renaissance philosophical movements, such as Rousseau’s idea of the Noble Savage, when the individuals who were closely related to nature were more cherished than the ones who were socially and politically polluted in European urban areas. Today, the collective trust of Western societies in large-scale, industrial food production seems to be affected by the increasing detachment of their practices from nature (McMillan

and Coveney, 2010; Shiva, 2013). Nevertheless, due to the increased access to information, upper-middle classes in Western societies gain knowledge and understanding of Western eating habits and their enigmatic impacts on our most precious individual treasury: health.

A puzzling element of our cognitive connection to food is the way consumerism generates specific desires when faced with a multitude of choices through advertisements. Today's elderly generations can easily recall, for instance, the theatrical symbiosis established by multinational companies, between nature, adventure, virility, and cigarettes. Due to scientific results and political engagement, the younger generations can only find evidence of this former spiritual invasion of the individual through vintage archives on the web.

In fact, conventional food advertising is perpetually invading our private space because ads find new means of communication often in a still uncontrollable way on the web. There are some sustainable trends these days, which focus on food labels; however, companies often generate a sort of inauthentic authenticity by attracting consumers' attention to the place and context of production (Cohen, 1988). French-made cheese, Argentinian beef, real hamburgers, or farmer-made items have the goal of convincing consumers about the authenticity and realness of the specific product. Stiles et al. (2011) explain this phenomenon with the concept of "ghost of taste," when people associate an imagined truthfulness of the advertised food product with its origin, such as a farmer's photo on a meat package. This spiritual interconnectedness with the unreal characteristics of the offered item can also remind us of a sort of "hyperreality" (Baudrillard, 1995), where consumers imagine the non-existent synergies of the way and place of production with health and nature that gratify one's spiritual fulfillment.

Local and global food dynamics (Stiles et al., 2011) can justify this imagined unreal-reality because consumers are unable to track down the details of pre-purchasing phases. Certainly, eco-labeled items provide information on the origins of the food; however, this information is often limited to the place of production and not to its social and cultural contexts. The image we associate with the eco-labeled food in postmodern consumerism is a moral guarantee of our altruism with others and also with ourselves.

Barthes also evokes the circumstantial adjustment between substance and function in food consumerism (Counihan and Van Esterik, 2008). As in the past, today's food-eating habits contribute to a more functional objective that is self-identification in a society where a rising individualism requires a growing material excuse for socialization and prestige. Coffee breaks replaced tea breaks in most Western societies. Elderly Chinese people observe new generations' preference for coffee, a drink that did not touch Chinese society notably until the 1980s. In this sense, cultural colonization, mentioned previously, is a real global phenomenon. The way individuals identify themselves is highly correlated to the items we consume today. The image of products, such as coffee, justifies a dynamic professional and personal life that fits with postmodern expectations. If a further step is needed for self-identification, then sustainability fulfills the gap because it is new, trendy, perceptible, and healthy.

Conclusion

The question whether sustainable food consumerism will be maintained as a marginal demand in postmodern societies or will become a global norm cannot be answered yet. If today's spiritual, ecological, and social attachment to sustainable food consumption becomes a norm in Western societies, it will create a global challenge for the food industry and for the political legislation behind it. Since religious doctrines seem to have a reduced influence on our

individual food choices, the unconventional scientific understanding of our eating habits will probably contribute to better health awareness in society. Victor Lindlahr, in 1942, already advocated this idea: “ninety per cent of the diseases known to man are caused by cheap food-stuffs. You are what you eat” (Rosen, 2011: 64).

Therefore, the food we consume determines our health and indirectly our role and interactions in society. If health, both physical and mental, stays a primary driving force in increasingly educated societies, social pressure will probably lead to a more reliable food supply for the masses. Nevertheless, if sustainable food is available for all, privileged social classes will probably look for other salient alimentary symbols to identify themselves. We can only hope that they will stay within a controllable and sustainable limit that will not jeopardize future generations’ subsistence.

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