LÉVI-STRAUSS CULINARY TRIANGLE AND THE LIVING FOODS DIET

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ABSTRACT

The nature/culture dichotomy constitutes the ambivalent structure articulating the modern discourses of healthy eating. On one hand, nature is seen as an ideal; on the other hand it manifests itself as dangerous and uncontrolled. This presentation aims at developing further the theoretical approach presented in Claude Levi-Strauss’ culinary triangle and discussing its usefulness in analyzing the structures of modern eating.

Lévi-Strauss’ triangle is based on two polarities: nature/culture – elaborated/unelaborated. The ambivalent oscillation (progression/regression) between the poles of nature and culture, observable in the Lévi-Straussian model, is also manifest in the modern discourses of eating. Nature represents regression, the raw and the “rotten” side of our being, but at the same time it constitutes the ambivalent ideal (“natural eating”) toward which the eater is striving.

The problem of the Lévi-Straussian triangle is that it focuses mainly on the progressive, “civilizing” movement from nature to culture. Yet, it is precisely the regressive “fall” back to nature which constitutes the “moral” dilemma of the modern eater. In order to better conceptualize this “regressive” side of the Lévi-Straussian model we shall use Georges Bataille's theories concerning the “impure” and the prohibited side of human culture.

INTRODUCTION

The choice of food is a process in which nutrition produced by nature is transformed into food, a product of culture. People do not accept all possible substances as edible but make choices. Culture defines how possible nutrition is coded into acceptable food. (See Lévi-Strauss, 1966; Mäkelä, 2002). Ecological, biological, and economic conditions affect our choice of food, but it is the cultural understanding and categorisation that structures food as edible or inedible and as part of the world. According to the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966), no culture is without language and cooking skills. Nourishment that is not categorised by language and culture as edible, i.e. food, is not acceptable. Food is firstly in the Lévi-Straussian sense good to think and only
secondly does it become good to eat in the Harrisian sense. (Lévi-Strauss 1989, 3 and 9 and Harris 1986, 15.) However, the definition as edible does not indicate that food is good for you. It can also be “bad” for you, especially in relation to your health.

This conceptual ambivalence (edible as something bad) is well illustrated in the modern discourses of healthy eating, especially in the bewildering manifoldness of diets striving for good health. On a more fundamental level, what these regimes seem to undermine is the whole Lévi-Straussian idea of “culture” as a progressive movement away from “nature”. By using one paradigmatic case, namely the living foods diet, we aim at showing how the discourses of modern eating tend to blur the very limits of the Lévi-Straussian nature-culture dichotomy. For instance, the central idea of the living foods diet is precisely not to cook, i.e. heat the food which in turn seems to be contrary to the very idea of transforming nutrition/nourishment into food as it is seen by Lévi-Strauss.

The empirical data consists of living foods diet guidebooks and forthcoming personal interviews with “raw foodists”. This study is part of a larger research project “Life regulation practices and the nature-culture problem”, coordinated by Pekka Sulkunen at the Department of Sociology, University of Helsinki and funded by the Academy of Finland.

BACKGROUND

Since the mid-twentieth century the nutritional revolution equals to eating ‘light’. People eat light products whereas fatty and sweet delicacies are saved for exceptional occasions like feasts. The pleasures of the modern consumer are restrained and should not be seen on the waistline. Obesity is a sign of relapsed control and it puts into question not only the morals but the cultural competence of the eater. A civilized person can control his or her appetite. (Elias, 1978; Mennell, 1987).

Relapses into unhealthy snacking and binging are prevented by eating regularly and eating proper meals. This might explain the importance of meals as indicated by several empirical studies (cf. Mäkelä, 2000), because they act as a medium of controlled eating. Disciplinary and well organised eating is interpreted as a reflection of general governance of life, just like a tidy home (cf. Schmidt & Kristensen, 1986). The emphasis on ‘good’ eating is understandable because it indicates self-control.

Guiltless pleasures are possible with planned relapses, like occasional children’s ‘candy day’. However, these relapses do not question the basis of the striving for good eating. They could be seen as a ritualised test, a socially regulated transgression of the borderline between good and bad eating. Often it is really a question of the sweetness and fattiness of the forbidden fruit. Therefore, treats are not completely forbidden. However, these indulgences should not be seen on your body. Ideally, you should be thin, healthy and fit without paying remarkable attention to it (Morrison, 1995: 254).

Even if the question of good eating is primarily and often superficially linked to health issues, there are other, social and moral connotations related to it. People do not want to be stigmatised as eaters of unhealthy food nor as victims of food-related illnesses. Many people entertain food images, symbolical representation in which the characteristics of foods are transferred into the eater so that and food habits become exposed to moral judgement. (Fischler,1988; Stein & Nemeroff, 1995.) Strong moral and aesthetical considerations lurk behind the concept of ‘natural’ healthiness of eating. The body that takes shape has to find a balance between the heart and the body.
MAIN PRINCIPLES OF THE LIVING OR RAW FOODS DIET

“But like most things that seem simple on the surface, the presentation of raw and living foods isn’t simple at all. It is instead quite complex and requires serious study to learn the basic properties of foods and how foods act when handled in various ways.” Charlie Trotter (Trotter & Klein, 2003:9.)

Living, live or raw foods diet was developed by Ann Wigmore, originally from Lithuania but later moved to the U.S.A. She is an almost mythical person who cured her own illnesses and died in a fire in 1994. The living foods diet probably has most followers in the United States, but during recent years several books have been published in Europe as well. (Bruce, 2003; Mars, 2004; Safron, 2003; Underkoffler, 2003.) To put it briefly, the main idea of the living foods diet is to eat foods raw, i.e. uncooked foods from the plant world. The main principle is not to heat food over degrees Celsius as then the vital enzymes “begin deteriorating” (Alt, 2004: 11). Therefore, the cooked and/or processed food is considered to be bad for digestion. Furthermore, the living foods diet emphasises proper assimilation of nutrients by combining foods with a focus on acid-alkaline balance, the elimination of toxic and harmful substances.

Wheatgrass is considered to be a “superfood” due to its hold of chlorophyll. In the properties and uses of wheatgrass epitomise the living foods diet’s a very holistic view of eating as a healing, cleansing and preventing process. Accordingly, the foods stuffs should preferably be organically grown.

Even though, the raw foods are not cooked, the living foods diet involves a variety of preparation methods. These include growing wheatgrass and other greens indoor, juicing, soaking, sprouting, culturing and fermenting and dehydrating. Opinions about supplements varies. Some are against (e.g. Bruce, 2003) and some are for enzyme supplements (Underkoffler, 2003). Likewise, colon care is important to some, others do not mention it.

YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT AND NOT WHAT YOU HEAT: THE RATIONALE OF GOING RAW

According to Lévi-Strauss there is no culture without the art of cooking and language. The mastering of fire is considered to be one of the essential features of human kind. Therefore, cooking, i.e, the transformation of raw materials provided by the nature with heat into food dishes typical for certain cultures is in the core of human actions. Living foods diet, however, seems to contradict all this by claiming that it is the very act of heating, i.e. cooking, the food that destroys the good nourishment provided to humans by the kind and thoughtful mother earth.

Interestingly, it seems that that living foods is not seeing that something is lost with the civilization process but it is a question of increased knowledge of good eating and nourishment. However, the handbooks give very little detailed information about research on living foods even though the rhetoric is full of terms that could be called as scientification (cf. Niva & Mäkelä, 2005). Enzymes, acids, vitamins… In a way, it is not a question of going back to nature, it is a question of understanding nature in a new way. However, it could be said that this understanding is neither traditional nor mainstream. Furthermore, the argumentation is not based on a conventional style of scientific reporting since one’s own experiences – often in the form of testimonials rather than research results are emphasised. Yet, some authors of the guide books complain the lack of research).
There seems to be no yearning for lost wisdom or food habits like in the stone age diet [“Rent biologisk sett är vi jägare och samlare och skapade att överleva med på naturlig föda.” (Fredin Skog, 2005: 8)] On the contrary, Mars (2004: 4) asks: “Are we to stay bound to the hard realities of the past? Or will we let the evolution of our culture and technology guide our food choice toward a more healthful way of life before the era of agriculture and settling down.

The living foods diet actually is a very thoroughly thought diet. Nothing is left for a chance. In a way the message is that by carefully taking responsibility of your eating in the manner of living foods diet, you indicate that you are rational (and maybe not prone to the indulgences of modern life). You respect your health so much that you are ready to leave the cultured food behind you. It should be pointed out that living foods are no means unelaborated.

It is therefore rather self-evident that living foods diet is critical towards modern life. “We dig graves wit our forks” (Mars, 2004: 14) However, it’s not a question of retrieving back to some ancient way of life but a critique that points out that we are eating to live and not living to eat (Safron, 2003, Bruce, 2003). Even though, following the living foods diet requires a lot of commitment, it is not a eating style where the pleasure is put ahead everything. On the contrary, you are not enjoying your food as much you are enjoying your (functioning) body and soul/mind.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT, FOOD FOR BODY AND SOUL

“What is a diet? Mind, body, and spirit in union” (Underkoffler, 2003, 5)

In recent years there has been a definite development into believing that your diet can solve all your problems what so ever. This is evident both within conventional and alternative approaches. The old slogan by B-S: you are what you eat is more vibrant and maybe more concrete than ever. A glimpse of an Anglo-American bookstore’s health section shows that food and nutrition can cure everything from cancer to behavioural disorders.

It seems that the very essence of the living foods diet is the belief that by eating raw, uncooked food all the problems or illnesses caused by the Western life style and especially food habits and its imbalanced diet. In this sense, it is a very modern, rational diet. The belief that problems can be solved is deeply rooted in the argumentation. To survive the modern life, the living foods diet provides the answers and practices. The title of the Viktoras Kulvinskas’ book Survival in the 21th Century (1975/2002; http://www.naturalusa.com/viktor/Books/Survival.html) epitomises this idea nicely. It could be argued that the living foods diet is a very modern construction created in the ethos of individual well-being. Being that it fits well in the rhetoric of individual’s responsibility to take care of oneself in the spirit of the new public health discussion.

Religion is in some cases closely related to living or more precisely to raw foods. One example is the Hallelujah Diet that also promoted different types of (dietary) supplements. Also the statement “Jesus was a raw-foodist” with Bible quotations is to be find in several variations.

LÉVI-STRAUSS’ CULINARY TRIANGLE AND THE POINTS OF EATING

The starting point for the theoretical analysis of the data was the observation that the nature/culture -dilemma is interestingly ambivalent and contradictory in the modern discourses of ‘healthy’ eating.
Nature, on one hand, is seen as an ideal providing the model for healthy eating – however, this ideal is not that of a “pure”, “virgin” or “untouched” nature, but rather that of a nature scientifically (i.e. culturally) remoulded, worked through. Culture, on the other hand, is seen both as a progressive and a regressive factor: culture embodies the ideal of modern, “scientific” rationality which guides the dieter’s “nutritional” rationale, but at the same time it is seen as the bearer of dangerous wastes, toxic substances, which stem from its’ very form of symbolic/concrete appropriation (i.e. cooking) of the “raw” (i.e. the natural).

This is what gave us the idea to use Claude Lévi-Strauss' culinary triangle as a theoretical tool in the analysis of the discourses related to good and bad, healthy and unhealthy eating – but also as a methodological device that can be used to criticize the metaphysical assumptions underlying his structural model (above all the rigid nature-culture-dualism, the limits of which we hope to be able to show in what follows). The points of the Lévi-Strauss’ basic culinary triangle are the raw, the cooked and the rotten. The triangle, however, is not only a tool for analysing food classifications but a theoretical device Lévi-Strauss (1964; 1966) used in his analysis of myths in order to reveal more fundamental structural oppositions constituting human culture in general. In the culinary triangle these basic structures are represented by two polarities: nature/culture–elaborated/unelaborated. For Lévi-Strauss then the triangle constitutes a method for the study of the borderline between nature and culture and of the ‘progressive’ as well as the ‘regressive’ movement across this border.


The discourses of good, bad and pleasurable eating could, in many cases, be seen as reflecting the all-powerful borderline between “nature” and “culture” which the rules of eating might then be seen as constantly defining and redefining. From this perspective, however, the various paradoxes of pleasure would already manifest an ambivalence inherent in the concept of nature. On one hand, nature seems to represent regression, the uncontrolled, instinctual, “raw” side of our being: if the (cultural) control of pleasure is lost it turns ‘rotten’. The uncontrolled, “savage” nature is regulated with classification of edible foods, constant weight control, planned ‘relapses’ and (concretely) transforming the raw nourishment into culturally accepted food by cooking. The consequences of ‘rotten’ eating would, in turn, be crystallised in the fear of fat.
But on the other hand ‘nature’ also seems to constitute the ambivalent ideal type, the model toward which the eater is striving. This model functions on three different levels at least: 1) on the level of ‘health’ which is seen as a ‘natural’ state of the human body (eating healthy is seen as eating ‘naturally’); 2) on the level of aesthetics as an ideal of a ‘naturally’ thin and fit body, a ‘natural’ good looks (which is only attained at the cost of immense cultural and artificial training of the repressed body, Lupton, 1996); 3) on the level of morals in the discourse of treats and indulgences where nature, despite of its dangers, is seen as the source of pleasure (pleasure is, paradoxically, attained only by letting go, ‘transgressing’ the limits set by culture).

From one angle the Lévi-Straussian triangle reflects perfectly the moral stance apparent also in the discourses of modern eating: the movement from nature to culture (i.e. the controlled, elaborated aspect of things) is seen as ‘progression’, whereas the inverse movement (i.e. the uncontrolled lapse to the raw or the ‘rotten’) is interpreted as ‘regression’. But this is precisely the dimension where things also get complicated. First, as soon as we leave the dimension of control and start looking at things from the point of view of elaboration, we notice that ‘nature’ by no means signifies ‘unelaborated’ and, on the other hand, that the cultural elaboration can also turn “rotten”.

Secondly, unlike the Lévi-Straussian mythology the modern discourses of “healthy” eating do not represent transgressions of the cultural limit as mere regressions, but also as source of pleasure, albeit a “forbidden” one. This ‘transgressive’ aspect of pleasure, which is attained only in the ritual violation of rules, does not lead back to the ‘raw’ nature, but is structured by our cultural representations concerning the ‘forbidden’ or the ‘accursed’ (as the French philosopher and social theorist, Georges Bataille, has pertinently noted; cf. Arppe 2000).

Thus the notion of the limit separating the ‘pure’ from the ‘impure’ nature seems to be the focal point of many modern discourses of eating. The ‘pure’ represents either the culturally controlled or the unpolluted, non-artificial ideal type, whereas the ‘impure’ is either the uncontrolled or the culturally contaminated, depending on the discourse in question. The various difficulties in drawing this limit are manifested for instance in the vegan or living foods discourses of eating.

The living food diet adds yet another complication to the Lévi-Straussian scheme. The discourse guiding this regime seems to contain the idea that the regressive, “rotten” aspect of eating is of cultural origin. The danger and “pollution” would then no more come from the chaotic nature, but from the cultural appropriation itself – from the degenerating effect of culture when it becomes “excessive”, too refined or polished. But on the other hand, in distinction of the romantic ideal urging us to go and look for the ideal in the “pure” and incorrupt nature, the living food discourse wants to search for the salvation in the nature elaborated to such an extent that it almost becomes a simulacrum of the romantic ideal (‘nature’ reduced to its’ scientific components, so to say: vitamins, proteins, minerals, enzymes etc.).

**OPPOSITIONS OF THE CULINARY TRIANGLE AND THE LIVING FOODS DIET**

The problem of the Lévi-Straussian triangle is that it focuses mainly on the progressive, “civilizing” movement from nature to culture. Yet, it is precisely the regressive “fall” – on one hand back to nature (dimension of control), on the other hand to the “rotten” side of culture (dimension of elaboration) – which constitutes the “moral” dilemma of the modern eater. In order to better conceptualize this “regressive” side which the Lévi-Straussian model leaves unexamined we shall use Georges Bataille’s theories concerning the “impure” and the prohibited side of human culture.
While in the living foods diet people are not cooking but making or preparing meals, it is not an unelaborated process. In deed, it is rather elaborated to process to prepare food according to the core principles of the living foods diet. Following the living foods diet requires commitment that takes stand to the nature/culture dilemma or opposition. The living foods diet contains a continuous strife of definition between acceptable and unacceptable eating – i.e. acceptable/unacceptable degree of elaboration. For example, among those following living foods diet, “nature” constitutes the model toward which the eater is striving – hence, the definitions concerning the “naturalness” of the food become vital. However, the notion of natural, right way of eating is complicated as it is definitely mediated by the culture. The ambiguity of the living foods diet may be crystallized in the double meaning of the ‘cultured’ that refers both to fermentation and refined/cultivated/civilized (by the culture). In that sense, the fall back to the nature is not regressive in the context of the living foods diet.

That leaves us with a question: how can we situate the living foods diet in the culinary triangle? Do we need to redraw the triangle or is it completely unsuitable for the analysis of the structures of modern eating? What could be the new mythology constituting the discourse of the living foods diet and how should we analyse its constitutive axes in a situation where ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ can apparently no longer be used as such? What is the role of pleasure and of the cultural limit (as well as of its transgression) in the living foods diet? The challenge in the near future is to answer these questions.
REFERENCES


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