

Special Section Introduction

From Nature to Culture? Lévi-Strauss' Legacy and the Study of Contemporary Foodways

Guest editors

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Abstract

This introduction and special section explores the legacy of Claude Lévi-Strauss for the study of contemporary foodways. We revisit Lévi-Strauss' structural writing about food through different angles. To begin with, based on our ethnographic research with Moroccan cooks, we propose to consider some basic elements of food culture as an “alphabet”, as a shared language and, more generally, as a formally structured and normalized set of practices. Then, the first research article of this special section proposes to use Lévi-Strauss' model of myths in a novel way, by bringing culinary and social practices in Western Kenya into relation through the concept of mereological ambivalence. In the second and third articles, Lévi-Strauss' so-called culinary triangle, which represents a semantic field within which the various forms of food's transformation are structurally meaningful and constitutes possibly his most well-known theoretical contribution to food studies, will be explored and questioned through contemporary practices of dumpster diving in London and the discourse among raw food eaters in France and the United States. Overall, this special section hopes to demonstrate that despite valid and enduring critique of his semantic models, Lévi-Strauss' theoretical engagement with food can still generate exciting and fruitful analysis of contemporary foodways.

In the first volume of his *Mythologiques*, entitled “Le cru et le cuit” (1964, engl. *The raw and the cooked*), Claude Lévi-Strauss argued that the preparation of food is a form of language that reveals a society's structure. For Lévi-Strauss the so-called culinary triangle of the raw, the rotten, and the cooked represents a semantic field within which the various forms of transformation of food from more “natural”, i.e., raw, into more “cultural”, i.e., boiled or roasted, forms matter. Lévi-Strauss’ analytical legacy is felt throughout the social sciences and especially in the interdisciplinary domain of food studies until today, where more or less motivated and committed reference to the author’s influential work is almost imperative while dealing with habitual foodways, their meanings and the processes they trigger. Nevertheless, no recent attempt has been made to engage in fruitful academic exchange or to collect works that apply his structural theory systematically to the study of contemporary foodways and assess its impact on the analysis and theorizations produced within this domain.

In the context of radical transformations in the global food system, meaning at times the standardization, at times the diverse re-localization of processes of food production, distribution and consumption – often based on new technologies and new media – our collection of articles shows that a critical engagement with Lévi-Strauss’ work can still provide new insights into topical academic debates pertaining to social relations, discourses and practices arising around food. Since Lévi-Strauss, following extensive changes to food production, preparation and consumption, the notion of cooking has become ever more diversified, and is increasingly contentious. Yet, the multiple ways of combining and processing ingredients still give social and cultural meaning to food and trigger the creation of sociabilities and belongings through its own (final) destruction (Gell 1986).

This special issue aims to explore Levi-Strauss' legacy and evaluate its usefulness in today's context from different angles, ranging from domestic food preparation to collective diets and global circulation of food and ideas – or cultures – about food. To what extent can this conceptual framework still provide an interpretative scheme of topical food issues? Which contemporary myths does it shed light on? How could it be applied to read the history of food and link it to contemporary questions? Finally, are there new ways in which it could be used to make sense of foodways and social life today?

This special section comprises three research articles on contemporary food production and preparation, including the preparation of mereologically structured food in Western Kenya, skipping for “waste” in London's squatting communities and the raw food diet in France and the United States. The ethnographically based explorations of these practices embrace the analysis of related representations and socio-cultural effects. For instance, Mario Schmidt examines how the assembly of clearly distinguishable ingredients into one coherent dish resembles the construction of social parts and wholes amongst the jo-Kaleko of Western Kenya. Giovanna Capponi explores how food that from a capitalist logic of production is considered “rotted” or waste can be re-inserted into a system of value amongst London's precarious squatting communities. Solenn Thircuir highlights how the narratives associated with the raw food diet in France and the United States depict this food practice as a means to overcome health issues or to achieve a more balanced lifestyle against the degeneration associated with the modern food system.

Although mobilizing a classic anthropological theory, to which all our authors refer to, in order to question its contemporary hermeneutical value, this collection presents a broad spectrum of analytical perspectives on the preparation of food. We understand this to range from the production of food to its transformation into bodily sustenance or waste and we still consider it an anthropological fact: despite multiple changes within foodways, human beings

still need to think every day about where to get what kind of food and how to prepare it to feed themselves and others in a meaningful way. Underlying each food culture we often find an “alphabet”, which builds on a set of shared narratives and practices that is worth to be analyzed.

Significantly, our own research on Moroccan cuisine has shown that this idea may be expressed by research participants themselves and is not merely a result of analytical scrutiny. The idea of an alphabet underlying a food culture conceived as a shared collective language, and more generally as a formally structured and normalized sets of practices, may appear as contradicting recent theoretical and methodological postulates aimed at finding, describing and stating the almost incommensurable variety of practices included in a food culture. Yet, attesting this variety may be compatible with identifying sets of standardized, logically universal and relevant norms within a group. An alphabet of a food culture is framed within a “sphere of possibilities”, i.e., a range of permitted variations of given archetypes (Gell 1998). Such an alphabet, while establishing rules, allows playing with them insofar as the obtained result is still collectively intelligible within the specific food culture.

Through ethnographic research among Moroccan migrants in Milan’s hinterland (Mescoli 2014) and among Moroccans in Marrakech (Graf 2016), certain invariants of Moroccan cuisine emerged. These consist of basic elements such as ingredients and their combinations, gestures and techniques of cooking, tools and their uses as well as rules regarding commensality. Their operation follows shared norms and could potentially explain each possible dish associated to this gastronomy. Following Lévi-Strauss, this set consists of a schema that shapes mutually intelligible relationships between ingredients, procedures, cooking instruments and eaters, and thus describes a shared cultural unit (Lévi-Strauss 1964, 16). This means attributing a comprehensible content to the definition of a (food) culture

through pointing out those practices, which underlie it – by the actors associating to this culture as well as from an external gaze.

As some of the contributions to this volume also testify, these are often micro-elements compared to the final result, i.e. the completed dish. In both Moroccan cases, such micro-elements often consist of certain combinations of spices with meats. For instance, chicken is considered to “need” ginger, turmeric and, ideally, saffron, whilst ground meat “needs” cumin and sweet paprika – for Moroccan cooks the reverse combination, especially of chicken with cumin and paprika, is simply impossible on the grounds of aesthetics and taste. Furthermore, specific dishes are prepared using specific tools, such as the double-layered “couscoussière” pot for simultaneously preparing couscous grains and a sauce or the “tajine” pot for making stews with the same name¹. Commensality is equally ruled by these elements, such as eating from a shared plate, the absence of cutlery or the use of only three fingers on the right hand for eating². Indeed, the linguistic metaphor guiding Lévi-Strauss’ theorizations makes these micro-elements extremely relevant in that they are the fundamental units that allow the preparation and consumption of dishes – just like the letters of an alphabet are the basic units that allow the creation of sentences.

These elements (composing the alphabet of a food culture) are furthermore joined by what Douglas (1972) calls a “system of repeated analogies” whereby the parts recall the whole and gain meaning this way (see also, Sutton 2001). For instance, the cereals from which flour is derived to make bread, which is prepared and consumed every day in most Moroccan households, are still the main ingredients of couscous, which is typically prepared and consumed on Fridays (the Muslim day of rest). The latter, in turn, recalls yet more elaborate dishes based on the same grains on festive days in the annual lunar calendar. These might be

¹ Whenever this pot is replaced to make the preparation of tajine faster, it is often with pressure cookers with a particular shape (either a conical or a convex cover) that is recognized as common in Moroccan houses and different from that of other pots of this kind.

² This habit, as well as others relating to commensality, is noted down in various *hadeeth*, reports that describe words, actions or habits of the Muslim prophet Muhammad.

couscous prepared with a special sauce such as the boiled tail of the lamb sacrificed during Aid el-kebir for ‘Ashura (Islamic New Year) or “harira”, the quintessential Moroccan soup – either with tomato or milk – that is served during Ramadan and other festive occasions and is always thickened with wheat flour. The preparation and consumption of cereals – the smallest temporal units in this “system of repeated analogies”, and which climax on festive days in more elaborate dishes – in the form of flour for bread or harira, or as couscous, thus recall Moroccan food as a whole.

Furthermore, these material facts are endowed with spiritual meanings, as Diouri (1994) highlights by recalling that flour is among the main elements of the food tradition of the prophet Muhammad. Cereals can thus be considered as the essence of food and, as such, they constitute the primary gift (al-ni’ama) of God (Buitelaar 1993). Interestingly, and connected to this, in the migration context where food temporalities – festive among others – may be redefined, cereals and preparations based on them serve as a temporal redistribution of religious meanings. This occurs, for example, with regard to the sacredness of Friday. In a context where this day is not festive, such sacredness is preserved and transmitted through moving the preparation of couscous – the food associated with it – to the local festive day, i.e., Sunday (Mescoli 2019).

These structural elements within a food culture and their temporality over the year are the basis of the concept of cuisine – similar to a language. A cuisine is shared by a community of people who eat similar foods with a certain frequency and that they call themselves experts on; they believe to know what it consists of, how it is made and how it should taste (Mintz 1996) and which, as shown by the previous examples, is furthermore marked by certain rules of consumption, and an organized system of production and distribution (Belasco 1999). At the same time, no single dish tastes alike and Moroccan cuisine, nor any other, is not static.

On the one hand, although our research participants claimed that every woman cooked differently save for those unchangeable elements, at the same time each cook we worked with also asserted that she cooked just like her mother, thus suggesting a contradictory relationship between divergent cooking over space, i.e., between family members, neighbors and/or friends, and convergent cooking over time, i.e., from one generation to the next. Depending on what was emphasized – either creative individualism or continuity over time – cooks discursively and practically constructed their food preparation as idiosyncratic and creative or as based on a collective Moroccan cuisine³. Interestingly, for some of our interlocutors living in Italy, food preparations were considered to change much more in Morocco than amongst Moroccan people abroad. In fact, Moroccans abroad considered their foodways to be “stuck in time” since they relied on the traditions they had known from their family before migration to recover against the insecurity and ruptures triggered by their leave.

On the other hand and as all contributions show, any cuisine is – like language – by definition adapting to a changing material and social environment, such as food markets, taste preferences, dietary recommendations, or changing gender relations. The inherent adaptability and creativity of cooking emerges especially if we conceive of cooking as the collaboration between cook, food and environment (Graf under review): a cook, who relies on her bodily sense of taste to assess and evaluate various processes, collaborates with food, which transforms itself both as it cooks but also “naturally” as observed by Levi-Strauss. In doing so, a cook also engages her material environment, such as tools like spoons or blenders that extend the body (Ingold 2011) or by responding to the layout of (Sutton 2006) and temperature in the kitchen.

³ This is reflected in two television programs hosted by the well-known cook and TV star Choumicha: *Chiwāt biladī ma’a Choumicha* and *Chiwāt Choumicha* (Delicacies of the country with Choumicha and Delicacies by Choumicha), respectively devoted to present traditional dishes prepared by women in their houses around the country (Morocco) or “creations” – as the cook herself calls her food explorations – realized in the TV studio.

A given cuisine is thus guided both by shared structural elements embedded within a predictable temporality *and* by a cook's individual adaptive responses to an ever-changing material and social environment. This dynamic conceptualization allows going beyond understanding cuisine as a static set of rules, yet without rejecting the notion that a shared alphabet is drawn on when cooking a socially recognizable dish. As this brief introductory example and the following research articles show, Levi-Strauss' theoretical approach still provides an important starting point from which to understand cuisine and society more broadly.

This special section includes a selection of articles that have been presented in a panel with the same title during the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA) conference in Milan in July 2016. The variety of themes covered here testifies to Lévi-Strauss' theoretical relevance and opens up new avenues for thinking through, with and about his *Mythologiques*.

In the first article, Mario Schmidt relates culinary and social practices through the concept of mereological ambivalence, i.e., the question of how to make one whole out of many parts as in the combination of diverse ingredients into one dish. He proposes that by using Levi-Strauss' model of myths in a novel way, the preparation and consumption of food can serve to analyze the establishment and maintenance of social relations amongst the jo-Kaleko in Western Kenya. Schmidt describes how the preparation of "kuon gi omena", a porridge of diverse grains served with locally sourced sardines, combines ambivalent and seemingly incompatible elements of food – relating especially to taste and texture – into a dish that is perceived as tasty and wholesome. By arguing that discussions and habits around the combination of foods structurally resemble discussions and practices around social relations, especially the important question of who belongs to whom in this polygamous setting, Schmidt shows that instead of focusing on the sensual properties of food as laid out in the

culinary triangle, Levi-Strauss' focus on food's mereological properties can be theoretically fruitful for anthropological studies of food.

Giovanna Capponi explores in the second article how food that from a capitalist perspective can be considered rotten, is re-inserted into the flow of values amongst London squatters. Relying on a political interpretation of dumpster diving and anthropological theories of value, she reverses Levi-Strauss' culinary triangle to explore how foods that are deemed inedible and cast out of the capitalist food system – marked by formalized regulations expressed in expiry dates and their declaration as waste – can become valued nourishment as well as means for political statements in the hands of these precarious communities. Capponi describes the skipping practices of various squatting crews and the re-organization of food in their kitchens according to the new properties that it acquires, as well as the ways in which social actors confront their own personal and culturally informed tastes and desires in doing so. Capponi's observations challenge us to reconsider commonsensical notions of food's transformation – as well as of purity and edibility – and highlights the close connection between material practices and their symbolic significance. In this case, by consuming so called rotten food, London squatters critique the inbuilt inequalities and wastefulness of the contemporary food system.

Solenn Thircuir explores the growing interest in the raw food diet in France and the United States through Lévi-Strauss' culinary triangle, showing how the relationship between nature and culture – especially the role of human beings within it – is questioned in this context. Throughout her analysis of this particular diet, she highlights the limits of Lévi-Strauss' theorization in accounting for the temporal dimension of food practices and their change across time. As a result, what is originally presented as an opposition, “nature against culture”, is first re-elaborated and re-conceptualized as a continuum of practices and related discourses. Second, such analysis permits to revive the theory of the culinary triangle and to

endow it – in particular the poles of the raw and the cooked – with different meanings. More precisely, the permanence of dichotomies, despite being charged with actualized meanings, still reveals the need for social actors to classify food in certain ways.

The collection of these articles demonstrates that Lévi-Strauss' theorizations still provide a fruitful avenue for interrogating contemporary foodways. Indeed, his semantics still allow stimulating analyses of ethnographic material related to diverse food habits and representations, leading to new and exciting ways of thinking through, with and about his *Mythologiques*.

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