

Food and the Quantum Theory of Taboo

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To offer an explanation of the development of different styles and tastes in cuisine in France and England was only the most obvious – even if also the most important – aim of my book *All Manners of Food* (Mennell 1985). It was also intended to be an exploration of the usefulness of Norbert Elias's processual sociology in investigating the topic. And, as a counterpoint to that, I was also arguing (especially at the beginning and end of the book) that the static structuralist approach – which had until then been dominant in anthropological and sociological studies of food and eating habits – was of very limited value in understanding the complex styles of eating in historic societies. I pinpointed one of its weaknesses as 'the quantum theory of taboo' (1985:294).

The Quantum Theory of Taboo

The great virtue of the structuralists' approach was their recognition that patterns of likes and dislikes among foods are conditioned by subtle social and cultural influences. Mary Douglas put her finger on the central point when she wrote:

Nutritionists know that the palate is trained, that taste and smell are subject to cultural control. Yet for lack of other hypotheses, the notion persists that what makes an item of food acceptable is some quality inherent in the thing itself. Present research into palatability tends to concentrate on individual reactions to individual items. It seeks to screen out cultural effects as so much interference. Whereas ... the cultural controls on perception are precisely what needs to be analysed (Douglas 1978:59).

Attention therefore came to focus on patterns of opposition and contrast between different items of food, and between different social contexts in which eating took place (see, for example, Douglas 1972). On the whole, however, the structuralist approach to the study of eating habits either contented itself with depicting aspects of structures or patterns at one point in time (usually the present), or, if it ventured into explaining how these patterns had developed, resorted to only

the crudest kind of appeal to commonsense and usually erroneous knowledge (see, for example, Barthes 1979). The questions I wanted to pursue were whether the patterning had itself changed in a patterned way in historic societies. Was it possible to discern trends, and to speak of a *structured process of development*?

The question can be confused by the past emphases of social scientists. On the whole, anthropologists especially have looked most closely at food prohibitions and avoidances in 'traditional' or 'non-literate' – meaning non-European – societies, while in European societies historians and to a lesser extent sociologists have in contrast paid most attention to positive likings and preferences. A superficial inference might be that the path of development has been from great selectivity towards catholicity of taste. It is by no means so simple.

Structuralists and poststructuralists have on the whole seen food preferences and avoidances as always socially patterned, but taken the patterning and the sense of revulsion it often entails largely for granted. In *The Powers of Horror*, an essay on 'abjection,' Julia Kristeva describes very well the symptoms of psychologically deep-rooted repugnance and its physiological manifestations:

Food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and archaic form of abjection. When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk – harmless, thin as a sheet of cigarette paper, pitiful as a nail paring – I experience a gagging sensation and, still further down, spasms in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire (1980:2-3).

Yet Kristeva interprets repugnance as a problem of individual psychology, not as a question of social development. People are assumed always to have felt revulsion of this sort: if in the past they did not gag on hot milk, they gagged on something else, and the sense of repugnance was equally strong even if its objects were not always the same.

Mary Douglas in *Purity and Danger* (1966) situates the sense of defilement much more strongly in a social context. For her, defilement is connected with the boundary or margin of an order – one feels polluted and experiences repugnance when one has transgressed some socially defined and significant categorisation. This is very helpful; but again Douglas does not explain how boundaries may change, how the frontiers of repugnance may advance in a non-random way over time in historic societies. She tends to resort to commonsense appeals to the growth of scientific knowledge of hygiene as a principle source of change; in that, she ignores Elias's evidence which strongly suggests that, in European history, arguments from hygiene were generally used to justify retrospectively changes in behaviour and feeling which had already taken place.

Plainly we are close to the troublesome anthropological notion of 'taboo.' There are great differences in what anthropologists regard as the proper meaning of taboo. To avoid 'tiresome and unprofitable debate,' E.B. Ross (1978:1) uses the word in its most general sense, to mean simply avoidance of certain animals or plants as a source of food. That is too simple for our purposes, however, for we

are concerned not only with *behaviour* but with people's *feelings* with regard to the foods they eat. English, like other languages, contains a rich vocabulary to describe these feelings, from the neutral *avoidance* upwards in strength through *aversion* to *repugnance* and even *revulsion*. The increasing strength of the words corresponds to a rising scale of feelings associated with breaking a 'taboo.'

Paul Kapteyn (1980:47-90) has gone further, and suggested not only that there are variations in the strength of feelings associated with breaking prohibitions, but that two different kinds of taboo need to be distinguished: what he calls 'primitive' taboos and 'civilised' taboos. The word 'taboo' was introduced into English by Captain James Cook, who described the avoidances of various sorts among Polynesians encountered on his voyages of discovery. Cook noted, however, that many of these taboos could be set aside by individuals with no personal sense of guilt, shame or revulsion; for example, Tahitians collectively avoided eating with English sailors, but often a single Tahitian woman would break this convention without feeling shame so long as fellow-Tahitians did not know about it. This kind of avoidance, in other words, was enforced by what Elias terms *Fremdzwang* - 'external constraints' or constraint *by other people*. The same word, 'taboo,' was soon applied also to something which Kapteyn argues is actually quite a different concept: the feelings of shame and guilt enforced by *Selbstzwang*, or 'self-constraints,' which are the outcome of changes in social personality over time in the course of the civilising processes described by Elias (1939). A striking illustration comes from Sir Walter Scott, who describes how an aunt in her eighties asked him to send her the novels of the seventeenth-century writer Aphra Behn. She returned them, indignant at the impropriety of their contents. She had felt ashamed, *while sitting alone*, to read them; and yet, she herself reflected, sixty years earlier she had heard the same novels read out loud in the best social circles, with no-one feeling any such embarrassment. The feelings of personal embarrassment she felt in old age even when alone is testimony to the growth in her lifetime of *Selbstzwang*, in this case in matters of sexual propriety.

Theorists from Freud in *Totem and Taboo* (1913) to Mary Douglas have tended to equate rather than distinguish the two concepts identified by Kapteyn. It is not fashionable to draw any distinction between, say, the avoidance of eating the ritual animal of one's lineage in a tribal society and, for example, the revulsion many people in Western societies now feel at the idea of eating animal brains. The dominant view is what I have called the 'quantum theory' of taboo. It is that all societies pretty well equally use avoidances to demarcate boundaries of various sorts. The actual patterns differ, but the principle of patterning is the same. If there are changes in the objects avoided, if a food previously eaten is now avoided, then probably there are others which once were not eaten but now are. People of all types of societies have similar capacities for repugnance, and changes in the patterning of repugnance are not to be interpreted as advances or movements in any particular direction.

This assumption renders the 'quantum theory' impossible to refute: it posits, so to speak, that the particle of repugnance jumps unpredictably, so that no matter how much evidence is adduced for a pattern of change in a given area of behaviour and feeling, it can always be argued that there is some contrary movement elsewhere, so that the overall pattern of change possesses no particular direction. But, in consequence, the quantum theory of taboo entirely fails to meet the Popperian criterion of falsifiability.

Offal Revisited

If the quantum theory cannot be refuted, it is necessary to find a better theory. Elias's theory of civilising processes offers an explanation of changes in feeling in Europe since the Middle Ages towards such activities as eating at table, blowing one's nose, spitting, urinating, defecating and undressing. Elias did not directly discuss changes in feelings towards particular foods, but it was he who, back in January 1980, first suggested to me that offal would be a likely area in which to find such trends. He also observed that the French would feel least repugnance towards not just the snails and frogs' legs for which they are famous among Anglo-Saxons but also towards brains and other forms of offal. The Americans, he observed, were most squeamish about eating these things, with the British somewhere between the French and the Americans on this scale of repugnance and avoidance. Later the same year, Mary Douglas (in private correspondence) also expressed interest in the question of attitudes to offal, although she remarked that she would not expect to find a 'general theory' about offal.

Certainly I would not claim to be able to offer a 'general theory' on the subject. That is to say, I cannot offer an explanation for why certain parts of animals came, or did not come, to be viewed with varying degrees of repugnance. I cannot offer the kind of instrumental explanation of the origins of these food avoidances which Harris (1986) offers for certain famous taboos such as the Hindu prohibition of the slaughtering of cattle, persuasive though I find it. On the other hand, I do have some sympathy for Harris's taunt that the structuralists 'quit too soon,' by simply taking the connection between object and meaning as purely arbitrary. I think I can offer an interpretation which stands somewhere between the two extremes. But first let us look more closely at what constitutes 'offal.'

The word 'offal' is used here in the sense it has in the butchery trade in Britain, a sense stated precisely by the *Oxford English Dictionary*: 'the parts which are cut off in dressing the carcass of an animal killed for food; in earlier use applied mainly to the entrails; now, as a trade term, including the head and tail as well as the kidneys, heart, tongue, liver and other parts.' The word, however, has other less neutral meanings, which the dictionary records equally: it can mean 'the parts of a slaughtered or dead animal unfit for food; putrid flesh;

carrion,' and more generally it can have the sense of waste or refuse (it is related etymologically to the German *Abfall*). In American English, these pejorative senses prevail most strongly, and to use the word 'offal' in connection with food is itself repugnant to many Americans.

In French, the semantic field is rather different. The term exactly corresponding to the butcher's use of 'offal' in British English is *abats*, with *abattis* used for the equivalent parts of poultry. *Abats* and *abattis* are specifically culinary words; for the meaning of waste, refuse or garbage, which 'offal' can have in English there are in French quite separate words like *déchets*, *ordures*, *détritus*.

These semantic differences happen to bear some relationship to actual differences in feelings towards offal between France, England and the USA. Marshall Sahlins discusses the American food system rather amusingly in *Culture and Practical Reason*, and records:

During the meteoric inflation of food prices in the Spring of 1973, American capitalism did not fall apart – quite the contrary; but the cleavages in the food system did surface. Responsible government officials suggested that the people might be well-advised to buy the cheaper cuts of meat, such as kidneys, heart, or entrails – after all, they are just as nutritious as hamburger. To Americans, this particular suggestion made Marie-Antoinette seem like a model of compassion (1976:172).

Sahlins points out that there is more steak to the cow than there is tongue, but steak remains the more expensive because demand for it is so much higher, and that, he argues, is thanks to steak having symbolic connotations of wealth and virility (as also in France: see Barthes 1957:62–64). Cheaper cuts and offal are associated with the poor and with ethnic minorities ('soul food'). Already before World War II, a sample of 693 students at American universities rated offal very high amongst the foods they most disliked (Hall and Hall 1939), and the trend seems to be for this aversion to increase. Schwabe (1979:407) notes that while in 1908–1909 the American *Good Housekeeping* magazine gave eleven recipes for liver, six for heart, three for tripe, two for sweetbreads, and one for kidneys (making more than twenty-five per cent of all recipes), the issues of 1968–1969 included only five for liver and none for any other visceral organ (less than three per cent of recipes). The US Congress has given legal authority to the national prejudice against at least some forms of offal by exercising its constitutional powers over inter-State commerce effectively to ban the sale of lungs, spleen, and certain other organs.

Recent work by Katherine Simons (1990) appears to confirm my guess (1985: 311) that it would be possible 'to construct a scale of feelings about offal, with objects in ascending order of repulsiveness running from liver through kidneys, tongue, sweetbreads, brains, tripe to testicles and eyes – or something like that.' Simons conducted a survey of patients registered with a general practitioner in the city of Exeter in south-west England. A total of 407 questionnaires was returned (a response rate of 52%). In one section of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to rate a total of 27 selected food items on a five-point Likert-type

Table 1. *Dimensions Underlying Variation in Food Likes and Dislikes of Whole Sample. Principle Components Analyses with Varimax Rotation. N=407.*

Factors and Correlations				
Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	
Cabbage .73	Heart .81	Pork .77	Potatoes .74	
Turnips .73	Kidney .74	Lamb .73	Peas .73	
Parsnips .72	Tripe .71	Beef .70	Eggs .66	
Sprouts .71	Tongue .70	Chicken .65	Mushrooms .44	
Carrots .69	Rabbit .60	Fish .46		
Leeks .64	Sweetbread .57	Liver .45		
Lettuce .61	Brains .46			
Beetroot .54				
Tomatoes .52				
Onions .45				
			Factor 5	
			Mushrooms .52	
			Onions .51	

Interpretation of Factors and Percentage of Variance Explained

Factor 1	Attitude to farm-grown vegetables	29 per cent
Factor 2	Attitude to Offal	11
Factor 3	Attitude to foods as conventional main-meal meats	7
Factor 4	Attitude to suitability as normal-meal accompaniments	6
Factor 5	Attitude to suitability as special-meal accompaniments	4
	Total	57

scale ranging from 'Very much like' through 'Like' and 'Indifferent' to 'Dislike' and 'Very much dislike.' The list included several items of offal, though not the 'extreme' items like eyes or testicles which would simply be outside the experience of English people buying their food in a town like Exeter. The coded responses were then subjected to principal components analyses with varimax rotation. The results are shown in Table 1. This technique of 'factor analysis' identifies a number of factors or components which *in the statistical sense* 'explain' fractions of the total variance in the responses. However, it falls to the researcher to place an interpretation on the various bundles pulled together by the statistical process. In this case, five factors were extracted, and Simons's interpretation of what each factor signifies is given. Factor 2 is interpreted as 'attitude to offal,' with the items falling into something like the hypothesised order. It should be noted that liver, which I guessed to be the least repugnant item of offal, actually crosses over into the unrepugnant Factor 3. On the other hand, rabbit, to which many British people have come to feel repugnance since the advent of myxomatosis in the 1950s, intruded itself into the Factor 2 list immediately above sweetbread and brains. In spite of these complications, Factor 2 appeared to explain 11% of the total variance among food likes and dislikes.

Simons's evidence was drawn exclusively from one town in England, and it would be interesting to gather comparable data from France, the USA and other European countries. My guess is that, with minor differences, the rank-order of repugnance felt towards items of offal would be rather similar in each country. Probably something like a Guttman-scale would emerge, with Americans showing higher repugnance (feeling antipathy towards kinds of offal lower in the scale), the English somewhere in the middle, and the French showing lowest repugnance (being happy to eat all but the items highest in the ranking).

My own hypothesis about this lies somewhere between the extremes of Douglas and Harris. In the absence of any better – that is, a more historical – explanation of the formation of this particular scale of repugnance, I am happy enough to acknowledge that there may have been a large element of the arbitrary in the relationship between signified and signifier. Nevertheless, once the scale has taken shape, once the items of offal have been shaken down into some sort of order in a given culture area (in this case western Europe and European-type societies overseas), I suggest it retains considerable durability and that it is then possible to trace movements in thresholds of repugnance up and down the scale among various groups of people. It therefore remains relevant to ask whether there is any *historical* pattern in this.

The History of Offal

One thing is fairly certain: the association of offal with the food of the poor is fairly antique. There seems to have been from very far back a custom of the internal organs of newly-slaughtered animals being given away to the lower orders. A possible reason is that, unlike carcass meat, most offal cannot be kept long, and had to be eaten immediately. This is the nearest I can come to an instrumental explanation of origins in the style of Harris, though it does not explain much, and the subsequent cultural patterning around this possible kernel still needs to be explained.

The story of 'umble-pie' illustrates the association of offal with the poor. Jeaffreson (1875:II,52–55) asserts (on no very clear authority) that umbles, strictly speaking the internal organs of deer, were a greatly prized food in the Middle Ages, but that in the Tudor period they came to be regarded 'with qualified disdain, as meat fit for the inferior boards of noble banquets, but inappropriate to the higher tables.' Thus 'to eat umble-pie' came to mean much the same as 'to eat below the salt,' and by extension and a convenient confusion with the word 'humble' from a different root, has passed into modern English as a phrase for having to make humble apology or submit to humiliation. Or in another apposite English phrase, one has to 'swallow one's pride.' The connection between what one eats and the experience of shame and social inferiority is clear.

The 'courtly' cookery books of seventeenth-century England seem on the whole

to contain fewer recipes for offal than their French counterparts. May (1660) gives one for haggis (sheep's pluck minced in a sheep's stomach) but few others. Rabisha (1661) mentions rather more – tongues, feet, heads, kidneys, sweetbreads, but no liver – without their being very prominent. Patrick Lamb's recipes (1710) include 'Pullets in Bladders,' 'Patty of Calves' Brains' and black puddings, and 'Umble Pyes' feature in his menus, but again these dishes form a small minority of the contents. Writing later for possibly a socially less exalted audience, Hannah Glasse (1747), on the other hand, gives a great many offal recipes, most especially in Chapter II on 'Made-Dishes' where the French influence is strongest.¹ Half a century later still, Mrs. Rundell's *New System of Domestic Cookery* (1806) is notable for its directions for carving, which imply that the frontier of repugnance had not advanced as far as it has today. Calf's head for example:

Many like the eye; which you must cut out with the point of your knife and divide in two (p. xlvii).

Or a hare:

When everyone is helped, cut off the head; put your knife between the upper and lower jaw, and divide them, which will enable you to lay the upper flat on your plate; then put the point of your knife into the centre, and cut the head into two. The ears and brains may be helped then to those who like them (p. lii).

All the same, there are hints here that many people might not like the eye, ears, or brains. The evidence of the cookery books remains difficult to interpret, however. Offal recipes are not very prominent in either Eliza Acton (1845) or Isabella Beeton (1861), but they are there. Acton gives recipes for beef palates, tongues, oxtails, heart and kidney, and calf's head, sweetbreads, liver and – one mention – brains and ears. Beeton gives recipes for beef heart, kidney, oxcheek, cowheel, oxtails and tongue, sheeps' kidneys, brains, head, trotters, and sweetbreads. There is possibly some sign that recipes for items nearer the top of the scale of repugnance hypothesised above were becoming less numerous; on the other hand, Mrs Beeton's book contains several drawings of calves' heads sitting very recognisably on the serving dish.

Florence White (1938:68–69), in describing how a sheep's head and pluck (including tongue, brains, heart, lights² and liver) could be had for 9d and made to yield five meals for the family as well as one for the chickens, implies that in the late nineteenth century this was food for the very poor. But she does not hint at any feelings of repugnance, even looking backwards from old age. That such feelings were growing there is nevertheless little doubt. Such foods featured less and less in typical twentieth-century cookery books. Ambrose Heath, writing in *Wine and Food*, Spring 1939, said:

There are a great many parts of an animal that are not ordinarily considered appropriate for the table proper, and are usually eaten by their devotees with a feeling of apology. ... Lamb's tails, for example, make an extremely delicious if a little mutony pie, and really delicious stew can be made of other parts of this small creature,

the exact nature of which is better kept hid. But these are country joys unknown, for the most part, to the townsman.

Delicacy prevented Heath from spelling out that he was referring to 'lamb's stones,' the testicles of castrated lambs. He also, in the same article, said that brains, ears, feet, heads, lights ('yes, even lights') and tripe were delicacies no longer considered quite polite.

In France, the story of attitudes towards offal is even more complicated. The complication appears to arise from two forces pulling in opposite directions: on the one hand, the association of offal with poor people's food; on the other, the usefulness of offal in creating the wide variety of ragoûts demanded in an increasingly sophisticated cookery. (The latter gives point to the modern American euphemism for offal: 'variety meats.')

Taillevent (c. 1380) used an extensive range of offal, and there was little sign of change during the Renaissance. Le Grand d'Aussy (1782:I,323-25) draws on the sixteenth-century Latin text, *De Re Cibarica* (1560) by La Bruyère-Champier, physician to François I, for evidence of what parts of animals were then regarded with liking or disdain. Some surprising items, such as pig's lights (lungs), then seem to have found favour in courtly circles, although those of beef or veal were considered food for the poor. La Varenne (1651) made extensive use of offal in his recipes – heads, feet, tongue, liver, sweetbreads, tail – particularly in his section on dishes suitable for preparation in camp with the army. A quarter of a century later, LSR in his *Art de Bien Traiter* (1674) was scornful of La Varenne's rusticity and vulgarity. Among the recipes he particularly ridiculed were several offal dishes – ragoût of *gras double*, and an omelette made with the liver of a roe deer, for example. His own recipes are mainly for carcass meat, but they do include dishes of tongue, liver, sweetbreads and 'abattes d'agneau.' The tone of LSR's preface is hostile to anything smacking of the peasantry and common people, and many forms of offal appear to have shared that association in his mind. But the trend was against him. The usefulness of offal in creating the sheer range of distinctive made-dishes then becoming central to French cookery put it at a premium; it is known that offal fetched high prices in the markets of late seventeenth-century Paris. The cookery books of the mid-eighteenth century give great prominence to offal dishes, including those made from items very high on our hypothetical scale of repugnance. Marin's *Les Dons de Comus* lists the parts of each animal that were used in cooking. Of the cow: 'the head, of which the brains are used separately; the tongue, eyes and palate; the tail; the liver; the heart; the lungs; the spleen; the intestines, large and small; the tripe in general; the kidneys' (1739:9). The intestines were used by the charcutier, and of the various tripe, only the *gras double* was commonly used in the kitchen. Brains were served marinated in lemon, fried, in a terrine or a matelotte, or *en croutes*. Eyes were braised and served with a vinegar sauce. *Le Cuisinier Gascon* (1740) gives a recipe for stuffed calves' eyes *au gratin*. Menon, in *La Cuisinière*

Bourgeoise (1746), gives an even longer list of parts used by 'bourgeois and people who keep a good table,' adding to Marin's list for example sheep's 'animelles' or 'rognons extérieures,' and he gives several different ways of serving calves' eyes. There is certainly no sign of repugnance towards any form of offal in any of these books, even if Marin does make it clear that carcass meat is 'much more essential for cookery' (1739:12).

The first sign of any rising sensitivity in these matters that I have traced in France comes in the *Almanach des Gourmands* for 1806. Grimod tells his readers where they may obtain 'ram's *animelles*, formerly so sought after, but which, fortunately for the propagation of the mutton species, have entirely passed from fashion' (1806:269). And French ways of cooking and serving food as they developed in the nineteenth century involved increasing disguise of the more overtly animal-like qualities of ingredients.

Today one has the impression that offal, both in quantity and variety, is eaten more in France than England: certainly one sees brains and sweetbread, spleen and the like on public display in the ordinary butcher's shop more frequently in France than England. It is true that among the sample questioned by Claudian *et al.* in 1969, *abats* were the most frequently mentioned dislike among meats; but with 4.10 per cent of total reported dislikes (and about the same proportion of respondents) they were by no means so frequently disliked as celery (8.0 per cent), carrots and turnips (7.8 per cent) or vegetables in general (a towering 59.3 per cent).

I have only scattered statistics for the United States, but it is worth noting that even the level of repugnance registered in Claudian's French survey of 1969 was much lower than that recorded by Hall and Hall in their American study of 1939. Even half a century ago, 27.4% of Hall and Hall's respondents said they disliked 'organs' (brains scored 39.8% in that study). Hearsay evidence suggests that the American rate of rejection of offal would be far higher today.

Explaining the Historical Evidence

Although the historical evidence is patchy, it seems consonant both with Norbert Elias's theory of civilising processes and with the views of Keith Thomas as set out in his book *Man and the Natural World* (1983). Thomas shows how from the time of the Renaissance onwards, feelings towards meat-eating gradually underwent quite widespread changes. The dominant view among theologians at the beginning of the period was aggressively anthropocentric: animals had been created by God for the benefit of humankind, and this justified hunting, domestication, vivisection and extermination as well as meat-eating (Thomas 1983:41). By the eighteenth century, and more widely in the nineteenth century, this view lost its sway. Thomas particularly emphasises the rise of natural history undermining the anthropocentric view of nature; the systematic observation of animals

helped to make them seem less utterly different from humans in their capacity to suffer. This was part of the overall process to which sociologists often attach the word *Verwissenschaftlichung*, still more ugly in its English translation of 'scientification.' The development of natural history was, in its way, comparable to the Copernican revolution: heliocentrism had also served to undermine humankind's image of itself as the unique centre of all creation. But Thomas may be mistaking two strands of development for cause and effect. These intellectual developments were most directly felt only by an intellectual minority. Their wider impact on attitudes towards animals and cruelty were entangled with those of other long-term processes of social development, notably urbanisation, industrialisation, and the civilising of behaviour generally.

According to Thomas, the triumph of the new attitudes towards animals was associated with 'urban isolation from animals.' The argument needs to be handled with care. Working animals remained a feature of the urban scene until well into the twentieth century, but long before that, says Thomas, 'animals became increasingly marginal to the processes of production' and 'most people were working in industries powered by non-animal means' (1983:182). Yet the transformation of feelings began earlier still, when 'urban isolation from animals' was not a matter of *physical* but of *social* distance. For agitation against cruelty to animals did not begin among butchers or farmers or those who handled working animals. Grooms, cab-drivers and other servants did not own the animals themselves, and were usually concerned to get a job done as quickly as possible, by abusing their charges if necessary. On the contrary,

The new sentiment was first expressed either well-to-do townsmen, remote from the agricultural process and inclined to think of animals as pets rather than as working livestock, or by educated country clergymen, whose sensibilities were different from those of the rustics among whom they found themselves (Thomas 1983:182-83).

Feelings of repugnance towards the slaughtering of animals for food have in particular come to be much more widely shared. Many who continue to eat meat want to have nothing to do with slaughtering it themselves, and wish to see nothing that will remind them of what that involves. This is part of a more general trend over time for 'the animalic human activities [to be] progressively thrust behind the scenes of men's communal life and invested with feelings of shame' (Elias 1939:II,230). In this context, killing counts as an 'animalic' activity along with intimate acts like defecation, urination or copulation. There had always been some who felt revulsion at the sight of animals suffering in the shambles (there are precursors of every movement of feeling); Thomas cites John Foxe, author of the *Book of Martyrs* in the sixteenth century. But in the towns of medieval and early modern Europe, the slaughtering of animals took place under the public gaze just as it did in the countryside. Only gradually in Britain in the course of the nineteenth century were slaughterhouses carefully hidden from view. Often the overt motivation of legislation and regulation was concern about public health

and hygiene, but growing feelings of repugnance also played their part. Similar trends of opinion can be traced in the USA and in France, but it appears that the trend set in somewhat later in France than in the English-speaking world.

People's increasing ability to identify themselves with animals would help to explain their growing sense of repugnance in knowingly eating brains, eyes, or testicles. Yet I would be cautious about advancing this as a complete explanation. It is not utterly obvious that the various sorts of offal are inherently more likely focuses for the growth of repugnance, because inherently *looking* like parts of animals (or parts of humans), than many kinds of carcass meat. The social connotations of various items of food also play an indispensable part in the growth of feelings of repugnance. In England and France (and probably more in the former), various kinds of offal have long been viewed as poor people's food. That is not the case in all cultures. Among the Yoruba, offal is more valued than carcass meat, and is offered to honoured guests in preference to steak. On the other hand, once the various sorts of carcass meat and offal have been shaken into some rough order of prestige value – which happened at a very early stage in England and France – then the virtuosi of taste can consciously or unconsciously progressively refine and rationalise the distinctions between what is delicate and what is repugnant.

Conclusion

This is the essence of my alternative theory, which I have claimed lies somewhere between the extremes of structuralism, with its emphasis on the arbitrary relation between signified and signifier, and the instrumentalism of Harris. That is to say, the social connotations of particular foods may to a large extent be arbitrary in their origins within particular cultures. But, over time, the strengthening of feelings of repugnance, probably connected with the overall civilising process and the tilting of the balance somewhat from *Fremdzwang* towards *Selbstzwang*, can be observed with respect to offal.

The process is not, however, a simple linear one. One element in this does appear to have been a growing capacity for identification with animals, very much in line with the overall civilising process. This appears to have been manifested in a strengthening of feelings of repugnance towards items of offal which, psychologically more than merely visually, raise the problem of identification with animals most acutely – brains, eyes, testicles again. Nevertheless, this is not the only element in the process. It can be overridden by other forces of social fashion. It was overridden in eighteenth-century France by the then stronger social pressure for fashionable tables to contain a great variety of made-dishes.

It has also been overridden in limited manner and in limited social circles in the twentieth century, in a way which at first glance may make the growth of feelings of repugnance seem to follow a cyclical rather than linear path. Ambrose

Heath noted it when he observed, in *Wine and Food*, 20, 1939, that sweetbreads had by then been 'promoted to the highest rank,' unlike the many other kinds of offal increasingly despised and regarded with aversion. Another more recent case is that of tripe: its popularity, especially in the north of England where it was once much eaten, has greatly fallen since the Second World War. No longer is it much eaten in Yorkshire homes cold with salt, pepper and vinegar, or in Lancashire stewed in milk as 'tripe and onions'; but one is quite likely to find it being eaten in pricy London restaurants as 'tripes à la mode de Caen' or 'trippa alla Romana.' The same goes for brains – in England no longer much eaten on toast in poorer homes, but highly regarded in gourmet circles as 'cervelles au beurre noire.'

Comparative-historical studies of negative attitudes to offal, or of other forms of avoidance, will not refute the quantum theory of taboo, because it is unfalsifiable. Nevertheless, the accumulation of such studies ought at least to make the quantum theory both less plausible and less interesting; and it may help to convince anthropologists of the justice of Marvin Harris's contention that the structuralists 'quit too soon.'

Notes

1. 'Made-dishes' were those which involved a complicated sequence of operations with a number of ingredients, often including the creation of a tasty sauce in the French manner as a central part of the process. The contrast is with the English tradition of joints of meat simply roasted or vegetables simply boiled.
2. 'Lights' is the butchers' term for lungs.

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