TASTING FOOD, TASTING FREEDOM

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chapter two

FOOD AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO CONCEPTS OF POWER

How does a society learn to consume food differently: to eat more food (or less), to eat different food, differently prepared, in different contexts; to revise or modify the social (and perhaps even the nutritive) purpose of the consumption itself? This chapter has two aims. I want to block out the kinds of constraint that can define the situations where people accept the necessity of changing their food habits. Then I want to illustrate how, having changed their food habits, people try to cope with the changes in their own ways by creating new consumption situations, endowed with new meanings, which they themselves have engineered.

The use and application of power frequently enter into changes in a society's food consumption habits. Where this power

originates; how it is applied and to what ends; and in what manner people undertake to deal with it, are all part of what happens when food habits change. We do not understand these processes at all well, even though they are of immense importance to the world's future. Nor do I believe that much of the research on changing food habits addresses the cultural aspects of such changes. I think that group values and past practices can figure significantly in what changes, how much and how fast. Thus culinary history enters into the success and failure of new applications of power in the sphere of food and eating, but not in readily understood or carefully studied ways. I attempt here to explain, though only in a preliminary fashion, my own ideas of how power serves to advance (or retard) changes in food habits.

SUGAR, TEA, AND THE BRITISH WORKING CLASS

In my book *Sweetness and Power* [1985], I contended that the heightened use of tea, sugar, tobacco, and a few other substances which came to typify the spending habits of the eighteenth-century British working class probably provide us with the first instance in history of the *mass* consumption of imported food staples. The hope in that book was to be able to explain the peculiar attraction these novelties had for new consumers. But the argument remained incomplete in part because I found it impossible to locate and isolate some specific single cause for this new consumption. Many explanations had turned up in the literature; none seemed to me particularly convincing. Two historians, sniffing the air anew, have recently settled on "the quest for respectability" as *the* cause [Austen and Smith 1990; Smith 1992, 1995]. Respectability, concrete and specific as it sounds, takes us part of the way, by building on the path-breaking work of Norbert Elias.[1] Yet we still do not really know why so many English people so rapidly became such eager consumers of sugar and tea, for exam-

ple. The term "respectability" can be an umbrella for such things as hospitality, generosity, propriety, sobriety, social rivalry, and much else. The unanswered (and perhaps unanswerable) question persists, if what we aim at explaining is the peculiar power of a *specific* food (or even some category of foods) over consciousness and will. I earlier noted that possible factors influencing the British adoption of sugar included: the powerful stimulant contained in tea and other new beverages, coffee and chocolate, with which sugar was consumed; the common malnutrition of the British working classes at the time, such that the caloric contribution of sugar would matter unconsciously as well as consciously; the apparently universal predisposition of the human species toward the sweet taste; the readiness of people in most (if not all) societies to emulate their "superiors" if permitted; the possible significance of the element of novelty; and the usefulness of tobacco and the stimulant beverages in easing the industrial work day [Mintz 1985]. Faced with such a list, it becomes harder to talk about the relationship between some specific food and the exercise of power in society.

The emergence of British sugar-eating and tea-drinking took place against a background of overseas expansion and colonial conquest, which brought about a mounting commerce in enslaved Africans, and a growing number of plantations in the colonies. At home British society was undergoing increasing industrialization, the dislodgment of rural populations, and urbanization. Sugar, earlier a rare and precious imported medicine and spice, became at this time cheaper (at first rapidly, then more gradually); and while its cost went down, the uses to which it could be put proliferated. Sugar's increasing availability facilitated the increase in contexts within which it was used.

Once sugar began to be consumed by those of modest income, its employment for new uses increased swiftly. It entered into the rhythms of daily life particularly in its association with three new stimulant beverages: chocolate, coffee, and tea (in Brit-

ain, tea soon emerged as most successful). Much later and by a series of successive steps, sugar became important in its own right —that is to say, other than in association with these beverages.

Meaning

In studying materials dealing with home and work conditions in Britain in relation to sugar and other substances, I found it useful in 1985 to separate the broad changes in background that made access to sugar easier, on the one hand, from the circumstances of daily domestic life and work, within which consumers installed sugar in their everyday routines, on the other. On this basis I proposed two terms to simplify discussion. The daily life conditions of consumption have to do with what I called *inside* meaning; the environing economic, social, and political (even military) conditions with *outside* meaning.

Inside meaning arises when the changes connected with *outside* meaning are already under way. These grand changes ultimately set the outer boundaries for determining hours of work, places of work, mealtimes, buying power, child care, spacing of leisure, and the arrangement of time in relation to the expenditure of human energy. In spite of their significance for everyday life, they originate outside that sphere and on a wholly different level of social action. In consequence of these changes, however, individuals, families, and social groups must busily integrate what are newly acquired behaviors into daily or weekly practice, thereby turning the unfamiliar into the familiar, imparting additional meaning to the material world, employing and creating significance at the most humble levels. This is what happened to tea-drinking, once people tasted tea and were learning to drink it regularly; and what happened to pipe-smoking, once tobacco had been tried and was liked. People alter the micro-conditions as much as they can and according to their emerging preferences —the where, when, how, with whom, with what, and why—

thereby changing what the things in question signify, what they *mean* to the users. New behaviors are superimposed upon older behaviors; some behavioral features are retained, others forgone. New patterns replace older ones.

This happens, however, within the widest constraints that *outside* meaning allows for. I have just suggested that the processes that endow behavior with *inside* meaning unfold in relation to what I label "grand changes." But of course for the participants the micro-conditions themselves are, or become, grand—for it is out of them that the routines of daily life are fashioned. This interior embedding of significance in the activity of daily life, with its specific associations (including affective associations) for the actors, is what anthropologists often have particularly in mind, I think, when they talk about meaning in culture.

Some of us tend to be inordinately moved by the power of our species to invest life with meaning on this intimate, immediate, and homely level. Of course it is essential to stress the remarkable—even distinctive—capacity of our species to construct, and act in terms of, symbols. But in the case of the large, complex societies with which we deal today, it is at least as important to thorough understanding to keep in mind that larger institutional subsystems usually *set the terms* against which these meanings in culture are silhouetted. In daily practice, for example, job opportunities tell people when they can eat and how long they can take to do it; to a noticeable extent they also therefore tell people *what* they can eat, where, and with whom. Individuals are thus presented with a series of situations within which they may begin to make meaningful constructions for themselves, as long as such constructions do not violate the outer situational boundaries that have been established for them. But the job opportunities are determined by forces that transcend the means and wills of those who become the employees—as anyone who has lost a job recently knows.

In contrast to *inside* meaning, it is those larger forces expressed in particular subsystems, together with the state, that

have to do with what I mean by the term *outside* meaning. Thus, *outside* meaning refers to the wider social significance of those changes effectuated by institutions and groups whose reach and power transcend both individuals and local communities: those who staff and manage larger economic and political institutions and who make them operate.

In the case of the history of sugar in Britain, these larger institutions were the servants of the imperial political and economic system, who carved out the West Indian colonies and gave them governments; who saw to the successful—immense and centuries-long—importation of enslaved Africans to the islands; who bequeathed land wrested from the indigenes to the first settlers; who financed and managed the ever-rising importation of tropical goods to Britain, including chocolate, coffee, cotton, and tobacco, as well as sugar, rum, molasses, tea, and much else; and who levied taxes at all levels of society, to benefit its servants and the state. It will soon become clear that these background arrangements of conditions against which *inside* meaning can take on its characteristic shape—what I call *outside* meaning—are cognate with what Eric Wolf [1990, 586–87] has labeled "structural power."

Using the word "meaning," rather than "power," in the first of my labels (*outside meaning*) may have been somewhat misleading, but there was a reason for it at the time. During recent years many anthropologists have been abandoning an older interest in how things are caused—no longer trying to explain why *this* happened, rather than *that*—in order to interpret events in terms of what they were supposed to mean. Such a shift in emphasis is thought to have brought the fieldworker into view, to have humanized anthropology while demystifying both the fieldworker and the fieldwork situation.

Yet this stress on meaning has also led us away from seeking to explain what happens (or happened) over time. We know that particular events often *mean* different things to different persons or groups in the same society. The slave trade and slavery

"meant" that the British factory and farm workers would get their sugar; but the meaning of slavery and the slave trade to plantation owners, bankers, and the Colonial Office was entirely different. (One need hardly add that, for the slaves and their descendants, it also "meant" quite different things.) Anthropologists who are still interested in how things happen and the consequences of events, more than in what things may mean, need to be able to distinguish among different meanings, and different sorts of meaning, in order to continue to study causes and causation.

The abstract system we call "a culture," and the abstract system of meaning that is thought to typify the members of the society who "share" that culture, are neither simple coefficients of each other; nor two sides of one coin; nor merely the active and passive aspects of one system. To treat them as if they were is to bypass the complex nature of any society, and to impute to its members a homogeneity of value and intentions they almost certainly lack. *Outside meaning* is a term invented to avoid the imputation of any such homogeneity.

As for *inside meaning*, the use of "meaning" is entirely appropriate here, I think. Those who create such *inside* meaning do so by imparting significance to their own acts and the acts of those around them, in the fashion in which human beings have been giving their behavior social significance as long as they have been human. The gradual emergence of a food pattern called "high tea" among working-class Britons, for instance, was the work of those who eventually came to take this meal regularly; it was they who created the pattern. But they did so inside the constraints of work and income and their own available energy, constraints over which they themselves had hardly any control at all.

The connection between outside and inside meaning can be exemplified with a more modern case than that of sugar and tea in eighteenth-century Britain. But before looking at this case, we need to take note of a general paradox having to do with the whole issue of food and food preferences. On the one hand,

food preferences, once established, are usually deeply resistant to change. We cannot easily imagine the Chinese people giving up rice to eat white bread, or the Russian people, black bread to eat maize. Such deeply cherished tastes are rooted in underlying economic and social conditions, and they are surely far more than simply nutritive. But they must also be viewed in terms of the equally telling fact that *some* preferences, even in diet, turn out in fact to be quite readily surrendered. To be sure, it is far more common to add new foods to one's diet than it is to forgo old and familiar ones. The readiness of the North Americans to become eaters of *sushi*, which surely could not have been predicted in 1941—and not only for political reasons—is an apt example of an unexpected, even unpredictable adding-on. Somewhat more interesting in the present argument is the gradual decline in the consumption of complex carbohydrates by North Americans over the past seventy-five years, which has meant not just the addition of new foods, but also a palpable decline in the consumption of certain once-prized old ones. But in any event, these addings-on and gradual eliminations are often hard to explain, for they proceed against a substantial, persisting stability of diet at the same time.

We do not understand at all well why it can be claimed both that people cling tenaciously to familiar old foods, yet readily replace some of them with others. Hence situations of rapid change in food habits deserve a much closer look than they have received. We need to know far better than we do now why some food habits change easily and swiftly, while others are remarkably enduring. We are inclined to view this contrast as between basic or essential foods on the one hand, and less important or peripheral foods on the other. But this is not adequate to explain all particular cases of rapid change. When much else is changing, food habits may change, too, and such changes are often unpredictable. Where and how power comes to permeate these processes of change, projected in part against continuing stability, is not always apparent.

A CASE

Here, then, is one example of how power enters into the changes that affect food choices; but it is a large-scale and general case. It has to do with war. War is probably the single most powerful instrument of dietary change in human experience. In time of war, both civilians and soldiers are regimented—in modern times, more even than before. There can occur at the same time terrible disorganization and (some would say) terrible organization. Food resources are mobilized, along with other sorts of resources. Large numbers of persons are assembled to do things together—ultimately, to kill together. While learning how, they must eat together. Armies travel on their stomachs; generals—and now economists and nutritionists—decide what to put in them. They must do so while depending upon the national economy and those who run it to supply them with what they prescribe or, rather, they prescribe what they are told they can rely upon having. During World War II, upwards of fifteen million Americans were brought together in uniform, many millions more in mufti. The service people ate together, in large camps. They ate what they were given; what they were given was decided by powerholders who functioned outside the army and outside their direct experience.

Among other things, service personnel were given meat twenty-one times a week; even the Friday dinner had an alternate meat course (though it was usually cold cuts). For most soldiers (but only irregularly under combat conditions), never before had so much meat been thrust before them. They were also given vast quantities of coffee and of sweets of all sorts; there were sugar bowls on every table, and twice a day, without fail, the meal ended with dessert. (As it happens, soldiers were also given free cigarettes while standing in line for their paychecks each month.) Though the food habits of the civilians may not have been altered

so radically, certain things did happen, about which much is known. They got too little meat; and the wartime media were full of stories and jokes about romancing the butcher. They got too little sugar, too little coffee, and too little tobacco. Their food habits, too, were being radically affected. Hence North American food preferences—though "preferences" is more than a little misleading, under the circumstances—were significantly reshaped by the war experience.

Among the things that soldiers and civilians were *not* given was Coca Cola; but careful arrangements were made to allow them to buy it. George Catlett Marshall, chief of staff during World War II, was a Southerner. It was soon after Pearl Harbor that General Marshall advised all of his commanders and general officers to request the building of additional Coca Cola bottling plants in order to get the product to the front. By his letter Marshall gave Coca Cola the same status in the wartime economy as that occupied by food and munitions. Coca Cola was thus spared sugar rationing. In all, sixty-four Coca Cola plants were established in allied theaters of war, including the Pacific theater, North Africa, Australia, and elsewhere. The Coca Cola Company was asked by the armed forces to supply technicians to run the production; 148 bottling plant technicians were sent; three were even killed in theaters of war during World War II [Louis and Yazijian 1980].

In the light of Coca Cola's status by the time the war ended, it is noteworthy that, before the war, Coke was not a truly international drink—I would claim it was not yet even a really national drink.[2] Though Coke had traveled early in its career to Cuba, it was still principally a U.S. beverage, mainly consumed in the South. There were foreign countries where it was sold, but it was not yet well known internationally. I suspect that its most numerous consumers in the U.S. were high school students who laced their Coke with Southern Comfort whiskey so that they could get publicly (yet covertly) intoxicated at the senior prom. Indeed, it is probable that most people outside the South didn't

drink Coke, but "mixed" it instead. During the war, the fact that the United States professional officer corps was largely Southern may have played a role in this story, as well.

How *outside* meaning influenced the spread of Coca Cola is easy to discern. The rapid proliferation of Coca Cola bottling plants in allied theaters of war had much to do with its growing popularity. Power over labor and resources employed in the production of food undergirded the unhampered operation of the corporate system, closely coordinated in this instance with the will of the state. Even in times of politico-military crisis—some might say particularly in such times—corporate power neatly integrated with the state bureaucracy firmly underwrites the successful execution of what are defined as broader societal tasks. At such moments, the power of the state itself seems far less irksome to corporate America. The deployment of resources for food production is linked to conceptions of consumer choice as well. But in this instance the choices were managed in a specific fashion: 95 percent of all soft drinks sold on American bases during the war were products of the Coca Cola Company. There was choice; but one company only was accorded the right to specify its limits.

In contrast to *outside* meaning, *inside* meaning in a case of this kind has to do with what foods come to mean to those who consume them. The symbolism connected with Coca Cola, as it took on its national stature during the war, and as documented by such writers as Louis and Yazijian [1980, 50–67] and Pendergrast [1993, 199–217], was utterly astonishing. It may be relevant that soldiers overseas have not only been stripped of almost all of the marks of their individuality (clothing, jewelry, coiffure), but because they are in a remote land, they also feel bereft of those material representations of their culture that are embodied in architecture and in linguistic forms (familiar buildings, signs, advertising). Under such circumstances, which can be alienating, objects that can "carry" a displaced sense of culture, such as foods and beverages, take on additional potential power. Coca Cola turned out to be a nearly perfect symbolic repository. It was not

unusual to find in the letters that servicemen wrote home the assertion that they were fighting for the right to drink Coca Cola. The *inside* meaning of Coca Cola is certainly revealed in the emotions of a soldier who fights—among other things—"as much to help keep the custom of drinking Cokes as I am to help preserve the millions of other benefits our country blesses its citizens with"—to quote from one of many such references to Coke in the censored mail of wartime. Thus it was that Coca Cola was enabled to become a symbol—a veritable national symbol—among the warrior youth of the 1940s generation.

War, then, is a setting in which the exercise of the power behind *outside* meaning readily applies. Such examples do not have to do with the intrinsic nutritive significance of food. They help to explain, rather, how outside processes serve to impose many of the conditions within which *inside* meaning can take shape and manifest itself.

CONCLUSIONS

In his lecture to the American Anthropological Association annual meetings some years ago, Eric Wolf [1990] enumerated four sorts of power. By Wolf's reckoning there is, first of all, personal power, of a sort comparable to *charisma*. Second, there is the power of persuasion, by means of which one person exacts conformance of some kind from another. Third, and on a broader canvas, there is the "power that controls the settings in which people may show forth their potentialities and interact with others" [p. 586]. This "tactical or organizational power" is "useful for understanding how 'operating units' circumscribe the actions of others within determinate settings." Tactical power can be used, for example, by organized business entities, such as multinational corporations, banks, and conglomerates. The exercise of such power is tightly linked to the background social conditions

which affect food habits. But even more important is Wolf's last category. He writes of:

> a fourth mode of power, power that not only operates within settings or domains but that also organizes and orchestrates the settings themselves, and that specifies the distribution and direction of energy flows. I think that this is the kind of power that Marx addressed in speaking about the power of capital to harness and allocate labor power.... I want to use it as power that structures the political economy. I will refer to this kind of power as structural power. This term rephrases the older notion of "the social relations of production," and is intended to emphasize power to deploy and allocate social labor. These governing relations do not come into view when you think of power primarily in interactional terms. Structural power shapes the field of action so as to render some kinds of behavior possible, while making others less possible or impossible. [pp. 586–87]

When this perspective is applied to the subject of food habits, it is easy to see how structural and tactical (or organizational) power aligns the institutional frameworks that set the terms by which people get food, maintain or change their eating habits, and either perpetuate their eating arrangements and the associated meanings, or build new systems, with new meanings, into those arrangements.

All living organisms are faced with an imperious necessity: not to eat is to die. But beyond this, foods have meanings that transcend their nutritive role. Just as our species seems always to have made food carry symbolic loads far heavier than those of simple nutrition, so, too, the symbolism seems ready to spill over into even wider fields of meaning. The place of rice in Japanese culture, of bread in the West, of maize to many Native American

peoples—these significations clearly surmount any literal nutritive significance the foods themselves might have.

It might seem acceptable to say, then, that food exercises "power" over people in terms of what it means to them. But that is *not* the sort of "power" with which I am dealing; and it is important to be clear in this regard. The material world is invested with meaning. Because people act in terms of understood meanings, meaning can be said to effectuate behaviors of certain kinds. And power and meaning are always connected. "Power is . . . never external to signification," Wolf writes. Power "inhabits meaning and is its champion in stabilization and defense" [Wolf 1990, 593]. But the symbolic power of foods, like the symbolic power of dress or coiffure, is different from (even if related in some manner to) the tactical and structural power that sets the outermost terms for the creation of meaning. The power resting within *outside* meaning sets terms for the creation of *inside*, or symbolic, meaning.

Turn again to the words of that earnest GI who fought to preserve his right to drink Coke. There is no question about *inside* meaning in this instance. Such *inside* meaning is linked to *outside* meaning because what Coke means is coefficient with its history as a commodity, with the steps taken to ensure its availability, with the history of those very decisions by which Coke could become the purchased soft drink, the tie to home, the exciter of nostalgia, a very symbol of America. What I call *outside* meaning and *inside* meaning are clearly linked in Coke's story. But they are also quite different from each other, and they do not stand in any simple relationship.

In his own work, Wolf has set apart the issue of meaning from the issue of power. But he sees them as inextricably connected. He writes: "Meanings are not imprinted into things by nature; they are developed and imposed by human beings. Several things follow from this. The ability to bestow meanings—to 'name' things, acts and ideas—is a source of power" [Wolf 1982, 388]. As this essay attempts to suggest, the ability to "supply"

things, in the broadest sense, is also a vital source of power, not only because it may include some ability to bestow meaning, but also because meaning coalesces around certain relationships. Objects, ideas, and persons take on a patterned structural unity in the creation of ritual, as happened, for example, when "high tea" became a working-class eating custom. But it was the purveyors of the foods, the givers of employment, the servants of the state who exercised the power that made the foods available.

If we return briefly to the case of sugar in eighteenth-century Britain, we may inquire of the material to what extent the creators of background conditions can be said to set the precise terms for the emergence of *inside* meaning. Emulation, for example, played some role in increasing and in shaping food use; so, probably, did medical advice. The conditions under which landless people worked were determined by others: the hours when they might eat or rest, where they took their food, how they got to and from work. At the level of daily life, the customary practices that working people developed in order to deal with the newly emerging industrial society in which they found themselves were answers, or "solutions," to conditions over which they had no real control. In these ways, *outside* and *inside* meanings are linked through the conditions created and presented to potential consumers by those who supply what is to be consumed.

This chapter has aimed at clarifying these questions. But what is needed is a concerted effort to study the various ways in which stable food habits can be called into question. We may also ask ourselves *why* they are called into question. Some answers may have to do with poor nutrition, overeating, or inordinately expensive cuisine, relative to available resources. But other answers may have little or nothing to do with health or economy, even though people are being subjected to intense pressures to forgo some parts of their diet in favor of different foods. At times, as has been suggested here, large-scale structural changes, such as war and migration, may change the rules of the game, so to speak, compelling people to reorder their categories of mean-

ing in new ways, and to eat (and drink) differently. How this is done, and why it succeeds, urgently need to be understood. So, too, do all the means used to persuade people that what they are eating now should be replaced with something else. I think that it is within anthropology's capabilities to confront these issues solidly; but so far it has not done so. Until anthropologists try to find answers to these questions they will not be able to contribute in full measure what they can to our understanding of the world food problem.