CAN PRINCIPLES OF IDENTITY DIVERSITY AND CULINAR CULTURE BE MERGED

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Gastronomic cognition

In early May of this year, I spent seven days in the old German town Konstanz on Lake Boden. My well-intentioned hosts organized meals in national restaurants – Greek, Turkish and Italian. I asked them to take me just once to a restaurant with the local cuisine. To my great surprise, they told me there was no such restaurant in the town.

However, I was invited for a dinner with a family. The hostess prepared extraordinary dishes which all represented the culinary virtues of the local cuisine, along with soup and an asparagus side-dish!

It is no simple task to make a critical consideration of culinary cultureal identity, and that identity itself is not questionable because the "kitchen" is the beginning and the scene of almost all of human activities – biological, gastronomical, anthropological, ethnological, ecological, cultural...

So what can be done in one short paper?
If cuisine is part of the complex identity and we know that it is, there is a question of the entity of the social identity phenomenon.
To be different is at the heart of every identity!

The aim of this paper is to discuss some bases of modern understanding of the social identity phenomenon, with the cuisine as an essential part of it.

The light and darkness of identity

In the quest for a lost time

Does a human being need any social identity?
Of course he does. Otherwise, we wouldn't have quarrelled for centuries in the name of identity, affirming or contesting it, doing great deeds or terrible crimes. After all, isn't that the reason that the emotions of the majority of mankind are elevated nowadays?

That's why we have to be very cautious in the recognition and interpretation of human striving for identity – national, cultural, culinary...

In the quest for identity, our ontological need is to answer the following questions: **who we are, where do we come from and where we are going**! In the world that surrounds us, that we don't really understand, that isn't completely well-disposed to us, we would be lost without a virtual answer to those questions. However, we are not made to live alone, but to live in community, and that's why the whole story about identity becomes radically complicated.
By this ontological, together with cognitive function, it's possible to clarify the constant strivings of social groups in order to confirm their own identity. Those efforts are today, as always, in existential collision with complex economical, political and technological challenges.

At the end of the twentieth century this direct collision has been made worse by the powerful mondialistic logic of conspiratorial and semi-public groups which use social identity as a tool for manipulating people in order to fulfill *the will for power* (Friedrich Nietzsche).

Industrial and unbelievably rapid technological development, global ecological threats, regional conflicts, new relations between and inside social groups, uncontrolled globalization of the capitalist economy, the pressures imposed by the global financial market, the aggression of media and the industry of mass culture – all of these powerfully jeopardize the existing symbolic frame of social relations. Knowledge, skill, faith, tradition, the rules of behaviour, family, solidarity are permanently under the exhausting pressure of rapid change.

Where is the end of this?
Can we follow these changes psychologically nowadays?
Barely, and that's the reason for closing up in collective identity - the quest for ancient cultural and ethical roots, or modernism as *malicious differentiation* (Wablen) - which is the attempt to slow down, if only for a while, the advance of new times, that we have built but not yet accepted and in which we haven't found our proper place.

Obvious empirical reality

Such as we are, we need a social identity, because through it we simplify the perception of life and the world, so that we virtually succeed in organizing our lives. *And there is nothing more justifiable than this* (Pascal). The experience of identity offers a fictive order and designs the world, giving it meaning and in this sense it is undoubtedly the space of freedom.

However, it is like a fire, heating on one side and burning from the other.
Social identity transforms individuals into an uniformed entity, so that they may represent themselves as **obvious empirical reality**. This identity secures itself by the choice of a certain number of characteristics that are "*typical*" of the individuals that form the group. That's how the bearers of a certain social identity are recognized and interpreted as though by **labels** – "French" ("French cuisine"), "Negro", "Moslem"...
By this simplified approach, the colorful variations among the group are eliminated.

But what happens with smaller groups or with individuals who are, by some characteristics, closer to the identity of some other social group or are simply "*different*"? There is an established relation "*one versus the others*" in which the majority imposes rules of behaviour. Social identity is also a narrowed frame of limited freedom, which can progress to the direct repression of a minority by the majority.

Rear view

The foundation of social identities themselves we achieve by choosing, often irrationally, some abstract characteristics, **the essence**, which we experience as a constant in time and space. That's why we interpret the nation, race or some other cohesive factor as a timeless vertical. In many cases, the whole society behaves as if there had been no changes in history, as though our ancestors, in centuries gone, had the same way of thinking, singing the same songs, diversions, had the same aspirations, worries and pleasures.

But what happens when a look in the mirror is inevitable?
Even then, the social identity doesn't have to be questioned. The present state is usually seen as "*sick*". That's when we "look into the future, but see the past", in an attempt to find in that ragged history some period in which the group had the "*purity*" which is now soiled and the "*authenticity*", which is lost. In such situation, the chosen past, which was present for some people, is interpreted as an "*antique*" and "*monumental*" value to which we have to return in order to re-establish the truth about society and it's "*real*" substance. It's not uncommon to attribute to social identity the characteristics of a human being with "*collective memory*" and which can be "*humiliated*" and "*betrayed*" and which then has to be "*revenged*".
That rear view has seldom brought any good!

Forward view

The experience of social identity, while giving a simplified image of reality, has a lot of practical effects. In the modern situation of the most recent changes, two negative occurrences particularly stand out.

The first is the underestimation of contemporary history and a negative global relationship with contemporary events, probably as a consequence of fear and misunderstanding. The changes that we witness are interpreted as a pollution of traditional culture and an expansion of modern culture, as a global world's uniformity and the extinguishing of authenticity. There's no doubt that such tendencies exist, especially in global mondialistic logic. But such a relationship is not able to realize what is newly born or created, to recognize the future in the present. After all, millions of people are fighting today the best they can with a bad historical inheritance in order to make tomorrow possible for their descendants. Who can condemn their efforts as useless or not authentic?

The second occurrence is the pattern by which social groups are individualized and personalized, and all of that in the name of identity. This is individualism elevated to the level of a social value – "*the label*". As a result, the only legitimate principle of behaviour such groups recognize is the satisfaction of their own interests, which lie in the maximization of their own economic and political profit. This is a selfishly created pattern of development and expansion, which disregards the needs of other people. Such group individualism leads to conflicts between groups and to competition

between one another, and to the logical consequence of all individualism, the existence only of "*winners*" and "*losers*". The foundation of social identity is not the principle of cooperation, but competition!

»But, we have become more realistic, Even cynical I'm afraid. This means less solidarity, more selfishness, but also more effective. Is it possible to have material prosperity and collective lyricism at the same time? For the West, which is individualised, this is not possible. For the East, it is the only solution.« (Regis Debré)

The reality of social identity

The main characteristic of all societies is not to be still, but to be in constant boiling over, constant questing. This is not a question of choice, but the condition for survival and the only salvation from falling into entropy.

The reality of social identity is in change!
Change may be caused by ecological, migrational, political, economical, technological, cognitive and other factors. This is why people have a permanent need to repeatedly determine themselves, establishing new ways of acting and thinking.

This process of redesigning reality under the influence of history and ecology, is exactly the reason that social identity is never really a uniform entity, but the relation of different cultural groups and individuals which undergo change with characteristic dynamics.

It's surely exaggerated to speak nowadays about the danger of losing social, i.e. cultural, identity and about the need to stay where we are, to bring back, protect, preserve and clean up some historical "*essence*".
As culture is a constant process of change, acculturation is the mode of its existence!

The whole story of social identity may also be observed from an ethical aspect: tolerance and exclusivity.

Identity is, as we experience the world today, an ontological necessity, but its negative consequences must be avoided. How to reconcile two often conflicting and paradoxical aspects of social identity?

The transition to the new quality of understanding, tolerance and feeling that identities are a human resource and not the means of eliminating others are the only things that could establish the foundation for a more human experience of social identity and respond to the challenges which await mankind in future millennia. But that is another topic.

Will it really happen?
"Di doman non ce certezza" – I don't know what will happen tomorrow.
I believe it will!

Identity and culinary culture

Totemic collective eating

The plurality of actual and possible interactions between: the status of people who eat, the dishes on the dining table, relations at the table and the circumstances in which they eat – these are the principles of culinary culture identity.

Tell me what you eat, and I'll tell you who you are. (J.A.Brillat-Savarin)
The culinary culture does not exist as something apart, for itself and by itself. On the contrary, it is a necessary matter and confirmation of a larger cultural and social identity and as such, reflects the hidden multilevel structure of these identites! (1)

Each society has rules of behaviour, which determine identity and what and how to eat. Those rules are a reflection of the complex nature of social identity and also the external sign of internal social and family hierarchy.

But "cuisine" is not only a common matter of social identity, it is it's pride! But, presentation of culinary culture most often means *"national cuisine"*, and here we have again the simplified image of cultural identity in the form of »label«.

"Cuisine" is linked with variations on the concrete principles of identity: with natural environment, with the social status of the family and the family status of an individual, with the sacred and the profane with sickness and health, with masculinity and femininity, with childhood and maturity.

This is why eating always has a moral and symbolic side, *whether we eat to live* or *live to eat*. (Socrates)

Culinary culture is not only a matter of a wider cultural identity; it's a manifestation of ancient hidden anthropological patterns – autonutritionary behaviour.

At the dining table, his (the male's) ancient role of hunter lives on in several vestigial patterns. He sits at the head of the table and he is the one who carves the meat – male food, while his wife prepares vegetables – female food. In the restaurant, he is the one who gives instructions to the waiter, orders the meal and tastes wine. (2)

The loss or assimilation of concrete principles of culinary culture identity would also mean the loss of a given cultural identity and vice versa. One can hardly survive without the other for long!

You can never enter two times in the same river

If we go back to the roots, strictly following the culinary identity principles of cuisines which originated on European soil (for example, preparation of bread, meat on the grill, the use of olive oil) we would arrive in ancient Greece, at Homer's Iliad

and this symbolic description of a feast which Achilles prepares for his fellow soldiers.

At once Patroclus obeys the commands of his trusty companion. Meanwhile Achilles sets a vassal near the sparkling flames, which contains the shoulders of a ewe and a fat goat, and the broad back of a succulent pig. Automedon holds the meat, while godlike Achilles carves: he cuts it into pieces, and pierces them with iron spikes.

Patroclus, a man like the immortals, lights a great fire. As soon as the burning wood emits no more than a dying flame, he lays across the embers two long spears supported by two massive stones, and sprinkles the sacred salt.

When the meat is ready, and the banquet ready, Patroclus distributes bread around the table in fine baskets - but Achilles himself chooses to serve the meat. Then he sits down facing Odyssey, at the other end of the table, and bids his companion sacrifice to the gods.

Patroclus casts the first portion of the meal into the flames, and all of them set their hands to the dishes which have been prepared and served to them. When in the abundance of the feast they have chased away hunger and thirst, Achilles motions to Phoenix; Odyssey sees the sign, fills his great cup with wine, and addressing the hero says: Hail, Achilles...

From that day, up to today, everything is the same, but nothing is as it was! The European culinary oak ramified, built up, but also lost its branches. (3)

The culinary cultural identity – national, regional, local, social, and familiar – isn't a meal that you can add a new ingredient to and have the taste remain the same. On the contrary, each new ingredient, together with existing ones, contributes to a new taste.

The introduction of the potato into the German cuisine represented an important event in the history of the German people, greater than all military victories of Friedrich the Great. (Gunter Grass)

The cuisine" is certainly a dynamic human activity which follows the processes of social identity, but which also has its own development principles, together with agriculture, gastronomy, medicine, the nutrition industry, and also particularity in the process of acculturation.

If it were not this way, some originally fixed, once and forever given identity would be the residue on the bottom, an "essence", barely determined by the researchers, something that, in time, had been added on, various matters, layer by layer. Going back to that residue, even if it were possible, would hardly have any real meaning for culinary culture today and tomorrow.

Feast group

Even the best meal loses flavour if we eat it alone.

Collective eating and rules of behaviour at the dining table are typical only for man. The animals even those, which eat in pack, do not know the feast ritual.

Dining is a means of communication in which people affirm their identity inside the group. Those who share the meal, share the experience. This is why celebrations are followed by feasts, because this is an opportunity to strengthen existing relationships and forge new bonds between people.

The family and cooking in the house are without any doubt the first guardian and messenger of a society's culinary cultural identity principles – from the choice of agricultural cultures and the way of preparing a meal, to the symbolic and moral values of the meal. Culinary culture is one of central bonds, which gives it internal meaning and sense. That's why the hearth or stove, in many cultures the places for preparing food, are family symbols.

That symbol is seriously jeopardized by the individualistic principle of culture identity, which is attempting to dominate Western culture. The usefulness of cooking in the house is seriously questioned, above all by the new understanding of women's position in the family. The habit of taking semi-prepared or instant food, to eat out of the house, in restaurants, is more and more popular. Meals are individualised, we eat what we want and when we want!

So the origin of the family can be traced back all the way to collective dining. Modern civilization has still not found any other fundamental cell of living, immanent to human psychology, to replace the family. That's why we have to preserve the one we have, even if it appears old fashioned, through the institution of collective dining. Although the taking of food is becoming a more and more individual activity, it's pretty unbelievable that the kitchen and family table will vanish from our homes in the near future. (4)

By the loss of family institution, i.e. cooking in the house, the matters of culinary culture identity and the richness and innovation of recipes for preparing food would be seriously endangered.

Between two identities

The history of mankind could be called the history of migrations as well! Many futurologists predict that the next century will be a period of great migrations!

In today's world, in which the gap between West and East, North and South is deeper and deeper, migrational movements are more and more traumatic. International migration, be it constant, temporary, seasonal, legal or illegal, organized or spontaneous, is essentially characterized by a certain degree of mutual opposition

of social identities. Being alone, or in the family, migrants live between two cultures, in a "no man's land".

But the hosts are no less indifferent; their "essence" is seriously provoked! The first and the others, whether they want it or not, are changing gradually.

The majority of today's migrants set out after the Second World War. Neither they, nor their hosts predicted a protracted life in common. Nevertheless, that's what happened!

Culinary culture is one of the last identities that the migrant will renounce, the tastes that are acquired in childhood are engraved forever, and represent a space for great pleasure. The challenge of enjoying the new tastes, "cuisines", is the first thing that will attract the host to the migrants. Doesn't the number of "exotic" restaurants in the West prove that? The language of dishes and the surrounding in which we eat is universally understood, no matter what its place in the social culture.
The message is not only the culinary culture, but also the meal, as part of it!

Migrant's children, grown up and educated in the host country, are no longer willing to return to their "fatherland", they would be strangers there. This second generation has a better understanding of the social identity of the host country, and so seeks their place in that identity.

After all, what makes up the identity of American culinary culture?

If the prognosis that there will be great migrations in the next century proves true, *"culinary culture"* will surely significantly influence the course of social identity structure. This has already happened in the history of European peoples, not so long ago.

On the appearance of the barbarians, culinary art vanished, together with all the sciences of which it is the companion and consolation. Most of the cooks were massacred in their master's palaces: others fled rather then cater for their country's oppressors: and the few who stayed to offer their services had the shame of seeing them refused. Those fierce mouths and scorched gullets were insensible to the gentle charms of delicate fare. Huge haunches of beef and venison, immeasurable quantities of the strongest liquors, were enough to please them: and as the usurpers never laid aside their arms, most of their meals degenerated into orgies, and the banqueting-hall was frequently the scene of bloodshed.

However, it is not in the nature of things for excess to be of long duration. The victors finally wearied of cruelty: they allied themselves with the vanquished, took on a tincture of civilizations, and began to taste the delights of social life.

This change was reflected in their meals. A host now invited his friends, not so much to fill their bellies as to offer them a feast: they, in turn, perceived that an effort had been made to please them: a more decent joy animated them, and the duties of hospitality began to take on a quality of affection.

These improvements, which took place in about the fifth century of our era, received a further impetus under Charlemagne: and we learn from his Capitularies that the great king took personal pains to ensure that his realm should minister to the luxury of his table. (5)

When speaking of popular movements and the influence on identity that is on the culinary culture one should not forget internal migrations either.

On the basis of evaluation of UN experts, by the beginning of the next millennium, there will be more urban than rural population. The lights of the metropolis and the possibilities of magically getting a job attract the rural population in undeveloped countries.

The population migration from rural to urban environments in West Europe is mostly finished and the influence of both of them on changes of cultural patterns, that is, culinary culture, is very visible. Does this mean that it will stay like that?

The city that during thousands of years represented the goal of all dreams and wishes, the place of unexpected meetings and unforgettable feasting, the safe place, becomes unsafe, the place of boredom, the place of temporary sojourn where people come for work, expecting the next holiday. (Michel Reagan)

There are more and more urban citizens in the modern metropolis who are disappointed with life in *lonely crowd* (David Risman) and who leave the city seeking a peaceful and healthier place for living closer to nature. This is the reason we can expect a mass migration at the beginning of next millennium, but this time in the opposite direction – from the town to the country. This will surely influence further changes in the structure of social identity and a significantly different culinary culture.

The silence of the future

Is the culinary culture of our ancestors from, saying, two hundred years ago, the same as ours? Of course it isn't, and it can't be! Will our "cuisine" be the culinary culture of our descendants in, say, two hundred years? Of course it will not and it could not be!

However, time and space have a concrete context, giving appearances a special contextuality. What is the context of our time? There are a few of them, but one is nevertheless dominant – the process of *deconstruction* (Derida)! In this process, everything is in the game, because the sense of deconstruction is out of deconstruction!

It's already obvious that a lot of things in the future will not be the continuation of the past! We live in a period of great deconstructions, still questing for new answers to ontological questions because the existing ones, those that we inherited and put the finishing touches on, are no longer satisfactory.

A global culture of a primarily techno-industrial nature is now encroaching upon all the worlds' milieux, desecrating living conditions for future generations. We – the

responsible participants in this culture – have slowly but surely begun to question whether we truly accept this unique, sinister role we have previously chosen. Our reply is almost unanimously negative.

For the first time in the history of humanity, we stand face to face with a choice imposed upon us because our lackadaisical attitude to the production of things and people has caught up with us. Will we apply a touch of self-discipline and reasonable planning to contribute to the maintenance and development of the richness of life on Earth, or will we fritter away our chance, and leave development to blind forces?(6)

Let us remind ourselves of the ancient Greek wisdom:
Gods gave people a happy life, but they are not aware of it!

NOTES

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