

## Interpretations of Food in French Sociology of Imaginary

*Valentina Grassi\**

### **How to cite**

Grassi V. (2013). Interpretations of Food in French Sociology of Imaginary. [Italian Sociological Review, 3 (3), 193-201]

Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.13136/isr.v3i3.70>

[DOI: 10.13136/isr.v3i3.70]

### **1. Author/s information**

\* Department of Law, University of Naples "Parthenope" (Italy)

### **2. Contact authors' email addresses**

\* [valentina.grassi@uniparthenope.it](mailto:valentina.grassi@uniparthenope.it)

### **3. Article accepted for publication (*data*)**

November 2013

**Additional information about  
Italian Sociological Review**

**can be found at:**

**About ISR - Editorial Board - Manuscript submission**

# *Interpretations of Food in French Sociology of Imaginary*

Valentina Grassi

Valentina Grassi, Researcher, University of Naples "Parthenope", Department of Law, Naples, Italy

Corresponding author:

Valentina Grassi

Tel. 0039 3474852271

E-mail: [valentina.grassi@uniparthenope.it](mailto:valentina.grassi@uniparthenope.it)

## **Abstract**

Sociology of imaginary in French context was born thanks to the recovery of the theories of the anthropologist Gilbert Durand for the study of social phenomena by Michel Maffesoli. Concerning the food, the analysis of the imaginary regimes by Durand places the archetype of nourishment within the *mystical* structures of imagination. It's possible, through alimentary practices, to discover the cultural axes of a society and its imaginary. According to Maffesoli, eating together is a social act of *communion*, it is a communication process and a relational exchange. Nowadays, postmodern imaginary is making its way toward a new ecological alimentary wisdom, which Maffesoli calls *eco-sophia*.

Keywords: food, social imaginary, community experience, ecological sensibility

Sociology of imaginary in the French context comes in the wake of the work of great anthropologist Gilbert Durand. Inheriting the approach of Jungian psychoanalysis, and the interdisciplinary studies that, since 1933, were born around the Eranos Circle, Durand develops a structuralist analysis of the imaginary of different cultures, dividing it into two major regimes of the imagination, the diurnal regime and the nocturnal regime. All symbols, myths, different productions of the human imagination can be, according to Durand, placed in the grand topological scheme processing in a book published in France in 1960, *Les structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire*.

In his works, already Durand affirms the importance of studying the social imaginary in order to understand the emotional components of social action. And is a student of Durand, Michel Maffesoli, to collect his heritage and found a called *sociology of the deep*, or sociology of imaginary, through his works and through the research carried out within the Ceaq, the Center for Studies on the Current and the Quotidian, born in 1982 in Paris. This research laboratory with an international vocation is primarily concerned with new forms of sociality and imaginary in its many forms, in particular by developing the theories of its founder Michel Maffesoli. In this context, even the food and the alimentary practices have been the subject of the anthropological interpretation of Durand as of the sociological approach of Maffesoli, which collects suggestions of classical and contemporary authors in the French context and beyond.

## **The imaginary of food in the work of Gilbert Durand**

In *Les structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire* (1969), the French anthropologist Gilbert Durand divides the structures of the human process of imagination into two main regimes, *diurnal* and *nocturnal*. The first is all about symbolic images that relate to the divisions and oppositions in the fight against the enemy: we can find, therefore, the symbols of the sword and the sceptre as representations of that area of the imagination (*schizomorphes* structures). With the second regime, Durand collects the archetypes and symbols of the imagination that have to do with synthesis and mystical intimacy, so with anything that creates synthesis between opposites and with all that brings in the deep intimacy (*synthetic* structures and *mystical* structures). According to the author, it is possible to find *symbols* and *myths*

associated with the two regimes of the imagination in all human cultures, past and present, as each structure is associated with the universal *archetypes* of meaning (C.G. Jung) that are the essence of the experience that man makes in the world. Man builds his relationship with the world through some processes of sense building, making use of archetypes, symbols and myths as part of subjective experience and social life: this is the *imaginary*.

Mystical structures of imaginary include all symbols of body cavities, such as the womb, and all symbols of *food*; because it is something that goes down into the stomach and then reaches the deep cavities of the body, becoming substance. In the context of food, there are many symbolic elements: for example, the fluid elements refer to aquatic symbols, symbols of intimacy, joining the scheme that Durand calls the "alimentary trajectory" of swallowing. Mystical structures of the human imagination refer to the process of the digestive descent, which causes substances to reach the depths of the body, referring to symbols of intimacy.

According to Durand, the alimentary act has the nature of a double negation: mastication is the negation of plants and animals as food, not to destruction, but instead to a "trans-substantiation" (change of substance) through the second negation which is the digestive process. Both ancient alchemy and religions used the alimentary communion and rituals associated with this just to recall the process of trans-substantiation: alchemy originally aimed precisely to transform the substance of lead into gold. The body implements exactly a process of elaboration of substances that in the imagination is the process of the creation of material reality: Gaston Bachelard, the French philosopher who has long studied the processes of the human imagination, says in this regard, "the real is primarily a food" (Durand, 1992 [1969]: 293).

The process of the internalization of food helps us understand the presence of interiority: it is the fact of awareness of the digestive assimilation that confirms the existence of an inner substantiality in the human body. The essence of food, at the level of the imagination, is the awareness of man's deep intimacy and how this intimacy actively gives form to reality. In different cultures, as well as in science, the theories of "fluid" and "waves" show the effectiveness of substances in the modification of reality. The principle of identity, of the constitution of the self, receives a boost from alimentary assimilation: the process is secret, as it occurs in the visceral deep cavities. The alchemist, like the poet, like the man in search of himself, all have a strong desire: to penetrate the depths of intimacy.

The first alimentary archetype is *milk*, which is called "the first mouth substantive", where the act of breast-feeding is the first process of the trans-substantiation of primordial material. The image of breast milk is, in many cultures, the symbol of substantial union; in ancient cults of the Mother Goddess, the image of big breasts refers to food abundance. In the cultural imagination of many cultures milk is then associated with vegetation and honey. *Milk* and *honey* are often present together in poetry and the mystical: just as maternal milk symbolizes the essence of intimacy, honey in the heart of the tree, bee and flower is the symbol, as in the collection of Hindu philosophical texts, *Upanishad*, "the heart of things", the sweetness of intimacy found.

By combining in a mythical way the primordial drink and natural vegetation, we can switch to another symbol of sacred drink, that is *wine*, which is produced by vineyards. Wine is a symbol of "secret" and deep life, of blood as a source of life. In mysticism, natural breast milk and artificial wine are confused in their symbolic references to the source of life and orgiastic joy, such as in the myth of Dionysos (Brun, 1969; Kerényi, 2010). He is the archaic god of vegetation, in particular the lifeblood found in plants: with the action of heat and humidity, it bore the fruits of plants to their full maturity. Subsequently, Dionysus is the god of wine, as an element of ecstasy and the liberation of the senses, representing the perennial flow of creation in its essence. From an anthropological point of view, Dionysus represents the primordial, wild and animal nature of man, which is a constitutive part of his being, alongside the more "civilized" one. With Dionysus, life is revealed in its immensity, its potential to push the boundaries of order, then in its creative potential.

## **Imaginary of food and cultures**

For the comprehension of social imaginary, the researcher must immerse himself in the culture of a society, even from a historical point of view. Throughout human history, food has been much more than a means of livelihood: from a macro-sociological level, it has been an instrument of power, an

economic driver, a social glue, and a cause of conflict. In contemporary society, the food industry sector is one of the most powerful in the world. The meaning of food is also relevant in the micro-sociological context, in everyday practices and social relations: in fact, it's one of the most important social components that express the peculiarities of every culture.

Even contemporary society expresses its cultural peculiarities through food: from the question of GMOs to the biological food culture, from ethnic to vegetarian cuisine, from ritual fasts to festive binges, much of emotional and practical life revolves around food, to the point that J.P. Poulain talks about "social food space " (2002).

From traditional hunters/gatherer societies to sedentary ones based on agriculture, the practices of the production and consumption of food are witnesses to the various phases of human history. Many examples can be found in the documents of human culture, from sacred texts like the Bible to tales and popular traditions. In the social history of food emerges its ceremonial role, the relationship between food and sex, its healing properties, its power for salvation of the soul or, conversely, its power of damnation.

In hunter/gatherer societies, or even in villages and in contemporary big cities, in all cases social activities go through a time of food intake, a meal that can be prepared in a professional or basic way. Moreover, in most societies, meals can be classified into three large categories which express the distance between each practice and group rules and social codes: from the most informal meal to formal meal or to festive meal, generally associated with religious activities. Conversely, the way of access to food varies infinitely, as the importance of culinary processing, the frequency of each food taken - whether solid or liquid - the distribution in time of the day, week or seasons, the locations of food taken, in the domestic space or outside - in a restaurant for example - as well as the nutritional content and the preparation of the table associated with each meal (Desjeux, Garabvav-Moissaoui, Palomares, 2002).

The art of cooking food teaches that art itself needs science and that science is also an art; the art of cooking also involves aesthetics, that is, the way you present food and also includes a form of cultural knowledge. Eating and drinking are also forms of knowledge, especially because they provide an insight into cultural traditions.

Meals with others constitute the ritual moments that punctuate the daily lives of social actors and thus, the collective existence (Freund, 2013). It is therefore possible, through alimentary practices, to discover the traditions and stages of the development of a society, within its daily life, just where the values and traditions are transmitted. Micro-sociology can, therefore, benefit from the analysis of these practices, finding in them the traditions and innovations that are encountered in everyday life: it is just the place for the relational construction and transmission of imaginary of social subjects.

The normal course of the day is punctuated by the moments of the three main meals: this articulation may be subject to change, but it tends to be constant in all social environments and also in time. What differ are the spaces, the food, the opportunities and therefore the composition of the guests. But, this does not change the fact that a biologically essential practice also becomes a significant social practice. In this regard, the festive occasions are particularly significant: they always culminate with a collective banquet, in all cultures as well as in all social environments.

The meals in common on festive occasions were certainly more common in the past, especially in the religious area: we can think about how Christianity has marked significant moments in the life of Christ through consuming meals together (i.e. the wedding of Cana and the Last Supper), repeatedly played back in the paintings of the past. Today, the importance of the kitchen can be found in the proliferation of recipe books (many of them aim to convey traditional recipes) as well as in the specialization of the trades connected to the kitchen, from the chef to the sommelier.

Customs and traditions are considered by sociology to be one of the forms of social regulation. The kitchen is one of the main components of all traditions: in Europe, British, French, German, Italian, Spanish and Greek traditions each have respective traditions about the dishes they serve for breakfasts, lunches and dinners and also about differences in the importance given to different meals.

Even common language reflects the social importance of the kitchen and food. Many metaphors, in fact, refer to the alimentary sphere. Culinary vocabulary, as well, is rich and varied with terms relating to: the different dishes, forms of food preparation, the spaces for the presentation of meals, the crafts and skills required for those who are dedicated to the kitchen. Food is, therefore, a fundamental element of culture, through which traditions are transmitted and innovations pass (think

of the fashion of "nouvelle cuisine"). Hence, food is a crucial component of socialization. Even hospitality passes first through the kitchen.

The kitchen is a mirror of society and, at the same time, conforms to the image of a society. Even the regional varieties of the cuisine of a country reflect the traditions and innovations within cultures: transformations pass through the introduction of new products (such as the arrival of the potato) as well as through the changing ways of preparing and packing foods and beverages.

Finally, multiculturalism in contemporary society is closely linked to migration in the era of globalization and also regards alimentation. Consumer styles change, taste is involved in a process of "exoticization", ethnic cuisines are spreading and alimentary *metisage* is now increasingly widespread as dishes are brought together from different cultural backgrounds.

### **Food and sociality in Michel Maffesoli**

Eating together can be considered a "total anthropological fact" (Morin, 2013): this social act has, in fact, to do with biology and with chemistry, both natural and artificial, but also with the *communion* of those who communicate around the table. By sharing a meal, food and drinks, we can communicate, we can open ourselves to each other and we practice conviviality. This social phenomenon has to do with the quality of life and living together, with well-being. Modern Western civilization suffers particularly from the degradation of conviviality and of being together: people are able to resist the obligations of individualistic and hyper-technologized civilization thanks to the rites of meals eaten together. Modernity has built a social imaginary mainly founded on *individualism*; postmodernism, however, as Maffesoli says, is giving voice to a social imaginary which is based on the sharing and communion with each other. The fact of eating together has always been the foundation of community (Maffesoli, 2013a): the examples are numerous, from family meals to business meals to religious meals (weddings, funerals). From an anthropological point of view, all religious mythologies represent meals together and they symbolically represent the basis of conviviality in the community liaison. Nowadays, the growing attention that young people pay to the quality of the food is also very interesting, with the focus on the *biological* and the spread of networks of *collective gardens*, very popular in cities like Paris and Rome; in this perspective, neighbourhood markets are experiencing a re-valuation, in small and in large cities.

Attention to the ritual meal is part of the sociology of everyday life, in the French context, which is developing especially around Michel Maffesoli. It involves understanding the anthropological significance of the consolidation of the social bond and of practices related to daily domestic life, that characterize what Maffesoli calls the "re-enchantment of the world". The interest in cooking, in food tastes, in rituals of meals eaten in common reflect a "presentism", which characterizes contemporary society. Eating together is one of the forms of communion with emotions, linked to the moment, ephemeral, which are characteristic of the post-modern era.

The practice of living together belongs to the popular mass culture that, instead of being considered "dominated and enslaved" (Maffesoli, 2013a: 25), must be regarded as the modern version of the myth, as it stages playful environments of community experience which are the soul of the re-enchantment of the world. Holidays and recreational environments participate in the re-mythologizing of social life. Although it has often been regarded as marginal compared to mainstream sociological analysis, the daily life of social actors is an object of great importance for sociological comprehension, as in the manifestations of everyday life are found practices of attribution of meaning, i.e., the processes of the social construction of reality by those who live it. It is the task of the sociologist, therefore, to pay attention to all these micro-behaviours and to the sense that subjects give them, especially when it comes to behaviours as anthropologically and psychologically significant as those related to food.

It is interesting to note that the traditional division of roles between men and women and between the public and private sectors in today's culinary rituals is gradually fading out. Even "fashionable" culinary styles tend toward cultural and social *metisage*, producing what Maffesoli calls a "kitchen oxymoron", where popular dishes are associated with luxury foods and dishes can also put together cultural traditions very distant from each other. Cultural and social *metisage* is also characteristic of the postmodern era.

Each society seems to have built the foundation of its being together on the conviviality of eating together as well as drinking together, in a sort of "self-loss" within the community facilitated, for example, by the ecstatic action of wine. Ecological sensitivity, contemporary religious forms and productions of art and mass culture lead us to the understanding of a progressive re-valorisation of these "aesthetic" practices: Maffesoli means them in the etymological sense of the term, like "perceptions through the senses", establishing itself as real "ordeals" of post-modern being together.

Modernity has built a relationship with time based mainly on speed and acceleration; postmodernity is discovering, even in new forms, a more *qualitative* relationship with time, which is based on the importance of waiting and slow. The meal as an act of eating is related to the pleasure of taste, to the "wisdom of the stomach" and to the love of good food that produces a reaction to fast-food, enhancing what is now called "slow-food": quality needs time, "the time of the Creator". The question of time in contemporary society obliges us to ask some important questions: if cuisine and the quality of food require time, perhaps all of social life could gain quality with the enhancement of the "slow" style, with taking time, especially at work, where the obligations of profitability and productivity seem to reign at all costs. Acceleration has been one of the fundamental components of modernity: the process of the modernization of Western society has resulted in a series of accelerations of social experiences, so the majority of actions are now faster, how to move, to produce, to work and to communicate. But, this compulsive acceleration gradually erased the importance of time, care and dedication to all social activities, because quality, of course, takes time.

### Communication through food

Both in construction and in transmission of social imaginary, a key role is given to the processes of *communication*. Communication is a process that establishes all forms of social relations, which combines the opposites of conflicts and mystical unions within itself. From an anthropological point of view, the ritual of the meal is a symbol of communication in society: it combines the conflict, the exchange up to the mystical communion. With regard to conflict, we can think of the traditional culinary challenges of families in the villages (Maffesoli 2013b: 119), as well as the differences and hierarchies that can be highlighted in the distribution of people around the table. In this sense, the rites of the meals become symbols of social rituals, in the *coincidentia oppositorum* (G. Durand), which is characteristic of all forms of social relationships.

In a 1961 essay, R. Barthes (1961: 979) states that food must be considered a *system of communication*, replete with its body of images, its "protocol" of use and conduct. What Barthes called "alimentary facts" must be studied through direct and indirect observation in all their manifestations, in art, economy, even in advertising, in the social imaginary which Barthes calls "the mental life of a given population". The analysis of the collected materials must be conducted without any ideological or economic determinism, but trying to understand all the implications of the "functional structure of a communication system" which is the *sign*. Barthes himself brings up an interesting example (1961: 980). As a person buys something to eat, this action conveys meaning through the object-food and conveys a situation to which this refers. Since in all societies food products pass through a complex system of production and consumption, then through a system of social institutions, it is not possible to distinguish the sign function from the purely food function. Food communication is a communication system. So, as in many other systems of communication within a society, it acts as a sign system's functional unit. Through the signs *symbols* are socially constructed, with the attribution to them of socially shared *emotional* meaning: the social imaginary is constructed so.

Alimentation is, therefore, a system: in order to understand what its functional units are, first you must analyze the alimentary facts, i.e., products, techniques and uses. Then they must be submitted to what is called in linguistics, the "trial of communication". One must observe whether the transition from one fact to another produces a change in significance. For example, the choice of whether to use one food product rather than another is not simply linked to individual tastes, but has social connotations involving social institutions: this is the case in the consumption of a commercial wine rather than a prized bottle of wine. Certainly, today, one of the alimentary practices that has a strong social connotation within the communication system of "food" is the consumption of *organic* products that today is a socially-marked practice. Organic food is consumed, in fact, in certain social

environments and brings with it some social meanings that involve institutions, such as family, school and media.

The multiplicity of alimentary facts refers to the social codes associated with meals: they vary greatly in different cultures and following hours of the day. For example, formal and informal meals associated with the content can vary depending on the day of the week: during the weekend meal can be an opportunity for migrants to cook dishes of their country of origin, to receive friends, or to eat informally trays face on television (Desjeux, Garabvav-Moissaoui, Palomares, 2002). Food outlets can also vary according to the seasons of winter or summer, the dry season or the rainy season: in Europe or in the United States summer allows more frequent or later meals at home or outside; summer is also associated with grilled meats and barbecue. Indeed, in many societies, there's a gender division of labour and women are more likely than men to the kitchen, especially when it comes to daily meals; one period of life leaves some uncertainty about who does what in the kitchen: this is the period of youth. Moreover, alimentary facts vary depending on the occasion, festive or ordinary: the moments of celebration are often associated with food whose function is to renew social ties between group members.

A communication process is also a relational exchange: one can think of all the traditions of a neighbourhood, where the act of eating together is a means of socializing. The characteristic of all social rituals is that different elements (conflict, exchange and mysticism) coexist in harmony, a tension that constitutes their profound nature. The table is a place of strong emotional ties as well as of great battles and discord and to accompany these rites there is often wine, the effects of which are also unpredictable. The whole theatricality of the meal, as well as of its social rituals, embodies the fundamental ambivalence of harmony and conflict, ultimately of life and death. The entire cosmos rests in harmonious tension, which is well represented by the table. Finally, there is the component of the mystical communion. It is a component of social existence we can find in a very marked way in the rites of meal, which, while introducing substances into the body reinforce sociality within the social body.

### ***Eco-sophia* and postmodernity**

In the imaginary of postmodernity, according to Maffesoli, we are witnessing a return to the Earth and to the territory as symbols of unity and communion, and then as a factor of social relations and bonds. Western modernity has been dominated by a *projective reason* which, in the context of educational, political and economic institutions, tended to mobilize social energies for a future project. In the prevalence of the imagery of a diurnal regime (G. Durand), modern man has had an attitude towards the nature of power and domination towards an inert and passive entity. The Myth of Progress has had destructive consequences in the relationship that modern man has had with the environment, with the earth and with the cosmos. "Progressive totalitarianism" has had disastrous consequences, especially in the social and natural environments.

According to Maffesoli, modernity is characterized by what he calls the *ratio seminalis* (Maffesoli 2010: 7). It is a process of imposition of an exterior design sense, which is both the meaning and the purpose of things. A polarity reversal is in progress in post modernity, an epochal change that is also having profound consequences in man's relationship with the environment. While modern progressivism declines, a strong and vigorous ecological sensibility is taking root in popular culture. *Progressivism* is being replaced by *progressivity* which finds many "archaic" axes, such as people, land, nature, feelings and moods, considered outside of dominant thought. These are all aspects which consist of interdependencies and from what Baudelaire called *correspondances*.

Attention to nature implies the acceptance of things as they are: it is *to say yes* to life as it is occurring and to how it changes through its internal processes. The return of the "natural" allows adaptation to the world as it is. This is a *tragic* attitude, which accepts the lightness and darkness of existence. The idea of *perfection* is replaced by that of *completeness*, according to the multiplicity of being in the world, with the acceptance of all aspects of the common environment-house (in greek *oikos*).

Natural *progressivity* was only accepted with difficulty by modern *progressivism*, which claimed control on spatial and natural processes. In fact, anything considered "wild" provoked suspicion and was ruled out through processes of artifice and control technologies. Modern social, economic and political *power*

tried to control the *puissance* of social interaction: this is the process that M. Foucault called *domestication* by modern institutions. An attempt was made to eliminate the affections, the feelings and the "dark side" of social experience. In postmodernity we are seeing a reverse process, in which all of these elements are rediscovered and valued.

As a symbol of the return to the wildness of nature, Maffesoli invokes Dionysus as the archetype of ecological sensibility. The god is represented with the "glebe" at his foot. Divinity close to nature, Dionysus is a god of the present, the "here and now". In the success of organic products, "kilometer zero products" and in the spread of various forms of valorisation of the land, there is something *pagan*, a new *animism* that is embodied in the ecological practices of life in the post modern era. We can find attention to the quality of everyday life in the relationship with time and in the contact with nature, which Maffesoli summed up in the formula "pleasure of being from pleasure of being of things" (Maffesoli 2010: 17).

The basis of modern man's relationship with nature is a "meta-physical" conception, in the etymological sense of the term. This conception places nature "beyond" (*meta*) physics, and therefore beyond itself (*physis*). Wild nature must be controlled, forcing it beyond itself. This process helps modernity to build the negation of what is properly natural in humans, such as instincts. From this perspective, everything that binds man to nature, like body, desire, pleasures of being is denied in favour of the logic that Maffesoli defines "of must be". And everything that is denied, but is part of the human experience of the world, takes a perverse route: we can think about all forms of overeating or sexual excesses that have spread. The "asceticism" of modernity is now replaced by the return of Dionysus, a shrub, worldly and *chthonian* divinity, which precisely evokes the relationship with Earth and the hedonism in everyday life. Post modernity is making its way toward ecological wisdom, the *ecosophia*.

### The ecological sensibility

The logic that Maffesoli defines as "let be" is not a logic of passivity: also, thanks to the influence of Eastern traditions, this "poetic" attitude refers to something that can derive the maximum effectiveness of things because it lets them go, because it lets go of their natural cycles. In a way, this attitude regards the relationship with nature and the process of knowledge. On this subject the author invents the term "geosociology", which refers to a sociology that respects the intrinsic truth of the object of study that is already there, just as he respects the Earth in its essence. Geosociology is an attitude toward the relationship with the outside world, just as with ecological awareness, it makes us all explorers of the "secret nature of things".

If sociology seeks to understand the roots of many contemporary social phenomena, it is important to pay attention to the new relationship that society is building with the earth-mother: an *organic* and *holistic* approach, in which the well-being of Earth becomes the well-being of those that inhabit it. The desire for "wholeness" is, according to Maffesoli, characteristic of post-modernity: from this it is possible to interpret the ecological awareness that is spreading, between holism and organic thought. The universal and the particular, the local and the global are united in a "dynamic rooting" contained in the formula of "glocal", where you can find an interesting synergy of archaic traditions and technological development, as well as in the production of organic products. This is a "conjunctive" logic that enhances the direct relationship with the land, with the territory, as a reservoir of traditions and knowledge that can be extremely useful even today, in relation to the technological development setting.

Ecological sensibility is often associated with *exoticism* of alimentary practices. Overall, exoticism is seen as a way to tame the cultural and geographic distances, which manages identity by asserting different miscegenation and introduce a break in the routines of daily life. We can distinguish three kinds of exoticism (Desjeux, Garabvav-Moissaoui, Palomares, 2002): the first is an "exoticism of passage" and its functions are to discover another culture, to violate the family norm or limit social risks, to reduce the cost of food; the second is an "exoticism of spot" and its function is to break the routine meals adulthood; the third is an "extreme exoticism", with followers of macrobiotics, consuming mainly cereals, legumes, some vegetables and some fruits according to the degree achieved by the adept. This scheme is inspired by religious traditions of the Far East, which aims to reproduce



in food constituent fundamental equilibrium of the universe: the yin and yang must be balanced. If exoticism lives in a social dynamic, the cycles of life and the social construction of taste, it also refers to the relativity of its contents.

The ecological sensibility is based precisely on attention to things as they are, to their presence, to their "proximity"; there is a chain that combines in semantic and etymological way the terms "humus", "humanity" and "humility". There are some correspondences between the deep essence of the earth, man and the respect for otherness. In this context, the communal territory, such as space, creates the social bond: nature, and the elements that compose it, are the presuppositions of that invisible force that unites the social subjects to each other. Many of the contemporary manifestations of attention and care for the earth, from community gardens in the cities to the practices of responsible consumption, are also opportunities to create social networks and community solidarities. Ecology becomes a new social way to pay attention to the natural cycles of things and to increase respect for things and people "as they are".

The "biotope" in ecology is that space that houses an ensemble of living beings (flora and fauna) and makes possible the life in common. The term "ethics" in its etymological sense, refers to the set of traditions and customs of a community, which is the foundation of its social bonds. Both the biotope and ethics recall that living beings live within a relationship and this interdependence is the condition of their existence. The link to the territory and the other is not a reactionary and anachronistic return to the past, but a rediscovery of the root of socially being together and ultimately of the living beings' life on this Earth.

Examples of this ecological sensibility in contemporary society are numerous: people speak at length about the *green economy*, an economy that is more environmentally friendly, that has sustainable development as a reference value and that makes use of all methods of improved industrial processes to energy saving and that has the least possible environmental impact. There are now numerous claims for the improvement of the quality of water, air and ecosystems in general, also in view of a healthier diet: the knowledge is widespread that quality of life depends on the quality of the food eaten. Environmental awareness is now a way of preserving future generations, trying to make them able to take advantage of the same environmental resources, unpolluted, which we currently have (*sustainability*). Nowadays, there are many political and social movements, networks and groups that join around ecological sensibilities of various forms, from environmental protection to the defence of the quality of food and to responsible consumption: this is certainly a sign of social change of the imaginary and the behaviour that manifests an irreversible paradigm shift. The path of modernity has produced the domination of the *eco-nomy* while postmodernity is rediscovering the value of *eco-logy*.

## **Food and social imaginary**

As in all social practices, subjects are both rational and irrational eaters. Through portraits, stories, celebrations and food sharing situations, we can understand the social relationship with food (Puolain, 2002). There are some paths of thought that lead to these permanent challenges people face in meeting with foods and the choices reflect the history of subjects and society, how they negotiate conflicting desires, how they suffer, they adapt or transgress influences and constraints, they advanced games and challenges, leading to a construction of some typologies of eaters. The symbolic dimensions emerge from this kind of analysis.

In the human imagination, food refers to the process of the digestive descent, which causes substances to reach the depths of the body: that's why Gilbert Durand places the food between the mystical structures of imaginary. There are also many others symbolic elements that have to do with food and that lead to human intimacy, such as breast milk, wine, honey etc.

In different societies the practices of the production and consumption of food are linked to the evolution of human cultures, and we can find elements of the experiences of food in different texts, sacred or profane. The food has many different characteristics: it has a ceremonial role, some healing properties, a power for salvation of the soul or, conversely, a power of damnation. Therefore eating and drinking, just like cooking, are forms of knowledge and they can provide an insight into cultural traditions. Moreover, society builds the foundation of itself on the conviviality of eating and drinking together, in some "aesthetic" practices (M. Maffesoli) that are facilitated by the ecstatic action of wine.

The “alimentary facts” (R. Barthes) can be studied through direct and indirect observation in all their manifestations, to understand the social imaginary of a given population. Food communication is a communication system and the signs of this system are its functional unit: the attribution of some socially shared emotional meanings turns them into symbols, contributing to the construction of the social imaginary.

Western modernity has been dominated by a certain imaginary of progressivism, which tended to mobilize social energies for a future project in all educational, political and economic institutions. The modern man has had an attitude towards the nature of power and domination and this attitude has had disastrous consequences, especially in the social and natural environments. Postmodernity is now giving revalorisation to some aesthetic practices especially through an ecological sensitivity, some contemporary religious forms and some productions of art and mass culture. In the imaginary of postmodernity, according to Maffesoli, there's a return to the Earth and to the territory as symbols of unity and communion and as a factor of social relations and bonds. The examples of this ecological sensibility are numerous: from the *green economy* to the sustainable development as a reference value. The knowledge is widespread that quality of life depends on the quality of the food eaten, depending in turn on the well-being of the earth and the ecosystem.

## Bibliography

- Barthes R. (1961), *Pour une psycho-sociologie de l'alimentation contemporaine*, Annales. Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations, vol. 16, n. 5, 977-986
- Brun J. (1969), *Le retour de Dionysos*, Desclée, Tournai
- Corbeau J.-P., Poulain J.-P. (2002), *Penser l'alimentation. Entre imaginaire et rationalité*, Privat, Toulouse
- Desjeux D., Garabvav-Moissaoui I., Palomares E. (ed.) (2002), *Alimentations contemporaines*, L'Harmattan, Paris
- Durand G. (1992), *Les structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire*, Dunod, Paris [ed. orig. 1969, Bordas, Paris]
- Freund J. (2013), *Cuisine, tradition et innovation*, Manger ensemble, Les Cahiers Eupopéens de l'imaginaire, mars 2013, 43-45
- Grassi V. (2005), *Introduction à la sociologie de l'imaginaire*, Erès, Ramonville Saint-Agne
- Grassi V. (2010), *Synchronies: image, imaginaire, société. Etudes de l'imaginaire dans la sociologie française et italienne*, Éditions universitaires européennes, Sarrebruck
- Kerényi K. (2010), *Dioniso. Archetipo della vita indistruttibile*, Adelphi, Milano [ed. orig. 1976]
- Maffesoli M. (2010), *Matrimonium. Petit traité d'écophilosophie*, CNRS éditions, Paris
- Maffesoli M. (2013a), *Une éthique de l'esthétique*, Manger ensemble, Les Cahiers Eupopéens de l'imaginaire, mars 2013, 78-82
- Maffesoli M. (2013b), *La table comme lieu de communication*, Manger ensemble, Les Cahiers Eupopéens de l'imaginaire, mars 2013, 119-121
- Morin E. (2013), *Petite introduction à la papillosophie*, Manger ensemble, Les Cahiers Eupopéens de l'imaginaire, mars 2013, 78-82
- Poulain J.-P. (2002), *Sociologies de l'alimentation, les mangeurs et l'espace sociale alimentaire*, PUF, Paris