Butta la Pastiche! Camp Visions and National Palates

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I draw from Science and Technology Studies (STS), Anthropology, and Queer Theory to show how Sociotechnical Imaginaries around national palates have, at times, taken on the sensibility of Camp – celebrating and naturalizing the artificial. Where existing work on both Sociotechnical Imaginaries and Gastronationalism have focussed largely on the material output of sociotechnical systems, I draw attention to their emotional output, asking what affects or modes are evoked when imagining food in relation to nation. Orienting the paper around a stage performance, given in 2013 by butcher and Slow Food representative, Dario Cecchini, titled 'Carne e Spirito', I ask how efforts to recognise the variability and flexibility of small scale industry can and have instead come to naturalize both nation and national body, lapidifying had hitherto been fluid. This begs a second, perhaps more pressing question: how does the camp mode of celebration potentially obscure a more insidious practice of regulating a national body?

CV

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KEYWORDS

Nation, Food, Camp, Geographically Indicated Foods, Food Production, Sociotechnical Systems

Sahar Tavakoli, "Butta la Pastiche! Camp Visions and National Palates", inSighout. Journal on Gender and Sexuality in STEM Collections and Cultures, 1 (2023), 30–36, DOI: 10.60531/insightout.2023.1.5

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Can the future of a nation be strengthened, undermined, or in any way altered or redirected by manipulating the diet of its body politic?

Introduction

In his *Physiology of Taste; or, Transcendental Gastronomy,* 19th century lawyer and epicure Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin gives a definition of the figure of the gastronome. In a series of prefatory aphorisms, he writes: "The destiny of nations depends upon the manner in which they are fed."[1] Brillat-Savarin is descriptive rather than prescriptive here, observing some general truth about the time in which he lived and ate. Nonetheless, the aphorism begs the question: Can the future of a nation be strengthened, undermined, or in any way altered or redirected by manipulating the diet of its body politic?

In 2013, butcher-poet Dario Cecchini travelled from his native Chianti Hills in central Tuscany, Italy, to Copenhagen, Denmark, where—in a circus tent set up on the harbour island of Refshaleøen—he recited Dante and slaughtered a pig. It was a political performance: a call to bear witness to an existential threat looming over a racial minority whose members are scattered all over the globe—a race of local Butchers. In this tent and for this audience, the future of nations depends not only on how its members eat but on how their food is bred, raised, slaughtered, and sold.

This is a paper about sociotechnical systems constructed around local or geographically indicated foods and the imaginaries that are baked into them. I raise the question of how sociotechnical imaginaries that both give rise to, and emerge out of, such foods naturalise social categories of community, culture, or state in such a manner that once flexible (cultural) practices are ossified in place and time. I combine Science and Technology Studies literature on sociotechnical imaginaries with the anthropological concept of Gastronationalism to ask how the feeding of a nation becomes proxy for the nourishment of a body politic. Furthermore, I queer the timelines along which these sociotechnical imaginings unfold. Rather than invoking the future to bear upon the present, the sociotechnical narratives composed around food set their referent in the past, tacking between what has been and what is yet to be, with the present existing as an incidental point on their arc. What is strange here is not that the past plays a role in the imagining of the nation in the present. This has been well described by scholars such as Benedict Anderson and Eric Hobsbawm as a component of national narratives or tradition-making. What is strange is that this queer unfolding of time, so clearly described in these texts from the fields of political science and history, has been completely overlooked in discussions of sociotechnical imaginaries, even where those imaginaries participate in the making of an image of (sociotechnical) nations. The timeline of the sociotechnical imaginary appears to be one where the future hangs over the present, the

[1] Brillat-Savarin, The Physiology of Taste; or, Transcendental Gastronomy, trans. Fayette Robinson (Philadelphia, 1854), 25.

past is forgotten. Considering the past as well as the future in discussions of the sociotechnical imaginary furthermore results in a vision of nation that is deeply Camp, lending what would otherwise be understood as "low-class" or "poor taste" a degree of respect often reserved for high culture.

Performing Pasts and Futures

Cecchini's performance, *Carne e Spirito*—literally "flesh and spirit" but perhaps more accurately "body and soul"—unfolds as follows:[2]

We begin with a stage decorated to invoke the rolling hills of the Tuscan countryside: yellowed grass covers the floor while a fallen tree trunk lies at the front of the stage. Craggy grey boulders punctuate the scene. Two figures challenge this rural idyll. First, to the right of the stage, is Cecchini, sharpening a breaking knife and dressed in a butcher's apron. Rather than the standard starched white, Cecchini's uniform is coloured with a vertical green stripe running from right shoulder to armpit and a red stripe from left shoulder to armpit. The traditional white separates the two. In the mirrored vision of the audience, Cecchini appears as a walking Italian *tricolore*.

The second figure is a recently slaughtered pig, hung by its hind legs from unseen rafters and left hovering a few feet above a bundle of straw and sawdust, into which its blood continues to gather. The effect is the suggestion of a carcass offered from the heavens above. The last decade has seen a continued downward trend in rainfall across both Northern and Southern Tuscany.[3] In Cecchini's Tuscany it might not rain cats and dogs, but it does seem to rain swine. In a dislocated performance of his daily labour, Cecchini slices open the belly of his supporting actor, scooping out purple, grey, and pink entrails. What follows is, presumably, less day-to-day. As he separates the offal by organ, Cecchini recites verses from Dante Alighieri's *Inferno*. "[...] io venni men, così com'io morisse. E caddi come corpo morto cade," he cries. "I fainted as if I had met my death. And then I fell as a dead body falls."[4]

The performance was the opening act of the third annual *MAD Symposium,* a three-day event dedicated to discussion on the production, protection, and culture of food and dining, founded by René Redzepi, chef and co-owner of the restaurant Noma in Copenhagen, David Chang, founder of the Momofuku restaurant chain and food brand, and the former editorial team of the now discontinued food magazine *Lucky Peach*. In 2013, the symposium theme was "Guts", dedicated to "visceral stories of strength, persistence, risk-taking, and embracing failure"[5]. Cecchini, who owns and operates a small butchery shop in Chianti, was performing on behalf of Slow Food International.

Somewhat at odds with its own international status, Slow Food defines its mission as the preservation of local methods, practices, and values related to food and cookery. The organisation first emerged in the late 1980s as a loose coalition of individuals, figure-headed by Carlo Petrini, whose first course of public action was to protest both (and sometimes interchangeably) what they considered to be the fast-foodification of Italian cities and the Americanisation of Italian life.[6] Today, Slow Food has established a much more significant presence, not

[2] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hcn1TOYxLuE (accessed 18 July 2023).
[3] Cf. Michael Märker et al., "Assessment of Land Degradation Susceptibility by Scenario Analysis: A Case Study in Southern Tuscany, Italy", Geomorphology, 93/1-2 (Jan. 2008), 120–129.
[4] Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia: Inferno*, V, 141–142. English: *The Divine Comedy,* trans. Allen Mandelbaum (New York, 1991), 81.
[5] https://madfeed.co/mad-symposium/mad-symposium-3-guts/ (accessed 18 July 2023).
[6] Cf. Florence Fabricant, "A Faintly Amused Answer to Fast Food", *New York Times*, 15 Nov. 1989, C10; Roberta Sassatelli and Federica Davolio, "Consumption, Pleasure and Politics: Slow Food and the Politico-Aesthetic Problematization of Food", *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 10/2 (2010), 202–232, at 206.

only in Italy but across the world, involving itself in the production of European Union food and safety legislation and organising food archiving projects based on the premise that both tradition and locality are being lost in an estranged, globalised world.[7] Above all, the organisation champions some notion of the "authentic" or "natural", in this instance through the altogether inauthentic and unnatural fusion of Dante and butchery in a mock Tuscany located in Copenhagen.

Sociotechnical Imaginaries, Gastronationalism, and Camp

Introduced by Sheila Jasanoff and Sang-Hyun Kim in their text *"Containing the Atom: Sociotechnical Imaginaries and Nuclear Regulation in the United States and South Korea"*, and elaborated upon in *"Dreamscapes of Modernity: Sociotechnical Imaginaries and the Fabrication of Power"*, the sociotechnical imaginary encompasses "collectively held, institutionally stabilized, and publicly performed visions of desirable futures, animated by shared understandings of forms of social life and social order attainable through, and supportive of, advances in science and technology"[8]. Put differently, the sociotechnical imaginary is an animating force, one that organises and guides systems of meaning relating to the production or practice of science and technology. Important here is that the transfer of influence does not only move one way. While imagining in the present provides a foundation for what might come, collective understanding of what the future might look like, might require or deny, shapes the way science and technology projects are funded, practised, or popularly interpreted today.

If we are willing to accept that food production and preparation constitute a kind of specialised knowledge, involving specialised instruments and technologies—and we should—then it would be fair to characterise the vision evoked by Cecchini, and, by extension, Slow Food, as a kind of sociotechnical imaginary. Where Cecchini and Slow Food depart from our standard case studies of sociotechnical imaginaries is that, rather than envision some promising future as a means of informing practice in the present, they turn to a vision of the past. The future is an ominous foreboding here.

Where we wish to be is where we have already been.

Gastronationalism, too, relies on collective vision. In her study of foie gras, Michaela DeSoucey identifies Gastronationalism as an extreme form of Gastropolitics, with conflicts unfolding between social movements, state regulators, and cultural markets where food functions either as a boundary object or an obligatory passage point between interests.[9] The similarity to sociotechnological imaginaries lies in the way in which the word "gastronomy" itself simultaneously refers to identity, geography, and practice. Gastronomy is, in other words, an example of the way in which visions of "ought" shape what "is", with Gastronationalism encompassing those instances in which transformations from vision to practice are applied to populations themselves as well as to the protection or policing of those populations.

Existing literature on Gastronationalism has, in the main, focussed on overt expressions of xenophobia

[7] Alison Leitch, "Slow Food and the Politics of Pork Fat: Italian Food and European Identity", *Ethnos*, 68/4 (2003), 437–462 at 440.
[8] Sheila Jasanoff and Sang-Hyun Kim (eds.), *Dreamscapes of Modernity: Sociotechnical Imaginaries and the Fabrication of Power* (Chicago, 2015), 4.
[9] Michaela DeSoucey, *Contested Tastes: Foie Gras and the Politics of Food* (Princeton, 2016).

or cultural supremacy.[10] What has been missing in such accounts, however, is the acknowledgement that chauvinistic gestures may just as well emerge out of a genuine sense of affection for one's home and perceived traditions as they may out of disdain (or disgust) for the Other. To champion one's own nation is not necessarily the same thing as diminishing or disregarding another. Nations exist in both enactment and reception, and as becomes perhaps most clear in celebrations of nationhood by stateless or dispossessed populations, performances of national identity can be vital responses to the project of nation-building in the postcolonial era.[11] Furthermore, not all celebrations of nation freeze national identity in some past time. The rise of national branding decouples contemporary nations from their pasts. A nation can, for example, claim to be the future of global business without having to address its business dealings or policies to date.[12]

It is important, I think, not to characterise Gastronationalism simply as disingenuous efforts to mask bigotry in the seeming low states of food culture, or even as necessarily deliberate celebrations of national identity. More helpful, perhaps, would be to understand Gastronationalism as symptomatic of homogenisation under capitalism. Alison Leitch, for example, notes similarities between activism around endangered species and activism around preservation of national identity, arguing that commonalities are a consequence of late capitalism and its associated tending towards sameness. Nor are all efforts to protect food and food traditions necessarily Gastronationalistic. The same geographical indication (GI) labels that dissect maps also provide small-scale producers with a way to maintain relevance in an increasingly globalised market. Explaining Gastronationalism, however, is not the same as justifying it. To note that GI labels take the relationship between nature and nation as self-evident is not to say that GI labels exist to consolidate some form of national identity. Both can be strengthened at once, sometimes in seeming contradiction.

What the above efforts do have in common, however, is the affect of Camp. A notion coined by Christopher Isherwood, defined by Susan Sontag, and further developed by writers such as Richard Dyer and Morris Meyer, Camp encompasses an aesthetic quality that transforms the serious into the joyous without compromising any of its gravity. Often conflated with Kitsch, the Camp sensibility or mode is one that "rests on innocence. That means Camp discloses innocence, but also, when it can, corrupts it."[13] Indeed, Camp and Kitsch describe entirely antithetical outlooks. Where Kitsch transforms high culture to low and celebrates debasement, to embrace the Camp is to approach one's interests with respect if not reverence. As a sensibility rather than theory or framework, Camp is not applied to an object of study but instead emerges out of a subject.[14]

The "Camping" of imaginaries around food production—that is, addressing their aest-

[10] Cf. Troy Bickham, "Eating the Empire: Intersections of Food, Cookery and Imperialism in Eighteenth-Century Britain", *Past & Present*, 198/1 (2008), 71–109; Michaela DeSoucey, "Gastronationalism: Food Traditions and Authenticity Politics in the European Union", *American Sociological Review*, 75/3 (2010), 432–455; Atsuko Ichijo and Ronald Ranta, *Food, National Identity and Nationalism: From Everyday to Global Politics* (New York, 2016); Wynne Wright and Alexis Annes, "Halal on the Menu? Contested Food Politics and French Identity in Fast-Food", *Journal of Rural Studies*, 32 (2013), 388–399.

[11] Cf. Fredric Jameson, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism", *Social Text*, 15 (1986), 65–88, at 78; Sahar Tavakoli, "The Empire Strikes Through: The Drawing and Redrawing of Political Maps in the British Museum", *100 Histories of 100 Worlds in One Object*, 2021, https://100histories100worlds.org/the-empire-strikes-through (accessed 21 July 2023).

[12] Cf. Somogy Varga, "The politics of Nation Branding: Collective identity and public sphere in the neoliberal state", *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 39/8 (Oct. 2013), 825–845, at 827.

[13] Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York, 1966), 275.

[14] Cf. ibid., 281.

hetics or affect rather than their material output—allows for an exploration of how efforts to protect the local instead come to reassert and reify the national without cynically reducing such technological systems to the result of, at best, false consciousness or, at worst, outright chauvinism.

I don't mean to say that we are not at risk of feeding nationalism on a diet of protected food. Indeed, I would like to suggest that the danger of feeding nationalism is greater for the fact that it can be born out of—as Camp would indicate—"harmless fun".

A Race to the Finish

Ending his recitation of 14th century poetry, Cecchini addresses his audience directly with an urgent message. "In a world ever more filled with supermarkets", he says from behind a butcher's block topped with a stomach, a liver, and a bone saw, "and with butchers who are practically considered a race in extinction, and perhaps they actually are, I am convinced that butchers instead are actually the most delicate ring in the food chain, the most delicate link [...] But I am here as well to tell you that I do not want my world to end. I am here to tell you that butchers are an essential part in the world of food. They are my race."[15]

To treat categories of race and profession as like kinds, is, needless to say, simplistic if not downright offensive. Sliced and arranged between paragraphs of theory in a scholarly paper, the unhomeliness of the statement is clear. In a different context, however, the message might be more alluring. Despite its carnage and its problematic equivalences, Cecchini's performance is joyous and nonthreatening. One could choose to interpret *Carne e Spirito* as saying nothing more than that a local butcher's craft is only meaningful in a specific context. Camp allows affection and danger to exist side by side. Camping our sociotechnical systems affords the inclusion of a kind of dangerous politics stripped of its own warning signs.

There is an irony to Cecchini's verse of choice. Found at the end of the fifth canto, the lines are drawn from a response given by the soul of Francesca da Rimini to a troubled Dante who asks "in the time of gentle sighs / with what and in what way did Love allow you / to recognize your still uncertain longings?"[16] This is the second circle of Hell, containing the souls of those damned for their lustfulness. In contrast to its modern connotation, to be lustful in the Republic of Florence was not to be driven by lecherous desire but to love recklessly. To put contemporaneous ideas into contemporary words, what Dante asks the noblewoman is how we know ourselves to be smitten when love is a sentiment that exists beyond reason, and with what language we might express affection when, as a feeling, it exists beyond the realm of explanation. My own questions here have not been entirely dissimilar: How do we know ourselves to be advocating for exclusion when our advocacy takes on the celebratory affect of Camp, and in what manner do we dismantle structures that would further facilitate xenophobia and national insularity when commemorating community?

[15] See n. 2.

[16] *Divine Comedy*, 80 (see n. 4).