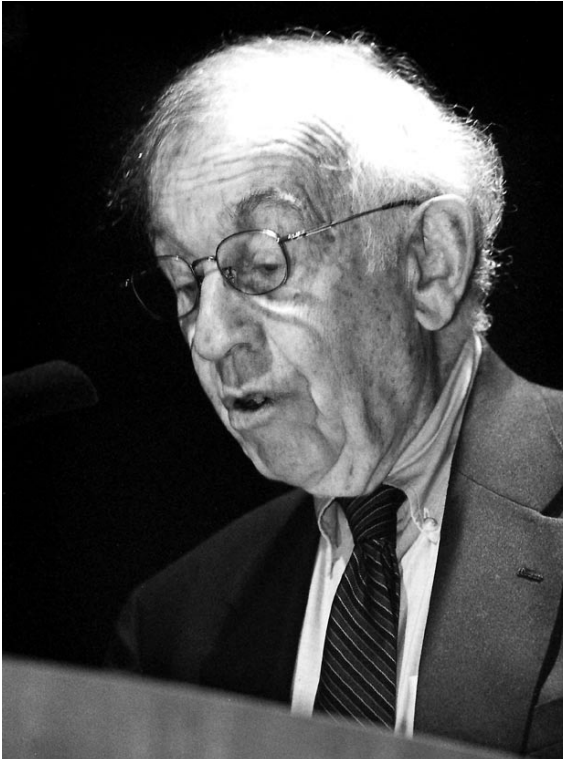


## Lecture 2:

# Food Patterns East & West: Some Hypothetical Contrasts

From a lecture by Sidney Mintz, as reported by Peggy Grodinsky



### Sidney Mintz

Sidney Mintz is professor emeritus at Johns Hopkins University's Department of Anthropology, which he helped found in 1974-75 after teaching for nearly 25 years at Yale. Prof. Mintz is known for his work on the Caribbean region, on food and eating, and on the cultural aspects of economic life. He has done fieldwork in Puerto Rico, Jamaica, Haiti, Iran and Hong Kong, and has taught in France, Germany and Hong Kong. Among his publications, *Worker in the Cane* (1960), the life history of a Puerto Rican sugarcane worker, has become an anthropological classic. His *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (1985), traced the emergence of the consumer society by examining changing consumption patterns through the history of such commodities as sugar, coffee and tea. His most recent book, *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom: Excursions into Eating, Culture and the Past*, explores the relationships between eating and cultural forms. Prof. Mintz is currently researching the history of soybeans and soybean food derivatives.

### Peggy Grodinsky

Peggy Grodinsky is editor-in-chief at the James Beard Foundation, a New York-based nonprofit that promotes the culinary arts through awards, scholarships and chef "performances." Ms. Grodinsky previously worked as senior editor at the Japan Society. She lived in Tokyo for two years, editing the *Daily Yomiuri*, the English-language version of the *Yomiuri Shimbun*. Trained as a reporter, Ms. Grodinsky was named first-place recipient in feature writing by the New England AP News Executives Association, and received a Freedom Forum Asian Studies Fellowship in 1993. She is a 1983 graduate of Oberlin College in Ohio with a BA in English.

To draw any serious contrast between food patterns East and West, one must define one's terms—yet these are all nearly undefinable. The last half century or so of world history has been marked by a revolutionary transformation of the global food market—a process of change still in motion. This transformation is even altering the significance of the post-Columbian expansion of European power, and the spread of European foods and food preferences in subsequent centuries. Hence what the period 1492 to 1992 meant in terms of world food is now becoming different; and even the ways in which we speak of "East" and "West" are changing. Previously, we were prepared to think about where one of those grand regions might end, and the other begin. But as the categories themselves have become increasingly blurred, that confidence seems more and more misplaced. Still, we persist in speaking of "East" and "West" as if we knew what we were talking about.

Even if one could say where West ended and East began, one would then need to specify what "Eastern cuisine" or "Eastern food" could be said to comprise; i.e., to generalize about "the East." Yet for obvious reasons we must not let Chinese cuisine or Indian cuisine or Japanese cuisine stand for the whole enormous range of foods, cooking techniques and lexicons that compose "Eastern cuisine." Among other things, the vast range of differences within any one cuisine is so great that it would bring an instant halt to the inquiry. Nor do I wish to enumerate differences, cuisine by cuisine: forks versus chopsticks; small pieces of meat versus large; tables versus mats; the presence or absence of table knives; plates of food in the center of the table; the fact that all the food is (or is not) served at the same time; *fan* and *tsai*; cantons of aesthetic preference—or the infinity of other differences of this sort. I wish to try to do things differently.

Until the dawn of the era of oceanic transportation five centuries ago, the food habits of human communities worldwide were closely linked to recognized regional resources, and to local climates and seasons. “Recognized” because no people ever eat everything edible in the local environment. Cuisines bespoke the human communities which produced and perpetuated them; the plants, birds, fish and animals that figured in their composition; the traditions of preparation, conservation and ritual sustenance that informed them; the social distinctions that eating and not eating might thereby validate.

But it is easy to overemphasize the heavily localized character of traditional cuisines. Long before the crossing of oceans became common, we know that people would travel hundreds of miles in search of salt, for example; that the sweet potato was found on both sides of the Pacific; that many species of coconuts, gourds and other domestic food plants that can float had been carried far from their loci of domestication.

And so we see the ancient and persistently local nature of food habits, on the one hand; and the spread of some human foods, even long before the rise of oceanic exploration and travel, on the other. Until the middle of the last century, at least, most humans got most of their food from an area of only a few square miles around where they lived. Note “most humans,” and “most of their food”; the wealthy and the powerful have been feasting on foreign honey, fresh seafood, glacial ice and exotic tidbits of all kinds, ever since the end of the Neolithic era, for as long as we have been blessed with stratified societies.

The production of at least some portion of the family’s food has been part of the everyday life of billions of human beings at least since domesticated plants and animals emerged as the major source of our food supply many millennia ago. The persistence of that practice and its accompanying expectations have been remarkable. People of my age who grew up in towns and villages in Europe and America, for example, can easily remember when perhaps a fifth to a quarter of the family’s vegetable consumption came

from their own backyards. These practices, so important in the very recent past of so many of us, make clear the fact that the global food dependence we are already coming to regard as prosaic is—outside the world’s great metropolises – in fact truly new.

But suppose that we try to turn back in time and speak in as broad terms as possible about the common features of world diet a couple of millennia ago. What might we find? I want to ground the East-West differences that interest me in an underlying common agrarian denominator—or at least hypothesize that there was such a denominator. This requires a hypothesis of my own. I think the establishment of large, populous societies worldwide involved changes that made agrarian folk everywhere move toward certain structurally similar features in their foodways. Admittedly, most of this is speculative, not yet truly supported by solid historical research. It has to be seen as an experimental hypothesis.

I think the basic food systems of all such large agrarian societies, East and West, could at one time have been classified as including first, one or more core complex carbohydrates; second, an accompanying legume or legumes; and third, a fringe of flavors or enhancing foods. This three-part structure, though it does not resemble the diagrams that nutritionists employ in any way, is nutritional as well as historical and political in its implications (Mintz 1985, 1992; Schlettwein-Gsell 1992). I also envision it as aesthetic, in the way that the masses of people who ate the foods in question came to perceive their cuisine. Most calories in it come from wheat or rice or maize or millet, or from tubers such as potatoes or taro or sweet potatoes. Most protein and much of the fat in it come from one or more principal legumes, such as soybeans and mung beans in Asia, chickpeas and lentils in Europe and southwest Asia, blackeyed peas and groundnuts (*Voandzeia subterranea* and *Kerstingiella geocarpa*) in Africa, and many different beans and the “true peanut” (*Arachis hypogaea*) in the New World. The third category, flavors and enhancers, covers foods of any sort. Because it is a residual category, it is vast and varied, but it can be

understood as having two principal and related functions, aside from the nutritive: it facilitates the consumption of large quantities of the core carbohydrate because of its sharp, contrasting tastes, and, as it successfully plays this part, it reduces the need and desire for animal protein. (Some enhancers are animal protein, of course.)

I want to make one other major point about the fringe foods, or the “enhancers.” It seems to be intrinsically human to elaborate even small sectors of a sense modality such as taste, partly as a form of aesthetic game, partly as a measure of technical aptitude. These days one might think of single-malt Scotches, of the many different sauces for pickled herring or of the variety of true coffees. In the case of enhancers such as *miso*, soy sauces, other fermented soybean derivatives, teas, pickles, mustards and many other strong-tasting substances, we see the intense application of human intelligence and virtuoso technique to achieve wide variety, with small differences, within narrow spans. The variety is then often silhouetted against the uniform taste of some complex carbohydrate or similarly bland food, such as rice, wheat, buckwheat, barley, noodles, bean thread, *shirataki* and so on. People take pride in their ability to create, detect and manipulate small differences, and they prize those differences. Keep in mind that the culturally specific, as in the case of *miso* or tea, finds its structural parallel in the case of, for example, mustard or coffee or wine in another culture.

I believe the basic diets of such agrarian societies were characteristically low in animal protein, even if their ruling classes were prodigal consumers. The Japanese diet is, I suspect, exceptional in this very regard because of the role of marine products. I believe the general paucity of animal food in the diet of common people worldwide took shape owing to extractive political arrangements, ultimately based on force, that characteristically siphoned such foods upward socially to the more privileged and powerful: living high on the food chain or, as they used to say in the American South, living “high on the hog.” But this asymmetry, I believe, was to some extent sustained by the way in which diets achieve aesthetic balance. Diets are socially reinforced by regularly satisfying people, and then becoming expected, in accord with habitual practices that fix the proportions of starch, protein and other components in some customary ratio that is then altered only for holidays, rituals and exceptional circumstances. In other words, people become habituated to their diets, even if those diets are not nutritionally optimal. I believe this happened to most agrarian societies worldwide. As for the wealthy and powerful, their eating of non-meat staples, the everyday foods of commoners, may (but not necessarily) take the form of a symbolic identification with “the people.”

So far I have been speaking about categories of

food—core, legume, fringe—and not about what filled these categories. But here I believe I can add another common feature of the everyday diet of ordinary people in large agrarian societies worldwide. That is the common existence of a cereal gruel or porridge made from one or more core complex carbohydrates such as rice, millet or barley, which composes the principal food. And nearly everywhere, I believe, bread is viewed as a step up from porridge. Of course bread is more easily prepared with some cereals (such as wheat) than with others (such as rice). The Western symbolic association of bread with food itself corresponds neatly to the Eastern symbolic association of rice with food itself. But in both East and West, I think it is certain that gruel or porridge of some sort preceded and doubtless greatly pre-dated leavened bread. The common core-legume-fringe pattern I am postulating here rested upon a porridge base, long before bread became common, and this is yet another way in which I believe that Eastern and Western mass food patterns were similar rather than, at base, different.

I do not mean to minimize or ignore the very substantial differences between the food patterns of China, say, or Japan, and those of Western Europe. But I think it may be useful to look for common features first, then to consider what forces may have served to make such patterns become much more different. Let me now point to a series of enormously important changes occurring in the West that began with the Columbian era of exploration, but which took firmer shape in succeeding centuries.

Approximately 300 years ago, the Western pattern—by which I mean the food habits of ordinary people in Western Europe in particular—began to be modified by at least four major interrelated changes:

- A gradual decline in the consumption of the starchy core and of vegetable protein, as other foods became available.
- An increase in the consumption of animal food—meat and dairy foods, and particularly animal fats.
- An increase in the consumption of processed sucrose.
- The introduction of tea, coffee and chocolate.

Of course I view these three latter changes as partial explanations for the former—people ate less “core” and more “fringe.” I cannot overemphasize the importance of these changes. Though they occurred at different rates and with differing intensities in some countries and regions, cumulatively they profoundly altered Western eating habits. This happened first in Western Europe and in the United States, and soon enough, in the European peripheries and colonial areas.

Such changes did not occur in the same way or at the same rates in the Far East. Their realization in the West clearly accelerated the divergence between food

patterns. My purpose in calling attention to these events is to argue that, in the principal ways in which ordinary people ate, so-called Asian or Eastern and Western food patterns were at one time much less different structurally than they would later become. This does not mean, of course, that people East and West were eating the same foods, or that what they ate was prepared in the same or similar manner.

Implicit in my argument about the core-legume-fringe structure of food patterns is the idea that vegetable protein played an important political role because it made possible the siphoning off of animal protein by ruling groups in many agrarian societies—possibly at a tolerable nutritive cost to commoners. This seems to have been particularly clear in East Asia, where soybean and mung bean by-products proved to be especially critical, and where indigenous creative genius led to the stabilization of an array of legume byproducts of enormous variety, and transcendental nutritive and cultural importance. It seems to me quite suggestive how many soy-based derivatives are contrived to resemble animal protein.

Where legumes have proven nutritively and culinarily significant in every world area with a stable agriculture, their role in Asia is note worthy because they have so often become vehicles for intense taste, serving simultaneously to fill two of the three categories I have enumerated: legumes, but at the same time taste enhancers or fringe foods. In Asia, the use of legumes as a contrasting base, especially when salt- or sweet-flavored, is particularly noteworthy. Whether as a stuffing for steam-baked goods, in sauces for meat and vegetables, as soup, soup-like and baked desserts, and in almost every way possible, sharply flavored legumes, especially toward the sweet pole, have become a signature feature of local cuisines.\*

I have already dwelt on a pre-baking era in order to point out ancient underlying commonalities in the preparation of porridge or gruel. What follows, however, is a generality that clearly differentiates some parts of Asia from others. I refer here to the use of animal byproducts, especially milk and its derivatives, such as cream and butter, their major byproduct, cheese and other related foods including buttermilk, curds, yogurt and other fermented products. The use of milk and these and other byproducts from pastoral animals is economically and culturally important in much of Asia, perhaps particularly on the Indian subcontinent, and extending northward along the edges of Han China. “The traditional boundary between milking and non-milking peoples in Eastern Asia ran roughly between India, Tibet and Mongolia (areas of milking to the west), and Burma, China and Korea (areas of non-milking to the east),” Simoons writes (Simoons, 1970). For the most part, these products, so familiar in most of the West and so important in India, were little

known and uneaten, and often even thought of as distasteful or repulsive, in Outer Asia.

I refer to these “dairy products” not only because I think that there are significant attitudinal differences in the way peoples feel about them, but also because their use has been absolutely fundamental in the development of broadly based food patterns and what goes by the name of haute cuisine in the West. In fact, if I were asked what single feature of Western food practices stands out for me as more contrastive than any other in marking the West off from the East, I would say the use of cream, butter and cheese.

This is the point at which my speculation must end. Though it serves only a limited purpose to classify the cuisines of Asia together as if they were merely variants on some common theme, I suppose something can be learned from the exercise. Much more, of course, could be said by particularizing the ways in which these cuisines diverge. I have not really tried to enumerate East-West differences here. It would take an eternity, and I think that it would leave us no better informed. Instead I’ve tried to identify certain underlying and ancient structural similarities upon which systems of difference arose, and have touched on what some of those basic differences might be.

(Note)

\* Space does not permit me to discuss cooking techniques here, in relation to particular foods. Dr. H. T. Huang’s important paper on fermentation and food science, which appears in Vol. VI of *Science and Civilization in China*, (a continuing series growing out of the work of Joseph Needham), points to the difference between steaming and baking as a basic diagnostic of Chinese cuisine.

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