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RESEARCH IN ECONOMICS AND RURAL SOCIOLOGY

SOCIAL CRISIS AND CRISIS IN FOOD TASTES: VEGETARIANISM AS AN ISSUE. A CASE STUDY IN PARIS

Current studies of food consumption fail to deal with vegetarians. They are not represented. Vegetarians cannot be found in statistics and only not appear in nutritional nomenclatures where their diet is mainly subjected to normative evaluations. Such a blank in representation and nomenclatures makes room for vegetarian advocates to impose their sole definitions of the diet. Vegetarianism appears as a philosophy of life embedded in core features, such as the rejection of cruelty towards animals, an intense awareness of health, and love of nature. Consequently, the adoption of the vegetarian diet proceeds from an exclusively moral choice which, though a typical privilege of the elite, ought to be open to everyone because of the particular edifying virtues the diet entails. In this paper, it is my concern to show that vegetarianism cannot be reduced to a moral choice: it is an important social fact that maintains close relations with the conditions of living, social aspirations and ways of socialization of tastes.

There is not a single vegetarianism but several vegetarianisms

There is not a single vegetarianism but several vegetarianisms which refer to highly contrasted definitions. Vegetarianism is not a single philosophy differently applied. Viewed as the theory and practice of vegetable-based food, vegetarianism is a handy but inaccurate appellation. In reality, vegetarianism is a polemic appellation, and a catchword: in an omnivorous society, declaring oneself a vegetarian means at least refusing meat as much as accepting vegetables. Such a versatile definition of vegetarianism should prevent the statistic study of the diet from any pretension to exhaustiveness, as the statistics can only capture the individuals disposed to divulge their adhesion to the anti-meat ideology. This stumbling block may explain why vegetarians are the absentees in current statistic nomenclatures. For instance, in France only a 1998 IFEN-INSEE survey sought to measure the phenomenon of vegetarianism and was able to find that 2% of the French declared they adopted the vegetarian diet. For its part, the British Vegetarian Society, without neglecting to count self-declared vegetarians, seeks to measure the social impact of vegetarianism by relying on statistics of vegetarian labelled food sales and purchases. Thus, in 1998, food sold under the vegetarian label represented a turnover of 455 million pounds, while the country counted 10% of vegetarians.

Vegetarianism in different social groups

The questionnaire survey (see Frame 2) shows the extreme social diversity of vegetarianism. Put in relation with their respective weight in the different departments they come from, the upper social categories are over-represented in

vegetarianism (see table 1). This is the case with executives, intermediate professions and employees. On the other side, craftsmen, shopkeepers and workers are under-represented in vegetarianism among their homologues in the various departments.

These differences appear even more distinctly when one observes the social composition of vegetarian respondents: preponderance of the sub-groups of executives and intermediate professions (respectively 35% and 40%) compared with those of employees, workers and craftsmen-shopkeepers (respectively 17%, 3.90%, and 2.80%). Undoubtedly, vegetarianism remains the privilege of the upper and middle classes, so that the presence of the working-class classes must be considered as an indicator of the social diffusion of the diet.

When compared with the whole French population, the proportion of men and women is different: men are over-represented among vegetarian employees (28% against 22% in the whole population); on the other side, women are distinctly over-represented among executives (66% against 31% in the whole population) and among intermediate professions (79% against 44.50%). Lastly, all social categories of vegetarians taken into account are more qualified and overqualified than the average French population.

Vegetarianism among members of working-class social categories (ie craftsmen and shopkeepers, employees, workers) and among members of upper social categories show significant differences by means of systematic features. Among the vegetarians of working-class social categories, the ratio of unmarried men is higher;

vegetarianism reveals itself to be precocious, starting for instance in the 18-24 age group amid trade employees; ages narrow around the 25-29 age bracket (which is the modal age of respondents) and the 30-39 age groups, just when the members of these social categories are the most in a position to feel the effects of unsatisfactory food supply and leisure, and existence; on the contrary, ages are more staggered within the upper social categories, the diet being carried on up to 50 years old among intermediate professions and up to 60 years old with executives; vegetarianism appeared more recently in working-class social categories (on average, the diet has been practiced for 5 to 10 years), even though these categories are well integrated into the non-standard food networks, as shown by their long consumption of organic food products; on the other hand, vegetarianism has been a feature of the upper categories for a long time (for over 20 years or for 10 to 15 years).

In the working-class categories, vegetarianism is associated with full urban acculturation, or with a type of uprooting: being born abroad is a significant indicator for this trait which is prominent among qualified manual workers. In the upper social categories, the diet goes hand in hand with existing family ties in the country, shown by a childhood spent in the countryside or by the fact of receiving fresh products or preserves from the country from time to time; manual workers adhere more often to broad vegetarianism, contrary to the upper categories who want the diet in all its broad, strict, macrobiotic, vegan components. However, observance of meat prohibition is stricter within the working classes than in the upper ones, where liberties are taken with prescriptions, so that the transgression of the prohibition may set up a pattern of differentiation between the social groups; in the working-class social categories, vegetarianism is associated with mistrust of allopathic medicine in favour of alternative medicine, contrary to the upper social categories, who more often use biomedicine.

In the working-class categories, vegetarianism is less often associated with intellectual motivations such as ecology, politics, history, psychology, psychoanalysis, and is more strongly linked with philosophical schools of thought of the spiritual type like Buddhism; on the other hand, vegetarianism in the upper categories is combined with a wide range of intellectual and political interests and more often closely linked with a hygienic type of school of thought such as hygiene or naturopathy; lastly, vegetarianism in the working-class categories looks coarse with few references to culinary modes; this feature of the diet is in contrast with that of the upper categories, which is driven by sound dietetic sensibility, and where raw and steamed vegetables are especially favoured, all modes of cooking that point to a vegetarian cultural socialization achieved through readership of specialized magazines; the upper categories are also those who mostly assign therapeutic virtues to food.

Semi-structured interview analysis shows that in working-class categories, vegetarianism may be a consequence of living and leisure conditions, resulting from loneliness, and from migration situations that may frequently drive people to seek for and discover alternative networks of food supply and new sociability. The characteristic features of this type of vegetarianism- which is above all male, lonely, precocious, austere, fresh- die down as the person rises up

through the social hierarchy, so that we can notice its relative homogeneity. Conversely, vegetarianism in the upper categories is bursting with enthusiasm, and turns out to be a convenient outlet to the effects of dissatisfaction that these social categories feel acutely towards current food supply. Long-since adopted, the diet in these social groups is rooted in domestic cultures and adjusted to lifestyles.

Individuals with atypical profiles

It remains that the respondents, all social categories included, have atypical social profiles in common, which are probably emphasized by the circumstances and setting of their recruitment - in the purchasing process in an organic food shop: vegetarians are overqualified in comparison with their counterparts in the overall French population. Examination of job features suggests another dimension of the atypical aspect of the majority of surveyed customers. For instance, the working-class categories are frequently composed of unskilled workers (mainly among workers), the intermediate professions of technical or, chiefly commercial or similar occupations (mainly among employees), and the upper categories of sales representatives, real estate agents, show-business people, jugglers, decorators, all occupations which, offering little or no job security and no statutory guarantees, exclude any ordered development as the formation of ordered career prospects; in short, these occupations do not allow the settling of ordered principles which would help to adjust individual existence or projects. It is as if, for those whose social and statutory identity was threatened, vegetarianism constituted an issue, an ideology that helped find sense, landmarks, because it favoured immersion and affiliation to a new social community.

This result obtained through the questionnaire survey was further strengthened by the interview analysis which suggests the existence of relations between the choice of a vegetarian diet and the perceptions individuals have of their position in the social hierarchy. Though a great number of respondents are at the outset of their professional career, the frequent gap between highly qualified individuals -which sometimes expresses a form of social ascension- and the insecure and low-paid jobs they get, feeds a genuine sense of insecurity. An overview of this anomic-like picture is one of a social rigidity that threatens to collapse because it fails to provide valuable and remunerative jobs. Though it is impossible to explain the variants of vegetarianism by the adherents' social position, recurrent links have been observed between sound representation of the threat of social relegation (among members of intermediate professions and employees) and adoption of a rather severe variant of vegetarianism, associated with adhesion to spiritual philosophies like Buddhism. A less tragic perception of social mobility is found in upward sections of both intermediate professions and executives, which goes hand in hand with laxer relations with prohibitions.

When an individual trajectory is perceived as downward, the social position frequently results from failures in comparison with the pace followed by most people of the same background, and that accounts for the fact that all the individual's behaviours and beliefs are affected by the images of these failures. The critical propensity of vegetarian arguments fit the critical dispositions of those

individuals endowed with high level of cultural capital, who may use them as a means of compensating for their social positions.

On the other side, vegetarianism is likely to be appropriated by groups with an optimistic perception of their future. For instance, among some sections of upwardly mobile executives and upper intellectual professions, the liberties taken with dietary prescriptions define the privileged type of connections they have with the diet - variables of seniority, high income, high level of education - which are constituent of social prestige and which tend to be powerfully reactivated within vegetarian practices. These groups frame the modes of uses and fix the norms to be followed for newcomers.

Vegetarianism and socialisations

How can we interpret vegetarianism, what makes it an “interesting” ideology worth embracing and practising? Can we be content with ascribing the preponderance of vegetarianism among the middle and upper social categories to the plain convergence we may observe between their social and ethical dispositions and the critical ideology embedded in vegetarian arguments? Indeed, vegetarian discourse conveys numerous reasons for dissatisfaction: rejection of bourgeois gastronomy, a protest against the marketing and consumption of processed foods they consider “poisonous”, “dangerous to the health”, “perverted”, “denatured”, “tasteless”; vegetarian discourse also denounces the pollutant character of industrialization (in farms and power plants), and rejects any form of oppression, all motives which characterize a learned variant of the food-related malaise particularly expressed by the intellectual sections of the middle and upper social categories. It is also worth noting that vegetarian rules, although displayed under the banners of prohibition, turn out to be less restrictive than one might think from the outset, and easily lend themselves to reinterpretation, especially among the upper social categories who tend to modify them and adjust them freely to their own somatic, leisured or medical values.

When we consider the dietary modes and associated practices of vegetarianism, the differences from one social category to another are numerous, while according to the current etiology of diet, we should be observing closer levels among all social categories if sensitiveness to animal suffering or to health were the main reason for vegetarianism. The common etiological pattern of vegetarianism should mainly apply to the upper social categories, among whom the intellectual and philosophical interests associated with the diet are more numerous, and where high levels of education might permit them to abstain more radically from eating meat, making them able to overcome prejudice by getting rid of its supposed virtues. But the links observed here do not express such causal influence. In reality, the different forms of vegetarianism that we can capture with indicators like frequency of

consumption or non consumption of different meat products, reasons for non-consumption, duration of the diet, etc., do not lead in the expected direction: the most precocious, the least inclined to transgress the meat prohibition, and the most concerned with animal welfare are to be found among employees. How then can we explain the strength and persistence of the common etiological outline in the analysis of vegetarianism, while experience does not confirm it?

To what extent does the way apprenticeships of “normal” food behaviours are organized within a specific social group can partially breed behaviours which are opposed to these norms? For instance, can we explain the precocity of vegetarianism among employees by the difference between their norms of domestic socialization of taste, of the leisure attitudes, etc. and other social categories? In the working-class social categories, the “precocity” of vegetarianism, in addition to the absence of vegetarianism above the age of 50, may be a generation effect; but it certainly gives a different representation of the body, in relation with the different social conditions of its use, hence with living and working conditions. Entering earlier into active life, the members of working-class social categories also represent to themselves earlier the general conditions to protect their bodies and adopt the adequate conducts, among which vegetarian practices may form one of the principles - vegetarianism is notably legitimated by the social categories just above them. Vegetarianism appears to be a way for anticipation, and for the protection of vital health. In the upper social categories, the extension of vegetarianism after the age of 60 exhibits a longer social and symbolic use of the healthy body, in addition to steady attention paid to preventive methods.

When analysing the process of the appearance and evolution of vegetarianism, one cannot neglect the influence of the institutional apparatus of diet regulation, however informal. Questions arising over the mode of information on organic food shops, on readings and information materials on food issues, show that this apparatus is composed of diverse institutions (food markets, dietetic and alternative food products, publishing markets, alternative medicines, exhibitions, conferences, etc.) which undertake to stimulate, frame and promote the diet. The relation the members of the different social categories have with these institutions accounts for the possibilities of their integration in, or exclusion from, vegetarianism. There is a dialectical link between the effect of these institutions and the social positions of the individuals, which accounts for the fact that the features of vegetarianism always come from the nature and the strength of the institutions that control the diet.

The adoption of vegetarianism is socially determined. The strong links that bind the diet to social mobility, to the social rationales of identity construction, reveal the original forms of appropriation and reinterpretations to which the diet gives rise; at the same time that these links render the social and cultural stakes of this variant of the ideologies of refusal

For further information :

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Frame 1: Vegetarianism

At the same time that it was named at the foundation of the British Vegetarian Society in 1847, vegetarianism was marked out a series of abstention practices within which one could soon distinguish three major groupings: broad vegetarianism, later called ovo-lacto-vegetarianism, which prohibits eating meat, fish or any food item the production of which required the slaughter of a living being. Therefore, eating animal by-products such as eggs, milk, cheese, and honey is allowed. However, there are several variants of this first type. Strict vegetarianism or veganism only allows vegetables, cereals and fruit. Lastly, macrobiotics: this diet is set according to a scale of progression in prohibitions, from minus three to plus seven, with food prescriptions becoming more restrictive as the number increases. For instance, while at minus 3 there is a tolerance of 30% of animal products in addition to cereals and vegetables, at plus 7, the diet should be composed of 90% cereals and 10% vegetables.

Frame 2: Survey

The results come from a monographic study undertaken by means of a questionnaire survey on customers of an organic food shop in an Eastern Paris suburb in 1997, and since completed up to 2003 with ethnographic observations and semi-structured interviews with new customers and respondents to the previous questionnaire. 859 clients replied to the questionnaire, and 380 (44% of the sample) declared themselves to be vegetarians. The questionnaire was completed on site before or, more often, after customers had completed their shopping; as a result, not all sections of the questionnaire are equally completed. However, we endeavoured to compare the vegetarians surveyed with the overall French population in terms of their sociological properties. The sociological profile of vegetarianism as drawn in this study results from the calculation of the PMD (Percentage to the Maximum Distance) - then put hierarchically into decreasing order- which linked the fact of declaring oneself a vegetarian belonging to a given socio-professional category with the series of motivations, beliefs and practices with which the diet is associated. Thus, though the survey presented here does not have a demonstrative value in itself, its results describe some of the determinations which frame vegetarianism in France and, partially, test the dominant presuppositions of specialised research traditions on western vegetarianism.

Table 1 Ratio of vegetarians surveyed (by social category of respondent) in their department of origin

	Paris (75)		Seine St Denis (93)		Hauts de Seine (92)		Val de Marne (94)	
	Total French population	Vegetarians	Total French population	Vegetarians	Total French population	Vegetarians	Total French population	Vegetarians
Farmers	0,04		0,03		0,02		0,05	
Craftsmen shopkeepers and managers	7,6	3,9	6,5	1,6	6,5	6,3	6,7	4
Executives and higher intellectual professions	26,6	32	9,3	41,1	24	18,8	17	28
Intermediate professions	13,4	40,8	15,9	35,7	16	43,8	17,3	48
Employees	13	16,5	15,4	17,8	12,8	18,8	14,3	16
Manual workers	13,9	4,9	33,9	2,3	19,1	12,5	24,6	4
Retired and other inactive persons	25,5	1,9	19	1,6	21,7	0	20,2	0
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100