

Irina Perianova, *The Polyphony of Food: Food through the Prism of Maslow's Pyramid*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012, 164 pp. ISBN (10): 1-4438-4117-X, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-4117-7

Reviewed by Rodica Albu

We have received a fascinating book on a fascinating subject. Irina Perianova's interdisciplinary study *The Polyphony of Food* is structured through the prism of Maslow's well-known hierarchy of human needs but goes well beyond it. Divided into three parts, (1. Food as Deficit and Existence Needs; 2. The Relational Framework of Food; 3. Food as Being and Growth Needs) and seven chapters, the study is a successful attempt at decoding the dynamics of the signifying values assigned to food in general and to various dishes and eating patterns in particular in specific social and cultural circumstances. The author has a solid academic background including seminal readings, from Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes to Goodman, Goody, Mennell, Counihan and Van Esterik, Standage, Onfrey or Ritzer and encyclopaedias of food and culture (Oxford, Gale), from *Cookery and Dining in Imperial Rome* to *Dining around the World* or *Globalizing Food, Agrarian Questions and Global Restructuring*. She takes advantage of her own double cultural background, Russian and Bulgarian, and she also puts to good use her international experience, which includes extensive travelling in Africa, as well as topic-related field research in Canada and the United Kingdom. She moves with ease in time and space, along the social scale, from food as part of the mere need for survival to food as an expression of aesthetic sophistication.

The first part of the book consists of two chapters and deals with two basic needs, (1) food as sustenance and (2) food as safety, and includes a discussion of the changing boundaries of edibility and of the culture-specificity of meals. It ends with a remark that will be resumed and developed in the final chapter of the book: "Americans (and increasingly West Europeans) have become distant from the source of their food." (p. 14) As globalization processes gain momentum, this becomes more and more the case in other parts of the world, most significantly, Eastern Europe.

The second part, which focuses on the relational framework of food, is divided into three chapters. Chapter 3, entitled *Food as Bonding, Solidarity, Acceptance, Affiliation*, treats the issue of bonding both as horizontal (as the act of eating together) and as vertical bonding (eating the same kinds of food), both approaches being amply seasoned with interesting examples. The very substantial chapter 4 deals with the idea of propriety in its various senses. The topic of the changing ideas about appropriate vs. inappropriate foods is treated through several theoretical filters (including politeness theory) and is subdivided into 1. Appropriate food for appropriate groups of people (food and class, food and gender, food and age etc.); 2. Appropriate

food at an appropriate place; 3. Appropriate food for an appropriate occasion; 4. Appropriate number of dishes or ingredients; 5. Appropriate eating utensils – cutlery or plates; appropriate table manners; 6. Appropriate sequencing and formatting of a meal; 7. Appropriate timing of a meal; 8. Appropriate seating arrangements – proper spatial distribution of guests and hosts; 9. Appropriate attitude to one's food; 10. Appropriateness and health; 11. Appropriateness and political correctness. Chapter 5, having to do with Maslow's idea of esteem (self-esteem, confidence achievement, respect of other, respect by others), is entitled *Esteem Needs: Personal Worth, Self-Respect, Achievement, Reputation, Autonomy* and regards food as an expression of an individual's worth and as a source of pride for the entire community. The subchapter *Food as National or Ethnic Worth* mentions savoury instances of a dietary imaginary in the distant lands of the former British Empire side by side with examples collected from ex-Soviet countries and from Bulgaria. The next subchapter, *Food and Memory*, examines the ways in which food loyalty and food allegiance last longer than common statehood.

The first chapter (Chapter Six) of Part Three is devoted to food as self-actualization. Since “food symbolizes, signifies and typifies, giving or rejecting social identity, it can place and define an individual” (p. 103) and, furthermore, it is “one of the most important stepping-stones towards **changing or expanding one's identity.**” (Ibid.) Starting from the case of late 19th-century Bulgaria, which experienced the shift from the Oriental heritage of the Ottoman Empire to “a desired European identity”, adjustment and accommodation through food represent the focus of the first division of this chapter. Food and eating patterns are some of the first things immigrants discover and talk about when confronted with the cultural patterns of their new home, which they usually compare with those in their countries of origin. Ethnic food remains important for first-generation expatriates, but not for the younger members of immigrant diasporas. The concept of fluid or multiple identities is now brought into foreground. In our postmodern world the following statement quoted by Perianova cannot be refuted: “[...] culture is less about expressing a pre-given identity (whether the source is national culture or 'ethnic' culture) and more about the activity of negotiating, regulating and authorising competing, often conflicting demands for collective self-representation. (Hall 1999, 38)” In the second section of Chapter Six, *Marked vs. Unmarked Foods*, the author operates with the terminology of the Prague School when she describes “the routine food of the host society” as **unmarked** food, whereas holiday food is described as **marked**. The term **nesting** – the folding doll syndrome – is considered to be “a useful construct used to describe different identity layers in the theory of fluid or multiple identities. Nesting is exemplified by food substitution. The

latter is common for all groups living together or in close proximity. Bulgarians living in Canada would order *tsatsiki* instead of Bulgarian *tarator*, and *Greek* salad instead of the *shopska* salad. The Canadian Russians would substitute whey for kvass in traditional Russian *okroshka* soup – a mix containing chopped cucumbers, radish, onions, egg, meat, dill, parsley and a dollop of sour cream and served cold.” (p. 113) The author supports her remark concerning the difficult arithmetic of the number of the identity layers with “spicy” illustrations collected from her respondents or selected from literature. Equally interesting are the next sections: *Food and Symbolic Capital* and *Food as Protest, Peace Offering and Fun*. The chapter is completed by the section *Aesthetics of Food*, which may be incorporated under the category of self-actualization as a growth need or it may be described as one of the upper tiers of Maslow’s pyramid reinterpreted by Chapman (1990).

The final, seventh, chapter *Food, Social Changes, Knowledge*, is an elegant demonstration of the fact that “gastro-cognitive maps of the world are subject to change just as the geographical maps” (p. 135), which is abundantly illustrated by present-day culinary changes. The new discourse of consumerism, the food-related metaphors in the intercultural social discourse, the psychological consequences of the alienation from the sources of food through the proliferation of industrial products, the specific language hiding the presence of artificial components and additives, the rearrangement of the spatial and temporal characterization of various foods (e.g., fruit now available all the year round), the change of the status of sugar across temporal and geographical divide, are only some of the exciting issues tackled by Irina Perianova in this final chapter basically devoted to the Global Village. The chapter ends in a remark on the epidemiology of food and eating patterns: “we cannot ignore the ease with which food and every single food-related activity, apart from eating per se, goes viral.” (p. 147)

Throughout the book as well as in the concluding pages, the author displays an acute awareness of the many other directions her study could take, which would lead to a few additional volumes. Suffice it to mention, for instance, the two ethical problems raised on the final page: “how justified are we to inflict pain on animals, and whether vegetarianism is a viable solution and will be a vehicle of logical self-expression if we reject eating meat.” (p. 150) Despite any such temptations, Irina Perianova, an authentic specialist in the semiotics of food and one who masters the strategies of written discourse, too, knows how to remain within the confines of a rigorous structure and academic style, which is scholarly and catching, amusing and inquisitive, as well as inspirational for further approaches to this vital topic.