

Scholarship on Contemporary American Folk Foodways

The subject of this paper is the study of the foodways of contemporary American folk groups. The most significant scholarship by researchers from Folklife Research as well as folk life studies by other social scientists will be briefly reviewed.

1. AMERICAN FOLKLIFE RESEARCH

THE FOLK GROUPS AMERICAN FOLKLIFE RESEARCHERS STUDY, are those Americans and their descendants who came from the Old World in the historic migrations of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries and settled down to live out lives in communities basically unaffected by industrialization. Before the early decades of the nineteenth century all Americans were folk, since they live in pre-industrial societies of the sort superbly described by Peter Laslett in *The World We Have Lost*, (1965). After industry took hold with its mechanization, mass production, and "popular" culture, many Americans, especially those in rural areas, still remained folk. However, these have increasingly become peasant-like groups, with a social, economic, and cultural life modelled on industrial prototypes. If American folklife researchers were forced to evaluate their discipline and the groups they study, most would subscribe to Iorwerth Peate's conclusion that:

The study of folklife, as I see it, is the study of the way of life of communities and of nations which are comparatively unaffected by a high degree of industrialization. The unit so studied can be a nation (as for example, Sweden, Ireland, or Wales) or it may consist of groups within a nation state (as Germany or the United States). Even in small national units such as Wales or Norway, certain highly industrialized areas and the heavy industries associated with them have to be excluded in part. But there is no exclusion of any class within the community . . . Let it be said at once that we are concerned with the complete way of live of the community which we study! (1958:100).

Folklife Researchers, of course, do not have a monopoly on the study of American folk, although they are the only ones researching folk society and culture in its totality.

A unit of study that has found many adherents among students of folk life has been the region. And the regional model proven most helpful in understanding the dynamics of a folk society and culture is that prescribed by cultural ecologists, especially Julian Stewart. This region is analogous to the biologists' ecosystem; it is not a miscellany of cultural items clustered together but the spatial demarcation of the sociocultural configuration and cultural landscape that emerge when a particular society adapts to its milieu in its own unique way. A folk cultural region, seen from an ecological perspective, is a "dialogue" between a folk group and its environment carried out by means of its culture. The effect an environment has upon the group living within it, and conversely the transformation brought about on this environment by its occupants, depends primarily on the group's culture; distinct regions result when different groups relate

to their own unique environment. North American folk cultural regions emerged for a variety of reasons, the most important among them being 1) the substantially different natural environments on the continent, especially along the eastern and south coasts where the first colonial settlements were established; 2) the diversity of Old World (both European and African) settlers, each with a distinct folk culture; and 3) the differing adaptive techniques invented or borrowed from indigenous Indians or neighbors to cope with new environmental problems. For almost three centuries these regions evolved, attaining a level of complexity and integration comparable to their counterparts in the Old World. A considerable number of studies on the earliest of these regions: French Canada, Coastal New England, Dutch New York, Southeastern New England, Chesapeake Tidewater, Lowland South, Appalachia, Louisiana, and the Spanish Southwest, have been carried out. Most provide useful data for the student interested in folk foodways.

II. FOODWAYS

MUCH OF THE PAST AND PRESENT RESEARCH ON THE FOOD of American folk groups and probably most of that done in the future will make use of the conceptual model, foodways. This concept refers to the whole interrelated system of food conceptualization and evaluation, procurement, distribution, preservation, preparation, consumption, and nutrition shared by all the members of a particular society. It is essentially a cultural complex, a bundle of ideas carried around by men as part of their conceptual equipment, and the patterned behavior and material phenomena these ideas shape. Both the emphasis of Folklife Researchers on the totality of folk life and the regional configuration of folk society and culture suggest that an emphasis on foodways is in harmony with both discipline and data.

An important influence on students of American folk foodways was the research done by British anthropologists in the 1930's, especially Audrey Richards. Inspired by Bronislaw Malinowski's functionalist ethnography, social anthropologists from the London School of Economics began to study the sociocultural context of diet in Africa. The first significant monograph from this group was Richard's *Hunger and Work in a Savage Tribe* (1932) in which she stressed the relationship between foodways and social organization. Her advisor, Malinowski, assessed her contribution to the anthropology of food:

She has set out upon an entirely new subject: the social and cultural functions of nutritive processes. To my knowledge there is no book upon this problem published by an anthropologist, or for that matter, by any student of an allied discipline. The author presents us with the first collections of facts on the cultural aspects of food and eating; she demonstrates conclusively that this universally neglected subject can and indeed must be treated in the science of human civilization; she lays the foundations for a sociological theory of nutrition upon which others will have to continue building (1932).

Dr. Richards investigated all the elements in the foodways cycle of the Southern Bantu, but emphasized the sociological ramifications of food procurement, distribution, and consumption. She also included a chapter on the symbolic use of food which was a pioneer study in ethnogastronomy. She followed this with an even more valuable study, the classic *Land, Labour and Diet in Northern Rhodesia* (1939). Comparing her two books, Richards wrote:

In the first book I described the fundamental urge for food as shaping human institutions and in the second I have given concrete material to show how the biological facts of appetite and diet are themselves shaped by the particular system of human relationships and traditional activities which are standardized in a social group — in other words the cultural mechanisms for producing, preparing, and dividing food (1939).

Although Richards did not use the term foodways, she evaluated the alimentary activities of the Bemba tribe as an interrelated system, which includes "land" labour, and diet. This system is, of course, exactly what is covered by the concept foodways.

The impact of this scholarship on the study of folk foodways in America cannot be underestimated. John Bennett, one of the leading American scholars in the field during the 1940's, took note of the British research in a 1942 report, *Food and Culture in Southern Illinois*, in reference to rural foodways research in the United States:

Scientific examination of food habits in American rural communities seems to date from the post-World War I period, when a number of modest studies emanated from agricultural colleges and rural sociology departments of state universities. These studies emphasized the necessity for modifying cooking techniques and food choices for dietary improvement, and suggests practical techniques for that purpose . . .

In recent years interest in food habits has tended to emphasize the essential involvement of diet and foodways within the total cultural configuration, and the obvious significance of this for remedial programs. Although rural sociologists have investigated dietary-cultural situations, a considerable share of the credit must go to British social anthropologists, who at a relatively early period were evolving a theoretical systematization of diet and culture from data gathered in Africa. This general approach does more than merely introduce the concept of culture to the field; it essentially points up the necessity for considering extra-physiological factors in the selection, production, and preparation of human foods. The illusion of an "economic man" searching out the most obscure foodstuffs from and unwilling Nature in the reasoned pursuit of complete fulfillment of his needs, must give way to the concept of a man conditioned by the preferences and prejudices of his neighbors, selecting only those foods sanctioned by the "culture". And since these prejudices and preferences are not fortuitous, but rather products of certain social processes, modificatory programs must deal with the controls and mechanisms of these processes.

The Southern Illinois Foodways Study took this point of view into the field, and subjected it to an empirical investigation (1942:645—646).

III. FOODWAYS PROJECTS

JOHN BENNETT'S REFERENCE TO THE FIELD PROJECT in which he participated serves an introduction to the important regional foodways projects undertaken in the early 1940's. The first was the Southern Illinois Foodways study, undertaken and led by John Bennett, Harvey Smith, and Herbert Passin in 1940 under

the sponsorship of the Social Science Research Council and the University of Chicago, a center of interest in foodways in the early 1940's. Fred Eggan, a professor of the Department of Anthropology, and W. Lloyd Warner, director of the university's Sociology Department, both advised the projects; giving to it an inter-disciplinary backing rare in field projects of this sort. A mass of data was collected and five articles appeared. However, the complete records of the project were never published. The goal of the project was both theoretical and practical: 1) they hoped to examine the relationship of foodways to other cultural configurations and 2) they sought to develop methods and techniques for those interested in modifying foodways in rural societies. Behind these two goals lay a hypothesis:

Men utilize and exploit the natural environment only to the extent allowed them by their customs and traditions. Between human beings and foodstuffs in the natural environment, there exists a cultural screen, which modifies and controls the selection of available foods.

This approach may be phrased as a simple a priori resolution: Food habits are to be considered as part of the general cultural milieu. It is therefore assumed they are integrated within social and economic systems (1942:647).

Although Bennett, Smith, and Passin were strongly influenced by the work of the British anthropologists, their project was far more ambitious than any undertaken in Africa with the exception of Richard's Rhodesian research. Their Illinois project was, for example, a regional study encompassing eight ecological microenvironments, each with its own distinct sub-regional culture. The foodways of the different groups living in each sub-region were analyzed in 1) the context of the larger Midwestern region, 2) the historical foodway patterns brought with the groups from older regional traditions — New England, Pennsylvania German, Appalachian and Lowland South, Ozark Plateau, 3) increasingly influential urban foodways emanating from northern Illinois centers. Using a variety of ethnographic methods — historical research questionnaires, interviews, and participant observation — the project obtained one of the most complete portraits of an American folk and peasant foodways on record.

The obvious success of the Southern Illinois Foodways Project encouraged scholars either individually or in teams to undertake similar projects. Many of these were coordinated by the National Research Council's Committee on Food Habits and Committee on Food and Nutrition, both formed in late 1940 under the leadership of Dr. M. L. Wilson, director of the Department of Agriculture's extension services. Wilson had long been interested in foodways research and many studies had been financed by his department, especially at small agricultural colleges. He authorized the underwriting of the Southern Illinois project. Wilson was able to secure the services of Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead, exceptionally able and sensitive anthropologists, to head the Committee on Food Habits. They met every month throughout the war (1941—45) coordinating the dozens of projects which "concentrating on folkways and not upon diet and nutrition" sought to describe the various foodway traditions existing in the United States and some of the problems these traditions were encountering

due to culture change brought on in part by the war. As an interdisciplinary organization they analyzed a variety of subjects bearing on foodways, including "the behavior of human beings, the physiology of nutrition, the nature and the use of foods, and the problems of administration both in simple and complex societies." (Mead 1964:2) Since many of these projects dealt with folk groups, their value to the folklife researchers is significant. Fortunately, the more extensive of these were reviewed in the National Research Councils' Bulletin 108, the Report of the Committee on Food Habits 1941—1943 (NRC 1943). This bulletin was followed up with a much more significant report, *Manual for the Study of Food Habits* (NRC 1945). Written by Margaret Mead, this report contains an extensive bibliography of almost 700 scholarly articles in the field of American foodways, in both alphabetical and categorical arrangement. It is possible therefore, to quickly review all the regional foodways studies, many of them folk done in the United States. The manual also contained a lengthy section suggesting a context for the collection of foodways data.

Naturally many of the studies cited in the manual were not as rigorous in their collection and analysis of data as Mead's outline recommends, but some projects, like the Southwestern study undertaken in 1942—43 by Michel Pyoan, director of the U. S. Indian Service Nutritional Laboratory, Albuquerque, New Mexico, and Margaret Cussler and Mary DeGive's Southeastern 1940—42 project were model ethnographies. Both studies had an applied anthropological orientation — the improvement of Indian, folk, or peasant diets were very much the concern of the sponsors. The Southwestern Project examined Indian and Spanish-American enclaves in Rio Grande Basin region of New Mexico. The foodways of various representative Communities were studied with emphasis on dietary practices and nutritional status. Where deficits occurred, new patterns were suggested, with the insistence on foods and methods rooted in each group's traditions. Pyoan himself wrote numerous articles based on the project and his colleagues another ten, including an exceptional ethnography by Morris Siegal and Margaret King, *Food Habits of Spanish-Americans at Cundizo*, New Mexico (1943) which has never been published. Fortunately Cussler and De Give published the results of their analysis of the folk foodways of three different communities in rural North Carolina, Georgia, and South Carolina in : *Twixt the Cup and the Lip: Cultural Factors Affecting Food Habits* (1952). This book when combined with their numerous articles and reports and unpublished dissertations adds up to one of the most complete portraits of folk foodways available. The authors utilized photographic methods extensively in their project, both as a tool for supplementing data on the natural and cultural environments and as a device for gaining insights into social and cultural processes. A documentary film, *You Can't Eat Tobacco*, was also made. It summarized the socio-cultural factors shaping foodways patterns in the Lowland South generally and the effect on communities with subsistence economics when cash cropping was introduced.

The "golden age" of American regional foodways research ended with the war and the decision to de-activate the Committee on Food Habits. Funds were

cut off for research and scholars who had shown an interest in the anthropology of food moved on to other subjects. This era was summed up in a brilliant but complex article in *American Anthropologist* by John Bennett entitled Social Scientific Research in Human Subsistence (1946). It remains one of the key documents for American scholars interested in food habits generally, and folk foodways in particular. Bennett's analysis of the field of food research, his classification of potential studies, and comments on the value of this kind of research for the society at large are trenchant and relevant today, a quarter of a century after they were written.

IV. FOODWAYS RESEARCH TODAY

IN 1964 MARGARET MEAD WROTE a third report for the de-activated Committee on Food Habits, entitled Food Habits Research: Problems of the 1960's. She reviewed the early history of the Committee on Food Habits (1940—46), noted the lack of research in the late 1940's and 50's, and suggested that the 1960's would see a renewed interest in foodways research. Her report also included a bibliography of almost 200 items, all dating from the 1945—1960 period. It would be presumptuous to summarize her summary, except to note that her prediction of more research in the 1960's was well founded. In 1961, for example, David Gottlieb and Peter Rossi published their lengthy A Bibliography and Bibliographic Review of Food and Food Habit Research. References cited number over 1,000 and date primarily from the 1920's on through the 1950's. Gottlieb and Rossi's work is close to being definitive for the field of American food habit research in the first six decades of our century. It notes virtually all the studies on regional folk foodways. A second event of importance in the 1960's was the joint symposium conducted by members of the American Anthropological Association and the American Dietetic Association in 1963. Out of this meeting came a renewed plea for meaningful foodway research.

What are the prospects for such research? They are extremely good in Canada, where under the enlightened direction of Carmen Roy of the National Museum of Man a series of well financed foodways projects are underway. These hopefully will maintain the high standards set by John Honigmann's Foodways in a Muskeg Community (1962). Working with an Indian community near Hudson's Bay, Honigmann brilliantly succeeded in showing the "extent to which the peoples food habits are determined by social and environmental factors and (in outlining) an attempt to improve the native diet and make the Indians more self-sufficient. (1962:1)

The dozen research projects presently underway are descriptive rather than didactic and since many of the folk groups being examined are still basically unaffected by industrialization, the projects are not salvage operations. Many folk societies are alive and well in Canada, a fact gratefully not overlooked by the Canadian government.

The same cannot be said of the United States. Except for the State of New York's funding of the Farmer's Museum, Cooperstown — an open air museum and institute whose students have been systematically investigating contemporary foodways in the surrounding rural communities — little help for folklife researchers has come from either local, state, or federal governmental agencies. Despite the potential value of such studies to officials interested in the nation's dietary and environmental problems, there seems little hope of aid forth coming in the near future from these sources. Further, the critical financial situation at many universities has forstalled research projects of all kinds. And truly significant studies of contemporary folk foodways like Don Yoder's in Pennsylvania have been accomplished on shoestring budgets. Until another period like the 1940's, research on contemporary folk foodways in the United States will rely on individual scholars or small student teams working essentially on their own. Their determination to capture an important segment of American folk-life will have to suffice until the day when the nation recognized the significance of its living heritage.

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