

8/19/2015

Report about the dissertation of Iveta Hajdáková, “Gastronauts of Eastern Europe: Experiencing and Digesting Luxury Gastronomy in the Czech Republic.”

This dissertation is based on participant observation in two Czech luxury restaurants; interviews with owners, cooks, servers and guests; as well as analysis of public sources and controversies about cuisine and cooking in the Czech media. The argument of the dissertation is hard to follow. While Ms. Hajdáková is highly erudite and draws freely and with genuine facility on numerous thinkers and theorists, it is often difficult for the reader to see how they all fit within a coherent framework informing the various observations, arguments and sidetracks. If I understood correctly Ms. Hajdáková’s intention, the dissertation aims to elucidate the paradoxes, contradictions and various strategies that result from attempting to produce, endow with value and sell “gastronomic experience.” Ms. Hajdáková pays special attention to the affects that are mobilized or taught as part of gastronomic experience, and how they are enlisted in projects of ethical transformation. This is a fascinating and highly sophisticated project, but it also seems incomplete.

There are several layers of argument in the dissertation. I will try to move from the ones that are the clearest to me to others that are less so. Along the way, I will try to indicate what I think requires further explication and development:

1. *Luxury restaurants and luxury service more generally are a form of economic exchange that takes place by means of denying or negating its character as an economic exchange – this is the “discreet economy” of luxury, which is structurally equivalent to a gift relationship.* (p.12) This is an excellent argument, though it runs into a small but instructive problem as Ms. Hajdáková moves from her earlier ethnography to new field sites. The owner of *Gusto* immediately denies that they are a “luxury” restaurant and points to the lack of starched white table cloths, which is a signifier of a particular meaning of “luxury”. The discreet economy described here is therefore built on multiple negations: negation of its character as economic exchange; negation of utilitarian, plebian relationship to food (just filling our stomachs); but negation also of ostentatious, i.e. bourgeois luxury. There is thus similarity to the negations that, according to Bourdieu, constitute the aesthetic of pure form, but I suspect that this aesthetic too is negated in favor of process and “experience”, as Ms. Hajdáková shows in the fascinating chapter on *Gusto*. The equivalent in the art field would be performance art, installations and art “events”. It is unclear, however, how much of this is specific to *Gusto* and to what extent *Gusto* represents a distinct cultural strategy (and perhaps a distinct social category) in a more heterogeneous field of cultural producers. One way to tackle this could have been to dedicate a chapter or a section to a sustained comparison between *Verdi* and *Gusto* (as well as Restaurant X), but such a sustained comparison is mostly lacking. As it stands, the chapter on *Verdi* is dedicated mostly to the experiences and strategies of servers, and it trails off without clear conclusions, while the chapter on *Gusto* is dedicated to the

- owners, chef and cooks, which forestalls a sustained comparison or a field analysis. It remains unclear how the two ethnographic chapters are related or how they fit within a larger framework.
2. *In the context of post-socialism, “food talk” - whether of food critics, TV shows, manifestos, or even how interviewees’ talk – constantly refers back to the socialist past in order to delineate for consumers (as well as servers, chefs, etc.) what part of themselves needs to be changed, worked upon, purified, so as to attain civility, normalcy and freedom.* (pp.26-27) Once again, this is an excellent argument, but it would have been useful to have a more systematic comparison of the position-takings by the different actors involved and to relate them to their social trajectories. The trajectories are occasionally reported in the dissertation, and there are some fascinating details, but no systematic comparison or conclusions drawn. For example, the condemnation of socialist food production and consumption seems to be shared by all the actors involved. Are there any exceptions? Are there any food critics, chefs, restaurateurs, hospitality experts, waiters or anybody who defends socialist practices? If not, how would one characterize the position of “food talk” within the broader conversation in the Czech Republic? If not, what fights are being fought through the medium of the bad food/bad eating:socialism analogy? Is socialism simply a convenient target for everybody? But if so, what different sides of the socialist past are picked up and accentuated by different actors? For what purpose? What are the lines of division and oppositions constructed around the rejection of the socialist past? In short, I would have liked Ms. Hajdáková to put more flesh on the bones of her otherwise intriguing argument that “after 1989, hospitality industry and the host-patron relationship became “good to think with” as they provided a frame for negotiating the economic transformation, new inequalities, changes in consumption and production of services, the re-imagination of tradition, traditional value of *pohostinnost* [hospitality] and its role within *pohostinství* [hospitality industry], and the place of the Czech Republic in the newly open world (p.8). Who are the different sides to this negotiation? What are they struggling over? With what consequences?
 3. *The peculiar medium through which food talk and food consumption works to educate and form individuals as subjects of freedom is affect.* (p.39) I find it harder to make up my mind about this argument, which at times strikes me as trivial and at other times quite profound. I think this is because Ms. Hajdáková actually uses the term “affect” to articulate two distinct arguments. In the first sense, there is the argument that affect is an integral element of acts of consumption, thereby fostering a sense of intimacy and belonging. (p.18) I do not find this argument particularly enlightening. Everything we do, and certainly everything that we consume, involves feelings, sensations, emotions and desires. That advertisers and cultural producers try to influence us through this medium is neither new nor distinctive. On the other hand, Ms. Hajdáková uses the term “affect” also to refer to the object, or ethical substance,¹ of a specific technology of the self. In this sense, she highlights the fact that through food talk, and especially through the practices she observed at *Gusto*, individuals are called upon

¹ Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*. (Penguin, 1987), 26-27.

to scrutinize not their rational decision-making, but how they feel, and specifically whether what they feel is authentic or not. (p.39-40) The only way to know whether a feeling is authentic or not, however, is to make sure it is not routine and habitual. (p.20) Hence, the technology of the self involves a trained capacity to recognize and reject what has become routine, comfortable and habitual, and a conscious effort to construct an “experience” that is surprising, that is an experiment in being other than oneself or that is a self-discovery. (pp.57-58, 72-74) This leads to the rejection of “luxury” in its starched sense, or even to the rejection of “civility” itself (e.g. the tomato salad episode, p.58, or the flatulent chef). This argument is extremely interesting, but also underdeveloped. On the one hand, we get a very detailed and fascinating analysis of a certain specific example (e.g. *Gusto*); on the other hand, we get relatively abstract generalizations about neo-liberal consumption via other authors (Bauman, Sutton, Thrift, etc.) What is lacking, once again, is a field or comparative analysis. To what extent, for example, is *Gusto* representative or is it an outlier? If it is representative, then of what and whom? Was something similar happening in Verdi or Restaurant X? What are the alternative cultural options on offer to construct authentic experiences? Who articulates the demand for such experiences?

I hope these comments will prove useful for Ms. HajdÁková.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Gil Eyal', written in a cursive style.

Gil Eyal
Professor and Chair