

AMBIVALENT TRADITIONS: TRANSFORMING GENDER SYMBOLS AND FOOD PRACTICES IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

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Introduction: From shortage to plenty

Studies of consumption are often focused upon individual identity and particularly on individuals' production of selves by the means of relating to a market of goods and services. Focusing on consumption involves not only an examination of individual consumers vis-à-vis the market, however. It also involves considerations of relations between individuals, groups and the nation and, not least, relations between family members. Changes in consumption patterns, resources and practices have to be negotiated within families.

This paper will deal with family- and gender-related consumption issues, examined with regards to changes in dietary regimes in post-communist Czech Republic, where an economy of plenty, with many new choices and alternatives, has replaced the socialist economy of shortage.

Scarcity was a key experience of daily life of actually existing/lived socialism – although it varied, in time and degree, between countries. The Czech agricultural sector was among the more efficient in the Comecon Union, so there was – for most of the socialist period – no real shortage of food among Czech and Slovak people. But certain types of scarcity nevertheless prevailed; southern fruit were scarce all year, fresh fruit and vegetables were difficult to find during winter time and quality meat seldom found its way to the butcher's block. Such types of food were scarce, and those that were more readily available were still limited by lack of choice. After the opening of Czech markets to the global economy, Czech consumers have been faced with a number of new products to choose among, and are confronted continually with dietary ideas from a range of different culinary cultures, through media – newspapers, magazines and television-shows – as well as through advertising.

The question, then, is: to what extent and how do people change their daily consumption practices and their everyday diet? To what extent do new ideas influence the way people think about their own food? The changes that people make are not only dependent on an abundance of alternatives or on financial resources, but must also be seen in relation to questions of identity involving ideas about the modern and the traditional, about the Czech and the non-Czech. Not least, people's dietary choices must be seen in relation to wider issues of kinship, gender and generation, including the continuous process of negotiating taste and individual preferences within each family.

Background

Since 1990 I have been working on problems of the post-communist transformation in Czech villages; in my research, daily life issues, agriculture and the production of food has been a main focus (Haukanes 1993, 1999).¹ Last year I carried out a more specific research project on food, consumption and health, in connection with which I conducted in-depth interviews with twenty-four women, mostly from the working or lower-middle classes, all of whom were responsible for the preparation of food for their families. Eleven of the women live in the town of Plzen and the thirteen remaining live in different small villages in South Bohemia, scattered over an area with a radius of about five kilometers.² Before I met the women I interviewed, they had all filled out a form where they had noted down one week's "food-work": the meals that they had prepared, what they had been cooking and for whom. The interviews proceeded partly as a deeper probing of the information given on the form, and partly as an "organized" conversation on core topics such as food and gender, food and national identity, and food and pollution. Changes in the diet were explicitly addressed in all the interviews.

My knowledge of today's consumption patterns, diet and preferences is most developed in relation to the countryside. Interviewing urban women has given me a limited but interesting, body of comparative material. One important difference between the rural and the urban relates to the production of foodstuffs and the extensive subsistence farming practiced in Czech villages³. Subsistence farming, which provides a seasonal abundance of various products, demands a greater expenditure of time spent on food-work from villagers than from town people⁴. When comparing meal structures and patterns of consumption, however, there are no clear indications that urban and rural women cook very differently. The difference is not so much between the rural and the urban as between generations: the younger women – both in villages and in towns – are more likely to be inclined to substitute traditional cooking with lighter and more “modern” dishes. This indicates a change in consumption patterns which is also explicitly identified by many of my informants; and which I have observed in practice in some of the village homes that I have visited and observed during the last decade.

Below I shall examine these changes and the challenges they bring to families and individuals through focusing on a key example, namely the dumpling, and its changing symbolic and nutritional place in the Czech kitchen during the last decade. Before I move on to the dumplings, let me say a few words about changes in consumption practices during communism as I know it from the South Bohemian countryside.

Scarcity and lack of choice in shops did not mean that the diet did not change in this period. When talking to older/middle-aged people about the diet of their youth, they give a picture that is quite different from the meat-centred and rather heavy diet I met when I first came to South Bohemia in 1990 (meat served for lunch almost everyday, including a bouillon-based soup as a starter, and often a piece of meat or some sausages for supper as well). The pre-war and early post-war diet was, for “ordinary people” at least, a much simpler one. According to older villagers I have talked to, meat as a main dish was in many families served only on Sundays, and the everyday lunch often consisted of potato- or milk-based dishes or a soup only. What is thought of as *traditional Czech food* today - dishes such as dumplings served with meat and gravy, or pork with dumplings and

sauerkraut – was for many people Sunday food in former times. Their status has changed from Sunday food to everyday food, but they are nevertheless thought of as national classics - *klasika* (see also Ulehlová-Tilschová 1945:557ff).

Dumplings – between national pride and unhealthy old-fashionedness

Food is an important symbol of group identity and an important marker of boundaries; it can signify youth culture or class identity (Bourdieu 1984), or it can be a metaphor for a particular nation and a signifier of ethnic community (see for example Bell and Valentine 1997). In the Czech kitchen, dumplings appear to have a special status. During my first stay in the South Bohemian countryside (1990/91) I encountered many people who had never met a foreigner before, at least not one from Norway. The first questions I received were likely to be the following: Do you like our food? Have you tasted dumplings? Do you have dumplings in Norway too? - thereby indicating that dumplings are typically Czech; they represent something special that is not found in all other countries. Dumplings have a special symbolic status in themselves, but they are also special because of the fact that they are part of dishes thought of as Czech classics. Wheat flour dumplings (*houškové knedlíky*) belong to what most people consider to be the national Czech food - *Veprů-knedlo-zelo*, i.e. pork with sauerkraut and dumplings⁵. Dumplings served with gravy and well-cooked meat, be it beef, pork, game or – mostly in villages – rabbit, represent another combination which is typical of the Czech cuisine.

Meat and dumpling based dishes are not only associated with the traditional and Czech, they are also associated with a certain kind of masculinity involving notions of male strength. Men, and in particular manual labourers, are believed to need lots of meat, and in particular to love meat prepared traditionally and served with dumplings. “Men need meat;” “They want meat with sauce and dumplings;” “men like a proper piece of meat – if there's no meat there's no lunch;” “men are demanding when it comes to food, they want meat with dumplings and nothing else. These are typical comments on food and gender that I've heard from Czech women as they discuss their male relatives' food preferences, and which I met during the interviews too. On the other hand “women like

salads and pasta;” “women like sweets;” or even – “women are more modest, they eat what is on the table and don’t have special demands.”⁶

In the homes of the women I interviewed, the division of labor was traditional. This means that the women were responsible for the cooking as well as most of the other household tasks, something that corresponds with my former experiences at the Bohemian and Moravian countryside as well as with recent statistical data on gender and labour in the Czech Republic (see Friedlanderova and Tucek 2001). Most Czech women whom I have met have high standards when it comes to caring for their families, and these include serving them the food that they like the best. There are expectations involved both from the wider community and from the woman’s family. Women, at least those over about 35 years’ old, are expected to know how to make the traditional meals. But these meals, and in particular the dumplings-meat-and-gravy dishes, are considered time-consuming and complicated to make. I don’t know how many times I’ve observed or heard mention made of unsuccessful dumplings spoiling a meal and/or having to be substituted in a hurry with potatoes or bread.

When during interviews I asked the women whether they knew how to make *knedliky*, some of the younger urban women said that they didn’t know how to make them and told me that they bought ready-made ones if, once in a while, they did decide to serve them. In most cases this information was conveyed in a slightly embarrassed voice, however, as if these women had revealed a shameful secret to me. Others rejected totally the notion of buying *knedliky*. As one middle-aged woman said, “if I serve bought ones, they (her husband and grown-up son) recognize it immediately.” “That’s not it” (*to není vono*). I have also come across cases where the lack of ability to prepare dumplings takes on a symbolic value far beyond the context of everyday meals. For example, an urban woman, now sixty years old, told me about her very difficult marriage and about her husband’s dislike of her ways of behaving. She said: “When he couldn’t find anything else to complain about, he blamed me for not serving him dumplings.” Her inability to serve the proper food was thus made a key symbol for their whole relationship and for her “failures” as a spouse in particular. The marriage ended in divorce.

The traditional mid-day meal is the main meal of the day in Czech homes and is of the kind that in modern vocabulary could be called slow-food, particularly when it comes to sauces and soups made “from scratch.” When asking my informants how much time they spend on cooking each day, most of them said that cooking lunch takes them from one to two hours, at weekends even more (for general statistics, see Friedlanderova and Tucek 2001: 102-103).⁷ As mentioned earlier, there seems to be a slight difference between generations, with the younger spending somewhat less time on cooking than the older ones. The younger women are also inclined to substitute some of the rather heavy traditional dishes with lighter and faster-made ones. Several of them said that they seldom made gravy-meat and dumpling-dishes, for example, but rather made more use of pasta, salads and poultry. This is, I believe, a countrywide tendency; the Czech diet is moving, although slowly, towards a lighter and “faster” one. The consumption of red meat is on the decline; in many cases it is being substituted with poultry.⁸ A tendency to eat more vegetables, particularly in the form of salads, is also visible both in private homes and in public venues (although the average amount of vegetables consumed a year is still far below the amount consumed in Western European countries (Zelená Zpráva 2000)). Many canteens at work places will now offer a choice between main courses, of which one may be a vegetarian, or they will serve big “multi-vegetable salads,” in contrast to the small cups with grated carrots, turnips or cucumber that followed the meal in former days.

A certain move away from the *klasika* can be thus observed, in particular in the homes of younger couples. Traditional food has gained a more ambiguous status in many people’s minds. Some mention their *klasika* with pride, as a national symbol of which they can be proud. One urban working-class woman, when asked what she understood by the expression “*Pravé České jídlo* (real Czech food) answered this: “The best food in the world.” She then went on to list off her favorite dishes, of which the first was *vepro-knedlo-zelo*.” The Czech artist Jiri Cernicky, when participating in an international art event called “Food Art” (staged in Norway in the summer 2000), piled praises on the dumpling: “There are so many different types of dumplings,” Cernicky wrote, “...offering artists of the kitchen such creativity which hotdog-

makers would only dream of. Dumplings might be one of the challenges of Czech cuisine to the world” (Cernicky 2000).

Representing the traditional Czech diet per se, *knedlíky* might also be interpreted in a less favorable light. *Knedlíky*, as the epitome of Czech national food, served together with meat and sauce, fits into the image of the Czech cuisine as a rather heavy and not particularly healthy one. This problematic health aspect was mentioned by many of my informants. For instance, when I asked her about her notions of Czech food, a young woman from Plzeň answered this: “heavy food, of which there’s a lot” and added; “I never make such food.” Others were less rejecting, but admitted that they reckoned it was too heavy. As one woman said: “Well, it’s heavy, but it’s ours” (*Je tezké, ale je naše*).

The warnings against traditional Czech cooking are not new. During communism, the hygienic control of canteens in workplaces and at schools controlled not only levels of bacteria and cleanliness; it also controlled the menu. For health reasons, canteens were not allowed to serve *knedlíky* and sauce based dishes more than twice a week.⁹ After 1989, these health arguments have been utterly emphasised and moreover, they have been embedded in a discourse that has to do with lifestyle and is connected to ideas about the modern and Western. During my first stays in the countryside I heard many people saying: “We should eat more like you do, in the West, more fish, vegetables and fruit.” Ten years later this “should” had become reality, at least for some people, a reality that was often presented as a choice of lifestyle and a deliberate break with the traditional. In connection with BSE being discovered in the Czech Republic last year, the general director of EUREST (international company running canteens in workplaces) answered this when asked by a newspaper whether Czech classics will be pushed out of the menu due to people’s fear of bovine meat: “*Rajská* (tomato-sauce) and *koprivá* (dill-sauce)¹⁰ where there is bovine meat has already disappeared from many people’s diet. In addition these kinds of dishes are getting unfashionable and it does not happen that for example a manager order such food for his lunch” (Pravské Noviny 26.10.02). Mariana, a young married village woman of 26 whom I interviewed last summer, demonstrated the same “managerial” attitude, distancing herself completely from

traditional cooking and talking about the Czech specialties with disgust. When, a few weeks after the interview, she invited me to a birthday party, she served me delicate homemade snack and sandwiches; “no dumplings here”, she said, with reference to our earlier conversation about traditions and food.

Many younger women like to experiment with new dishes and boast of their capability to do so, and –most importantly - have husbands who fancy new kinds of food and who are willing to abandon traditional cooking. In a few cases, it is actually the husband who demands that such changes be made. One reason for Mariana to avoid classical gravy-and-dumpling dishes is that her husband, due to the BSE scandal in Europe, will not eat beef. Eva, an urban woman of thirty-seven, told me that she had cooked traditionally the first years of after she married (she married right before communism fell): gravies and dumplings and a lot of pork meat. After 1989 her husband started to practice bodybuilding and demanded a different diet including chicken, rice and pasta, but no dumplings. This resulted in the whole family changing their diet. Now divorced, she and her daughter still stick to the body-builder’s low-fat diet, and she cannot imagine going back to a more traditional one.

More common than these two cases, are the ones where the woman would really like to change their family’s diet, but their husbands or their fathers want to have “real Czech food” with a proper piece of meat for each meal. “If it was up to me I would have a lot more vegetables on the menu, but he doesn’t want this kind of food, he prefers the traditional....” Or, as a young married woman living with her parents once complained: “My father cannot imagine a diet without *knedlíky*, but I don’t want to cook them anymore!”

Concluding remarks

Patterns of consumption are changing. In some cases the change involves a devaluation of the traditional Czech cooking and sometimes also Czech cuisine in general. In terms of gender and food symbolism, a *feminization* of the diet can be observed; the “male” gravy, meat, and dumplings-dishes are rarely seen at the tables of the younger generation, while the more “feminine” salads, pasta, and poultry-based dishes are common. This is not a straightforward and one-directional process, however. Food is a potent symbol of national identity as well as

gender-relations, and changes in patterns of consumption involve ambivalences, conflicts, and feelings of national pride and shame. Changes have to be negotiated within the minimal unit of consumption, and the winner in this process often seems to be the man. This does not mean that all men reject the new, quite the contrary. Ideals of masculinity are in transition too, meaning that a number of men identify with a “modern” way of living and prefer a lighter and faster kind of diet. But dietary changes, and “feminization” of the diet in particular, are in most cases dependant of the male family members’ approval, while the responsibility of caring for the family through food still rests primarily with the woman.

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Notes

- ¹ I conducted fieldwork in South Bohemia in 1990/91, in South Moravia in 1993, in South Moravia and South Bohemia in 1995 and in South Bohemia and Plzen in 2001.
- ² All of the interviewees were married and all had children, grown up or small. Only two of the women had husbands who regularly took part in the cooking. The youngest woman interviewed was twenty-five, the oldest sixty-seven.
- ³ While only one of the urban women interviewed had a substantial supply from her own production, all the village women had access to home grown vegetables, fruit and some meat, either from their own or parents' production.
- ⁴ For more details about this subsistence farming see Haukanes 1999, 2001 and Dvoráková 1999).
- ⁵ The classic study “Česká Strava Lidová” from 1945 mentions *Vepru-knedlo-zelo* as a national dish (see Ulehlová- Tilschová 1945). When during interviews I asked women what was typical for the Czech kitchen, some said, “well dumplings and what belongs to them.” The majority immediately responded *Vepru-knedlo-zelo*, and added a few more things such as gravy with meat or schnitzels. Another specialty often mentioned was the fruit-dumplings (*ovocné knedlíky*), which are ball-shaped dumplings containing a piece of fruit or some berries inside, be it a plum, an apricot, or strawberries.
- ⁶ This tendency to associate maleness with meat and with “traditional food” is demonstrated in studies from other European countries too (see Lien, Bjørkum and Bye 1998)
- ⁷ Not all of them prepared lunch everyday, since both they and their spouses had lunch at work while the kids had theirs at school.
- ⁸ See report from the Czech Minister of Agriculture SKOT – hovězí maso (May 2002)
- ⁹ In fact, this rule is still valid, but according to the cooks I know the control is less strict and does not include privately run canteens and restaurants.

¹⁰ Both classical meat, dumplings, and gravy dishes