



Milk, Myth and Magic

The Social Construction of Identities, Banalities and Trivialities in Everyday Europe

Milk constitutes a regular and unexotic part of the diet of most Europeans. It is consumed on a daily basis and generally taken for granted. However, milk is also a drink loaded with meaning and sometimes even a banal signifier of the nation as home. Based on data collected by students from the department of European Studies in Århus, Denmark in 2006 and 2007 this article compares and discusses the perception and classification of milk in 10 European countries.

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Milk - here understood as drinking milk from cows - is consumed on a daily basis throughout Europe, and constitutes a regular and fairly unexotic part of the diets of most Europeans. People of all ages have milk at breakfast, in their teas, coffees, or as an afternoon snack. Most people would probably claim that "we" always drank milk, although mass consumption of milk is in fact a modern invention, one preconditioned on among other things nutritional science and refrigeration techniques (Dupuis 2002; Nestle 2002; Fink in this volume). Today, however, milk has become one of the staples that is taken for granted in the everyday life of most Europeans. It is also one of the few food products that have become privileged by public authorities from local politics to the level of the European Union. School milk programmes is a prime example of such privileges, where milk has been made available for free or at artificially low prices for school children in most Western European countries through generous public subsidies from national and European political institutions to dairy producers and dairy industry campaigns (European Commission 1999). This continues to be the case also in the wake of an increasing questioning of milk's health benefits (e.g. Cohen 1997). However, in spite of the association with the ordinary - or perhaps because of it - milk is a product loaded with meaning and part of power struggles in the fields of food politics and everyday routines (see also Koustrup and Schøler in this volume).

The literature on food cultures and society is rather dispersed between the disciplines of anthropology, sociology and history (e.g. Spary, 2005). When the focus is on Europe, this literature tends to be further compartmentalised into national disciplinary literatures. In this article, we aim to take an interdisciplinary and cross-European approach to the study of food practices in Europe. As milk is consumed widely across Europe, we depart in the assumption that European's perceptions of milk also provide an important ingredient of the social construction of everyday life here. Based on new ethnographic research in around ten European countries, we explore some of the meanings that people in Europe attach to milk by outlining differences and similarities in perceptions and consumption of milk.

The article is structured as follows. First we introduce the methodological basis for this article, and why milk has been chosen as the object of study. Then we discuss the theoretical departure of the article, which is a combination of classical cultural sociological work about the social construction of reality by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966), and work on identity, classification and food in the everyday by Roland Barthes (1957/2000), Pierre Bourdieu (1984), and Mary Douglas (1975). And finally we analyse the way in which the new empirical data can be used to study how people classify everyday food products, and thus how this can be used to access the way in which people construct and maintain social and cultural identities through food practices and routines. Our study has shown that milk is almost universally perceived as induced with goodness, vitality and health, linked to good childhood memories, and seen as a marker of where home is. Milk represents the everyday in Europe, but no nation or locality can claim it to be truly and only theirs. Still we can detect differences where milk comes to function as a signifier of local belonging.

The main argument in this article has been inspired by Michael Billig's work on the banal ways that nationalism is reproduced in public spaces. However, we take Billig's concept of banal nationalism a step further, exploring how notions of the national become reproduced and reconfigured in the social practices and food consumption of everyday life (Billig 1995, see also Palmer 1999). Developing Billig's argument, we make a conceptual distinction between the *banal nationalism* that Billig discussed and a *nationalism of banalities* which is related to the reproduction of national belonging through the trivial practices of everyday life. This distinction is based on a differentiation between the publically waved "flags" that Billig discussed, and the way that people "consume" the nation by internalising and integrating it into everyday (food) practices.

Studying the meanings of milk in Europe

The empirical platform of this article is ethnographic fieldwork undertaken by student researchers in Britain, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Norway, and supplementary studies of per-



ceptions of food consumption in Iceland, Lithuania, and Hungary. The article thus draws on new primary data from ten European countries. These studies come out of two interdisciplinary research seminars about the social construction of goodness and badness in food products in Europe directed by us in the context of an international and interdisciplinary MA-programme at the Department for European Studies at Aarhus University. Thus, in the autumn 2006 the research seminar "The Social Construction of Milk: Narratives in Families across Europe" was conducted in cooperation with the Danish Dairy Board (Mejeriforeningen, henceforth DDB). And in the autumn 2007 an additional research seminar, called "The Sweet, the Fat and the Really Obese: The Social Construction of Goodness and Badness in European Diets", was funded by the Humanities Faculty of Aarhus University under the management funds for research priority areas (Lederpuljen).

The primary data in the first project was based on small-scale qualitative research where student researchers performed semi-structured interviews, focus groups, questionnaires with open and closed questions, performed observations in public spaces such as cafés and supermarkets and collected artefacts related to milk consumption. The target groups were in particular children, teenagers, and their parents. Studies were conducted in urban areas. In the second project we were more generally interested in similarities and differences in the ways that people distinguish between "good food" and "bad food" and the ways they associate "goodness" and "badness" with various food items in different social contexts (see ES 2008, forthcoming). The initial choice of milk as the focus of the first project was a highly pragmatic one, prompted through a collaboration with the DDB, and the opportunity to fund students' field research trips within the framework of an innovative teaching programme. The DDB's "problem" was to understand why people - especially young people in Denmark - appear to be drinking less milk than they used to. As the DDB found no satisfactory answers in quantitative statistical studies designed to map consumption trends in Denmark and abroad, they first mandated a larger scale qualitative ethnographic study of how Danes perceive of milk (Explora 2006, see also Øllgaard this volume). In order to understand if and how these perceptions reflect a particular Danish "milk consumption culture", or a general trend in Europe, they subsequently mandated us to place the study in a European context. Next to being an interdisciplinary MA programme with an emphasis on cultural analysis in Europe, the international student population at European Studies means that there exist significant and diverse language resources. In short, there was a good match between the resources and aims of this programme and the DDB's needs for a qualitative comparative European.

The above project led to an interest in exploring when and how seemingly banal foods like milk come to play a role in the construction and maintenance of personal,

regional and national identities in Europe, and how people classify and rationalise about everyday food choices. The article should be considered as a pilot study that identifies trends among various individuals and groups of people in different European countries (see also Koustrup and Schøler in this volume). The data is drawn from multiple sources; it is qualitative, and thus not representative in a strictly numerical sense. When we here refer to specific countries, we do not expect this to be representative in a generalising manner. Nevertheless, with reference to the theoretical concepts of habitus and doxa (Bourdieu, 1984), small-scale qualitative research is useful to the extent that we may assume that individual's perceptions are likely to be shared by more people than simply the individuals that we observed. In interpreting the new data, we also draw on theoretical insights into narratives, classification, identity formation, mythification and norms relating to food consumption in the everyday, as will be explained further below.

Food, meaning, identity and locality in the everyday

There is nothing new in linking food items or food practices to meanings and localities, or to see them as signs of nations and ethnicities. As Bell and Valentine for instance have pointed out "the history of any nation's diet is the history of the nation itself, with food fashion, fads and fancies mapping episodes of colonialism and migration, trade and exploration, cultural exchange and boundary-making" (1997: 168). Likewise Mennell (1996) has argued that the emergence of recognisably "national" cuisines coincided with the gradual formation of nation-states from the late 15th century. Over time, certain food choices and patterns of eating came to be seen as "characteristic" of a people, a region or a nation (Tannahill 1975): English "tea", French wine, Belgian chocolate, Scottish lox, Italian pasta, Swedish - or is it Danish? - Smorgasbord, and so on (e.g. Council of Europe 2005). Moreover, with migration and trade, food habits get imported, reshaped, and reinvented, such as the all-American pretzel that find its origins in Bavaria, Indian curry in Britain, Chicago's deep-pan pizza, and the beer and pub-cultures of Ireland promoted across the world by major breweries like Guinness (e.g. Diner 2001). A coffee chain like Starbucks took the reinvention of Italian style-coffee and American desserts even further by creating spaces with an atmosphere that is a mix of Euro-chick cafés and liberal Berkeley coffee hangouts that now spans the globe, and in which some people have even found their "home away from home" (e.g. Simmons 2004).

In processing the data from the "milk project", we first need to understand how nationhood is linked to social practices of everyday life, and to examine how forms of identity formation and national and local belonging operate in the context of the everyday. In a discussion of identity theories from the late 1980s, Philip Schlesinger noted that theories about nationalism and national identities rarely include the social processes that construct and reconstruct identities of the individual in everyday life (Schlesinger 1987). Rather discus-



sions about nationalism and national identity construction tend to focus on the ways that institutions, elites, media and states produce ideas about the people, the culture and the community, and attempt to install these ideas as true and real (e.g. Anderson 1983, Gellner 1983). As a result there is a tendency to perceive of nationalist feelings as something radical and somewhat apart from what most people experience in the mundane world of the everyday (also Linde-Laursen 1993).

In a similar vein, Michael Billig has argued that nationalism, national identity and identification are primarily studied in relation to crisis and ceremony (Billig 1995). In opposition to this tendency Billig has introduced the concept of banal nationalism, pointing to the more subtle national identity construction and maintenance that is involved in the reproduction of national identity in everyday life. Banal nationalism is related to what Billig describes as "flagging the homeland daily" (Billig 1995: 93). The "flags" that Billig identify are those seemingly banal or insignificant objects, concepts, phrases and words, that we hardly really notice, but which constantly remind us of our national belonging: the map of the nation appearing in the weather report complete with a nationally confined weather, the colours of the flag in logos and signs or the national lotto drawings. Such national signs, symbols and colours are "flags" that mostly go unnoticed, but they still serve to remind people of who they are and where they belong. "Flags" can also be words like "us", "we" and "they" in the national newspapers. Billig observes that it is the continual flagging that secures that individuals do not forget their national identity, and this is how theoretical concepts of the nation and of national identity are translated and reproduced into everyday experiences:

"... this reminding is so familiar, so continual, that it is not consciously registered as reminding. The metonymic image of banal nationalism is not a flag which is being consciously waved with fervent passion; it is a flag hanging unnoticed on the public building." (Billig 1995: 8)

"Flags" keep nationhood close to the surface of people's everyday life through their relationship to the embodied habits of social life, the places we live, the way we live, and the unconsciously held thoughts of home that we take with us wherever we go. So in order to understand how national sentiments are produced and kept alive in people's daily lives, it is necessary to look closer at where these seemingly mundane and unconsciously waved flags of identity operate. Billig acknowledges that almost anything can be used to "flag" the nation, though in his own study, the "flags" are those that revolve around generally accepted signs of nations, such as newspapers, political speeches and sporting occasions. National identities are thus maintained, communicated and understood on a day to day basis, which is "why people don't forget their nationality" (Billig 1995: 7). What makes food different from the symbols identified by Billig is above all that food is literally internalised through consumption. Food becomes shared with others through the experiences of

taste, presentation, social relations, and perceptions of what is right and wrong to eat. Foods thereby become part of an intimate and highly personalised symbolic interaction between "me", "us" and "them." People thus typically associate food with place and social contexts.

In the studies on food, locality and identity, a distinction is often made between high profile foods, and foods that are known to represent the nation in everyday parlance. Pork-based meatballs (frikadeller) have for example become discursively constructed as part and parcel of Danish society and democracy in debates over 'Danishness' in the country's mainstream media (Frello 2000). This debate has included the meals served in public kindergartens, and resulted in an "othering" of those who do not eat this pork-based national signature dish such as Muslim residents, and an underlying suggestion that those who do not eat pork are not in favour of democracy. Other examples are found, for instance, in the book *Culinary Cultures of Europe. Identity, Diversity and Dialogue*, a publication edited by scholars throughout Europe and sponsored by the Council of Europe (Council of Europe 2005). While the chapter on Belgium looks to more low-profile products such as endive and Brussels sprouts (Jacobs and Fraikin in Council of Europe 2005), the chapter on France emphasises French gastronomy (Poulain in Council of Europe 2005). The French case is in fact exemplary of how high profile foods come to symbolise and identify a nation. A similar notion is formulated very elegantly in Roland Barthes essay on wine and milk, where Barthes argues that the French nation is constructed through the consumption of wine, and he points out that milk is too banal to ever achieve a similar status in France (Barthes 2000 (1957)). Milk, according to Barthes, is thus the symbolic anti-thesis of how the French embody their identity. In both the French and Danish cases, specific foods can thus be said to "flag" the nation, and symbolically or discursively represent specific traits of national majoritarian identities. In short, specific foods can therefore serve as markers of belonging and nationality integrated into habits, discourses and social processes that organise and structure the everyday.

Talking about Milk

Our study of peoples' perceptions of milk is primarily based on narratives about milk. Following Ochs & Capps (1996) we treat narratives as stories people tell in order to make sense of their personal experiences and of the world they live in. By studying what people say about milk and about the situations where milk is or is not consumed, we get access to what we have called "the social construction of milk", which refer to the ways that people incorporate milk into their daily lives, and the values and meanings they ascribe to it.

The narratives that have been collected by the student researchers participating in our research seminars are not spontaneous tales about milk and its merits. In fact,



like with many other key ingredients of everyday life, the norms and habits of milk consumption are rarely articulated in language. As also Øllgaard points out in this volume, the knowledge that people have about when and where to do what in their everyday lives is an internalised knowledge which is primarily obtained and expressed through practice (Bourdieu 1990). People consume milk regularly, they make sense of it, but they rarely talk about it. This meant that our researchers at times had to show a great deal of creativity in order to get people started talking about milk, as the two quotes below indicate:

“Why milk? It is just there, you don’t have to talk about it. You don’t think about it” (German informant ES 2007: 87).

“I think it is funny... well ... it is incredible that something like this [our research project] exists” (German informant, *ibid*).

The astonishment expressed by our informants was often linked to a view that the everyday nature of milk made the topic too insignificant to even express an opinion about or conduct research into. As other informants stated: “[t]here are more important subjects [to study]” (*ibid*), and “[i]t is nothing I think about, for me it is just normal ... [...]. Like water and bread and everything else, it is part of everyday life” (ES 2007: 87-88). It therefore sometimes took our student researchers a good deal of persuasion to get people to participate. Interestingly, some of our informants appeared to find it embarrassing to talk publically about milk, exemplified well in the study of milk drinking habits among teenagers in a Dutch school class. Here the interviewers experienced that when teenagers were talking in front of their classmates they would deny ever drinking milk, despite the fact that in the questionnaires filled in a little earlier, the same teenagers had indicated drinking milk regularly, and despite the fact that milk is considered a stable in Dutch households (ES 2007: 100). This correlates well with the shyness found in a study of Danish teenagers, pointing out that milk is in some places seen as a private drink (Explora 2006). On the other hand 14-16-year old Irish teenagers willingly sang a jingle on milk to our student researchers, indicating that here there were no norms prohibiting talk about milk in public (ES 2007: 35).

In short, although milk may appear as a trivial topic, the absence of the topic of milk in “spontaneous” conversations does not mean that milk is not invested with meaning and governed by social norms. Rather, our findings show that people project meanings into milk, and that norms exist about where it can be consumed, and in what contexts. Indeed, as we will show below, most informants became more talkative once they got started.

Representing milk

In addition to narratives about milk, our researchers have also collected other kinds of material such as milk cartons, commercials for milk, reports and promotional material on milk by dairy boards and health authorities,

and media debates on milk from different countries in Europe. Such data give access to different forms of more or less official representations of milk and are interesting in relation to a study of “the social construction of milk” in everyday life both because they are vessels linking such official discourses to people’s private milk consumption practices, and thus feed into perceptions of milk that are expected to be representative within a given area.

In her seminal article “Deciphering a meal”, Mary Douglas talks about the concept of “food coding” (Douglas 1975). Here she introduces the idea that food encodes social events. Food is consumed in ordered sequences such as breakfast, lunch, tea and supper, and certain foods are allotted to specific eating occasions. While our study has shown that milk is difficult to classify, a number of common characteristics are ascribed to milk which generally frame the way our informants talked about it. As already mentioned above, “milk” is generally perceived as a non-topic; it is first and foremost perceived as a trivial or even boring commodity that people have in the kitchen and use at specific occasions. The triviality of milk is underscored by the occasions where it is consumed; in Europe milk is usually served at breakfast – often perceived as the most insignificant meal in terms of meanings according to Mary Douglas (*ibid*) – or it is used as an ingredient in the meals of everyday life. In fact, using milk in cooking is often what transforms a meal into an everyday low-status meal – contrary to the use of cream or wine which transforms the same ingredients into a festive, high-status meal (see also Koustrup this volume). Despite the triviality of milk which frames the way that people talk about it, in all the countries our students have researched, milk is nevertheless embedded with goodness and positive connotations as we explore below.

Milk messages across Europe: calcium and care

Politically milk is a contested commodity. In the United States, for example, Marion Nestle has illustrated the continuous power struggles over time around the official recommended daily required allowances of milk and of milk’s position in the food pyramid (Nestle 2002). Also various European studies have discussed the many and different interests vested in milk (e.g. Jönsson 2005, Nicolau-Nos & al, 2006).

Still, in the official recommendations by health authorities and public institutions, the health benefits of milk and milk products appear to be fairly straightforward. The recommendations for milk (product) consumption are fairly similar in most European countries. Many have adopted the 3-a-day campaign (milk, yoghurt, cheese) and the milk moustache campaign and generally milk is promoted as indispensable for personal health.

The official discourse on the goodness of milk appears to be reproduced in the narratives about milk that our



student researchers have collected. When talking about milk the informants first and foremost place the product within a public-scientific discourse of nourishment that is the same across Europe. People variously claim that milk is “good for you ‘cause it’s got calcium, protein and vitamins” (Irish informant, European Studies 2007: 35); it “is good for your bones and has a lot of calcium” (Dutch informant, European Studies 2007: 106), and it “increases growth... strengthens the nails ... and ... it makes the bone structure stronger” (German informant, European Studies 2006: 89), to mention just a few of a series of quite similar statements. In this respect people appear to be reproducing the ‘official’ discourse of health authorities and dairy boards. However, they do not generally refer their knowledge to these institutions; rather this discourse appear to have been incorporated into a common sense understanding of “how things are”, or “what our parents told us” (e.g. ES 2007: 75). The health discourse thus appears to be part of the habitus of our informants, that is, it is taken for granted that everyone knows that this is true. Only in Denmark did researchers come across people who openly questioned the benefit of milk, referring to the possible dangers of consuming cows’ milk. These informants primarily focussed on the fat content of milk, and made a connection between the consumption of full fat and semi-skimmed milk and the rise in obesity (Explora 2006). Where most Europeans tend to regard full fat milk and semi-skimmed milk as the ‘normal’ type of milk, in Denmark there seems to be a general agreement that only milk low in fat content is healthy. This is also expressed in the DDB’s statistics over the sale of milk, and low-fat milk has had an unusually high successrate in this country. This Danish example refer to a growing global movement that has begun to question the health official praise and health claims of milk, and instead linking it to lactose intolerance, obesity, heart disease and different forms of cancers (e.g. Cohen 1997). This, paradoxically, in spite of the fact that the difference in the fat content of different varieties of milk is much lower than in most cheeses – or in meat for that matter.

The public-scientific discourse of nourishment is in our material supplemented by a discourse of emotional nourishment. In all the countries we have researched, milk appears to be more than a drink or just a food. Everywhere milk is associated with the family, and the relationship between parents and children. Providing milk to someone - even to one self - is widely seen as providing care, especially parental care. Milk is perceived as *the* drink that good parents provides for their children, and can thus become understood as an extension of the “milk tie” between mother and child (e.g. MacClancy, 2003; Dupuis 2002). This implies both naturalness and morality. Situating milk within the “natural” relationship between parents and children, we found a further discourse on the universality of milk, namely that milk is generally perceived as being linked to childhood or even as being childish. Many of our teenage informants thus expressed that milk was pri-

marily for small kids. Also adult informants related milk to childhood even if our data suggest that most of our informants continue to consume milk throughout their lives. Older informants even related milk to the good memories of childhood or young age. For them, milk is not only something you drink as a child, it is also related to nostalgic memories of a world long gone, where the grass was greener, the cows were happier and the texture of milk was like velvet. Indeed, clover-eating happy cows on sunny meadows are often depicted on milk cartons, or they are decorated with illustrations of national or local symbols. Such contextualisation obviously draws on selective politics of memory.

Differences in perceptions of milk

Milk thus appears to be linked to health, home and happiness throughout Europe. But there are also significant differences in people’s perceptions of milk. In the following sub-sections we will outline some of these differences. We are particularly interested in investigating when and how milk is transformed from being perceived as a banal drink related to the private sphere of everyday life to become a sign of a banal form of nationalism in which the nation is home.

The first difference we will look at is related to the question of what exactly people talk about when they refer to milk. The second has to do with the question of whether or not the goodness of milk can be provided by something other than milk. The third has to do with the question of when milk ceases to be milk and is transformed into something else. None of these differences are articulated openly by our informants. Rather they appear in the taken-for-granted notions informants talk according to.

What is milk?

When Europeans talk about the white substance that they pour into glasses or have with their cereals in the morning, they simply call it milk: mælk, melk, mjölk, milk, milch, m’êko, lait, latte, leche. However in practice they are referring to several different variations of this white substance. Above we noted that in Denmark there was a particular emphasis on the degree of milk fat, but another distinction to make is between fresh milk and Ultra High Temperature (UHT) treated milk. Both are perceived as “regular” milk in their different locations.

Fresh milk is primarily consumed in the Nordic countries, the British Isles and in Ireland. Here the term “milk” is synonymous with “fresh milk”. Notably, our informants did not automatically mention this, as it was simply taken for granted that when talking about milk, it means fresh milk. When the question of ‘what kind of milk’ is raised, people often act surprised, expecting that real milk is *obviously* fresh. They may discuss degrees of freshness, as this Irish adult informant who compared today’s fresh milk with that of the past:



"40 years ago you had the local dairies with 20 cows (...) you had a relationship with milk [...] it came directly from the cow [...] it was clean, fresh, unpasteurised, warm" (Irish informant, ES 2006, 37).

But the milk they talk about is nevertheless by definition fresh.

In other places in Europe the standard milk is perceived to be UHT. This may be illustrated with two quotes from the German study: to the question of whether an informant consumed fresh or UHT treated milk, the reply was: "do you mean fresh milk directly from the cow or what?" (German informant ES 2007: 93). Another informant tried to rationalise the "normality" of UHT treated milk:

"I mean fresh milk which comes straight from the cow wouldn't be tasty in my opinion. It must be heated (...). This is very important to me" (German informant ES 2007: 92).

In our study UHT milk was considered to be the norm in Germany, the Netherlands, the Czech Republic, and France. In Italy, some of our informants claimed to consume fresh milk, while others primarily consumed UHT milk, and from our data it is not possible to state that there is a norm as to which of these two types of milk is considered the regular *latte*.

Rather choice of milk appears to be part of identity construction on the part of certain social groups. In Milan, for example, our researchers interviewed informants who very self-consciously claimed that they only consume fresh milk from glass bottles. This glass-bottled milk appears to be "an attitude", as Roland Barthes has termed it (Barthes 1961), that is, an element in a personal and social identity construction. These observations for Italy are supported by observations made in supermarkets where both fresh milk and UHT milk appears readily available, whereas for instance in Denmark, UHT milk is not a standard article.

Milk and mixture

Can the almost universal goodness associated with milk be retained if milk is mixed with other products? Will the "milk tie" still hold? In other words, the question of when milk is 'milk,' and when it ceases to be 'milk' is another area where we can observe different perceptions across Europe. Based on data from our study, we observed that there is a phenomenon that could be called 'a cult of pure milk' in Ireland, Denmark and Norway. This means that if something is mixed into the milk - such as coffee, chocolate, sugar or nutella - it simply cease to be perceived as 'milk' (ES 2007; Explora 2006). The same has been shown to be the case in Sweden (Jönsson 2005). Informants make this clear in several different ways: they categorise milk and milk-based products differently, they emphasise the whiteness of 'real' milk, and products based on UHT milk are not referred to as 'milk'. Chocolate milk sold in these countries is generally made from UHT-treated milk, however this does not seem to bother people most likely because they do not consider it to be milk. The 'cult of pure milk' finds an opposite in for instance

France, where statistics show that as much as 77 % of milk purchases are UHT-treated, and most is used for mixing and cooking. Informants from France willingly categorised yoghurt, chocolate milk and milk-based coffees as milk. As one informant said: "it is especially the cultural heritage. We have all been brought up on chocolate milk" (French informant, ES 2007: 41). In Italy, the Netherlands, Britain, the Czech Republic and Germany, our informants did not make clear distinctions between pure milk and milk-based drinks either. Here 'milk' refers both to pure milk and to milk mixed with various other ingredients for instance fruit flavours, chocolate or simply sugar. These differences in the classification of milk are, as we show below, closely linked to particular myths and histories about milk which may be linking milk to the national home.

The replaceability of milk

The question of what qualifies as milk spills over into the question of whether the goodness of milk can be had with other products. Is milk replaceable or is milk - as in white, pure drinking milk - indispensable? It appears that informants whose perceptions of the goodness of milk draw on the 'official' scientific health discourse while pointing specifically to the benefits of calcium are likely to replace milk with other products, for instance yoghurt, cheese, juice or even ice-cream. This was particularly the case in our studies in Germany, France, the Netherlands, Italy and the Czech Republic. Thus, Italian informants emphasised that cheese could replace milk as a suitable source of calcium; in France our informants preferred yoghurt over milk not least because of the taste; here even fruit juices can replace milk at the breakfast table. In Germany ice-cream was mentioned as a suitable substitute for milk, and in Britain - probably one extreme - one informant preferred cream over milk. The possibility of replacing milk with other products *and* retain the (health) benefits may be seen from the following quote by a German informant:

"[Milk] is important at our age. One can make sure that the bone structure does not suffer damage too fast by getting vitamins and proteins, but that can also be in the shape of yoghurt, cheese and ice cream [...] I like to eat a lot of ice cream. Almost every day. We all eat ice cream [...] You know, because there is a lot of milk in it. Exactly because there is a lot of milk in it" (German informant, ES2007: 91).

Among informants who construct their perceptions of the goodness of milk primarily from the family discourse or the childishness discourse, however, it appears to be practically impossible to substitute milk with other products. Even if informants do consume other milk based products, these are not associated with the benefits of milk. In our material this appears to be the case in Denmark, Norway, Ireland and to some degree in Great Britain. According to Jönsson (2005) it is also the case in Sweden.



The national myth of milk

In *Mythologies* Roland Barthes made fun of former French president Pierre Mendes-France for consuming milk during a speech in the National Assembly. Milk, according to Barthes is “the true anti-wine” (Barthes 2000: 60). The only respectable way to treat it is to turn it into cheese, and enjoy in the company of a good glass of wine. Wine in France is what Barthes called the “mythical signifier”: it is signifying the nation. Similar cases could be made for other countries: beer may for instance qualify as the “mythical signifier” in Germany, Belgium, and the Czech Republic. What characterises wine and beer in the respective cases is that they are incorporated into national self-understanding; they are in a certain way synonymous with the nation.

Milk is not incorporated into the national self-understanding in quite the same way in any of the European countries our students have visited. Milk just appears to be an unexotic ingredient in everyday life. Still, we found that a national claim to the national milk is made in the “cult of pure milk” countries identified above. Here informants in various ways make a distinction between their own nation’s milk and that of other nations. Taste was one of the main distinguishers for people. Hence, people in Northern and Western Europe tend to stress that their own milk taste better than foreign milk, contrary to what appears to be the case in Germany, France and the Czech Republic. The better taste is attributed to the specific national way of treating cattle - which is allegedly better than what is found in other countries - and to the fact that the cows are fed on grass growing on national soil. In Norway, Ireland and Denmark, the picture of cows feeding off national grass, where the national rain falls, is strongly part of the image of the national cultural landscape (Explora 2006, ES 2007). The cows and thus the milk is representing the nation.

The distinction between national and foreign milk is also related to issues of trust. It would appear that one reason why the national milk is believed to be better is, as indicated above, that foreigners cannot be trusted to treat the cows right and thus to produce good milk. This is illustrated well in the statement by an Irish informant:

“You don’t know what you get [when drinking milk abroad]. Irish milk is the best... Like what do they milk in those other countries? [I know it is] cows but what do they eat, you don’t know, do you, really?” (Irish informant, ES 2007: 33).

It is interesting to note that the distinction between national milk and foreign milk is at least to a certain degree consistent with the common identity discourses found in these countries. Thus to the Irish the foreign milk is primarily English milk which means that the national distinction of milk becomes related to the traditional significant other of the Irish (see McIver 2003). To the Norwegians, foreign milk is primarily the non-Scandinavian milk, rather than simply the non-Norwegian milk and it would appear that the Norwegians claim a Scandinavian identity through the milk drinking practice. This is related both to taste and to the

act of drinking milk. As stated by two Norwegian informants:

“For instance when we were in Spain or on Mallorca I liked it better [the Norwegian milk]. But when I was in Denmark I did not think there was so much difference” (Norwegian informant ES 2007: 22).

“I don’t think it is Norwegian [to drink milk] but maybe more Scandinavian. That we all are crazy for milk” (ibid: 23).

The Danish milk study (Explora 2006) found that the national identification of milk is not to be understood as nationalism in any radical sense of this concept. Rather it appears that the nationalisation of milk and milk consumption is a way of constructing the nation as home. This also becomes clear when looking at the commercialisation of milk by the gigantic Danish-Swedish Arla dairy company that labels all fresh milk products in the national language where it is marketed, apart from lactose-free milk. Thus, the fundamental distrust - and many years of war - among these two countries may be read into Arla’s strategy of labelling. Drinking milk is thus at the same time related to the ‘milk tie’ of family and (emotional) nourishment, and to the nation as a safe and unique place. The trivial act of drinking milk in the everyday thus becomes a way of reproducing a sense of banal nationalism.

It also appears that this banal nationalisation of the marketing and drinking of milk is primarily found in countries where nation building to a large extent has been linked to agriculture and agri-industrialisation. As for instance noted by J. J. Lyngsø who have studied the development of nutritional narratives in Norway in the interwar period, “[p]ure, fresh white milk in glasses or bottles may be taken as the very symbol of the new national diet. In this glass of milk the ideas of agricultural policy and new scientific knowledge were united” (quoted in ES 2007: 17). The reason for the successful identification of milk with the national diet may not only be attributed to new scientific ideas about nutrition, but also to commercial interests related to a general overproduction of milk in these countries (ibid). Fink, (in this volume), shows the same for Denmark. There is thus a mythification of milk that adds to the list of other traditions that have attained a mythical status (Barthes 1951) such as national customs, daily life, home, good parenting, strength and health.

Conclusions: From banalities to trivialities

In the processing of data from the milk project we have been inspired by Michael Billig’s concept of banal nationalism. Billig’s focus on the ways in which a sense of nationality is created through the ordinary practices of everyday life inspired us to interpret the nationalisation of milk and milk drinking in some of the countries we studied as acts of banal nationalism: the reproduction of a sense of nationality through the consumption of an un-exotic and very basic food item. Milk is consumed all over Europe. And everywhere it appears to be both a food item which is taken for granted as part of the daily



diet and a drink loaded with meaning. All over Europe, milk appears to signify goodness, health, family, childhood and the bonds between parents and children. In this way it is both a 'strong' drink (Explora 2006), and a trivial drink.

It is only sometimes that milk flags the nation. This happens in countries where we find what we have called a "cult of pure milk" - and in countries where nation building has been linked to agriculture and to agri-industrialisation.

This kind of banal nationalism is slightly different from the one Billig discussed. Where Billig was primarily concerned with the banal ways in which national identity was reproduced through continuously flagging, we have primarily dealt with a banal form of nationalism or a nationalism of trivialities to use the term proposed by Linde-Laursen (Linde-Laursen 1993).

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