Posts tagged 'Cape Colony'

My Book

I've been finishing a book, which will be out in May this year.

Mind Your Own

My parents moved house last week. They weren't, though, the only inhabitants of their property to relocate. During their final few days of packing, a swarm of bees took up residence in my sister's old tree house. Unfortunately for the bees, there was...
no way that they could safely establish a hive there, so my mother called Gerald the Bee Man, who put her in touch with a couple of local beekeepers. They lulled the bees into submission with smoke, and then coaxed them into a new hive over the course of two days. The queen and her underlings will spend the rest of their lives pollinating fruit trees, far away from the temptations of suburban tree houses.

Deciding to remove, rather than exterminate, errant bee colonies has implications beyond the ethics of killing animals and insects. Bees exist not only to make a cheerful buzzing in our gardens and to provide us with honey. Einstein remarked, famously: 'if the bee disappeared off the surface of the globe, man would have only four years to live.' Although this is something of an exaggeration, I can understand his terror at the thought of the disappearance of bees, both culturally and ecologically.

Bees are invoked, frequently, as metaphors for our societies – the way we live, the way we organise ourselves – and for how we should be. One of the most striking features of researching the Victorian period is the number of references to bees and beehives. During a debate on a new Bees Regulation Bill in the Cape Colony’s House of Assembly in July 1894, one MP objected to the legislation which, he believed, would limit beekeeping in the Cape on the grounds that bees provided the poor with an example of hard work and co-operation:

Yesterday they were treated to various dissertations on the abject misery of the poor white population, and yet they were now asked to consent to the second reading of a measure which would deprive the poor white population of the country of one of the most useful object lessons they could possibly be afforded them.

Describing colonial society as a beehive, Henry de Smidt, the Director of the Census in the Cape, argued for the inclusion of ‘idle’ children in the Census because they formed ‘an integral portion of the human hive, drones though they might be.’

Both men echoed Isaac Watts’s tremendously popular poem ‘Against Idleness and Mischief’:

How doth the little busy Bee
Improve each shining Hour,
And gather Honey all the day
From every opening Flower!

How skilfully she builds her Cell!
How neat she spreads the Wax!
And labours hard to store it well
With the sweet Food she makes.

In Works of Labour or of Skill
I would be busy too:
For Satan finds some Mischief still
For idle Hands to do.

In Books, or Work, or healthful Play
Let my first Years be past,
That I may give for every Day
Some good Account at last.

(I prefer Lewis Carroll’s version, How doth the little crocodile?)

For the Victorians, the appeal of the beehive lay in its tightly organised and maintained social structure, its strict hierarchies, and its efficient productivity. It was
Bees are also useful for describing our often fraught relationship with nature: I think of the periodic, National Enquirer-esque hysteria around killer African bees invading the United States. I wonder if the horror of Roald Dahl’s story Royal Jelly, where a beekeeper accidentally turns both himself and his baby daughter into bees, was reflective of wider anxieties about the implications of human tampering with nature during the early 1980s.

The decline of bees says as much about us, as it does about bees. But other than providing a series of handy, mutable metaphors, bees and, indeed, other pollinators both wild and farmed, are absolutely essential to our food chain. Alison Benjamin and Brian McCallum explain:

honeybees are vital for the pollination of around 90 crops worldwide. In addition to almonds, most fruits, vegetables, nuts and seeds are dependent on honeybees. Crops that are used as cattle and pig feed also rely on honeybee pollination, as does the cotton plant. So if all the honeybees disappeared, we would have to switch our diet to cereals and grain, and give our wardrobes a drastic makeover.

The disappearance of the world's bees has significant implications for our food security. Ensuring that we have enough to eat is linked to health of our pollinators. The decline in European bee populations began in the 1960s, but since the late 1990s, this has both accelerated and spread around the globe. Between 1985 and 2005, managed honeybee populations declined by 20 per cent across Europe, and 54% in England. In the United States, four of the main bumblebee populations have diminished by up to 96%. In Britain, three of the region's 25 bumblebee species are now extinct, and half of the remainder have declined significantly, some by as much as 70% since the 1970s.

A paper published last month in Science showed more than half the wild bee species were lost in the 20th century in the US. It made use of a remarkable record made of plants and pollinators at Carlinville, Illinois between 1888 and 1891 by entomologist Charles Robertson. Scientists combined that with data from 1971-72 and new data from 2009-10 to discover the changes in pollination seen over the century as widespread forest was reduced to the fragments that remain today.

They found that half of the 109 bee species recorded by Robertson had been lost and there had been a serious degradation of the pollination provided by the remaining wild insects, with their ability to pollinate specific plants falling by more than half. There was an increasing mismatch between when plants flowered and when bees were active, a finding consistent with climate change, according to the researchers.

So it's not just various species of honeybee which are dying, but bumblebees and wild bees too. So why are they disappearing?
Scientists all over the world are still trying to answer this question. Initially, the dramatic decline in bee populations from around 2005 were ascribed to a mysterious Colony Collapse Disorder – also called Marie Celeste Syndrome – where whole, apparently healthy, beehives seemed to die overnight. In 2007, a third of beehives in the US were wiped out in this manner. In the same year, ten million bees were reported to have died in just a fortnight in Taiwan. In the winter of 2007/2008, a fifth of British beehives disappeared too.

It's unlikely that there is a single cause for CCD. A combination of factors arising from climate change, depleted habitats, decreasing biodiversity, and widespread pesticide use, have placed ever more stress on the world's bee populations. Last year, the varroa mite was linked to the global decline in bee numbers:

Varroa destructor has spread from Asia across the entire world over the past 50 years. It arrived in the UK in 1990 and has been implicated in the halving of bee numbers since then, alongside other factors including the destruction of flowery habitats in which bees feed and the widespread use of pesticides on crops. Bees and other pollinators are vital in the production in up to a third of all the food we eat, but the role the mites played was unclear, as bacteria and fungi are also found in colonies along with the viruses.

But the mite's arrival in Hawaii in 2007 gave scientists a unique opportunity to track its deadly spread. 'We were able to watch the emergence of the disease for the first time ever,' said Stephen Martin, at the University of Sheffield, who led the new research published in the journal Science. Within a year of varroa arrival, 274 of 419 colonies on Oahu island (65%) were wiped out, with the mites going on to wreak destruction across Big Island the following year.

The European Union has proposed a partial, two-year ban on the use of neonicotinoids on flowering crops to limit the decline of European bee populations:

Scientific evidence has mounted rapidly since March 2012, when two high-profile studies found that bees consuming neonicotinoids suffered an 85% loss in the number of queens their nests produced and showed a doubling in 'disappeared' bees who got lost while foraging. Neonicotinoids
The removal of the hive from my parents' garden made me wonder to what extent CCD has affected South African bee populations. And the answer – I think – is that local bee numbers appear not to have declined as dramatically as those abroad. I'd like to qualify this statement heavily: this is the conclusion I've drawn after a morning's worth of fairly thorough research. I'm not a melittologist (obviously) and I may well have missed a few vital and obvious studies.

Bees are certainly under threat in South Africa. As the South African Bee Industry Organisation notes, habitat loss and the arrival of foreign parasites have taken their toll on bee populations.

Also since 1990 a problem has emerged caused by the movement within South Africa of colonies of the endemic Cape honeybee (Apis mellifera capensis) to regions outside its natural distribution. The interaction between these Cape honeybees and colonies of the other honeybee species in South Africa proved to be disastrous. The so-called Capensis Problem caused extensive damage in the beekeeping industry in South Africa.

Interestingly, though, South Africa's bees seem to be more resilient to the threat posed by the varroa mite. The mite was first identified in the Western Cape in 1997, having probably entered the country in contaminated hives offloaded at Cape Town harbour. It then spread around the country, even infecting wild bee populations. But only a small minority of bee colonies have collapsed so far.

Why? Well, local bee species may have developed ways of repelling or resisting the mite. Also, South African bees, although under increasing stress, don't have to contend with the same range of threats as do those abroad. A 2009 survey of the density of bee populations all over the world concluded that 'Genetic diversity and colony densities were highest in South Africa and lowest in Northern Europe'. The authors of the study suggest that these differences correlate with climate – bees in more temperate regions tend to be healthier than those that are not – but also with the fact that South African bees are able to roam across far bigger wild habitats:

African subspecies disperse via long-distance migratory swarms, leave the nest in response to disturbance or disease (abscending) more readily, and have a faster generation time and smaller colonies than European honeybees. These traits promote population gene flow and high genetic diversity, boosting effective population sizes in Africa.

Agriculture, with its pesticides and low biodiversity, seems, then, to have an impact on the health of European bee populations.

We're already beginning to feel the impact of the decline in bee populations:

The most dramatic example comes from the apple and pear orchards of south west China, where wild bees have been eradicated by excessive pesticide use and a lack of natural habitat.

In recent years, farmers have been forced to hand-pollinate their trees, carrying pots of pollen and paintbrushes with which to individually...
pollinate every flower, and using their children to climb up to the highest blossoms. This is clearly just possible for this high-value crop, but there are not enough humans in the world to pollinate all of our crops by hand.

Looking at the comparative good health of South African bees suggests ways in which the global bee population could be increased. Limiting the use of pesticides, increasing habitat for bees by planting wild flowers and leaving areas of uncultivated vegetation on farms, and finding ways of preventing the spread of parasites, will all assist in encouraging healthier bee colonies. All over the world, campaigns and organisations have emerged to lobby for the protection of bees, and the coolness of urban beekeeping is linked, I'm sure, to wider concerns about declining biodiversity.

A world without bees, is a world which will struggle to feed itself.

Further reading


The Politics of the Plate

Last week, Michael Pollan argued in the New York Times that this year’s American presidential election may be the first time that the food movement enters mainstream politics. Pollan suggests that the debate around California’s Proposition 37, which would require all products containing genetically modified food to be labelled, is indicative of wider disenchantment with the American food industry:

What is at stake this time around is not just the fate of genetically modified crops but the public’s confidence in the industrial food chain. That system is being challenged on a great many fronts – indeed, seemingly everywhere but in Washington. Around the country, dozens of proposals to tax and regulate soda have put the beverage industry on the defensive, forcing it to play a very expensive (and thus far successful) game of Whac-A-Mole. The meat industry is getting it from all sides: animal rights advocates seeking to expose its brutality; public-health advocates campaigning against antibiotics in animal feed; environmentalists highlighting factory farming’s contribution to climate change.

This disillusionment with Big Food has produced an attempt at transparency by businesses like Monsanto and Nestle, whose recent advertising campaigns have gone out of their way to paint these organisations as purveyors of honest good food.

Pollan wonders, though, if this public scepticism of the industrialised food chain, coupled with the relatively recent interest in ‘whole’ and ‘real’ food sold at farmers’ markets, in vegetable box schemes, and at independent shops, will translate into anti-Big Food votes. In other words, will – largely – middle-class willingness to support small and local producers translate into a political movement?

But this certainly won’t be the first time that food has become a vehicle for political engagement. In fact, it was through food and drink that women all over the world first entered politics at the end of the nineteenth century.

When I went through the photographs I took on a recent trip to Australia, I realised that I’d taken pictures of coffee palaces in nearly every town and city I had visited –
These coffee palaces were established in Australia – and elsewhere – by the temperance movement which swept the globe during the nineteenth century. Coffee palaces, coffee shops, and other, similar, cafes and meeting places were meant to entice men away from pubs, saloons, and ‘canteens’, as they were called in South Africa.

Temperance was one of several causes – from single, working women to abused and neglected animals and children – associated with middle-class philanthropic organisations during the Victorian period. From the 1870s, though, temperance became increasingly associated with women.

The founding of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) in the US in 1874 was a pivotal moment – not only in the history of opposition to public drinking, but in the development of feminism. Jed Dannenbaum describes its origins:

On Sunday, December 23, 1873, Boston-based itinerant lecturer Dio Lewis visited the community of Hillsboro, Ohio. His topic for the evening was temperance reform. Lewis urged the women of the community to band together and pray in the local saloons in an attempt to close them. The next day, Christmas Eve, a group of Hillsboro women enacted Lewis’s plan. The Women’s Crusade had begun.

In the next four months over 32,000 women in more 300 Ohio communities participated in the Crusade. The movement spread throughout the country to several hundred other communities, and in
many the crusades succeeded in closing, at least temporarily, all the local retail liquor outlets. The Women’s Crusade severely disrupted the liquor trade and forced out of business manufacturers and wholesalers as well as retailers. Within the year the Crusade had evolved into the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), an organisation that was to help shape American history for many decades to come.

Although predated by local temperance organisations, a branch of the WCTU was established in the Cape Colony in 1889 after the visit of an American woman activist to the Huguenot Seminary in Wellington, a small town in the wheat- and wine-producing south-western Cape. Huguenot was modelled on Mount Holyoke Seminary in Connecticut and was staffed by American teachers, who invited representatives of the WCTU to tour the colony.

As in other parts of the world, the Cape WCTU campaigned against the sale of alcohol, promoted temperance by persuading teetotalers to sign pledges never to drink, and organised clubs and societies for children. The Myrtle Branch – run by the Young Women’s Christian Temperance Union in Wellington – taught children about the dangers of tobacco and alcohol, as the secretary noted of a meeting in 1896:

Mrs Fehr spoke to us, she told us that strong drink leads to anger, debt, despair, destruction, and death and showed us how it leads on from one to the other.

Why, then, the appeal of temperance work to so many middle-class women? All over the world, it was a movement to protect the family – specifically women and children – against the violence and erratic behaviour of alcoholic men. Pubs, saloons, and canteens were seen as places where family budgets were squandered on cheap drink, while wives and children waited at home, anxiously, for the return of drunken, and potentially violent, heads of households.

The Cape’s WCTU – like sister unions in Britain and elsewhere – broadened its activities to campaign to protect women and children from ‘vice’, disease, and abuse. It ran a strong campaign against the re-introduction of the Contagious Diseases Act in the Cape in 1891 on the grounds that it was an ‘indignity to women’. In 1893, allied with organisations like the Citizen’s Law and Order League and the Women’s Purity Society, the WCTU campaigned for the raising of the age of consent for girls from twelve to fourteen years, and also for the better control, or eradication, of brothels and prostitution.

It made sense, then, that the WCTU in the Cape established a franchise department in 1895, on the grounds that women’s demands would only be taken more seriously if they could wield power via the ballot box. The collection of Women’s Enfranchisement Leagues established around South Africa between 1902 and 1910 – which were united as the Women’s Enfranchisement Association of the Union in 1911 – owed their origins to the WCTU.

What the campaign against alcohol did was to allow women to enter the male-dominated public sphere. Women and children, they argued, bore the brunt of men’s alcoholism. Theirs was a campaign to maintain the sanctity of family life.

In the United States, a similar movement grew up around concerns about the safety of food processed in factories. A series of scandals drew attention to the ways in which manufacturers added a range of substances – from chalk to arsenic – either to make products go further, or to improve their colour and texture. The women-led campaign for pure food – which culminated in the passing of the Pure Food, Drink, and Drug Act in 1906 under Teddy Roosevelt – was also described as a movement to protect the family.

For all the controversy over the campaign for women’s suffrage around the world
during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it's worth noting that the food- and drink-based campaigns that gave rise to the franchise movement were often deeply conservative. Writing about the pure food campaigners in the 1880s and 1890s, Lorine Swainston Goodwin explains:

_They had formed independent literary clubs, village improvement societies, women's granges, mother's circles, and a wide assortment of other groups dedicated to self-improvement and to the well-being of their families and neighbours. The altruistic nature, conservative facade, and vitality of the new organisations appealed to a wide cross-section of discreet women who saw the need to improve and protect their society by employing prudent means, such as circulating petitions, and using personal influence, expose, and court action to achieve effective methods of controlling food, drink, and drugs._

Temperance, too, was often a deeply conservative movement – and this extended to the franchise campaign. The WEAU in South Africa campaigned only for white women's right to vote; Emmeline Pankhurst was a lifelong Tory; and it's striking how many British suffragettes went on to be enthusiastic supporters of fascism. Early feminism was not necessarily on the political left.

Pollan's appeal for the food movement to enter politics is part of a fairly long history of food-based political campaigning. And although it's clear that he imagines that supporters of the anti-Big Food lobby will vote for Obama (and please do, lovely American readers – and you can donate to his campaign here), there are some lessons to be learned from the temperance and pure food movements of the late nineteenth century: people – women, in particular – became involved in them because they perceived drunkenness and adulterated food to be threats to everyday life. They also meshed with women's dissatisfaction with being left out of the political process.

Unfortunately, many of the markers of Pollan's food movement of the early twenty-first century – like farmers' markets – are perceived as being out-of-reach of the average American. For the food movement to enter politics, it needs to make itself relevant to the lived experiences of ordinary people – and to connect to concerns, like unemployment or welfare, which they feel to be more important. It needs to shed its aura of elitism.

Further Reading

Jack S. Blocker, Jr., 'Separate Paths: Suffragists and the Women's Temperance Crusade,' *Signs*, vol. 10, no. 3 (Spring, 1985), pp. 460-476.


SE Duff, 'Saving the Child to Save the Nation: Poverty, Whiteness, and Childhood in the Cape Colony, c.1870-1895,' *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 37, no. 2 (June 2011), pp. 229-245.


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Children’s Food

I’m writing this post while listening to this week’s podcast of BBC Radio 4’s Food Programme. The episode is about nine year-old food writer Martha Payne, whose blog about the dinners served at her school became the cause of a strange and troubling controversy a month ago.

Martha uses her blog, NeverSeconds, to review the food she eats at school. As Jay Rayner points out, although she may criticise – rightly – much of which the school provides for lunch, NeverSeconds is not intended as a kind of school dinners hatchet job. She rates her meals according to a Food-o-Meter, taking into account how healthy, but also how delicious, they are.

As her blog has grown in popularity, children from all over the world have contributed photographs and reviews, and it’s partly this which makes NeverSeconds so wonderful: it’s a space in which children can discuss and debate food.

NeverSeconds came to wider – global – notice when the Argyll and Bute Council tried to shut it down in June, after the Daily Record published an article featuring Martha cooking with the chef Nick Nairn, headlined ‘Time to fire the dinner ladies.’ The blog’s honest descriptions and pictures of some of the food served to schoolchildren can’t have pleased councillors either.

As Private Eye (no. 1317) makes the point, the council’s bizarre – and futile – attempts to silence a blog probably had as much to do with internal politicking and minor corruption as anything else, but the furore which erupted after the ban also said a great deal about attitudes towards food and children.

What is really scandalous about the blog is that it reveals how bad – how unhealthy, how heavily processed – school meals can be. When Jamie Oliver launched a campaign in 2005 to improve the quality of school dinners in the UK, his most shocking revelations were not, I think, that children were being fed Turkey Twizzlers and chips for lunch, but, rather, that the British government is willing to spend so little on what children eat at school. Last year, the state spent an average of 67p per primary school pupil per meal, per day. This rose to 88p for those in high school.

Michael Gove has recently announced another inquiry into the quality of school meals – this time headed up by the altogether posher-than-Jamie Henry Dimbleby, the founder of the Leon chain of restaurants, who also seems to spend the odd holiday with the Education Secretary in Marrakech. It’s a tough life.

But as Sheila Dillon comments during this episode of the Food Programme:

> Martha Payne, a nine year-old who seems to understand better than many adults, that dinner ladies, or even individual school kitchens, are not the source of the school dinner problem. It has far deeper roots.

When did it become acceptable to serve schoolchildren junk food for lunch? The way we feed children tells us a great deal about how we conceptualise childhood. Or, put
another way, what we define as ‘children's food’ says as much about our attitudes towards food as it does about children.

The idea that children should be fed separately to adults has a relatively long pedigree. The Victorians argued that children – and women – should be fed bland, carbohydrate-heavy meals to prevent their delicate digestive systems from being exerted. Fruit, meat, spices, and fresh vegetables should be eaten only in strict moderation.

There is, of course, a disconnect between what experts – medical professionals, childrearing specialists – recommend, and what people actually eat. In the late nineteenth-century Cape Colony, for instance, the pupils at an elite girls' school near Cape Town were fed a diet rich in red meat and fresh fruit and vegetables.

But the belief that children's bodies are delicate and potentially vulnerable to disruption was an indicator of shifts in thinking about childhood during the mid and late nineteenth century. The notion that children need to be protected – from work, hunger, poverty, and exploitation and abuse from adults – emerged at around the same time. As children were to be shielded from potential danger, so they were to eat food which, it was believed, was ideally suited to digestive systems more susceptible to upset and illness than those of adults.

But as scientists became interested in the relationship between food and health – in nutrition, in other words – towards the end of the 1800s, paediatricians, demographers, and others concerned about high rates of child mortality during the early twentieth century began to look more closely at what children were being fed. For instance, in the 1920s and 1930s, scientists in Britain and the United States drew a connection between the consumption of unhealthy or diseased food – particularly rotten milk – and high rates of diarrhoea, then almost always fatal, among children in these countries.

They were also interested in what should constitute a healthy diet for a child. As childhood became increasingly medicalised in the early twentieth century – as pregnancy, infancy, and childhood became seen as periods of development which should be overseen and monitored by medical professionals – so children's diets became the purview of doctors as well. As RJ Blackman, the Honorary Surgeon to the Viceroy of India (no, me neither), wrote in 1925:

> Food, though it is no panacea for the multitudinous ills of mankind, can do much, both to make or mar the human body. This is particularly so with the young growing child. All the material from which his body is developed has to come from the food he eats. Seeing that he doubles or trebles his weight in the first year of life, and increases it twenty-fold by the time he reaches adult stature, it will be seen that food has much to accomplish. Naturally, if the food be poor, the growth and physique will be poor; and if good, the results will be good.

Informed by recent research into dietetics, doctors advised parents to feed their children varied diets which included as much fresh, vitamin-containing produce as possible. In a popular guide to feeding young children, The Nursery Cook Book (1929), the former nurse Mrs K. Jameson noted:

> Many years ago, I knew a child who was taken ill at the age of eight years, and it was thought that one of her lungs was affected. She was taken to a children's specialist in London. He could find nothing radically wrong, but wrote out a diet sheet. By following this... the child became well in a month or two. This shows how greatly the health is influenced by diet.
Since starting to write this book I have come across an excellent book on vitamins called ‘Food and Health’ (Professor Plimmer), and I have found it very helpful. I have endeavoured to arrange the meals to contain the necessary vitamins, as shown in the diagram of ‘A Square Meal’ at the beginning of the book.

Indeed, she went on to explain that children who were properly fed would never need medicine.

In 1925, advising mothers on how to wean their babies in the periodical Child Welfare, Dr J. Alexander Mitchell, the Secretary for Public Health in the Union of South Africa, counselled against boiling foodstuffs for too long as it ‘destroys most of the vitamins.’ He argued that children’s diets ‘should include a good proportion of proteins or fleshy foods and fats’, as well as plenty of fruit, fresh vegetables, milk, and ‘porridge…eggs, meat, juice, soups’.

What is so striking about the diets described by Mitchell, Jameson, and others is how similar they were to what adults would have eaten. Children were to eat the same as their parents, but in smaller quantities and in different proportions. For example, some doctors counselled again children being allowed coffee, while others believed that they should limit their intake of rich foods.

So what is the origin of the idea that children should be cajoled into eating healthily by making food ‘fun’? Mrs Jameson’s recipes might have cute names – she calls a baked apple ‘Mr Brownie with his coat on’ – but they’re the same food as would be served to adults. Now, our idea of ‘children’s food’ differs from that of the 1920s and 1930s. When we think of children’s food, we imagine sweets, soft white sandwich bread, pizza, hotdogs, and brightly coloured and oddly shaped foodstuffs designed to appeal to children.

As Steven Mintz argues in his excellent history of American childhood, Huck’s Raft (2004), the 1950s and 1960s were child-oriented decades. Not only were there more children as a result of the post-war baby boom, but with the growing prosperity of late twentieth-century America, more money was spent on children than ever before. Families tended to be smaller, and increasing pocket money transformed children into mini-consumers.

Children either bought, or had their parents buy for them, a range of consumer goods aimed at them: from clothes and toys, to ‘child-oriented convenience foods…’ – ‘Sugar Frosted Flakes (introduced in 1951), Sugar Smacks (in 1953), Tater Tots (in 1958), and Jiffy Pop, the stovetop popcorn (also in 1958).’
The same period witnessed a shift in attitudes towards childrearing. Families became increasingly child-centred, with meals and routines designed around the needs of children, rather than parents. In many ways, this was a reaction against the orthodoxies of the pre-War period, which tended to emphasise raising children to be obedient, well-behaved, and self-disciplined.

So the definition of children's food changed again. For the parents of Baby Boomers, food was made to be appealing to children. Fussiness was to be accommodated and negotiated, rather than ignored. And children's desire for food products advertised on television was to be indulged.

I am exaggerating to make a point – in the US and the UK children during the 1960s and 1970s certainly ate less junk than they do now, and this new understanding of children's food emerged in different ways and at different times in other parts of the world – but this change represented a bonanza for the burgeoning food industry. Although the industry's attempts to advertise to children are coming under greater scrutiny and regulation (and rightly so), it does have a vested interest in encouraging children and their parents to believe that is what constitutes good food for children.

I think that it's partly this shift in thinking about children's relationship with food – that they should eat only that which they find appealing, and that children will only eat food which is 'fun', brightly coloured, oddly shaped, and not particularly tasty – that allowed for the tolerance of such poor school food for so long in Britain.

Martha's blog is a powerful corrective to this: she, her classmates, and contributors all have strong opinions about what they eat, and they like a huge variety of food – some of it sweets, but most of it is pretty healthy. The irony is that in – apparently – pandering to what children are supposed to like, politicians and policy makers seem to find listening to what a child has to say, fairly difficult. If we're to persuade children to eat well, then not only should we encourage them to talk and to think about food, but we need to listen to what they have to say about it.

Further Reading


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Hot Cross Bun Fight

Just before Easter this year, a group of Christians in South Africa objected to the labelling of hot cross buns at Woolworths, a premium supermarket, as halal. Possibly chastened by the furore which erupted over its stocking of Christian magazines a couple of years ago, Woolies apologised. But, wonderfully, the response of the South African public was hilarity: what on earth, asked people on social media and radio chat shows, was wrong with making hot cross buns available to Muslims?

As many pointed out, it would be interesting to see if these Christians also avoided McDonald's, KFC, Nando's or any of the other fast food chains which serve halal food. In a country as socially and culturally diverse as South Africa, it makes sense for restaurants and shops to sell halal and kosher products. Most chicken sold in
South Africa is halal, for instance.

In fact, the South African Easter meal of choice is *pickled fish* – a dish developed by slaves brought to the Cape from southeast Asia, India, and elsewhere during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Many of these slaves would have been Muslim, a religion tolerated by the Dutch and, later, British authorities on the grounds that they believed it to be ‘civilised’ and unlikely to encourage slaves to revolt or disobey their masters and mistresses.

So South African Christians eat a *dish at Easter* which was created by Muslim slaves more than two centuries ago. And even those who are not Christian eat it: we had my Mum’s version of pickled fish on Good Friday – based on a recipe my great-grandmother cooked – with pilaf instead of the usual bread-and-butter, and it was delicious.

I was interested by the *hot cross bun debate* because – I think – it’s the first major discussion South Africans have had about the labelling of halal food. Last year there was some controversy about a meat supplier which allegedly sold haram meat as halal, but the debates then were about the regulation of the meat industry, and not about the public’s willingness – or otherwise – to eat halal food.

This ‘storm in a baking pan,’ as Father Chris Townsend of the Southern African Catholic Bishops’ Conference put it, was fairly unusual, in international terms, in the way that it was greeted with such widespread condemnation. In France, the first country in Western Europe to ban women from wearing the *burqa* and *niqab* in public, the labelling of halal food is now an *electoral issue*. Concerned by the *depressing popularity* of far-right loon* Marine le Pen*, Nicolas Sarkozy announced in *January* that if re-elected, he would enact legislation to ensure that all halal foods are clearly labelled. (You can donate to François Hollande’s campaign here.)

Sarkozy justified these new measures – which angered Jewish leaders as well – by implying that the ritual slaughter of animals for halal and, by implication, kosher meat is inhumane. But French Muslims argue that Sarkozy and the French right’s attack on ritual slaughter has less to do with the treatment of animals than it does to *broader debates* about multiculturalism and social integration in France. As one French blogger commented:

*Nicolas Sarkozy and Marine Le Pen have resorted to this because they have no solutions to the real problems. It’s the last desperate thrashings of a mad dog that has nothing to lose. It’s part of a chain of thought that goes from halal meat to Islamism to terrorism.*

This isn’t the only recent debate about the labelling of halal meat and ritual
slaughter. Australia and Canada have seen similar discussions, and the Daily Mail seems to specialise in a kind of hysterical journalism which links the widespread availability of halal meat to the end of Britain and the imminent arrival of Armageddon. Religious slaughter is banned in New Zealand, Switzerland, Luxembourg, Norway, and Sweden. An attempt to enact a similar ban in the Netherland last year was blocked at the last minute.

What makes these debates interesting is that they are hardly new. David Smith writes that in 1995, a federal German court effectively banned Muslims from slaughtering animals without prior stunning. The court ruled that the practice was not required by their religion and was thus not protected by the constitution's guarantee of freedom of religious expression. In January 2002, however, the Federal Constitutional Court ruled that the right to freedom of religious expression and choice of occupation did in fact ensure the entitlement of Germany’s Muslims, or at least those responsible for their provision with halal meat, to resume stunningless methods for such ends without the threat of legal action.

In his excellent Franz Kafka, the Jewish Patient (1995), Sander Gilman explores shifting attitudes towards shehitah, the slaughter of animals in accordance with Judaic law and custom. In the 1880s and 1890s, various campaigns to outlaw shehitah emerged in Europe. In Germany, only Saxony eventually banned shehitah in 1897. While many supporters of the campaign were anti-vivisectionists or were concerned about the treatment of animals in abattoirs, there is no coincidence that this interest in the butchering of kosher meat developed at the same time as a wave of anti-Semitism swept Europe.

In 1883, delegates at a meeting of the Congress for the Protection of Animals in Vienna argued that the protection of ritual slaughter was an indication of Jewish influence over European politics. But others pointed out that the attempt effectively to ban kosher meat was driven by anti-Semitism. In 1885, the Lord Mayor of London compared the campaign to the allegations around Jewish ritual murder during the medieval period. The liberal Berlin Daily News declared in 1893 that those opposed to ritual slaughter were 'pure anti-Semites'. Unsurprisingly, the Nazis outlawed ritual slaughter – also in the name of preventing cruelty to animals – during the 1930s.

There is, then, an obvious link between anxiety about religious difference, and even racism, and concerns about ritual slaughter. That said, expressing concern about the ways in which animals are slaughtered should not necessarily immediately be construed as religious or cultural intolerance. Countries need to find a balance between facilitating the religious practices of all their citizens, and the humane treatment of animals.

The South African hot cross bun fight (ahem, sorry) was not, though, about ritual slaughter. The Christians who complained about the labelling of hot cross buns in Woolworths were angry about the association of a Christian symbol – the cross on the bun – with a sticker connected to Islam. Next year, Woolies will sell hot cross buns (without the halal sticker) and spiced buns (with a halal sticker). The buns will be identical, with the exception of a flour-and-water-paste cross on the former.

I don't know enough about the history of attitudes towards religious slaughter in South Africa to position this incident within a broader, historical context, but there are several examples of religious communities coexisting fairly harmoniously during periods of this country’s past. Most of the butchers in nineteenth-century Cape Town were Muslim, for example. This meant that the majority of Victorian Capetonians ate halal meat, regardless of their religious beliefs.

This incident demonstrates not only the extent to which food is integral to the maintenance of religious identities – which is particularly ironic given the fact that so
many of the traditions and rituals we associate with Easter have pagan origins – but that people's anxieties about religious freedom and identity are frequently played out through debates around food.

Further Reading

Sources cited here:


Feed the Children

There has been some fuss recently around the publication of Charles Murray's new book, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010* Murray, who co-authored *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* in 1994, has a reputation for annoying left-leaning academics and public policy makers. His description of the Bell Curve was accused of being blind to cultural and social influences on learning and childhood development, and his most recent polemic has been criticised for its rose-tinted view of the American white working class during the mid-twentieth century.

One of the best criticisms of the book which I've come across is Nell Irvin Painter's article for the *New York Times*, 'When Poverty was White.' Painter, whose *History of White People* (2010) I urge you to read, makes the point that America has a well-hidden and very recent history of white poverty. She accuses Murray of 'historical blindness' caused by his narrow focus on the cultural and policy changes of the 1960s as the root of white America's decline. The story of white poverty... is much longer and more complex than he and his admirers realise or want to admit.

Her point is that to understand the nature of poverty – why some families seem incapable of escaping it, why certain members of society seem to be particularly susceptible to it – we need to historicise it.

There is a similar argument to be made about white poverty in South Africa. One of the reasons why photographs of poor whites in South Africa draw such attention is because South Africans tend to think of poverty as being black. Poor whites are a strange anomaly in the economic and racial politics of post-1994 South Africa.

But 'poor whiteism' as a social and political phenomenon only disappeared during the economic boom of the early 1960s. Since at least the 1920s, South African governments were preoccupied by the 'poor white problem' – by the existence of a substantial group of people who, as the popular author Sarah Gertrude Millin wrote in 1926, could not support themselves 'according to a European standard of
South Africa's earliest soup kitchens were not for black, but, rather, for white children. The first child welfare organisations aimed their work not at black families, but, rather, at white families who were poor. South Africa's attempts to introduce compulsory elementary education in the 1910s and 1920s pertained only to white, not to black, children. This isn't to suggest that black poverty was somehow less acute or widespread than white poverty. Far from it. State concern about poor whiteism was borne out of a eugenicist belief that, as Millin suggested, white poverty signalled a decline in white power.

The first attempts to eradicate white poverty were directed at families and children. Although we tend to associate the poor white problem with the 1920s and 1930s, there had been a large group of impoverished white farmers in the country's rural interior since at least the middle of the nineteenth century. By the 1880s and 1890s, colonial politicians, and particularly those in the Cape, were increasingly anxious about this class of whites. This was partly because the numbers of impoverished whites – both in rural and urban areas – had increased during the region's industrialisation after the discovery of diamonds and gold, but it was also the result of decades of poor education which had produced at least two generations of unemployable whites.

Both in South Africa and in the rest of the world, poverty was racialised during the 1880s and 1890s. The existence of unemployed and unemployable poor whites challenged the association of 'natural' supremacy and the exercise of power with whiteness. The term 'poor white' no longer simply referred to white people who lived in poverty, but, rather, invoked a set of fears around racial mixing and white superiority.

Impoverished white adults were believed to be beyond saving, as one Cape industrialist argued in 1895: 'the adults are irreclaimable. You must let them die off, and teach the young ones to work.' The Cape government poured money into schools for poor white children. In 1905, education became compulsory for all white children in the Cape between the ages of seven and fourteen. Politicians also passed legislation to allow these children to be removed from parents deemed to be unable to care for them appropriately. After the declaration of the Union of South Africa in 1910, government spending on education grew from 14 per cent of the national budget to 28 per cent in 1930.

But the problem did not go away. Industrialisation and economic expansion, as well as the effects of the Great War, two depressions, and urbanisation in the 1920s and 1930s increased the numbers of impoverished whites. By the end of the 1920s, it was estimated that out of a total of 1,800,000 whites, 300,000 were 'very poor', and nearly all of these were Afrikaans. The Carnegie Commission of Investigation on the Poor White Question (1929-1932) concluded that an inability to adapt to a changing economic climate, outdated farming methods, and poor education were to blame for
the existence of such a large population of impoverished whites.

In 1929, the South African government devoted 13 per cent of its budget to the eradication of white poverty. Much of this went to education, social welfare, and housing. The introduction of more stringent segregationist legislation progressively disenfranchised blacks, and reserved skilled work for whites.

There was also a shift in emphasis in how child welfare societies – the numbers of which had mushroomed during the 1920s – dealt with poor white children. No longer did they only work to ensure that white children were sent to school and adequately cared for by their parents, but they began to focus on how these children were fed.

I'm still trying to account for this new concern about the effects of malnutrition on white children. I think that it was due largely to an international scientific debate about the significance of nutrition in raising both physically and intellectually strong children. Louis Leipoldt – Medical Inspector for Schools in the Transvaal, food writer, Buddhist, poet, and Afrikaner culture broker – was particularly aware of this new thinking about childhood development and nutrition, and wrote about it extensively in publications on child health and welfare in South Africa.

In a report of a survey of the health of children in the Cape published in 1922, the province's Medical Inspector of Schools, Elsie Chubb, argued that malnutrition was widespread in the Cape's schools for white children. In most schools, around 10% of the pupils were malnourished. In one school in the rural Karoo, 79% of children were found to be severely malnourished.

Chubb recognised that malnutrition was not purely the result of an inadequate supply of food – although it was certainly the case that many poor parents simply couldn't afford to buy enough food to feed their children – but of poor diet. Some child welfare volunteers wrote of children sent to school on coffee and biltong, and who returned home at the end of the day for a basic supper of maize meal and cheap meat. Chubb wrote that far too many children were fed on a diet heavy in carbohydrates and animal protein. Children did not eat enough fresh fruit and vegetables, and milk. She recommended that feeding schemes be established to supplement children's diets with these foodstuffs.

Helen Murray, the headmistress of a girls' school in Graaff Reinet and active member of the town's child welfare society explained the contemporary understanding of the link between malnutrition and poor whiteism particularly well in 1925:

In the winter of 1918 our schools had regular medical inspection for the first time. The doctor who inspected told some of us that he had found some fifty children in our poor school suffering from malnutrition and spoke strongly of the results of such a condition. The children were not in danger of dying of starvation, they had dry bread and black coffee enough to prevent that, but they were in danger of growing up to be 'poor whites' of the most hopeless type. The body insufficiently nourished during the years of growth would develop physically weak, and the brain as a result would be unfit for real mental effort. The child suffering from years of wrong feeding could not be expected to grow into the strong, healthy, clearheaded man or woman our country needs today, and will need ten and twenty years hence. To see that the underfed child is well fed is not a matter of charity, but must be undertaken in self-defence.

As a result of the inspection, the child welfare society found a room in the town where between fifty and ninety children could be provided with 'a good, hot meal' on every school day:

We had been told that these children could be saved from growing up
weaklings if they could have one good meal of fat meat, vegetables or fruit, on every school day of the year….

We have the satisfaction of knowing that there has been a marked improvement in the health of the children and of hearing from a Medical Inspector that she has found the condition of the children here better than in many other schools of the same class.

Murray's experience in Graaff Reinet was not unique. As child welfare societies were established in the towns and villages of South Africa's vast interior, their first work was usually to establish soup kitchens, either in schools or in a central locations where schoolchildren could be sent before the school day – for porridge and milk – and at lunchtime, for soup or a more substantial meal, depending on the resources of the local society.

In Pietersburg (now Polokwane), to eliminate the stigma of free meals for poor children, all white children were provided with a mug of soup at lunchtime. Better-off parents paid for the soup, thus subsidising those children whose parents could not contribute. In Reitz, local farmers, butchers, and grocers donated meat and vegetables to the soup kitchen, and in Oudtshoorn children were encouraged to bring a contribution – onions, carrots, or cabbage – to their daily meal.

The National Council for Child Welfare, the umbrella body established in 1924 which oversaw the activities of local child welfare societies, liked to emphasise the fact that it was concerned for the welfare of all children, regardless of class or race. Some welfare societies, and particularly those in areas which had large 'locations' for black residents, did establish clinics and crèches for black children. But most of the NCCW's work was aimed at white children in the 1920s and 1930s, and the same was true of the South African state. By the 1920s, most municipalities in towns and cities made free milk available to poor white mothers with babies and very young children.

Increasing state involvement in child welfare, alongside the work of independent societies, had a significant impact on the health of white children in South Africa during the early twentieth century. But it was only because of the growing prosperity and better education of the majority of white South Africans after World War II that white poverty and malnutrition were gradually eradicated in the 1950s and 1960s.

By historicising poverty – by understanding that white prosperity in South Africa is a relatively recent phenomenon – we can understand it as a phenomenon which is not only eradicable, but which is also the product of a range of social, economic, and political forces. As South African governments and welfare organisations were able to reduce white poverty and malnutrition dramatically during the early twentieth century, so it is possible for contemporary governments to do the same.

But charity and soup kitchens were not the sole cause of the disappearance of white poverty and malnutrition. Jobs, education, and better living conditions were as – if not more – significant in ensuring that white children no longer went hungry.

Further Reading

Texts cited here:


The Empire Bites Back

Well, HELLO there! Dear readers, I have missed you dreadfully. I return to normal service as the madness of the past few weeks simmers down. Also, I have a re-enamelled bath, which is useful.

This veeeery long post is a paper I presented a few weeks ago at the 'Breaking the Boundaries' seminar series organised by the Department of Historical Studies at the University of Cape Town. I'm hoping that this will form the basis of a new research project, so all comments, criticism, and feedback (ho ho) are particularly welcome. It's very draft-y, so please excuse the wonkiness of the writing and the inevitable inaccuracies and omissions. If you'd like a properly referenced version with all the academic bells and whistles – although I have listed the sources I've cited, below – please let me know (sarahemilyduff [at] gmail [dot] com) and I'll email you a copy.

Introduction

In the preface to her eponymous recipe book, Alice B. Toklas noted:

> Though born in America, I have lived so long in France that both countries seem to be mine, and knowing, loving both, I took to pondering on the differences in eating habits and general attitude to food and the kitchen in the United States and here. I fell to considering how every nation...has its idiosyncrasies in food and drink conditioned by climate, soil and temperament. And I thought about wars and conquests and how
invading or occupying troops carry their habits with them and so in time perhaps the national kitchen or table.

Toklas's point that national cuisines are produced as much by local circumstances as they are by war and conquest – by global forces, in other words – is worth considering. The study of food, and particularly of food in history, requires us to think beyond boundaries and borders: ingredients travel around the world, and, at least since the seventeenth century, we have become accustomed to eating things – plants and animals – alien to our natural environments; regional patterns of cookery are shaped by migration and occupation by foreign forces; local customs, techniques, and flavours are exported around the world. The way we produce, distribute, prepare, and consume food is determined by a range of factors, many of which operate on a global scale. The study of food also exceeds disciplinary boundaries: it opens a window on to the linkages between political, economic, social, and cultural spheres. By its nature, this study is universal: all people eat and experience hunger. Food history has an immediacy which links the personal with the historical.

Despite the growing popularity of the field of food history, little has been written about the place of food within the British Empire, one of the most important global networks of trade, administration, and communication in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries. The purpose of this paper is twofold: firstly, to provide an introduction to the origins, development, and nature of the field of food history, and, secondly, to suggest ways in which food can be inserted into histories of British Imperialism. I conclude with the outline of a project which I hope to pursue in the future.

We are what we eat: food histories

'We are what we eat,' writes Raymond Grew, 'can be thought of as beginning with biology and the hard realities of climate, soil, property, and labour; but it continues through social structure, economic exchange, and technology to embrace culture and include a history of collective and individual preferences.' In other words, food history seems to offer a way of studying change over time which takes into account nearly every sphere of human activity. It bridges the gap between the cultural and the material. Food provides nourishment, but it also carries with it a range of assumptions, symbols, and signs which are occasionally as important as its primary function. When Spanish missionaries in sixteenth-century Mexico refused to celebrate communion using maize, instead of wheat, wafers, they did so purely on the grounds that wheat, an imported crop, represented Europe and, thus, civilisation. Similarly, when well-meaning lady food reformers attempted to 'Americanise' the cuisine of recent immigrants to the United States during the 1920s, they did so because the cooking of Italy, Poland, and Ireland was seen as less 'civilised' than that prepared by white, Protestant Americans.

Given their aim to write total history, it seems inevitable that the first examples of food history were published in the journal of the Annales school in France in the 1960s. Beginning with a series of articles which examined the diets of a group of former European servicemen during the Second World War, Annales ESC regularly featured writing on food history. An edited volume of the best scholarship on the topic, Food and Drink in History, appeared in 1979. The Oxford Symposium for Food and Cookery was founded by Theodore Zeldin and Alan Davidson, the editor of the Oxford Companion to Food (1999), in 1981. Beyond Annales and the papers read at the Symposium, the first significant work in the field was Alfred Crosby's The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492 (1972). Crosby's achievement was to write about the implications of the conquest of Latin America for human bodies and for landscapes – both Latin American and European. By writing about disease (specifically syphilis), plants, animals, and other foodstuffs, he demonstrated the extent to which political conquest altered the environment, demographics, and social and cultural life of Latin America and Europe. This study, along with Bridget Ann Henisch's Fast and Feast: Food in Medieval Society (1977),...
and Savouring the Past: The French Table from 1300 to 1789 (1983) by Barbara Ketcham Wheaton, heralded the beginning of a flood of histories of national and migrant cuisines, recipes, particular ingredients, hunger and famine, gender and food, and food and imperialism.

This historical research was complimented by a range of anthropological and, to a lesser extent, sociological studies published at around the same time: Claude Lévi-Strauss's The Raw and the Cooked (1965), Mary Douglas's Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo (1966), and Cooking, Cuisine, and Class: A Study in Comparative Sociology (1982) by Jack Goody, being some of the most influential texts. It was the publication of Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History by Sidney Mintz in 1985 which blurred disciplinary boundaries between history and anthropology. Indeed, more recently, the field has as frequently been called 'food studies' as 'food history' to indicate its interdisciplinary nature.

It is no coincidence that food history emerged as a field in its own right during the 1970s. The effects of Green Revolution, which used technology to increase wheat, maize, and rice yields all over the world, but most spectacularly in Mexico, India, and Vietnam, became particularly evident in this decade - and these, along with the oil crisis and a spike in global food prices between 1972 and 1974, were partly responsible for the emergence of a more vocal green movement. The first Earth Day was held in 1970, and in 1972 the Club of Rome's The Limits to Growth argued that humanity must learn to live within the earth's natural limits. One of the important streams within the movement was the food counterculture – sometimes dubbed the 'counter-cuisine' and exemplified by the cooking of Alice Waters at her Berkeley restaurant Chez Panisse – which had particularly strong support in California in the 1960s and 1970s. Food activists argued for a rejection of industrialised food production and encouraged consumers not only to buy 'natural', locally sourced food, but also to grow their own. In Diet for a Small Planet (1971), the book which summed up much of the thinking of the counter-cuisine, Frances Moore Lappé wrote that the meat-centred diet favoured by most Americans threatened the ability of future generations to feed themselves. Later, she argued that meat-centred diets were not only unhealthy, but also as socially and ecologically unfair.

It is not surprising, then, that historians should turn to food history as a way of accounting for contemporary diets and explaining how tastes and food preferences change over time. Like environmental and women's history, then, the origins of food history overlap to some extent with a kind of activism. This is particularly evident in the body of work which has been produced since the 1990s. There are few more potent indicators of global inequalities than the over-abundance and waste of food in the West, and the scarcity of food and famine in the third world. With concerns about food supplies, food security, changing eating patterns, obesity, and the industrialisation of food production escalating, it is unsurprising that the history of food has emerged as a popular field over the past decade. Food history is now as frequently styled food studies – even when written by historians – and the best known food historian is a professor of journalism at UC Berkeley Michael Pollan, author of the wildly popular The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals (2006).

If there is anything unusual about the field of food history, other than its plurality of focus, it is its popularity among lay audiences. Indeed, Gastronomica, one of the three main journals for food history (the others being Food and Foodways and Food, Culture, and Society) is a popular periodical sold in upmarket American supermarkets. The discipline is largely based in the United States. Its professional organisation, the Association for the Study of Food and Society, is located there, and the most prominent food historians are American: Jeffrey Pilcher has written extensively about histories of food, identity, and nationalism in Mexico – his study ¡Que viven las tamales: Food and the Making of Mexican Identity (1998) is considered by many to be the founding text for the new generation of food historians; and Harvey Levenstein and Warren Belasco both focus on the nature and history of the American food industry since the beginning of the nineteenth century – the oldest, most extensive, and most influential such industry in the world. There is a strong
streak of activism in Levenstein and Belasco’s writing. In *Meals to Come: The History of the Future of Food* (2006) by Belasco and Levenstein’s *The Paradox of Plenty* (2003), the authors argue that their purpose is to account for, and offer solutions to, the pervasiveness of bad American eating habits. Similarly, Italian food historians – who constitute the second biggest grouping within the field – have allied themselves closely to the *Slow Food Movement*.

But like the heavily interdisciplinary, largely US-based *history of childhood* (or, increasingly, childhood studies), the ascendancy of food history is due also to the *cultural turn* in the humanities during the early nineties which drew attention to the interconnectedness between the discursive and the material. And it is related to the growing popularity of the field of *global history*. Interest in global or world history is linked as much to contemporary concerns about the implications of globalisation as it is to efforts within the discipline to write from less ‘West-centric’ points of view. Food history is particularly suited to understanding history in global or transnational terms. As Raymond Grew notes, the ‘universality of food gives it enormous potential as an indicator of cultural differences and historical change’. He adds: ‘food can be used as a kind of trace element, tracking the direction of change, revealing the complex intersections of old and new that demark the global and the local but belong to both.’

All societies produce, distribute, prepare, and consume food, and all societies construct rules around the preparation and consumption of food. The study of food is a useful means of gauging economic progress: it links labour systems with technological innovation, transport, social organisation, environmental factors, and nutrition. Since the sixteenth century, at least, the distribution of food has occurred on a global scale. As Grew notes, food history provides ‘particularly satisfying evidence of how ordinary, daily activities are related to larger, historical trends’. The study of food encourages the comparison of different societies on equal terms, and avoids imposing western models on non-western societies. The tracing of the diffusion of ingredients across the globe allows for the comparison of different responses to the same product, showing up the ways in which groups of people define themselves against others. Food history examines how food is used in the definition and demarcation of social and national identities, and how these change over time. It draws attention to how power is implicated in the distribution and consumption of food. Grew explains: ‘the study of food demonstrates how deeply processes of political and social change can reach into society. No wonder then that commentary on contemporary cuisine is often also a comment on politics, commercialisation, the ecology, and cultural decline.’ Food opens up ways of understanding how power operates within societies.

It is unsurprising that the field of food history is extraordinarily varied, and although generally politically left leaning, it is not dominated by any particular dogmas or controversies. This may be related to the fact that food historians do frequently write for lay audiences. One of the strongest and most popular trends within the field is the fashion for writing histories of single dishes, ingredients, or foodstuffs: like *tea*, *salt*, or *milk*. These are useful in showing how societies give ‘new’ cultural and social meanings, how these ingredients are integrated into existing social structures to reinforce or undermine identities and boundaries. Histories of *chocolate* and *coffee*, for example, trace how two beverages became quickly associated with elite status during the sixteenth after having been introduced to Europe, and then slid down the social scale as *free trade policies*, the development of the *plantation system*, and *industrialisation* caused prices to drop.

There is also a growing literature on the industrialisation of food production, and on the construction of national and immigrant identities. But possibly the most significant trend within recent food history has been its focus on addressing contemporary food-related problems – such as obesity, famine, unsustainable agriculture, and the apparently unstoppable power of the largely American, yet increasingly globalised, food industry – through food history. Grew notes that ‘commentary on contemporary cuisine is often also a comment on politics, commercialisation, ecology, and cultural decline’ and I think that this is true of food.
history as well. Indeed, this may be the cause of one of the field’s greatest weaknesses: historians’ present-mindedness often produces a rose-tinted view of the past, and a desire to return to a way of cooking and eating that never really existed. In fact, one of the most sustained criticisms of the field is that it is *academically lightweight*.Much of what passes under the name of food history can best be described as pedantic antiquarianism. And for all the field’s claims to being truly global in focus, it has largely ignored Africa and large swathes of Asia.

There is some scholarship on African food history, although much of it has been produced by anthropologists and archaeologists. Southern Africa has a kind of inadvertent food history: *Diana Wylie’s Starving on a Full Stomach: Hunger and the Triumph of Cultural Racism in Modern South Africa* (2001), *Beer, Sociability, and Masculinity in South Africa* (2010) by *Anne Mager*, and *Lance van Sittert’s* research on the South African fishing industry, and *William Beinart’s* writing on large-scale livestock farming, and especially sheep in South Africa, constitute, among others, a significant body of work. *Elias Mandala’s* *The End of Chidyerano: A History of Food and Everyday Life in Malawi, 1860-2004* (2005) and *Igor Cusack’s* writing on recipe books and the construction of new, national identities in sub-Saharan Africa, engage with the field of food history to the greatest extent.

One way of addressing this lacuna is to consider the role of food within histories of imperialism, and especially of British imperialism.

**Food and Empire**

Histories of national cuisines are, inevitably, transnational histories too. In Britain, for example, the *national dish* of *chicken tikka masala* does not exist as such in south Asia, but was invented in ‘Indian’ restaurants staffed mainly by Bengalis in centres like London and Birmingham to invent a meal that would appeal to British palates while simultaneously appearing to be exotic and, at least at first, sophisticated. A history of twentieth-century cooking in Britain is as much a history of the British Empire, the Commonwealth, India, and Bangladesh. Indeed, the history of imperial conquest since the sixteenth century cannot be disentangled from histories of food. Sidney Mintz argues:

> Sugar did more than revolutionise the tastes of the British people. It put into place a major economic and strategic system which lasted for more than two centuries and saw the lines of British trade and production directed along routes and towards destinations which were to dominate British global interests long after.

Although Mintz overstates his case, his point that imperialism, and particularly in its early stages in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, was driven by demand for luxury goods – such as spices, tea, and coffee – is an important one. Even if there is no acknowledged subdiscipline on imperial food histories, there is a large body of work which understands the complex workings of power within the British Empire through food. So much so, in fact, that some commentators have noted the absence of food in the recent *Oxford History of the British Empire* (2002). As in the case of the larger field of food history, there is no single approach or focus which distinguishes this historiography on food history in the British Empire. Some of the most popular works have been on single foodstuffs, like tea, *curry*, and, most recently, *opium*. These studies attempt to bridge cultural, social, and economic history by demonstrating how the meanings attached to particular ingredients or commodities change over both time and space – and the implications of these shifts for imperial networks of trade and finance.

Perhaps the best place to begin looking for such a history is the large scholarship on *nineteenth-century domesticity*. In an article about curry and cookbooks in Victorian households, *Susan Zlotnick* concludes:
As figures of domesticity, British women helped incorporate Indian food into the national diet and India into the British empire; and this process of incorporation remains etched on the pages of the domestic cookery books written by middle-class women like Eliza Acton and Isabella Beeton. If a later, more aggressively masculinist imperial discourse tries to erase them from the annals of empire... early Victorian cookery books attest to the important ideological function women performed in the construction of Victorian imperialism. At both the symbolic and the practical level, Victorian women domesticated imperialism.

As middle-class notions of domesticity were evoked in missionaries' attempts to 'civilise' African subjects, so food, its preparation, and its consumption became increasingly significant in defining who was, and who was not, civilised. Nancy Rose Hunt demonstrates this in her study of the role of missionaries in educating young Congolese men and women during the early twentieth century, pointing out the number of 'evolutionary theme[s]' evoked by the missionaries to emphasise the progress of their protégés, from 'darkness to lightness, savagery to civilisation, heathens to Christians, monkey stew to roast beef.' 'Civilisation' is achieved when a traditional European meal replaces that originating from Africa.

Histories of food are, then, particularly useful in explaining the cultural and social implications of British Imperialism for both men and women. To my mind, the most interesting work on food history within the British Empire is being done in a relatively new sub-field which focuses on imperial trade, commodities, and consumerism during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Commodities of Empire research project run jointly by the Open University, the British Academy, the University of London's School of Advanced Study, and London Metropolitan University, 'explores the networks through which such commodities circulated within, and in the spaces between, empires' as a means of understanding how 'local processes...significantly influenced the encounter between the world economy and regional societies.' Arguing that imperial expansion, the trade in commodities, and the industrial revolution should be understood in relation to one another, the project considers how the 'expanded production and global movements' of commodities 'brought vast spatial, social, economic, and cultural changes to both metropoles and colonies.' It is telling that of the seventeen working papers produced by the project so far, nine are on food, and half of the articles in the Journal of Global History's special edition on commodities, empires, and global history are on food. Alan Pryor explains how the study of Indian 'pale ale' provides new ways of understanding the construction of imperial identities and the workings of imperial free trade:

The story of the development of Indian pale ale is one of cultural invention. This was a new product that was neither British nor Indian, occupying the space in between those two cultures in British India. In the late eighteenth century, George Hodgson developed a new beer for India...
in an obscure brewery on the eastern periphery of London. Hodgson’s pale ale was a light beer with a refreshing bitter taste, which was to become a signifier of Anglo-Indian identity in numerous accounts of life in India. Eighteenth-century beer was a relatively low-value product, and its export to India was only made possible by the Byzantine economics of the East India Company. The growing demand for pale ale in India brought competition from other brewers, particularly from Burton-on-Trent. …the difficult trading conditions of India were instrumental in the development of new marketing techniques, were subsequently employed to introduce a new genre of beer into Britain, Indian pale ale.

…there was an unofficial agenda to commodify the British Empire, particularly India, which is epitomised with the development of Indian pale ale. Heroic accounts of colonial adventures were often peppered with references to its restorative qualities. The sub-text was that India was Britain’s challenge, particularly the climate, but the superiority of her manufacturing ability was able to produce a beer that was able to meet it. This fitted with an idealised version of empire, where the metropole imported the raw materials for its manufacture, rewarding the colony with manufactured goods, education, governance and progress. By following the marketing and development of this product it becomes possible to gain greater understanding of the emerging debate over protectionism and free trade as it affected Britain’s relationship with its empire.

Frank Trentmann has shown how the development of the Empire Marketing Board during the early twentieth century to protect and encourage imperial trade in food was connected to the development of early consumerism: the ‘imperial consumers’ – rather than customers – of the 1920s who could afford to choose between a new range of branded food, bought foodstuffs promoted by the Empire Marketing Board for the good of the Empire. In a study of the Empire Marketing Board’s promotion of the King’s Christmas Pudding in the late 1920s, Kaori O’Connor concludes:

The incorporation of specifically empire ingredients in a symbolic dish made especially for the king, and the partaking of the royal pudding in households throughout the kingdom, the dominions, and the colonies that Christmas Day of 1927, was an act of secular communion, the enacting of empire through consumption. It emerged as a unifying force during a time of social dissent and division at home and abroad, and it appealed to the public on many levels and across social classes. To begin, the King’s Christmas pudding was highly popular with the new breed of women consumers. It validated the social activism of women previously engaged in the empire and related movement; it was a gift to all the women to whom Christmas dinner in general, and the pudding in particular, were the ultimate test of their skills and taste as cook or hostess; it empowered women by giving them the opportunity to practise critical consumption. Retailers and wholesalers welcomed the promotion of the King’s Christmas pudding and empire ingredients as an additional spur to trade. After EMB initiatives, Sainsbury, for example, actively promoted ‘Empire’ goods across their product range and the firm’s Christmas advertisements began to specify the origins of dried fruit: ‘Australian sultanas’; ‘Special Offer for your Christmas Pudding and Mincemeat – try our Empire Raisins’. Origins had always been important in the luxury trade, and now they acquired a more general political significance. Above all, as a recipe the King’s Christmas pudding provided the vital link between production and consumption, becoming an instrument of social action.
By focussing on the production and reception of one commodity or product – be it Christmas pudding, pale ale, cassava, or tobacco – historians are able to construct an understanding of how the effects of imperial trade were felt and shaped by a range of people: housewives in Britain, businessmen in the City of London, producers in the colonies, and traders in imperial cities like Cape Town, Delhi, and Melbourne.

I would like to sketch briefly a project which addresses a lacuna in this imperial history of food commodities.

**Meaty Questions**

In a country where Heritage Day is renamed National Braai Day (or barbeque day), it seems that historians should not have to work very hard to justify the study of the historical significance of meat eating in South Africa. I became interested in tracing attitudes towards eating meat – and examining how these attitudes influenced and were shaped by the introduction of livestock farming and the growth of a meat industry in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – when thinking about why it is that no meal is seen as complete unless it contains meat of some kind. As Pollan writes about vegetarianism, meat is not only convenient and quick to cook, but most of our cultural and religious celebrations are based around the consumption of some form of meat. In a time of growing anxiety about the ever-increasing amounts of meat which the world’s population appears to be demanding – although there is some reason to believe that this concern is not based on any firm evidence – as well as mounting evidence to demonstrate the ecological unsustainablility of the meat and dairy industries, it seems reasonable to ask why meat is associated with prosperity and with eating well.

It also seems logical to base this study on a series of examples drawn from the southern hemisphere. Southern Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Argentina, and Brazil all have prosperous meat industries which supply both local and international markets with beef and lamb. This is a transnational history of meat-eating. All of these countries and regions are also all former colonies and dominions, and an understanding of how meat industries developed in these regions must be understood within imperial contexts. There is a small body of work on meat-eating, the best known of which is Roger Horowitz’s history of the American meat industry, *Putting Meat on the American Table: Taste, Technology, Transformation* (2006). And research into livestock and cattle- and sheep farming in southern Africa, Australia, and other places constitute a foundation for such a study. But equally importantly, all of these nations constitute national and gendered identities around the consumption of meat – and particularly red meat.
I would like to trace not only the origins of the meat industries in these regions, but also consider how the origins of these businesses were linked to the complicated ways in which meat was used to define social, national, or gendered identities. Preliminary research on South Africa positions food, and particularly meat, as being central to the early colonial encounter, and I'll end with a tentative discussion of how attitudes towards meat can be used to illustrate the first interactions between white settlers and the indigenous inhabitants of the Cape in the seventeenth century.

In a history of cassava production in Brazil, Kaori O'Connor notes:

It is a curious feature of colonial and imperial studies that food security and details of food production, preparation and consumption, which contemporary documents show was the overriding concern of settlers’ daily lives and the motivation for many of their relations with Amerindians and slaves, has been consistently overlooked or minimised in academic and economic histories of the period. A preoccupation with food and the dread of scarcity and famine runs through all the early European accounts of New World colonisation generally…

Indeed, Jan van Riebeeck's journal of his time as Commander of the Dutch East India Company (DEIC) settlement at the Cape is preoccupied with food. This was overwhelmingly the result of the fact that the settlement's primarily – indeed only – goal was to produce and, where possible, procure fruit, vegetables, and meat for passing Company ships. Failure of the settlement's gardens meant a failure of the scheme altogether. But Van Riebeeck and the other employees of the DEIC spent their first few years at the Cape with very little to eat: feeding themselves was considerably more difficult than they had anticipated it to be. Additionally, the consumption of particular foodstuffs was a marker of identity, and food became a means of facilitating contact between indigenous peoples and European settlers. The first communication between the employees of the DEIC and the Khoikhoi centred around food: two representatives of a Khoikhoi group were invited on board a DEIC ship and the Dutch 'generously filled their bellies with food and drink' in exchange for information about Khoikhoi willingness to barter cattle for DEIC goods. Later, a skipper who had gone ashore to find fresh provisions was presented with '4 bags of beautiful mustard leaves and sorrel and also a catch of about 750 lovely steenbras'.

There is evidence of some exchange of culinary traditions – the Khoikhoi developed a taste for bread and the Dutch took to penguins' eggs – but this was no example of happy multiculturalism: exchanges occurred because these foodstuffs tasted good and did not fundamentally alter the ways in which identities were forged through food. One of the most constant refrains in the journals is Van Riebeeck's relief that the edible plants and animals at the Cape were similar to those 'at home'. He wrote
that the fish at the Cape were ‘quite as good and tasty’ as ‘any fish in the Fatherland’. Even hippopotamus meat tasted ‘like calf’. This meant that the Cape was a viable place for the cultivation of fruit and vegetables grown from European seeds for European ships, and that European settlement was possible in this part of Africa. It also meant that this landscape could allow Europeans to be ‘civilised’ in it.

For instance, in October 1652, nearly six months after landing in Table Bay, DEIC employees held a farewell dinner for a group of visiting Company officials. Van Riebeeck described the menu: ‘Everything on the table was produced at the Cape: the fowls were reared here, new green peas, spinach, chervil, pot-herbs, asparagus (a finger’s thickness) and lettuce as hard as cabbage and weighing at least 1¼ lbs each.’ It is reasonable to assume that his cook did his best to replicate the cooking of the Netherlands. This was European cuisine prepared using vegetables grown from seeds imported from Europe, but produced in the Cape. This feast was more than a meal: its purpose exceeded simply providing a group of DEIC employees with dinner. The inclusion of local ingredients or aspects of Khoikhoi cuisine would have been seen to undermine the authority of European settlement in the Cape.

Food did facilitate contact with indigenous people: the Khoikhoi were as willing to accept bread, tobacco, and alcohol in barter as they were copper wire or beads. Yet the Khoikhoi did not willingly relinquish the one possession which the Dutch desired above all: their cattle. After an initial exchange of a cow and her calf for ‘3 small plates of copper and 3 pieces of ½ fathom copper wire’, the Khoikoi were considerably less forthcoming. Cattle were not only a source of protein for the Khoikhoi, but represented wealth and status. There is some evidence to suggest that the Khoikhoi actually ate very little red meat, keeping it – like many societies all over the world – for times of celebration and, even then, only slaughtering as few animals as possible. Bags of copper wire could not compensate for the loss of such valuable beasts.

It is, thus, telling that one of the few recorded Khoikhoi outbursts against the Dutch centres around food. The diarist and DEIC official JG van Grevenbroek spent much of his time at the Cape – which spanned between c.1685 and his death in c.1726 – compiling a study of a group of people whom he dubbed ‘Hottentots’, based on a series of interviews which he conducted with them. By 1705, Grevenbroek had written an account of various Khoikhoi groups in the western Cape. He paid a great deal of attention to their eating habits, and recorded one Khoikhoi man: ‘You eaters of grass and lettuce. Feed it to your oxen: personally we would rather fast. Your habits disgust and sicken us: we never belch or fart. With your foolish values, you treasure a woman’s necklace of tiny beads above sheep.’ Here, the Khoikhoi – accused by white settlers of being dirty, smelly, and uncouth – turn the tables on the Dutch colonists, describing them as uncivilised, and partly for their enthusiasm for ‘grass and lettuce’ – foodstuffs considered by the Khoikhoi to be cattle feed.

But Grevenbroek notes that Khoikhoi tastes did change:

*Our lettuces also and other vegetables they have at length learned to eat greedily, thought at first, mocking the indiscriminate taste of Europeans, they would say that they were only fit to be eaten by cattle along with the grass of field. Then, if asked to lunch or dinner, they would retort, make the oxen your guests, pile up the grass, boasting that they could endure fasting and had learned to bear poverty from childhood.*

Ironically, travellers to the Cape during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries echoed the Khoikhoi outburst against Dutch settlers, describing the farmers of the rural interior as uncouth and uncivilised for their almost exclusively meat-based diets. James Ewart, a British officer stationed at the Cape between 1811 and 1814 described the ‘Boer’ – who was also, significantly, a stock farmer – with whose family he lodged on the eastern frontier:
At his meals that is dinner and supper the only which are regular, he eats an enormous quantity of beef or mutton swimming in the fat of the sheep's tail, with a proportionate allowance of coarse bread or vegetables; this he washes down with liberal potations of common brandy, being excessively fond of ardent spirits, seldom using wine which he could easily procure. Having sufficiently gorged himself during dinner, he takes a sleep for two or three hours, and on rising again, resumes his pipe which is seldom out of his mouth.

These few examples demonstrate how food, and meat in particular, mediated the colonial encounter – and from both sides. I think that they are suggestive of a wider history which needs to be written about histories of meat, and especially red meat, in transnational perspective.

Conclusion

As histories of childhood tend to be about adults' views of children rather than of children themselves – and the same could possibly said of animal history – so the history of food is not so much about food, but rather the complex interactions around it. Indeed, some of the worst examples of food history tend to focus on food itself, producing painfully nitpicking histories of ingredients and recipes. Nevertheless, a history of the ways in which we have used food to construct identities, to forge and break relationships, to fund and found empires, and to sustain economies provides us with new ways of understanding the functioning of imperialism, and of connecting global trends and changes with local, and even individual, experience.

Further Reading

Texts quoted here:


Other sources:


Yong Chen, ‘Food as World History: Broadening the Horizon and Reach of Historical Research,’ *Journal of World History*, vol. 21, no. 2 (June 2010), pp. 297-304.


Sian Griffiths and Jennifer Wallace (eds.), *Consuming Passions: Food in the Age of Anxiety* (Manchester: Mandolin, 1998).


Frank Trentmann, ‘Beyond Consumerism: New Historical Perspectives on Consumption,’ *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 39, no. 3 (July, 2004), pp. 373-


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**We could be anywhere**

I’ve spent the past fortnight in New York – mainly for a *conference* at Columbia – and on my last morning had breakfast at a restaurant which could only have been in New York, and, more specifically, in Morningside Heights. The Hungarian Pastry Shop is a shabby, comfortable, and much adored cafe among local residents and Columbia’s students and academics. It serves a range of unbelievably good cakes and pastries, the menu for which is an ancient and faded handwritten banner above the counter. Mothers with small children munch apple strudel alongside workmen in overalls, lecturers with textbooks, and small old ladies with thick foreign accents. Founded by immigrants, this could only be called The Hungarian Pastry Shop outside of Hungary. Over the years, it’s been tweaked to satisfy the demands of now elderly mittel-European customers, a group of whom was sitting in the sunshine when I arrived, as well as the undergraduates who spend long hours reading over its big mugs of strong coffee. The Shop has a menu in German and table service, as well as an exterior decorated with murals, a graffiti-covered loo, and posters advertising digs, extra tuition, and auditions for student productions.

Over a cherry danish, orange juice, and iced coffee, I considered a comment made by my friend Ester a few weeks ago when we had lunch at a new cafe which has recently opened in Cape Town, *Skinny Legs and All* (yes, as in the *novel* by Tom...
Breakfast at the Hungarian Pastry Shop

We had homemade lemonade, soup, and excellent coffee.

As we were admiring the cafe's interior, Ester noted perceptively that we could have been anywhere – that we could have found this restaurant and eaten similar food, underpinned by the same values and ideas about cooking, in any other city with a demand for sophisticated good food, be it Melbourne, San Francisco, or London. I think that this is a point worth exploring.

In New York I had coffee and lunch in cafes which I could have described in precisely the same terms. At Bubby's in Brooklyn's Dumbo, Tablespoon in the Flatiron District, and the City Bakery off Fifth Avenue I could have been anywhere. Of course, all of these restaurants say a great deal about New York, its gentrification and the role of food and restaurants in this process. The City Bakery was founded in 1990, at a time when the slow regeneration of Manhattan was nearing completion and when enthusiasm for artisan bread (best exemplified by the craze for sourdough in San Francisco) was beginning to peak. Bubby's and Tablespoon – both of which emphasise the extent to which they source seasonal ingredients locally – ride on the City Bakery's success. In a similar way, Skinny Legs and All is an indicator of the success of Cape Town's central city improvement district, and also of the very, very slow emergence of a food-focussed South African green movement.

For all their localism, these restaurants are very similar: they serve similar food, they're influenced by the same collection of chefs and food writers, their attitude towards cooking is based on an understanding of the value of seasonality, and they are influenced by global fashions in decor. Even the cafe I went to in achingly cool Williamsburg – populated by hipsters who conformed pleasingly to type with oversized sunglasses, topknots (for the girls), v-necked t-shirts (for the boys), and MacBooks – could as easily operate in Cape Town's Woodstock, or in the trendier parts of east London.

To note this similarity isn't a criticism – it's simply to point out that these cafes are local manifestations of a global phenomenon. But not all aspects of globalised eating are seen in such positive terms. Since the 1980s at least, there has been a heightened concern that globalisation is causing diets to become homogenised: that the international popularity of fast food chains, supremely...
McDonald's, signals the end of discrete, local food cultures.

The apparent ubiquity of the golden arches seemed to indicate a kind of culinary *end of history*; as liberal democracy appeared to *triumph* with the collapse of the Soviet Union, so did the eating habits of the West. The opening of a branch of McDonald's in Red Square in *Moscow* in 1990 was the final nail in communism's coffin. I remember clearly going to eat at one of the first McDonald's to open in South Africa after the end of the international business *boycott*. Eating there was as much an affirmation of South Africa's re-entry into the world as was the country's *participation* in the 1992 summer Olympics.

I think it's fair to say, though, that McDonald's no longer means these things – which isn't to suggest that it's not doing well. A recent article in the *Economist* predicts that McDonald's and other budget chains, like *Aldi*, are set to *profit* out of a world in recession. However much revelations about the chain's profoundly *unhealthy* products and poor *environmental* and *labour* practices have dented its apparent invincibility, it is still believed to be part of a broader shift in an international *Westernisation* of diet. This was confirmed, apparently, by Oxfam's recent *report* on the global food crisis, *Growing a Better Future* which claims that *pasta* is the world's favourite food.

But is this anything new? And it is possible for all of us, truly, to eat the same diet? As I *wrote* a few weeks ago, the survey on which Oxfam bases its *report* on favourite foods seems to be pretty dubious to me. It's also worth noting that the success of global brands depends on their ability to 'localise' their products. McDonald's has *diversified* its menu to appeal to local tastes, with a greater number of vegetarian options in Indian branches, smaller portions in Japan, rice products in Singapore and Taiwan, kebabs in Israel, and pita bread in Greece. In other words, the success of McDonald's lies not in the imposition of a foreign brand, but in its ability to make its products at once familiar and enticingly exotic.

Restaurants on the upper end of the scale use precisely the same strategy. Writing about the opening of a branch of *Les Halles* in *Tokyo*, *Anthony Bourdain* describes how he adapted his French bistro cuisine to suit Japanese tastes:

> I... *scaled down the portions and [prettied] up the presentations. ... I* rearranged plates to resemble smaller versions of what we were doing in *New York*: going more vertical, applying some new garnishes, and then *observing customer reactions*. I looked for and found ways to get more *colour contrast* on the plates, moved the salads off to separate *receptacles*, stuck sprigs of herb *here* than *there*.

At *Gordon Ramsay's* restaurant *Verre* in *Dubai*, the head chef had to become accustomed to cooking *halal meat*, which is drained of much of its blood and can't be aged. *Jay Rayner* writes:

> Then there was local taste. Some ingredients simply didn't sell. If he *brought* in pigeon, he told me, they would lie in the fridge for a week, *neglected* by the customers, until, in desperation, he would *turn* them...
On a domestic scale, the middle classes have eaten strikingly similar things all over the world since at least the nineteenth century. The movement of people within the British Empire caused the same dishes and menus to be served up on at last four different continents. When Abbie Ferguson and Anna Bliss arrived at the Cape from Connecticut in 1873 to establish an elite girls’ school, they were pleased – and relieved – to find that their middle-class Dutch-Afrikaner hosts ate the same meals, and in the same way, as they had done in the United States. Bliss wrote to her mother:

thus far I have seen quite as well regulated families & as much attention paid to ‘propriety’ as in America. … Wherever I have taken a meal there has been a servant in the room to wait on table or one has come at the tap of the bell, & all done so quietly & orderly.

The circulation of recipe books and advice on cookery in newspapers and in private correspondence around the Empire demonstrates the extent to which these diets remained fairly similar. They were, as today, inflected by local tastes and produce. In the Cape, the American teachers commented on the colonial habit of eating yellow rice’ (rice cooked with turmeric and raisins and flavoured with cinnamon and bay) with every meal – something introduced by slaves from southeast Asia during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

In other words, the diets of the wealthy have tended to be fairly globalised since international travel was made easier, and more common, from around the beginning of the nineteenth century. With the invention of the jet engine in the mid-twentieth century and, latterly, the internet, these trends have moved around the world more quickly and we're also considerably more aware of them. It's the poor – those whose diets we have an unfortunate tendency to romanticise – who have historically tended to eat a fairly limited range of things.

The difference now is that there are far more middle class people wanting to eat similar diets. Oxfam also notes that the newly-affluent Indian and Chinese middle classes consume more meat and dairy products than ever before. Exactly the same trend occurred in Europe during the 1950s and 1960s, but this was a shift on a far smaller scale and in a world where food systems were not as globalised as they are today.

I think that it's misleading to suggest that diets are becoming progressively more Western. Rather, particular ingredients – meat and dairy above all – are increasingly popular in societies which, traditionally, have tended to eat more fish, vegetables, and other starches. Our planet simply can't sustain meat- and dairy-heavy diets. Refocusing our attention to responding to the demand for these foodstuffs would be considerably more effective than simply bemoaning the Westernisation and homogenisation of global diets. This is an argument which not only draws an impossible distinction between 'bad' global and 'good' local diets, but also ignores a long history of global culinary exchange which has been mitigated by local tastes and preferences.
Is Baking Feminist?

Life in post-1994 South Africa can be very strange. Yesterday morning my friend Ester and I went to the National Gallery’s retrospective on...Tretchikoff. Yes, apartheid South Africa's favourite producer of kitsch, bad, and, occasionally, bizarre artwork has earned himself a serious exhibition and re-evaluation. As far as I can see, his sole redeeming feature was his consistency: Vladimir Tretchikoff was never mediocre, but always uniformly, consistently, bad.

But on our way into the Gallery, we came across Cape Town's first experiment in yarn bombing. This is a form of graffiti or street art where knitting and other needlework is used to decorate public spaces. Statues get scarves; railings are covered in woolly tubes; and trees are festooned with crafty baubles.

Yarn bombing is now a global phenomenon, and it's part of a broader craft movement which seeks to celebrate, promote, and often re-learn hobbies like knitting, crochet, and tatting. Stitch and Bitch societies – founded originally in the United States – can be found now in nearly every major city, and knitting is...
A yarn-bombed lamp in Hay-on-Wye

The yarn-bombed National Gallery in Cape Town

particularly hip. Much of this is given a feminist spin. It's an attempt to reclaim activities once derided as unimportant because they were performed largely by women. Some craftivists make the – legitimate – point that suffragettes used embroidery, tapestry, and quilting to create banners and to raise funds for their cause.

Baking has undergone a similar transformation. At the Hay Festival a fortnight ago, Nigella Lawson argued:

Baking is the less applauded of the cooking arts, whereas restaurants are a male province to be celebrated. There's something intrinsically misogynistic about decrying a tradition because it has always been female.

I agree.

She added that How to be a Domestic Goddess (2000), the recipe book which kick started both her career and the British enthusiasm for cupcakes, is an important feminist tract. Now if this is the case – and I write this as one whose copy is scuffed, stained, and torn from extensive use – then I am a three-toed sloth. But her point that baking is seen as a particularly feminine, and, as a result of this, frivolous, pursuit is worth considering. In fact, professional cake-baking seems to be dominated by women: most pastry chefs are female. Restaurant cooking and bread baking are largely a male preserve, and are seen as more serious, complex, and creative activities.

But feminists are not the first women to celebrate baking and home cooking as part of the construction of particular femininities. However much money suffragettes may have raised with their needlework, even larger numbers of women organised tea parties and sold cakes, cookies, and delicately embroidered goods at fetes and bazaars to support missionary work and other more conservative causes. In 1881, the Huguenot Seminary, an elite girls' school near Cape Town in the Cape Colony, organised a bazaar selling cake and embroidery and raised enough to fund a year's rent and living expenses for a woman missionary working on a Dutch Reformed mission station in the Transvaal.

Baking has been used by different women at different times to mean many things. What is so interesting about the recent rediscovery of baking (and knitting too, for that matter) is that it's been embraced enthusiastically by young, educated, middle-class women. I think that this is the product of a variety of factors: the impact of a
resurgent green movement and the global economic recession have encouraged a rediscovery of craft and cooking both to save money and to reduce our impact on the environment; young fashion designers and cooks' interest in knitting and baking have made these fashionable pursuits and rendered 'make-do-and-mend' cool; the impact of television series like Mad Men have prompted a (hopefully ironic) re-embrace of domesticity; and this is also a reaction to the feminism of the 1970s which rejected traditionally feminine pursuits because of their connection to women's subordination.

And here is a crucial point: middle-class women now have no need to bake or to knit. These are leisure activities, to be done in the evenings and over weekends. We forget that until relatively recently in the West, most women baked and sewed not out of choice, but because they had to: because shop-bought cakes and clothes were expensive. One of my maternal great-grandmothers was a seamstress because that was deemed to be an appropriate trade for a white, lower-middle-class adolescent in pre-War Cape Town. But my very bourgeois paternal grandmother employed a cook, nanny, and maid servant to do her domestic work for her – as indeed her mother had done too.

I don't know what my great grandmother would have made of yarn bombing, nor of the slow gentrification of the Cape Town suburb in which she lived for most of her life. Woodstock, recently dubbed 'Cape Town's Manhattan' by the New York Times, is being gradually transformed into a hip, middle-class enclave. And baking is an aspect of this transformation.

This map drawn by UC Berkeley student Danya Al-Saleh plots the gentrification of San Francisco's Mission District through bakeries. (See here for a bigger version.)

She's not the first to do this. Kathe Newman has argued that 'cupcake shops can provide a more accurate and timely guide to the frontiers of urban gentrification than traditional demographic and real estate data sets.' This is certainly true for Cape Town. The very traumatic gentrification of parts of the Bo-Kaap or Malay Quarter – where families were forced to move out of houses which they had rented for generations – was signalled by the arrival of upscale bakeries. In Woodstock, where gentrification seems to be proceeding at a slower pace and without the fracturing of existing communities, bakeries and cafes have begun to appear along the main road and near the Neighbourgoods Market, that ultimate expression of Capetonian cool.

In the city's eastern precinct – the district which stretches from Parliament at the top of Roeland Street and all the way to the Cape Archives – people have been lured out of their cars and onto pavements first by Charly's Bakery, and then by Mugged on Roeland Street (ho ho), and the coffee- and cupcake-selling Book Lounge. When I first started working at the Archives in 2005 for my MA thesis, the furthest I would go for lunch was to dash across the parking lot to a slightly dodgy sandwich shop. I returned in 2008 while researching my PhD, and could choose between at least five different places to eat – and felt safe to walk to all them.
As one commentator notes, it's because cupcakes and cake shops are fashionable at the moment that we can use them as an indicator of gentrification:

In the 1990s, it might have been the proliferation of Starbucks coffee houses that indicated gentrifying neighbourhoods, and in the 1980s, perhaps gourmet yoghurt shops moving into an area, etc. I don't know about other cities, but in NYC where I live, right now it would be the new doggie day care centres that are springing up in many places that appear to designate a change to a more affluent, up-and-coming hipster-ish nabe.

The point remains that cupcakes have been embraced with enthusiasm by middle-class women and have been implicated in the creation of contemporary middle class femininities. Activities once performed by women out of necessity have been transformed into hobbies – and because of middle-class buying power, cake shops and cupcake bakeries are now involved in the gentrification of poor, often crime-ridden neighbourhoods.

I am not suggesting, to paraphrase Cyril Connolly on George Orwell, that I can't eat a cupcake without commenting on the appalling working conditions in the icing sugar industry. I understand how fraught and disruptive processes of gentrification can be, but I really enjoy being able to walk down main road Woodstock to buy coffee and cake at The Kitchen. And I think that it's fantastic that so many cake shops and cafes are run by women, and I'm so pleased that the craft movement is reviving and remembering skills which were at risk of being forgotten.

But I do think we need some perspective. Our enthusiasm for cupcakes and cakes is helping to fuel gentrification of poor neighbourhoods – and we need to think carefully about the implications of this. As my friend Shahpar pointed out a few weeks ago, cupcakes are snack food for Dhaka's busy street vendors. In other words, cakes and baking mean different things all over the world. Cakes, cupcakes, and baking can only be associated with feminism for white, affluent middle-class women. Baking a tray of cupcakes may be a subversive, feminist act for me, but it's a well nigh impossible one for a woman living in Gugulethu.

Tangerine and Cinnamon by Sarah Duff is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License.

Revolution, Revival, and Food

Over the past fortnight another corporate conglomerate has bid to replace the evil empire Monsanto as the most problematic business within the global food industry. It has emerged that the Swiss-based Glencore, a commodity trader specialising in energy and food which was listed publicly for the first time this week, was partly responsible for causing the hike in food prices at the end of last year when it became clear that Russia's grain crop would be badly damaged by catastrophic fires. Raj Patel explains:
Glencore has now revealed its traders placed bets that the price of wheat would go up. On 2 August Glencore's head of Russian grain trading called on Russia's government to ban wheat exports. Three days later, that's what it did. The price of wheat went up by 15% in two days. Of course, just because a senior executive at one of the world's most powerful companies suggested a course of action that a country chose to follow doesn't mean Glencore made it happen. But happen it did, and the consequences rippled round the world.

At the time, Mozambique experienced a massive uprising in response to increased food and fuel prices. Protests were organised via text messages and, in actions that foreshadowed those of governments in the Arab spring, the Mozambican state responded by shutting down text capability for pre-paid phones and sweeping up hundreds of protesters. Over a dozen people died, many were injured, and millions of dollars of damage was caused. It's safe to say that tens of thousands were pushed further towards hunger as a result of the higher wheat prices.

Six months later, the Arab world exploded. The riots which began the insurrection in Tunisia were partly in response to high food prices. In Egypt, the government increased spending on wheat to compensate for a fifty percent hike in the cost of imported grain and cereals – even so, the price of bread rose by a quarter in Cairo's private markets. In Libya, expensive and scarce food has fuelled the uprising against Muammar Gaddafi. Even the World Bank has woken up to the connection between food prices and political unrest, and warned that unstable regimes in North Africa and the Middle East were seriously undermined by discontent over the price of staples, like bread and pulses.

This association of high food prices and revolution isn't anything new, as this graph posted by Paul Mason on his blog, shows:

What this graphic demonstrates is the extent to which political instability and the cost of food, and bread especially, are connected. This is particularly interesting because the graph links the Springtime of the Peoples, the "failed" revolutions of 1848, with this year's Arab Spring. In 1848, only four countries were immune to the revolution which swept Europe: Russia and Poland, and Britain and Belgium. The first two had small middle classes – the group largely responsible for the upheaval in the rest of Europe – and very efficient means of controlling and monitoring dissent. The second two had strong, flexible constitutional governments which could implement change and respond effectively to demands for reform.

High food prices are not, then, the main cause of revolutions, but it is telling that Britain could feed her population for less than did other nations in Europe in 1848. With the repeal of the protectionist Corn Laws in 1846 and improvements in technology which allowed commodities to be shipped around the world more
quickly, grain prices remained low in Britain throughout the second half of the nineteenth century.

I think that it's best to think about food protests as catalysts for revolutions: they cause people who would not normally take to the streets – women in particular – to become involved in anti-government demonstrations. Protesting about food prices or shortages is not an especially politically partisan activity. Food protests demand simply that the state successfully distribute food and regulate prices – that it, in other words, fulfil one of its most basic obligations to its citizens.

As the Nobel prize-winning economist and all-round good egg Amartya Sen argued in his classic Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation (1981), food shortages and famines tend to occur not when there isn't enough food to go around, but, rather, when it isn't distributed effectively. This happens when systems of exchange – a labourer works in exchange for money which she can exchange for food – break down or change radically. Writing in 1976, Sen explained:

"A recent example was the 1974 famine in Bangladesh. The flood that destroyed the crop did reduce the availability of food, but the sharp decline in employment and the failure of exchange entitlement of labour was immediate, and the famine was made severe by that."

The European potato crop failed in the mid-1840s because of an infection of Phytophthora infestans but it was only in Ireland that this caused widespread and devastating famine. In 1845, at least a third of the Irish population ate only potatoes. When the blight destroyed the year's supply of potatoes there seemed to be nothing else to eat. Why? After all, not all Irish people were dependent on potatoes in the mid-nineteenth century: about half ate grains as well. A century and a half previously, all the Irish ate a considerably more varied diet. The difference was that the system of assizes – rules originating during the medieval period which governed the weight, quality, and distribution of bread – were repealed in 1838, allowing the price of bread the rise according to market forces. This meant that the Irish who were starving in 1845, and these were, overwhelmingly, the poorest proportion of the population, weren't able to buy bread – of which there was enough to feed everyone.

Famines are caused by bad harvests, but they are also the product of dysfunctional systems of trade and distribution. It's little wonder that they should cause revolutions: they demonstrate very clearly when governments are no longer able to respond to the needs of populations. In France, the Flour War erupted in 1775 after the introduction of laissez-faire economic policies caused the ancient guild system to go into a terminal decline: the groups of merchants who had once controlled the pricing and trade of grain and flour in France were no longer responsible for doing so, and bread prices rocketed. The widespread violence – caused frequently by women – forced Louis XVI to fire Jacques Turgot, his controller general.

This was a prime example of the state's inability to feed and care for its subjects. The War was also partly responsible for politicising poor French women, who on 5 October 1789 marched to Versailles to demand that Louis sign the Declaration of the Rights of Man and that he lower the price of bread. This very, very angry mob of women forced the royal family not only to accede to the new revolutionary Assembly, but to move to Paris.

It isn't necessarily the case the famine and food shortages will cause revolution: there was a catastrophic famine in North Korea in the mid-nineties and the country still has periodic food shortages, but dissent has not been allowed to grow into any significant anti-government activity. This is due to the effectiveness of North Korea's security forces and to the fact that North Koreans are simply too hungry, too tired, and too broken to overthrow their leadership. They have been starved into submission.
The Women’s March to Versailles, 5 October 1789

But food shortages are responsible for other mass movements too. The Cape Colony experienced a series of bad droughts during the second half of the nineteenth century, the worst of which occurred in the late 1850s and early 1860s, at the same time as outbreaks of rust on the wheat and the appearance of the oidium mildew on vineyards. The Cape’s newspapers described the increasingly desperate situation in rural areas: all the water dried up in Swellendam, farmers lost their sheep and horses, and the land was too dry to plough; there were allegations that farmers were stealing water from neighbouring farms’ rivers in Ladysmith; in Victoria West and Calvinia the cost of meat, groceries and other household goods rose sharply, and transporting produce to Port Elizabeth was almost impossible as draught animals were in short supply. Finding freshly-slaughtered mutton – the meat of choice in the Cape – was difficult. On top of this, the population, many of whom had already been weakened physically by food shortages, was also subjected to ‘unusually virulent’ epidemics of measles, typhus, and ‘white sore throat’ (diphtheria).

It is no coincidence that the 1860 Great Revival began in the worst affected rural areas. From the 1850s onwards, the ministers of the Dutch Reformed Church – numerically the biggest church in the Colony and the most politically powerful – had encouraged its members to pray for revival and religious ‘awakening’. Religious revivals are group manifestations of intense emotion, ranging from weeping and fainting to trances and speaking in tongues during which supplicants pray for conversion and salvation. Clergymen ascribed these outbursts of extreme religious enthusiasm to the presence of the Holy Spirit, but they were as much the product of social and economic change as anything else. There were at least three major revivals which swept most of the congregations of the Dutch Reformed Church in the nineteenth century (in 1860, 1874-1875, and 1884-1885), as well as several smaller, more localised ones.

The Great Revival in 1860 began in the colony's impoverished, hungry, and desperate rural interior. It was brought to the attention of the church’s leadership when a fifteen year-old coloured servant girl went into an ecstatic trance during a service in Worcester – then the parish of Andrew Murray jnr, one of the church’s most prominent ministers. The girl lived in the rural village of Montagu and was visiting friends in Worcester. Her behaviour, which whipped the other congregants into a religious frenzy, mimicked that which had taken root at her church in Montagu. The revival subsequently from Worcester throughout the Cape.

The colonial state – rightly – blamed farmers’ unwillingness to conserve water during times of plenty for the devastating effects of the drought. But others – including members of the Dutch Reformed Church – accused the Cape’s government of not doing enough to help them, and believed that the scarcity of rain and food were a punishment from God. People's willingness to turn to the church and to religion – away, in other words, from the state – showed that the authority of the state was being undermined by the crisis.

Similar circumstances contributed to the uprisings in the Arab world: instead of turning to charismatic religion, people in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, and elsewhere demanded the removal of unpopular, corrupt, and dysfunctional regimes. In a time of increasing food scarcity and volatility, governments will have to work harder to prove their necessity to their citizenry.

Further Reading

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