

Editors' Introduction

Radicalizing the History of Food

Food studies, the multidisciplinary study of the place of food and foodways in culture and society, has grown apace with public interest in the pleasures and politics of the table. As food politics leaps into the mainstream of political and popular culture, food studies scholars in general and food historians in particular must ask difficult questions about their relationship to an emergent public politics that often substitutes gustatory satisfaction, consumer choice, and grassroots education for collective organization. In recent years, a rich harvest of popular books such as Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, television series such as *Jamie Oliver's Food Revolution*, and films such as Morgan Spurlock's *Supersize Me* has placed questions of food safety, obesity, environmental degradation, and the global loss of local folkways in common conversation. The new food politics has asserted binaries of fast/slow, industrial/organic, and global/local foods. Yet maintaining this opposition between a pastoral landscape of traditional foods and the "dark satanic mills" of McDonaldization often requires historical amnesia about the place of food production and consumption in the rise and maintenance of agrarian empires, plantation slavery, and capitalist modernity.

The growing gap between food politics and the historically minded scholarship of food studies generates the central questions of this special issue of *Radical History Review* entitled "Radical Foodways." Can we use food as the gateway to think about broader questions of empire, migration, health, modernity, and the body, while simultaneously approaching food, in and of itself, as a critical subject of analysis, one increasingly important to our public readers and to our students?

In asking this question, our articles dissect some of the key categories of the field of food studies as it has developed in the last decade. Indeed, food studies has

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moved so rapidly to the center of the academy in part because it operates at so many levels, illustrating the conjunction of multiple contexts and meanings. Food studies insists first of all on the materiality of its subjects as tangible objects that are grown, cooked, processed, served, tasted, swallowed, digested, and excreted. Thus, we must think about food as an extension of the corporeal and an essential element of different traditions of health and medicine. Yet at the same time, as Claude Lévi-Strauss famously observed, food is “good to think,” rich in symbolic meaning, fetishized into national cuisines, marked as manifestations of differing social classes as well as racial or ethnic traits, and laden with nostalgic memories of lost pasts or homelands. Moreover, food, in its abundance and lack, exists at the heart of challenges for states and empires to govern, reform, and discipline their populations.

In refusing distinctions between the social, economic, cultural, symbolic, and medical, our articles expand the reaches of biopolitics and biomedicine. If the new food politics privileges individual morality and personal choice (in ways that often abandon the legislative, workplace, and domestic hurly-burly), this special issue offers new ways for historians and the public alike to think about the politics of the intimate, the corporeal, and the sensual. In turn, this offers new ways of identifying how the tendrils of empire, nation building, state formation, class and racial constructions, and gendered structures reach into the very banality of everyday life.

These articles deliberately trace new terrain in the academic study of food but remain mindful of the need for scholars to expand a food politics that for all its dreams of combining gastronomic pleasure with individual morality often depends on an imagined past of “pure eats.” Taken together, these articles identify new spaces, subjects, locales, and methods for historians to think about power, resistance, and struggle. It is particularly appropriate to challenge historians to consider “radical foodways,” because as much as the public has been willing to consider the personal politics of food, food is often dismissed in scholarly circles and the classroom as too enjoyable, too frivolous. Too often this has meant that otherwise useful studies—for example, of commodity production or imperial economies—consider foodstuffs as objects with no special relationship to bodies. In recognizing food as something that is simultaneously tasted, represented, produced, consumed, fetishized, even vomited, we render visible racial, gendered, and classed formations; the tense processes of governance; the quotidian imaginings of idealized civilization and modernity; and tenuous construction of collectivity and alterity. These articles insist on the importance of issues of hunger, state legitimacy, labor, and collective identity at the heart of a food politics that, in its ambition to join unadulterated pleasure with pure food, has tended to eschew the tragic, the contested, and the repressive. In the final analysis, these articles demonstrate the growing coherence of food history (and food studies) as an important field in its own right as well as the significance of the study of food in expanding our definitions of biomedicine, governance, colonialism, and migration.

The feature articles of this special issue are linked in pairs that together offer comparative geographic and methodological approaches. In a section entitled “Food, Medicine, and the State,” Sandra Aguilar-Rodríguez and Mark Swislocki each link food histories to (bio)medicine and its application to state practice. In the process, they historicize terms, notably *hunger* and *nutrition*, which, far from being universal measures of physical health, are culturally significant categories steeped in discourses of civilization and modernity. Aguilar-Rodríguez balances discourses around milk drinking with its actual practice in urban and rural twentieth-century Mexico. Drawing on biomedical notions of nutrition grounded in transnational discourses of civilization, lighter-skinned, male, and middle-class urban reformers sought to impose milk drinking on poorer children. Women, constructed in postrevolutionary Mexico as backward, yet charged with reproducing and feeding future citizens, struggled to implement the intimate demands of state intervention. Diet, Aguilar-Rodríguez demonstrates, is a key terrain for racialized, classed, and gendered contestation and, even in regional and national spaces, depends on the transnational circulation of ideas about civilization, modernity, and health. Swislocki offers a history of ideas about food and health in imperial and republican China. Disaggregating categories of nutrition and hunger, Swislocki confronts persistent metanarratives that linked Chinese national decline with famine. In extending Foucauldian notions of “governmentality”—the art of governing—to non-Western geographies and to nutrition, Swislocki highlights how the transformation of the Chinese state, and its changing visions of managing its population, depended on different biomedical ideologies. Republican China, dependent on Western biomedical ideas of calories and vitamins, sought legitimacy in promising to deliver the “sick man of Asia” from malnutrition. This marked a dramatic rejection of imperial Chinese conceptions of health and nutrition that focused on needs determined by regional difference.

In the “Empires of Food” section, Tanachai Mark Padoongpatt and Michael Wise extend histories of empire and colonialism as practices that demanded and, indeed, depended upon the reordering of foodways. Padoongpatt examines the nexus of food, ethnicity, and definitions of the exotic that emerged out of the informal twentieth-century American empire. As part of a critique of contemporary ideologies of multiculturalism that cast food as benign emblems of the pleasures of multiethnic societies, he locates the persistent racism of the touristic consumption of food, both abroad and at home. Although food may have represented economic opportunities and community building for Thai migrants, its broader consumption stripped food of its radical potential and in racially covert ways cast Thai culture as timeless and static. His work demonstrates how the politics and unequal cultural confrontations of empire—including patterns of migration that imperialism fostered—catalyzed associations of food, food production, and exoticism. Like Swislocki, Wise argues that our study of power and control must extend beyond abstract understandings of the body to encompass interactive relationships between the

body and its (colonized) environment, for which food is a critical link. His concern lies with colonialism as a process that reaches into the body itself. In understanding the Indian reservations of Montana as a colonial project, Wise examines the forced substitution of beef for bison. The regulation of meat emerged from representations of Indians as uncivilized and predatory, and attempts to incorporate them into a productive, Western economy. American officials believed that the centralization of killing into slaughterhouses would work to subordinate Blackfoot Indians into the cattle industrial labor system of the Great Plains. His brutal story exemplifies the ways that American Indian history has been conceptualized within a colonial frame. At the same time, he innovatively shows the importance of understanding the place of food, nutritional policy, and even food aid, in the development of imperial labor regimes.

Two articles, one by Camille Bégin and the other by Donna Gabaccia and Jeffrey Pilcher, compose the “Taste/Race/Ethnicity” section and offer food studies as key locations for understanding the lived experience of race and ethnicity. Both papers extend our study of how food as “taste” and as possessive elements of cultural communities becomes central to the contested relationships surrounding nation building manifested in the everyday and intimate process of, on the one hand, regulation and reform and, on the other hand, archive building and ethnography. Gabaccia and Pilcher take a comparative approach to the study of street foods of southern Italian migrants in New York City and Mexicans living in San Antonio, Texas. Two remarkably similar cultures of street foods confronted contrasting regulatory regimes in different U.S. urban spaces. Mexican vendors in the Southwest were able to preserve their traditional patterns of street food production in the face of decades of attempts by Anglo newcomers to impose Anglo urban patterns on newly conquered territory. This success, however, was won at the cost of being consigned to illegality, a legacy that still persists among more recent migrants from Latin America. Italian migrants were readily incorporated within the urban structures of an established metropolis, and partly as a result, Italian food was more likely to be considered worthy of fine dining. Moreover, their article demonstrates in its reading of business culture how foodways became the salient ethnic subjects of simultaneous touristic fascination and reformist concern. In an age in which food is increasingly an object of television voyeurism and of a touristic search for exotic edibles, their analysis demonstrates that food becomes labeled “ethnic food” in the ironic context of regulation, reform, and fascination. Bégin extends this examination of ethnic and racial fascination/repulsion cast through the lens of food in her reading of the American Work Projects Administration’s writings and ethnography of southern black and white foods. Drawing on the work of Ann Stoler, Bégin conceptualizes the WPA as a deliberate process of archive making that described the nation to itself in ways that depended on transforming the real experience of racial boundary crossing into social and cultural segregation. Extending our understand-

ings of taste and of the relationship of food to nationalism, she introduces the notion of a “sensory economy” that demonstrates how racialized economies are experienced and determined in sensual ways.

Our “(Re)Views” section engages directly with the potentials and limits of contemporary food politics and collectively identifies an active role for food history in complicating the moralistic, limiting assumptions of food politics that, in wishing for tasty, healthy futures, idolizes an assumed past. Our authors collectively consider the “good food revolution” — a revolution dependent on the pleasures of good eats, enticing reading, and enjoyable films and television. Yet these articles implicitly represent a debate among food scholars about the relationship between the academy, public, kitchen, farm, and restaurant. Rebecca O’Neill, in an overview of recent “boundary”-crossing books, suggests that there are real opportunities — and examples — of exchanges of ideas and questions between scholars and the public food revolution. As each in their own way depends centrally on the effects of knowledge production, she warns, nonetheless, of a growing divide between scholars and activists. The members of the Minnesota Agri-food collective add a voice of concern about the very methods of this self-styled food revolution, a revolution of spectacle provided and organized for the sake of viewers. In their critique of Jamie Oliver’s “movement for you,” they critique a politics of spectacle that targets and shames bodies, especially of women and children, that fall outside a norm. Food history, with its ability to place current food efforts in longer histories of (bio)political reform, not only challenges the “newness” of social movements that are televised but also reveals how the TV narrative — almost by necessity — refuses the cultural, racialized, and political economic pressures that shape diet. What remains is the prime-time shaming of the individual for the “free” choices that they have made. If O’Neill finds the good food revolution in the printed page and the collective in television, Laura Lindenfeld looks optimistically to the documentary film. Can films, with their explicit calls to action, facilitate change that transcends the spectacle? She insists that documentary films, unlike television, have a broader ability to promote a radical thinking about food systems (as opposed to the personalized eating that accompanies Jamie’s revolution). Lindenfeld seeks to move beyond comfortable declarations of radical potential to consider how films are consumed. Can the consumption of knowledge, however dramatically presented, provoke action? If, as the collective insists, the food revolution cannot be televised, Lindenfeld wonders if it can be filmed? Equally, we must consider the hidden racialized and gendered assumptions and binaries of food politics.

Precisely because too much of the good food revolution depends on an idealized past, food history can force considerations of cultural, economic, and political power. In the “Reflections” section, Amy Trubek considers other covert assumptions of the good food revolution, in particular a moral assumption of a right to a “good life.” The historical approach to food complicates a dichotomy between good and

bad foods. Moreover, proponents of “good food” depend on a notion of a pristine past in which food was fresh, wholesome, and tasty. Tracey Deutsch identifies a similar fetishizing of the past in a “pastoral nostalgia” about small farming. The ideal of the past depends on binaries of the natural and industrial that ignore histories of production and policy in a gendered valorizing of older women’s cooking. If grandmothers (or, maybe, great-grandmothers) offer the model for us all, then mothers, and their consumer choices, become targeted for the nefarious and processed. Deutsch warns us that even as bygone women are nostalgic heroes of local eating, women, as consumers and feminists refusing the demands of the kitchen, are blamed for our contemporary plight. In a politics of shame, similar to that identified by the collective, women provide a political cover. We must look more closely at intertwined histories of marketing, consumer choice, production, and family. She identifies a discomfiting alliance between the moralizing food revolution and the moral movement of evangelical Christianity. The image of Jamie Oliver praying over a buried deep-fat fryer begins to make sense.

Our “Teaching Radical History” forum (available in edited format herein and in an interactive format online) joined food scholars from across the world in conversation about the challenges of the food history classroom. Food historians must constantly struggle against the smirks and smiles of those who see it as “too fun.” Yet even as we debated whether food history is significant in and of itself or an entry point into broader transnational histories of empire, labor, and migration, we recognized that food history can foster a transition from radical history to radicalizing history—one with enormous potential to help students place themselves and their lives and histories into far-reaching critiques of hidden and tangible systems of power and exploitation.

Finally, a note on the visual material of these articles: taken together, they represent a suggestive commentary on the challenges of presenting food studies especially in an era when food, notably in its media representations, is a key and familiar element of visual cultures. This special issue, confined to pages and the Internet, still demonstrates how taste is a cultural process not indistinct from other sensory experiences, but also how much historical writing privileges the visual (in imagery and words). One of the key challenges of the food historian is to translate multisensory sources, histories, and modes of analysis into mediums that depend on the visual.

If our images suggest the unique methodological challenges of food history, our cover image highlights its potential. In 1924, the Willard Hotel in Washington, DC, offered a feast of bison meat to journalists—despite, as Michael Wise reminds us, the fact that Blackfeet Indians had been discouraged from the selfsame meals. In this case, a classically dressed chef, accompanied by a man in a Buffalo Bill suit, supplants the American Indian, and the hotel kitchen replaces the prairie.

This touristic evocation of bygone cultures and disappearing animals depends as much on the presence of the meat and its hinted taste as on the ironic placement of the chef's whites, Buffalo Bill, and tuxedos. Piled high on a platter in thick slab cuts with the chef's knife poised to carve (or symbolically slaughter), the bison meat completes the tableau. The taste of meat is hinted at in its presentation; the height and burnished color evoke wildness, gaminess, and fleshiness. For the historian, this image reveals binaries that clarify the place of food history in its broader contexts. Wildness and savagery is set against civilization and domesticity and the hunted against the farmed. At the same time, a food once key to cultural and ethnic identities is transformed in the heat of the kitchen and in the light of the flashbulb into an object of touristic fascination. The photo recalls the exoticism of food from colonized people restaged at the heart of the imperial metropole. The hotel kitchen provides a backdrop for a scene of adventuresome dining not unlike contemporary television shows depicting dining adventures in strange lands. If, as historians, we place these slabs of meat at the center of our analysis, we gain entry into histories of the most intimate experiences of power, exploitation, and resistance.

—Daniel Bender and Jeffrey M. Pilcher

