

EDITORIAL

Editorial – food in global history

‘Within the past few decades’, wrote the food historian Jeffrey Pilcher in a historiographic article published in the 2016 *American Historical Review*, ‘[t]he historical study of food has emerged as part of the new cultural history ... But the recent cornucopia of research has also been inspired by a growing interest in food within the wider society.’¹ Three articles in this issue, submitted separately but brought together here as a cluster, demonstrate the truth of Pilcher’s comment, and represent only some of the rich harvest of food research in global history. (Food metaphors are hard to avoid when one is writing about food.) They approach food from three different angles – as a consumable, a commodity chain, and a global trade good – yet offer many points of overlap.

Penelope Francks challenges analyses of relative living standards across the Great Divergence, which have argued that greater consumption of more nutritious food, especially livestock products, in England and other regions of northern Europe, were in part responsible for economic development and eventual industrialization. Such quantitative assessments, she asserts, fail to capture what people actually ate, which can offer an alternative window onto changing living standards. She uses evidence derived from the work of food historians of Japan to discuss the development of the Japanese diet in the past, and compares this with conclusions that have been drawn about significant changes in the English diet, including consumption of staple grains, vegetables and fruits, animal products, foraged plants, and commercially processed foods. Francks also surveys changing domestic and larger-scale techniques of food production, and concludes that, in Japan as well as in England, many people had increasing access to a greater variety of food, prepared and served in more complex ways. Opportunities to ‘trade up’ to higher-quality, more enjoyable, and more nutritious foods increased in both places, though what these were was quite different. Whereas in England the ‘respectability basket’ that embodied changing dietary living standards included meat, dairy products, and processed food items, in Japan it included a wider range of vegetables and fruit, along with commercially processed tofu, soy sauce, and sake.

Thomas DuBois examines one element in what has long been considered part of the ‘modern’ food basket, beef, analysing commodity chains that took China’s beef to growing markets in Russia, Japan, and elsewhere. As a corrective to accounts of the beef trade that only examine the Atlantic and only focus on the largest exporters and the largest and wealthiest importers, he traces three chains that developed in China from the 1730s through to the 1930s: the Qing-era caravan trade that drove live sheep and cattle from Mongolia to Beijing; the Harbin meat-packing industry that grew up around the Russian China Eastern Railway to sell Mongolian beef to the Russian Far East; and the Japanese-dominated export of beef from Qingdao. DuBois argues that the development of China’s cattle and beef industries is not a single story, but rather the confluence and progression of numerous local ones, which created a complex and

¹Jeffrey M. Pilcher, ‘The embodied imagination in recent writings on food history’, *American Historical Review*, 121, 3, 2016, p. 861. For a recent survey of this cornucopia of food research, see Paul Freedman, Joyce E. Chaplin, and Ken Albala, eds., *Food in time and place: the American Historical Association companion to food history*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2014.

multidirectional network of producers, processors, and consumers. These Chinese beef chains shared elements with the more familiar Atlantic ones, including a transition from live trade to industrial slaughter and refrigerated transport, greater investment in the early twentieth century involving domestic and foreign capital, and a range of strategic and political considerations. But they also differed in that Chinese beef production was more web-like, with individuated and diverse regional production chains that supplied both internal and external markets, whereas the Atlantic and Australian beef trades developed smooth point-to-point chains largely run by global players that connected interior pastures to finishing, slaughtering, refrigeration, and shipping industries on the coast, and then to the world.

Gema Aparicio and Vicente Pinilla also focus on a staple in long-distance food trade, analysing the dynamics of international trade in cereals, primarily wheat, in the first third of the twentieth century, and examining the causes of the significant declines in this trade and the associated prices that took place after 1929. To do so, they construct and use a database based on the statistical yearbooks published by the International Institute of Agriculture in Rome, and compare the trade in cereals with the general trade in food and agricultural products. Their study begins in the final decades of the first wave of globalization, which the expansion of free trade boosted, and ends in the 1930s, when this globalization collapsed. Although protectionist measures developed in response to the crisis of 1929 were responsible for some of the decline, they find that the relative importance of cereals in global trade was already diminishing decades before this. This decline was partly the result of restrictions on the grain trade by countries such as France, Germany, Italy, and Spain, designed to promote self-sufficiency in the production of cereals. But it was also a consequence of the changing dietary living standards that Francks discusses, as rising incomes allowed people to diversify their diets and eat more meat and vegetables rather than grain. Aparicio and Pinilla remind us that animals are consumers as well as products in the food chain, noting that trends in the trade in maize ran counter to those in wheat, even increasing during the Great Depression, because of steady demand in Europe for maize as animal feed.

These three articles highlight the many actors who shaped changing patterns in the production, trade, and consumption of food, including government officials and agencies, shipping and transport companies, and large-scale import and export merchants, but also farmers, herders, and individual consumers. They also reveal complexities – sometimes unexpected – in patterns of dietary development and the trade in foodstuffs. For example, Francks notes that in 2013 UNESCO declared the ‘traditional Japanese diet’ of plain rice and small side dishes of fish or vegetables part of the ‘intangible cultural heritage of humanity’, while DuBois suggests that by a century ago that traditional diet included some beef. This may have still been only an occasional luxury, but it was enough to worry Chinese observers that Japanese demand could have a major impact on the population of draught animals in China.

Changing consumer demand, new technologies of production, and fluctuating government policy continue to have an impact on local, regional, and global foodways, of course. Disruptionhub.com, which predicts every January what the biggest disruptions of that year will be, named ‘meatless meats’ one of 2018’s key disruptive technologies, and it remains to be seen what the current tariff showdowns will mean for my farmer neighbours in the US Midwest. Prediction about anything in the contemporary political climate is difficult, but a very safe one is that interest in the global history of food will continue, and that it is welcome.

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