Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-48383-4 — Many Mouths
Nadja Durbach
Excerpt
More Information

Introduction

The Politics of Pickles

In 1968 Magnus Pyke argued that what “human communities choose to eat is only partly dependent on their physiological requirements, and even less on intellectual reasoning and a knowledge of what these physiological requirements are.” Pyke, a nutritional scientist who had worked under the chief scientific advisor to Britain’s Ministry of Food during World War II, illustrated his point by recounting that, in preparing the nation for war, military officials had demanded that land be allocated to grow gherkins. They had insisted, Pyke recalled, that the British soldier “could not fight without a proper supply of pickles to eat with his cold meat.” The Ministry of War had apparently been “unmoved to learn from the nutritional experts” that pickles offered little of material value to the diet, as they had almost no calories, vitamins, or minerals. The Ministry of Food, Pyke asserted, nevertheless designated precious agricultural land for gherkin cultivation. For what the human body requires, this former government official conceded, often needs to be subordinate to what “the human being to whom the body belongs” desires.[1]

This pickle episode exemplifies why a book about government feeding must be more than merely a study of the impact of food science on state policy. The nutritional sciences, which began to emerge in the late eighteenth century and made significant advances from the 1840s,[2] established that the nutritive and energy potential of food could be measured, calibrated, and deployed. Food science might have been one of the “engine sciences” that Patrick Carroll positions as central to modern state formation, particularly in the British Isles.[3] But if science was integral to modern forms of governance, it must nevertheless be understood not as preceding and dictating state action but rather, as Christopher Hamlin has argued, as “a resource parties appeal to (or make up as they go along) for use wherever authority is needed: to authorize themselves to act, to compete for the public’s interest and money, to neutralize real or potential critics.”[4] That there was “a sharp division" between "theoretical knowledge" of nutrition and "its practical implementation"[5] was thus often strategic. The results of scientific studies of food were deployed as "facts" both by and against the state when it was useful to do so, exposing the ways in which this body of knowledge has been constructed not only through objective, neutral, and experimental practices but also through historically contingent social, cultural, and political processes.[6] That researchers rarely agreed among themselves as to dietary standards during the period under investigation here only made it more difficult for any individual or single body of experts to garner enough authority to control the discourses of food values and then convince state agents to prioritize this expertise over other political, economic, or social concerns. It is for these reasons that the nutritional sciences make sporadic, and always culturally and politically contextualized, appearances in this study of government food rather than acting as either its narrative thread or its chief explanatory device.

The decision to plant gherkins on agricultural land desperately needed for growing nourishing foodstuffs for the home front had nothing to do with nutrition, given that it was widely agreed that a pickle had almost no nutritive value. Pyke acknowledged that the Ministry of Food understood that this decision in fact undermined its own attempts to replace imported foods – which had provided two-thirds of the nation's calories before the war – with homegrown healthy produce.[7] That the Ministry of Food felt compelled by the Ministry of War to prioritize the morale of soldiers by catering to their food preferences, even at the expense of the health of civilians, suggests that state agencies had to negotiate feeding priorities, often pitting the presumed needs of different British populations against each other. In defending cultural tastes and traditional eating habits, even during a moment of severe food shortages, these government authorities demonstrated that they understood that food was a complex "munition of war." If the Ministry of Food repeatedly claimed that it was "vital to the nation that every scrap of food is used to the best advantage," its officials nevertheless conceded that the uses of food exceeded the material.[8] However unassuming, the soldier's pickled gherkin was thus part of a broader cultural politics of state feeding that this book analyzes from the workhouses of the 1830s to the postwar Welfare State.

Following the dictum of anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Many Mouths* analyzes government food as something that may or may not be "good to eat" but is definitely "good to think [with]."[9] Food has symbolic power and carries cultural meaning because eating is intimate: One takes food into one's being, assimilating it into the self.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-48383-4 — Many Mouths
Nadja Durbach
Excerpt
More Information

Consuming particular foods, sometimes in ritualized ways, is not, however, only an individual act as it frequently also marks the eater as a member of a group, reinforcing the centrality of food to culture.[10] If eating is part of fashioning individual and group identities, this takes place within political and economic contexts in which its "animal reality" is laid bare.[11] As the most crucial scarce resource, the essence of bare life,[12] food is a highly politicized object of exchange. Its distribution exposes the ways in which relations among the ranks, sexes, races, and generations have been established and managed, thus revealing social hierarchies.[13] This is most evident when viewed on a planetary scale. That the Global North is currently suffering a crisis of obesity at the same time that the Global South experiences chronic hunger is not, Chris Otter argues, "a gigantic paradox." Instead, it is the result, he asserts, of modern economic and geopolitical processes. These two sides of the worldwide food crisis are thus "the starkest, most basic way in which global inequality is manifest."[14] That the highest rates of obesity in the United States and Britain occur among groups who also have the highest poverty rates complicates understandings of the ways in which socioeconomic disparities affect food consumption and are thus written on the body itself.[15] Since this happens in ways that are neither self-evident nor consistent over time and space, historians have studied food fights in order to elucidate how power has operated in a range of past societies.[16] Given that food serves as "the most visceral connection between government and population,"[17] focusing on government feeding in particular allows for analysis of the nature of a state's investments in specific groups of subjects. At the same time, it reveals how a variety of publics have contested the state's authority by asserting their own needs, desires, and rights, either through making specific claims on government resources or by refusing the services offered.

Many Mouths thus follows other recent historical scholarship that in taking "the culinary turn" has brought "the mental, discursive worlds of cultural history together with the material, embodied understanding of the past."[18] It is a study of the material and the symbolic importance of feeding programs initiated by the British government for particular target populations from the 1830s through the 1960s. I use a series of case studies – paupers, prisoners, famine victims, prisoners of war, schoolchildren, wartime civilians on the home front, and pregnant women, infants, and toddlers – to think about the role that food played in debates about the appropriate relationship between these different groups of British subjects and the state. I demonstrate the ways in which government food was central to negotiations around national, class, ethnic, racial, colonial, generational, and gender identities and

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-48383-4 — Many Mouths
Nadja Durbach
Excerpt
More Information

the cultural meanings attached to these subject positions during a period when the role of the state was consistently being reevaluated from within and without.

This is not, however, a top-down administrative history of government programs. As Patrick Joyce has argued, the state is productive: "[I]t confers on us identities, rights and values, enabling us as citizens to criticise and refashion it."[19] *Many Mouths* proposes that potential beneficiaries of state-feeding programs were not passive recipients of food aid. As we shall see, paupers demanded roast beef dinners, famine victims refused to eat food that compromised their caste practices, prisoners of war expected that culturally familiar foodstuffs be dispatched to them, and the home front population across the class spectrum utilized canteens that had been established for the working poor. If in other national contexts government food produced a national cuisine through the disciplining of consumer habits,[20] in tracking these consumers' assertions of their food rights, my case studies illustrate how much the British state was forced to concede and cater to the public's conservative tastes and traditional eating practices, though in some cases it deployed these food habits to achieve its own ends. Although these publics were differently constrained by a range of social, economic, cultural, and political factors, they were nevertheless agents that actively shaped government feeding initiatives and thus the nature of the state itself.

In order to expose the complexities, nuances, and multiple logics of these programs, I offer a close reading of several key moments in the history of state feeding that reveal the tensions that emerged around the role of government, the rights of subjects and citizens, and the place of particular populations within the British nation and its empire. Unlike other European histories of state food where a strong centralized state significantly impacted the development of policies and their deployment,[21] *Many Mouths* focuses on the introduction and operation of these schemes as negotiated processes that suggest the limits of the modern British state's ability to control its food programs in practice and thus to stabilize their meanings. Following James Vernon's argument that food and its lack can serve as a "critical locus for rethinking how forms of government and statecraft emerge and work,"[22] I argue that disputes over state feeding expose the ways in which the relationship between the governing and the governed was made and remade throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But instead of offering a generalized theory of the modern British state, this study foregrounds the inherent messiness of food fights in particular precisely because what we eat is always both materially and culturally significant.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-48383-4 — Many Mouths
Nadja Durbach
Excerpt
More Information

This book is bounded by two critical moments in the history of the modern British state. It begins with the reorganization of poor relief that was predicated on a centralized bureaucracy and solidified the state's commitment to market principles. It ends with the introduction of the Welfare State that explicitly rejected both the ideology of the poor law and the mantra of limited state intervention in its refashioning of the relationship between the citizen, society, and the state. But this book does not trace a growing state interest in feeding its citizens. Analyzing the period from the 1830s through the 1960s in fact underscores the incoherence and inconsistencies of the British government's food policies and the ways in which it instigated them anew to solve the problems it had identified at each historical juncture. *Many Mouths* thus seeks to understand the social, economic, and political theories that influenced the implementation of some feeding schemes but not others; the historical contexts in which these programs were formulated, implemented, and reworked; and crucially, how both the administrators and the recipients (intended or otherwise) of government food services realized, interpreted, and made meaning out of these exchanges.

Many Mouths begins in the workhouses of the 1830s, where Charles Dickens's Oliver Twist memorably and politely asked for more gruel. In doing so, the fictional Oliver and his real-life counterparts, who frequently demanded not only more gruel but also roast beef and plum pudding, challenged the state's claim to be providing sufficient and appropriate foodstuffs to those in its care.[23] By this moment what scholars have called the nineteenth-century "revolution in government" was well underway.[24] With the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, the British state (at least temporarily) levied fewer taxes and decreased public spending on the military. At the same time, however, it began to play a much greater role in the daily lives of British subjects despite prevalent discourses of laissez-faire, on the one hand, and the persistence of a culture of paternalism and voluntarism, on the other.[25] This is most evident in the reforms of the 1830s and 1840s, which saw increased government intervention (though some would have said interference) in the regulation of industries, in public health, in maintaining social order, and in the management of poverty.[26] To carry out these reforms in a uniform way that stamped out individual and local abuses, the British government evolved techniques that led to more centralized and more bureaucratic forms of administration. The first half of the nineteenth century thus witnessed the beginnings of a new form of statecraft predicated on the accumulation of empirical knowledge and the management and deployment of this information by those who claimed to use their specialized (though never actually disinterested) expertise in the service of the public good.[27] The expansion of bureaucracy in general led to a trained, salaried civil service and systems of governance that relied as much upon a range of professional administrators, who operated at varying removes from Westminster and Whitehall, as on the centralization of the structure of the state.[28] The 1834 New Poor Law, as we shall see, heralded these changes as its administrative architecture set the stage for a distinctly modern approach to statecraft.

In practice, the modern British state was shaped by the principles of classical political economy that emerged at the end of the eighteenth century. Based on the economic theories of Adam Smith and David Ricardo, the utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham and his disciples, and Thomas Malthus's principle of population, the field of political economy started to provide the ideological foundation for many of the state's decisions about the distribution of its scarce resources beginning in the 1830s. Although unevenly applied, this philosophy continued to inform some policies through at least the end of the nineteenth century. The rules of political economy dictated that the nation's wealth could be increased through the promotion of self-interest and the protection of individual liberties. The foundation of this system was free market capitalism. This did not mean that the state had no role to play beyond the securing of private property. Proponents of laissez-faire generally agreed that the state should provide services where individuals and corporations had failed to do so, or in cases where government could do so more efficiently, with less waste, and thus more cheaply. However, political economists argued that too much government intervention in market forces would only perpetuate poverty. Because the potential for the population to increase far outstripped the ability of the food supply to meet the needs of subsistence, Malthus argued in 1798 that population growth would need to be checked if individuals, and thus the nation, were to flourish. Malthus theorized that this would happen through war, famine, and disease, as well as through the deliberate decision to limit reproduction, though he advocated delayed marriage and sexual moderation rather than technologies of birth control.[29] Later couched in terms of the Social Darwinian maxim "survival of the fittest," this justified minimal government interference in the economy, particularly in relation to food resources, so as to allow natural and moral forces to weed out the "surplus population."

Although these ideas were heavily contested, the persistence of this philosophy frequently resulted in parsimonious policies that sought to minimize public spending on those widely considered overly dependent upon the state. This included the population of Ireland, much of which was left to perish in the name of political economy when

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-48383-4 — Many Mouths
Nadja Durbach
Excerpt
More Information

famine ravished the country between 1845 and 1852. At the same time, however, and despite this rhetoric of cheap government, the state actually grew in the 1830s and 1840s as successive Whig administrations enacted reforms that attempted to address the effects of rapid industrialization and urbanization, which had led to marked class conflict. It was in this period that the British government began to regulate factories and mines, to introduce public health measures, to inspect railways, to increasingly assume responsibility for the maintenance of social order, and to provide more central oversight of prisoners and paupers who, as institutionalized populations, were now being fed at government expense.

The period from the 1850s through the 1870s saw a further expansion of state powers, even under the administration of the Liberal Party, which had emerged out of a coalition of Whigs, free traders, and radicals in 1859. Under the leadership of William Gladstone, the Liberal Party championed personal liberties, laissez-faire capitalism, and a minimalist state. The second half of the nineteenth century nevertheless saw increased government intervention in the social life of the nation during both Liberal and Conservative administrations. This included the state provision of services such as libraries, museums, baths, and wash houses that the public could make use of at their discretion. But this period also witnessed the introduction of primary education (which became mandatory in some school districts from 1870 and across England and Wales in 1880), the state regulation of prostitution, and the tightening of the laws enforcing compulsory smallpox vaccination, all of which were widely contested in the name of personal rights.[30] Gladstonian liberalism, however, spawned no initiatives to feed the large numbers of people across the British Isles who remained desperately hungry even as others prospered during this era of relative political and social stability. But it was in this period that humanitarian rather than politico-economic theories of famine relief first began to circulate in India in response to a series of devastating food crises that imperiled the subcontinent in the wake of Britain's imposition of direct rule in 1858.

Although, as Elaine Hadley has argued, mid-Victorian political liberalism was fraught with contradictions,[31] it was not until the 1880s that new political ideologies began seriously to challenge the gospel of limited government, despite the fact that the functions of the state had been expanding over the course of the century. The term "liberalism" has a complex history within both British society and its historiography, not least of all because its definition was increasingly contested from within the Liberal Party itself.[32] Through the 1870s, this focus on the securing of a free market and personal liberties – the latter assumed largely to be the property of middle- and upper-class white men – was intimately associated with Gladstone's Liberal Party. But in the last decades of the nineteenth century, a progressive faction within its ranks began advocating for more government intervention in the social and economic life of the nation. Government should not merely safeguard the rights of individuals and their property, they argued, but seek to better society by improving the lives of the most vulnerable British subjects.[33]

This New Liberalism emerged in the 1880s, the decade when the global output of manufactured and agricultural goods began to outpace Britain's own. The resulting economic downturns in both the agricultural and industrial sectors and the growing influence of Marxism across Europe led to the flourishing of trade union activity and the emergence of a range of socialist ideas and organizations in Britain, which could no longer confidently claim to be "the workshop of the world."[34] Several industrial disputes that culminated in the 1889 London dock strike revealed the extent of working-class discontent with standards of living, despite an expansion of the franchise in 1884 to include a majority of working-class men. At the same time, a series of social investigations, such as George Sims' 1883 *How the Poor Live*, exposed the middle-class reading public to the scope of urban poverty, warning them of the social instability wrought by the ever-growing gulf between rich and poor that persisted in one of the wealthiest nations in the world. These exposés suggested that these stark economic divides were endemic to capitalism rather than resulting from an individual's moral failure to pull oneself up by one's bootstraps. The solutions, they argued, must therefore be systemic changes driven by the state, though housing tended to take precedence over food in these accounts. Sims, who was a dramatist as well as a journalist and thus favored a colorful metaphor however condescending, compared the working class to a "good, patient, long-suffering dog, chained to a filthy kennel for years, and denied even a drink of clean water." This "snarling" dog, he warned, was now "sniffing viciously in the vicinity of someone's leg." Thus, Sims called not for an increase in charitable giving but rather for "a good marrowy bone, with plenty of legislative meat upon it," as only government measures, he implied, could ameliorate economic and social conditions enough to stave off revolution.[35] New Liberals heralded this call, maintaining that the nation could no longer ignore these profoundly destabilizing problems; their answer was for the state to take direct action.

In the 1880s and 1890s, a range of socialist associations and political parties began to emerge that echoed and buttressed New Liberalism's

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-48383-4 — Many Mouths
Nadja Durbach
Excerpt
More Information

call for increased state intervention.[36] These progressive philosophies of governance resulted first in housing reforms and in municipal experiments in the “gas and water socialism” that became identified with the London County Council around the turn of the century.[37] By the early twentieth century, these demands for a much more interventionist state also became central to the platform of the new Labour Party, which explicitly sought to ameliorate the lives of the working class not only through strengthening the trade union movement but also through social reforms that addressed economic disparities head on. There were significant disagreements between the parties, particularly around issues of industrial labor.[38] The coalescence of New Liberalism and Labour ideals about the role of the state as an agent of social reform nevertheless led to a range of parliamentary legislation in the first decades of the twentieth century that reflected this shared belief that the purpose of government was to create the conditions in which all individuals had equal opportunities to flourish. The New Liberals’ introduction of old age pensions, unemployment and medical insurance, and crucially, school meals and medical inspection was a rejection of the economic liberalism that had shaped government policy during much of the nineteenth century. But it also meant that, on the eve of World War I, the state was much more present in the daily lives of the British public than ever before.

Although the British wartime state attempted to minimize government regulation of the economy, the exigencies of total war in the end required increased state control. These measures included the introduction of home front rationing during the last months of the hostilities and the regulation of food parcels dispatched to British POWs abroad. The industrial depressions of the interwar period in turn stimulated more, rather than less, state involvement in the economy despite attempts after 1918 to return to “business as usual.” The Liberal Party went into decline during this period, divided by profound philosophical differences within its ranks as well as a range of political, economic, and imperial issues. But both the Labour and Conservative Parties, from 1931 working together as a coalition National Government, increasingly promoted protections and subsidies for local industries, as well as the expansion of state services. The state’s assumption of administrative control over a scheme to provide free and subsidized milk in schools in 1934 embodied both of these trends. When war loomed again in 1939, the British public’s daily experience of the state, both central and local, was thus even more tangibly felt, which prepared citizens for the controls that were swiftly put into place at the onset of the hostilities.[39] These included an almost complete regulation of the food

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-48383-4 — Many Mouths
Nadja Durbach
Excerpt
More Information

supply. Not all food policies were universally welcomed or consistently embraced on the home front. The government's assurance that all would have access to adequate amounts of the basic alimentary requirements nevertheless maintained the nation's morale and rendered the Ministry of Food one of the most popular government agencies during the hostilities (though not in its aftermath, given the extent of postwar rationing).[40] Significantly, it also paved the way for a new vision of the modern British state that emerged in the wake of the war.

Many Mouths ends in the period of the Welfare State. Born out of longer trends in the government provision of social services, the 1942 Beveridge Report, and the immediate experiences of a state-controlled economy during World War II, the Welfare State attempted to actualize a new philosophy of government that stood in direct opposition to the New Poor Law. When the Labour Party won the election in 1945, it introduced a comprehensive system of social welfare programs that provided cradle-to-grave care to all citizens. Only the National Assistance program that furnished cash benefits to the necessitous was means tested. Health care, unemployment insurance, family allowances, and a range of other programs including the Welfare Foods Service, the subject of Chapter 7, were provided to all citizens, regardless of need.

Although the Welfare State did not sweep away social inequalities or firmly held beliefs about the distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor, historian Carolyn Steedman remembers its food programs as explicitly reconfiguring the relationship between the citizen and the state. Looking back on her 1950s childhood, Steedman maintained, "I think I would be a very different person now if orange juice and milk and dinners at school hadn't told me, in a covert way, that I had a right to exist, was worth something."[41] In Figure I.1, Dr. Edith Summerskill, Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Food, hands a bottle of this orange juice to a small child. This 1950 photograph, likely produced by the Labour government for propaganda purposes, illustrates the state's deliberate positioning of itself as the provider of welfare benefits to its most vulnerable citizens. If welfare orange juice instilled in Steedman a sense of self-worth, a message this photograph attempted to inspire, in my story it has a more complicated history. I interrogate the ways in which the government pitted the welfare of its domestic citizens over its colonial subjects, thus questioning the ideology at the heart of the Welfare State and the way its tenets actually played out in practice.

My case studies trace these shifts in philosophies of governance as they pertained to the modern British state's strategic use of food.