Pouring Ourselves a Large Gin

WHAT WE EAT IS OUR BUSINESS, OR SO WE GENERALLY believe. We resent being told to consume more vegetables, cut back on salt, and embrace lentils, particularly when the advice emanates from the government. The food writer Diana Henry summed it up: 'When the government tells us to watch our drinking I want to pour myself a large gin.'[1] It's not simply that we are contrary. We also wonder whether such interventions into our private lives violate the underlying principles of democracy. Shouldn't we be allowed to make our own dietary mistakes? New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg learned this to his cost in 2012, when he attempted to ban the sale of extra-large soft drinks. The scheme failed because critics viewed it as an attack on individual freedom. 'New Yorkers need a Mayor, not a Nanny', shouted a full-page advert in the *New York Times*. And when a school near Rotherham, in the north of England, eliminated deep-fried Turkey Twizzlers and fizzy drinks from its cafeteria, outraged mothers rose in protest, insisting that their children had a right to eat burgers, potato crisps and other unhealthy food.[2] Our diets, we feel, are our own concern.

At the same time, we rely on the government to ensure that our food is safe; the pan-European horsemeat scandal focused attention on what can happen when regulatory systems go awry. In January 2013 shocked consumers across the continent learned that their supermarket 'beef' lasagne and chilli con carne might have contained a significant percentage of horsemeat laced with phenylbutazone and other dangerous chemicals. Blame was ascribed in part to reductions in government inspection programmes. We expect the state to help us eat safely and feel let down when it does not. We are also troubled by reports that our

fondness for sugar and disdain for exercise is causing a costly crisis in public health and hindering economic growth. British newspapers regularly warn that diabetes and obesity are on course to bankrupt the National Health Service and researchers calculate the economic costs of our collective failure to eat properly. One survey placed the figure at well over fifty billion dollars for the United States alone.[3] Other people, at least, ought to eat sensibly, because their ill-advised consumption habits affect us all.

Our inconsistent attitude towards how much say anyone, and especially the government, ought to have in shaping our diets induces what psychologists call cognitive dissonance – the sense of vague discomfort that results from holding incompatible or contradictory beliefs and values. We'd like to pour a large gin, but fear that if everyone followed that approach the social and economic consequences would be disastrous. Nor is ours the first generation to worry about striking a balance between dietary freedom and public well-being. During the Second World War, deficiencies of the US diet were identified as a threat to national security after a shockingly large number of army recruits were rejected on grounds of ill-health attributed to bad diet. In response, government officials established a wide-ranging programme of dietary reform aimed not only at managing the United States' limited food resources but also at improving public health by changing the nation's eating habits. Yet the very people charged with implementing this programme suspected that it was fundamentally incompatible with liberal democracy. The federal Committee on Food Habits fretted that its own programme was encouraging the sort of submissive rule-following it believed characteristic of totalitarian regimes. Real Americans would, and should, resist such intrusions into their private life.[4]

These tensions between individual choice, public well-being, and the wealth and strength of the nation were born in the Enlightenment. It was in the eighteenth century that everyday eating habits became a matter of state concern. New theories about how to build economically successful states led to new ideas about the relationship between individual diets and national resilience – to the emergence, in other words, of what we might call food security. *Feeding the People* offers a deep history of the concept of food security and a fresh account of how eating became part

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of modern politics. It also helps explain our own fraught relationship with dietary guidelines by showing how healthy eating became embedded within a neoliberal framework valorising personal responsibility and choice rather than state-led intervention.

Feeding the People tells that story through the history of a food that is emblematic of this transformation: the potato. Today, the potato is a global staple. According to the United Nations, there is not a single country in the world where potatoes are not grown. They are fourth on the list of the world's most important food crops; China is the largest producer, harvesting nearly 100,000,000 tonnes in 2016. Mashed, stewed with cauliflower and cumin seeds, deep fried, made into pancakes, or prepared in thousands of other ways, potatoes are eaten daily around the globe. At present Europeans are the most enthusiastic consumers. Turkmenistan leads the field, at nearly 140 kilos per person per year.[5] Potatoes are an exemplary modern food. Because of their global importance and nutritional merits, the UN declared 2008 to be the International Year of the Potato. (See recipe for Sichuan Stir-Fried Potato Slivers.)

This is a remarkable achievement for a food that was totally unknown to most of humanity before the sixteenth century. Until then the only people who ate potatoes lived along the spine of mountains that runs from the Andes in Bolivia and Chile northwards through the Rockies. These mountains, the homeland of potatoes, were also home to the vast Inca empire, whose overthrow by Spanish conquistadors in the sixteenth century released a whirlwind that blew potatoes to Ireland, India and beyond. The story of the potato's spread around Europe and the world traces out a new history of the relationship between everyday eating habits and the modern state.

According to most scholars, the notion that the population's eating habits affect a state's political and economic security developed between the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries. It was then, explain historians, that individual health ceased to be a private concern and became a matter of public importance.[6] Politicians and officials in many countries became ever more concerned about the impact of poor diet on national efficiency and strength, and responded with a range of

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Sichuan Stir-Fried Potato Slivers

More potatoes are grown and eaten in China than anywhere else in the world. Along with chilli peppers, maize and peanuts, potatoes reached East Asia from the Americas over the seventeenth century, and slowly penetrated local foodways. This modern recipe for spicy matchstick potatoes translates several of these new foods into a recognisably Sichuan-style idiom.

Sichuan Stir-fried Potato Slivers
[炒土豆丝 *chao tudousi*]

<u>A. Ingredients</u>

potatoes (250 g.)
spring onion (25 g.)
4 dried chillies
vegetable oil (40 g.)
salt (2 g.)

<u>B. Method</u>

1. Peel and wash the potatoes. Slice into coarse slivers. Steep in cold water and rinse a few times to remove some of the starch, then drain the water. Cut spring onions into 2.5 cm-long sections. Remove the stems from the dried chillies and cut into 2.5 cm-long sections.
2. Add oil to wok and heat to medium-high. First add dried chillies, spring onion and salt – be quick. Once the chillies have turned reddish-brown, add potatoes and stir-fry rapidly until done, remove from the wok and it is ready.

<u>C. Distinguishing features</u>

The potato slivers are crisp. The flavour is slightly spicy. Good for eating with rice or for accompanying alcohol.

innovative new programmes, from state-subsidised school dinners to healthy-eating campaigns. Hunger and malnutrition were transformed from personal misfortune to national emergency, notes James Vernon, because they began to be perceived as threatening 'political stability,

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economic production, and racial efficiency' in ways that affected all of society. They demanded 'not just philanthropic intervention but forms of statecraft'.[7] The voluminous writings on food security similarly connect developments during the inter-war years to the deepening conviction that adequate diets were essential to national and global stability. The establishment in the late 1940s of international agencies such as the FAO is usually considered the culmination of this new conviction.[8]

The belief that effective governance entails effective management of the population's eating habits is an essential part of modernity. Developments since the late nineteenth century transformed many aspects of the state's relationship to food, and politicians and officials have been able to design and implement ambitious projects in ways unimaginable a century earlier. The degree to which states accepted responsibility for the population's welfare also changed significantly. Yet the fundamental modern belief that everyday eating habits shape a nation's political and economic success emerged not in the late nineteenth century, but a hundred years earlier, during the Enlightenment.

This chronology matters. Situating these ideas in their eighteenth-century context allows us to see the close connections between enlightened debates about food, political economy, public well-being and effective statecraft, all of which have decisively shaped today's world. Everyday eating practices acquired a new political importance during the Enlightenment because statesmen and scientists, philosophers and philanthropists, became ever more convinced that there was a correlation between diet and national prowess. The eighteenth century also saw the emergence of the conviction that the way to guarantee a well-functioning economy and a secure state was by enabling people to *choose* the right foods, rather than by requiring them to do so. The key point, to paraphrase the political scientist Bernard Harcourt, is that the logic that underpins today's approach to nutritional governmentality 'was embedded in the first articulations of liberal economic theory'.[9]

We can blame the Enlightenment for our ambivalence about whether our diets are our business, or everyone's business. Today's healthy-eating

plates, food pyramids and governmental dietary guidelines have their roots in the eighteenth century. So does the hostility to more robust forms of intervention, such as Mayor Bloomberg's soda ban. Following the potato on its journey from the Andes to everywhere is one way of tracing out that history. The history of the potato also opens up alternative vistas for thinking about food security, or, better, about what is often called food sovereignty, which stresses the importance of empowering locals to determine their own eating and agricultural practices. Andean villagers, rather than the Inca state, were the protagonists of the potato's emergence as a South American staple, and early modern peasants and labourers were the pioneers who spread potato cultivation across Europe. Today, UN analysts and agricultural experts increasingly recognise that small farmers hold the key to a sustainable agricultural future.

Following the potato in its travels helps tell this story because it reveals these intersections with particular clarity. Potatoes make visible the ways in which our ideas about eating are entangled with the emergence of capitalism and its celebration of the free market. The potato's story also reminds us that ordinary people make history in ways that continue to shape our lives. Potatoes, in short, are a good way of thinking about the origins of the modern world. *Feeding the People* argues ultimately that we cannot resolve our current concerns about food justice and security without understanding the genesis of the very language and ideas we employ in their analysis.

NOURISHING THE COMMONWEALTH

What ordinary people eat has not always been of much interest to the state. *That* people ate was of course very important. Rulers everywhere have long been concerned about the political consequences of famine. Nothing, declared the Tudor politician William Cecil, 'will sooner lead men to sedition than dearth of victuals'.[10] Attention was usually focused on ensuring an adequate food supply to cities, whose concentrated populations offered the greatest potential for rebellion. Polities in many parts of the ancient and early modern world maintained public

warehouses that could distribute grain to urban residents in moments of shortage. The Roman empire for example devoted considerable resources to providing residents of the capital with a reliable supply of grain. The Chinese state was unusual in using its system of state granaries to feed both urban and rural populations. From around the seventh century CE Chinese rulers oversaw a network of grain storehouses located in many parts of the empire whose purpose was to prevent famine and maintain consistent supplies for all their subjects, not only those living in cities. Kings were also alert to the dangers of ignoring the food needs of their own armed forces. In the Andes, the Inca state oversaw an extensive network of storage facilities, which it used to warehouse food and other goods for itself and its troops.[11]

In addition, rulers have long recognised the importance of regulating food prices. The Ottoman empire intervened decisively in the grain cycle to ensure that Istanbul received the hundreds of tons of flour it required daily. Ottoman regulations controlled the prices at which food was sold and at times directly oversaw the transport of grain to urban markets, using a fleet of state-owned ships.[12] Municipal governments in many medieval European cities regulated both the cost and quality of foodstuffs. The guild system also aimed to ensure that foods sold at market conformed to the required standards of healthfulness and quality. Food-suppliers who did not satisfy these expectations were fined. A 1379 English ordinance for example sanctioned London bakers for selling meat pasties containing 'garbage, not befitting, and sometimes stinking, in deceit of the people'.[13] Outlawing such practices was a legitimate, indeed necessary, exercise in governance.

Civic authorities at times also regulated the luxuriousness of meals served at weddings or other festive gatherings. Legislation might prohibit certain dishes or limit the total budget. The Roman *Lex Fannia*, from the second century BCE, restricted the number of courses that could be served at private feasts. Such regulations might in addition detail who was, and was not, permitted to eat particular foodstuffs. Peasants in seventeenth-century Japan were banned from consuming a wide range of foods including tofu and white rice.[14] These sumptuary laws aimed to

prevent wasteful expenditure or sinful overindulgence, and also worked to preserve social distinctions. By the sixteenth century European regulations moreover began to reflect a concern that individual or communal gluttony presaged a descent into more general immorality, in ways that threatened the body politic as a whole. The puffy, overfed body of Henry VIII represented for French Catholics both the physical dangers of overindulgence and the moral bankruptcy of Reformation England. The dietary failings of individuals thus influenced, and mirrored, the spiritual state of the country.[15]

Feeding the hungry is furthermore a charitable imperative in most religions. For Sikhs the distribution of food to those in need is a central religious obligation. In early modern Europe and the Mediterranean world a variety of religious charities likewise dispensed food to prisoners, paupers and other hungry folk.[16] These associations between feeding the poor and the larger religious framework helped position governmental attention to the food supply as a matter of ethics. For a prince, insisted the Confucian philosopher Mencius, failing to provide grain in times of famine was the moral equivalent of murder. In pre-Mughal Bengal, kings were likewise expected to distribute rice to those in need. Hunger imposed a moral obligation on rulers, and those who failed to live up to this obligation risked a loss of legitimacy.[17]

For most ancient and early modern states, in sum, ensuring that urban populations had access to a steady and safe supply of food was a recognised component of statecraft. Rulers moreover demonstrated their moral fitness to govern in part through their concern for the well-being of the poor. These multiple involvements with the food supply, observed the historian Charles Tilly, 'did not by any means form a harmonious whole. On the contrary, they virtually guaranteed that food policy would be a matter of bitter political debate.'[18] But as long as the population was not perishing as a result of famine, or unsettling the social order by conspicuous displays of extravagance, or provoking divine wrath through sinful overconsumption, political philosophers did not give much thought to what, specifically, ordinary people had for dinner. Monarchs worried about preventing food riots but not, in general, about

the particular features of their subjects' daily diets. Whether their polenta was made of millet or of barley, whether their soups contained cabbage, or whether they baked or griddled their bread possessed no political significance. Such things were the purview of priests and doctors, not statesmen. The only body whose daily diet was of unquestioned political importance was that of the ruler, for whom court physicians designed individualised dietary regimes, and whose robustness was a topic of perennial political anxiety.[19]

Because the diets of ordinary people did not form part of the art of governance, the everyday eating habits of the population do not feature in political treatises from early modern Europe. Niccolò Machiavelli did not find the subject relevant to his discussion of statecraft. Giovanni Botero, whose 1589 *The Reason of State* offered a pioneering and influential analysis of effective governance, took an entirely traditional view of food's importance to this enterprise. He reminded readers that 'experience has shown us, not once but many times' that 'scarcity of bread exasperates the common people more than anything else', and so could lead to rebellion. He noted the importance of food supply in mounting military campaigns, and also lectured rulers on the ethical need for personal restraint in all things, diet included. The particular eating habits of the population, however, did not form part of his model of statecraft.[20] The political philosopher Thomas Hobbes devoted no attention at all to the topic. In his 1651 *Leviathan*, Hobbes addressed eating as simply a basic human need, not as a matter of state.[21] The chapter on 'the nourishment of a commonwealth' does not consider the mundane matter of how people actually nourished themselves. 'Nourishment' instead provides a metaphor for commerce and property rights; for political philosophers such as Hobbes, the 'nourishment' necessary to sustain the body politic was the gold, silver and other commodities that facilitated trade, not bread and pottage.[22] Commerce, the policing of markets and the supply of grain were thus important matters of statecraft, but what people did in their kitchens was not.

By the late eighteenth century, such domestic matters formed part of the art of governance in Europe. In Britain, no less than the prime minister himself addressed Parliament on the need to encourage the

population to add more wholegrains and potatoes to their daily bread.[23] This unprecedented interest in such minutiae reflects changes in the understanding of governance. These changes were identified many decades ago by the French theorist Michel Foucault, who described how a new political appreciation of 'the population' emerged in Europe in the late seventeenth century. The new theorists of statecraft viewed the population as a resource to be managed, alongside other endowments such as forests or factories.[24] Together with pro-natalist policies, schemes to extirpate idleness, public health campaigns and other enterprises aimed at improving the population, dietary reform came to form part of the eighteenth-century understanding of how to govern. From the perspective of eighteenth-century political theorists, what people ate on a daily basis was deeply relevant to evaluating the strength and fitness of the polity. By the end of the century the earlier dearth of accounts describing the eating habits of labourers and other ordinary folk had been replaced by myriad commentaries from politically engaged observers eager to assess the overall health of the body politic. The techniques of government, and the modern state, had come to embrace daily diets. The conviction that effective governance requires some scrutiny of the population's eating habits is an essential part of modernity, and this conviction emerged in the Enlightenment.

STATES AND INDIVIDUALS

The new association between the wealth and power of the polity and the energy of the population was addressed by many eighteenth-century writers. The Marquis de Chastellux, a philosophically minded military official who composed an influential treatise on public happiness, maintained that English labourers were healthier than the French because they enjoyed a superior diet. As a result, Britain was stronger than France, regardless of the relative populations of the two countries. The French state therefore had a direct interest in improving the eating habits of French working people.[25] Identifying, and promoting, the foods that would enable this improvement was hailed as a patriotic undertaking. In the view of many writers, potatoes provided an excellent solution to this challenge. A few grains of salt, and a little butter, bacon or milk was

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