

# Food, Health and Welfare in the Long Twentieth Century: Introduction

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Spanning from the 1890s to the 1980s, this special issue presents six essays addressing complementary topics relating to food, health and welfare during the Progressive Era, the New Deal, and the late twentieth century, three key periods of transition in American welfare provision. It grew out of the 2020 Historians of the Twentieth Century United States Winter Symposium, which received generous support from the British Association for American Studies, the David Bruce Centre for American Studies, and the Institute for Liberal Arts and Sciences at Keele University. Featuring contributions from scholars from the UK, the US, and continental Europe at various career stages, these essays highlight key continuities in the ways that race, gender, and – more implicitly – wealth shaped understandings of health, deservingness, and an individual’s capacity for self-government.

First, by scrutinizing the emergence of calorie counting during the Progressive Era, Nina Mackert details how health, now figured in terms of weight and body shape, became adopted as key markers of Americans’ ability to govern themselves, and consequently their suitability for exercising citizenship. In doing so, she historicizes norms of ability. This focus on healthy bodies was predominantly promoted by middle-class white men (and, to a lesser extent, women), and provided further rationale for excluding racial others, women, immigrants, the poor, and the disabled. But this understanding of health also held some emancipatory potential: despite being restricted to the able-bodied and those with the wealth and education to pursue such dieting advice, advocates of African American uplift embraced a close attention to diet to refute health-based rationales for supposed black inferiority. Next, with particular attention to the ways in which food served as a tool for organizing social movements, Alice Béja analyzes meat boycotts that spread across American cities in early 1910, pushed by workers to protest the high price of the commodity. The response of socialists and

trade unions to these boycotts was mixed, as they worried about the way in which a boycott placed workers in the feminized role of consumers, rather than producers, and how focussing on reducing prices for commodities took attention away from the struggle for better wages. Béja stresses how the object of this particular protest – food – served to obscure the divide between the public and the private, and enabled women to use the boycotts to stake claim to a larger public role by situating themselves as concerned consumers.

Simon Buck then examines Townsendism, a social movement dedicated to demanding dignified living conditions for older Americans via a monthly two-hundred-dollar payment to pensioners that needed to be spent within a month on domestic products, and particularly the role music played in the movement's 1930s heyday and the movement's musical legacies. Townsendite songs contested negative stereotypes about older Americans, and served to galvanize supporters and paper over disagreements among the organization's membership. Meanwhile, their widespread transmission via radio and film highlighted older Americans' growing influence in popular culture. In subsequent decades, musicians periodically reworked the most famous Townsend song for comedic and political purposes. In the fourth essay, Jack Hodgson turns to the importance of state and local government for understanding how racialized conceptions of migrants to California (and Mexican Americans in particular) during the Great Depression led to differences in food relief and medical care provided to local and migrant children, and consequent discriminatory health outcomes. Moving from the more widely studied southern political limitations on the New Deal's reach, Hodgson shows how similar dynamics operated in a western context, where the economic demands of agribusiness combined with local administrators' racist and xenophobic assumptions about health and nutrition to ensure that relief was distributed unevenly.

My article then addresses the role of moderate white southern Senators in the expansion of the Food Stamp Program in the late 1960s and the 1970s. Their behavior points to the viability of a more racially and economically inclusive politics in the American South, a region notorious until that point for its poverty, reactionary political elites, and long-standing system of racial apartheid. These politicians well understood the medical rationales for reducing malnutrition and also their states' often racially fraught welfare politics, leading several to present antihunger spending as a way of reducing future welfare expenses. But they contributed simultaneously to food stamp expansion and the creation of a welfare system premised on ensuring that the able-bodied poor worked (rather than necessarily leaving poverty). Turning to the presidency, Caitlin Rathe's closing essay examines the way in which the language of austerity (often a cover for racially motivated opposition to

welfare) during the 1970s laid key ground for a more frontal assault on the logic of food assistance under the Reagan administration, which shattered the limited consensus on the need for a government-led effort to tackle domestic hunger. Building upon an increasingly hostile national discourse about welfare recipients and food stamps in the 1970s (with clear racialized and gendered dimensions that had long been evident in states with larger nonwhite populations), Reagan's administration extended earlier Ford- and Carter-era focusses on managing program costs. Beyond seeking to reduce program expenditures, his administration further denied the role of the federal government in eliminating hunger among food stamp recipients.

Of course, the authors' interpretations differ in places. Most clearly, Mackert and Béja focus on the ways in which food (and diet) in the early twentieth century served as a tool for political exclusion or empowerment respectively, and my perspective on 1960s and 1970s antihunger politics is more optimistic than Hodgson and Rathe's readings of the persistence of racialized understandings of poverty and malnutrition in hamstringing state- and federal-level measures to tackle the problems. Taken together, these essays highlight the long reach of racialized and gendered assumptions about food, poverty, and health. But for all the exclusionary power of these beliefs, at times activists and politicians harnessed concerns about food and welfare to refute rationales for minority exclusion or drive successful demands for better conditions, be it in the form of cheaper foodstuffs, old-age pensions, or a more generous (though still rickety) social safety net.

### AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

David T. Ballantyne is a lecturer in American History and the Director of the David Bruce Centre for American Studies at Keele University. His first book was *New Politics in the Old South: Ernest F. Hollings in the Civil Rights Era* (2016), and he is currently completing a monograph on Reconstruction-era Louisiana. In addition to wishing to thank the contributors, he is particularly grateful to the journal's editors for their advice in guiding this special issue to completion, and its anonymous peer reviewers for their insightful feedback on the articles that follow.