Nadja Durbach. Many Mouths: The Politics of Food in Britain from the Workhouse to the Welfare State

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This beautifully researched and written book by Nadja Durbach, Professor of History at the University of Utah, adds to growing contemporary as well as historical interest in how the British state can—and often does not—serve its people through food. This is not the first, nor will it be the last, twenty-first century book to dissect the British state's and the British people's complicated relationship with food. One thinks of the searing analyses in Lizzie Collingham's exploration of imperial and war-time food strategies (*Taste of War: World War Two and the Battle for Food* [2011]; *The Hungry Empire: How Britain's Quest for Food Shaped the Modern World* [2017]), Madhusree Mukerjee's account of Churchill's brutal approach to feeding India in World War II (*Churchill's Secret War: the British Empire and the Ravaging of India during World War I* [2010], or James Vernon's magisterial overview of Britain's hunger politics (*Hunger: A Modern History* [2007]).

In *Many Mouths*, Durbach applies her lens to the British state's internal tensions and reveals the significance of the wider British cultural uncertainties about who and what has responsibility for food, and whether it's of interest to the state at all or whether food can be reduced to individual or family responsibility devoid of societal or state underpinning as flagged by E. P. Thompson (*Customs in Common* [1993]).

As so often the word "British" is really a synonym for English. Rather, it is the centralized and London-centered state Durbach draws us into, taking us from the supposed high points of the arrogant imperial power to the uncertainties of the post-World War II de-colonializing state. I say supposed because in part Durbach exposes the questioning which went on. Messages and views at the top of politics may ooze with certainty when below the surface counter-views are bubbling. She presents such debates with deft attention to the detail. This is the stuff of real food politics.

The book is structured as seven case studies, presented sequentially across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In each, she explores the dynamics of what food was available and why it was contentious.

The first she calls "Old English Fare," a run-through the impact of the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act that altered the system of so-called relief for the poor and those without work. Its significance derived from the Elizabethan Law, itself a response to the loss of ecclesiastical (mostly monastic) support with the break from Rome and the dissolution of the monasteries. The New Poor Law brought in a system of workhouses (some buildings remain to this day) with a food morality of "if we pay for you to exist, and house and feed you, you must work for your existence." This apparently simple but unequal bargain became a tussle between localities and the central state, bodily needs, and parsimonious suppliers. It was brutal and its echoes remain to this day.

The following chapter digs into precisely whom the provisions might be for. Using prison food, it shows how food can be used by the state (and families, too) as punishment, and how the mode of delivery can divide even the oppressed. The divisions explored here are gender and race, and whether there is no absolute or common dietary need whatever the person. One of the most shocking tales Durbach presents is how dietaries were translated in the

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Empire. "A more generous scale of diet" was to be provided for European prisoners (71). In the colonies a surreal discourse emerged about the food needs (and wants) of "natives." There might be a thin logic present, such as an awareness that "Chinese or Coloureds" in Hong Kong might have different culinary preferences, or concerns by colonial secretaries that "negro" prisoners in Antigua might be being overfed (73), but the common reality was food being a vehicle for racism and race-typecasting, and to ignore appeals for what today we would call a universal human right to food.

The subsequent chapter on food, famine, and starving children in Colonial India amplifies how the British state used food as a control mechanism, particularly over famine relief. Hardship, famine, and brutality were known. What the British Empire did was to record it, and the musings about the moral boundaries and whether to stretch those boundaries for voluntary and governmental action. The 1880 Commission on the 1876–78 Indian famine, for instance, openly criticized the state's "parsimonious" relief, asking how to define absolute need.

In the World War I chapter, Durbach compares the different feeding régimes of Germany and Britain. Britain applied a blockade to restrict Germany's access to international food supplies. By the end of the war, this was deemed a strategic success, contributing to Germany's economic collapse. But it created other moral dilemmas. Under the Hague Convention, food parcels were allowed to be sent across conflict lines to feed Prisoners of War (POWs), free of customs duties (can you believe it?!). Some parcels ended up going via neutral Switzerland and the Red Cross.

The role of nutrition science is central in Durbach's fifth chapter, on the role of school food in Britain in the interwar years. A conventional narrative says that the 1906 Education (Provision of Meals) Act ushered in better feeding of school children by enabling local authorities to levy funds on the rates to provide meals. If only it had. Actually, the Act in part undermined existing charitable schemes who often withdrew leaving the job to the state. The Act only really began to gain traction in World War I partly to attract "housewives" into wartime paid employment and relieve them of the duty and worry of feeding their children. Work canteens could feed the men, as B. Seebohm Rowntree showed in *The Human Needs of Labour* (1921). The 1906 legislation had permitted free-standing Feeding Centres (not necessarily in schools). These lay the grounds for the British Restaurant system of World War II. But in the 1930s, local education authorities, then as now suffering major financial cuts, closed or restricted their Feeding Centres and substituted free milk under the 1930s Milk in Schools Scheme. Milk was a social "fix" for nutritional deficiencies in harsh economic times.

The "British Restaurant" scheme raised big social themes: what is food's social role? If there was to be public food provision, Churchill insisted on lofty social ideals—hence "Restaurants" not feeding centers or some such socialist-leaning term. In fact, "democratic dining" (96) continued as civic restaurants under Atlee's 1947 Civic Restaurants Act only to wither later.

By the 1950s, where Durbach ends, many tensions she raises are still live in UK food politics, notably post-imperial food strategy European relations, consumerist expectations, and a revolutionized food supply system running away with public health and ecosystems. *Many Mouths* is a brilliant dissection of the British state's legacy thinking about food. Contemporary policy-makers might learn much from its lessons.

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