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CHAPTER 4

LABOR HISTORIES OF FOOD

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WHAT does the lens of labor help us perceive about food and its history? This essay argues that the answer is just about everything. Work transforms the raw materials of nature into food. Work makes otherwise indigestible collections of organic material into an indispensable source of physical energy and nutrients. Work imbues these materials with social meanings. In brief, food and work are inextricably linked. Labor is central to food and, indeed, the need for food has motivated much of the labor humans have expended. Using the lens of labor sharpens our vision of the social processes, technological frameworks, and material needs that lay behind food in particular times and places. The kinds of labor systems in place dramatically shaped the kinds of food that were available and, conversely, changes to food often changed labor systems.

And yet the relationship between food and work has never been straightforward. People have used an enormous range of strategies to transform raw materials into food, and these strategies reflect the myriad social contexts and systems in which food has been eaten. The gendered division of labor, the way in which food is provisioned, ideas about what and how to cook, and the strategies of extraction, processing, or hunting that produce ingredients for food—all can vary profoundly even within the same era.

This question is particularly vexing in our own historical moment, when so much of the labor of food production is hidden from its ultimate consumers. Much of the work around food is now done by people who will not eat the food (agricultural workers on farms, truck drivers, line workers in canning factories, restaurant cooks). Migrant and guest workers epitomize this invisibility, their labor crucial to much agricultural harvest but their presence temporary and contingent on state

policy. When these people are identified by consumers, it is often by demands that they be expelled from the borders of the nations in which they labor.

This essay, then, sheds light on the enormous amount of labor that has been required to produce food and establishes the centrality of labor to studies of food history. It does so by being mindful of changes to the basic tasks that surround food: gathering, production, and consumption over time. Following an overview of the early history of food work and the "commercial turn" that marked global food production and consumption beginning in the late middle ages, a discussion of three sites of food-related labor—(1) the commercial world of food processing (especially manufacturing and retail), (2) farms, and (3) domestic spaces—structures the subsequent relatively loose chronological structure. This organization reflects the historical shift of the modern era toward elaborate specialization and pronounced spatial separation of food tasks. It does not, however, represent stark disconnection; indeed, the cultural and physical links among these different spaces are crucial to the culture and physical needs surrounding food. The final section reflects upon the implications of these histories for food, work, and their connections, concluding that food problematizes typical ways of categorizing work and labor.

Throughout, the essay emphasizes the enormous amount of work required to create food, a quality that exists even under modern systems of production. Furthermore, this essay emphasizes the social embeddedness of that labor. That is, it points to the way that food labor is often structured by local systems of power and identity—and especially gender. These two themes hold true across time. But food labor has of course also undergone enormous changes. In tracing these, two other themes emerge: first, that commercial revolutions and industrialization dramatically altered older forms of food work and, second, that industrialization, in particular, had differing and uneven effects globally, often resulting in increasing divergence in food work between wealthy and poor people.

The continuities among the different historical eras and linkages between systems of producing food is as important as their divergence; a central point of the essay is that the spaces and methods of food production have always necessarily overlapped, and often articulated in symbiotic ways, with each other. For instance, even the most industrialized of spaces has relied on agriculture for its food. Similar connections emerge across time (e.g., the ongoing importance of foraging and hunting even in the "modern" world). This emphasis on the overlap and connections among systems of labor reflects the complications of food production, as well as the emphasis in much recent scholarly literature on the limits of capital and economies to standardize, homogenize, and remake daily practices.¹ Finally, my analysis also reflects the particular importance to food of unpaid, household work that family members undertake to sustain themselves and each other. Domestic labor reveals important facts about the work necessary for food, and about the cultural footings of economies more generally. Thus the essay narrates a complicated and holistic view of the work of food production that emphasizes the ongoing significance of older systems and domestic spaces alongside more recent modifications and reshaping.

THE FIRST TASKS: ORIGINS OF HUMAN FOOD PRODUCTION

The emerging narrative of the work patterns required by ancient foodways usefully frames the relationship between food and work in several ways. First and foremost, it suggests the centrality of labor to studies of food. For most of human history, food's production and distribution, stood at the center of social and political structures—and of most peoples' daily work. It also suggests, as many scholars have pointed out, that taste and culture guided people. There has never been a time when food, and work around food, proceeded solely based on efficiency. Finally, understanding ancient food technologies and systems allows scholars to appreciate what has remained, and hence both the historical specificity and long roots of techniques such as hunting, foraging, herding, and communal farming.

Evidence of the significant labor required for food goes back to the prehistoric period. The earliest flint blades for killing and butchering animals are over 1.5 million years old; 30,000 years ago people wove baskets and crafted clay pots for the purposes of storing food. And these are just the activities that left material remains. We have no record at all of the detailed knowledge of seasonal migration paths, edible plants, and animal habits, food preservation methods, and countless other proficiencies that allowed people to survive.² Even the so-called "original affluent" foraging societies described by Marshall Sahlins exerted coordinated effort to get food, for instance, smoking out bees from their hives and collecting honey, gathering berries and leading organized expeditions into oceans and seas in search of fish and sea mammals (such as whales).³ Although, as Sahlins rightly observed, these peoples could often obtain subsistence with only a few hours of daily work, that work was highly skilled and depended on generations of collected knowledge and experience.

Food was not only hunted; it was also cooked. For at least 200,000 years, and possibly much longer, the hominid ancestors of modern humans gathered fuel for, built, and maintained fires to cook food. Records of firepits and cracked rocks suggest their efforts to boil and remove fat even from the marrow of animals they hunted; and we know that berries were not only gathered, but also preserved and dried.⁴ Scholars speculate that even in the most ancient times, taste mattered to what people ate.⁵ This observation suggests the long-standing importance of even rudimentary techniques such as roasting or stewing to social, cultural, and physical survival.

Settled agriculture emerged about 10,000 years ago and dramatically changed both food production and the societies that adopted it. As a central transformation in the way food is produced, it was also a transformation in labor systems and in the politics and society in which labor is embedded. Indeed, the appearance of permanent agrarian settlements has long been taken by anthropologists and historians as a crucial turning point in human history, allowing for the construction of more towns and cities, the growth of elaborate cultural and political systems around labor, access to land, and the invention of writing.⁶ We can see this in the

rise of archaic states, which began around 4,000 years ago in fertile river valleys of Asia, from the Tigris and Euphrates in the west, to the Indus and Ganges in the south, and the Huang He and Yangtze in the east. Urbanization followed shortly thereafter across Africa, Europe, and the Americas, as newer irrigation methods, improved crops, and food processing and preserving technologies could support larger populations. The first centralized states emerged as a result of, and also to sustain, large-scale agriculture.

Early farming developed dramatically new ways of wresting food from the landscape, even as it also drew from some long-standing techniques. The skills of planting and harvesting, already known to gatherers, were supplemented by new methods of preparing fields through slash and burn. As grains and legumes became central to human diets, bodies changed also: skeletal evidence suggests the backbreaking and joint-damaging nature of agriculture, as well as the deficiencies of the diet it produced. The ways that people cooked also shifted to accommodate new foods. Cooks used spices to create sauces that would flavor the otherwise monotonous diet. In all of these ways, food continued to require enormous amounts of work. Early agriculturalists also relied on, and eventually domesticated, sheep and goats (in Eurasia and the Middle East) and pigs (in Asia). The milk and meat produced by animals became crucial to nomadic pastoral societies, whose members herded, bred, and traded livestock—and whose food supply was heavily based on daily milking chores.

Both agricultural and pastoral ways of producing food relied on intricate social systems and relations. For instance, in Mesoamerica, the invention of alkaline processing called *nixtamalization* magnified the nutritional content of maize. This permitted the growth of large cities such as Teotihuacan, but required hours of intensive female labor every day. Arnold Bauer has suggested that patriarchy intensified in situations such as this, when men took control of farming and women's labor focused solely on cooking and processing within the household. The work of agriculture was often conditioned on changes in gender systems.⁷

As in agricultural settlements, pastoralism emerged from very particular social arrangements. Transhumanance, or regular patterns of seasonal migration between pastures, became a way of life for many herders. Cooks in these societies learned to ferment and culture dairy products (for instance, buttermilk, cheese, yogurt, and the alcoholic beverage *koumiss*) both to preserve them and to make dairy products digestible to adults (who typically lack the enzymes needed to digest lactose).⁸ And, while gender remained an important force in these societies, lines of authority were often more fluid than in settled agrarian places.

Agriculture in particular was structured around increasingly centralized, hierarchical, and expansive systems of labor-intensive food production. Central authorities, operating on larger scales than ever before, coordinated irrigation systems, grain production, and storage. For instance, ancient Egyptians typically spent much of the "dry" season (when the Nile was not flooding) working for elites and rulers on the infrastructure that controlled water flow. In many agricultural societies, food was produced for, and often distributed by, a central governing authority.

No single system fully described the many ways people got food. Even in the most agrarian of societies, people continued to hunt and forage. Indeed these alternate methods of getting food allowed laborers to resist the demands of elites, at times through violent uprisings and rebellions, but at other times through everyday forms of resistance that James Scott dubbed "weapons of the weak."⁹ Agriculturalists, foragers, and pastoralists interacted and occasionally sought refuge with each other when crops failed, when the most important wild foods were scarce, or when herds were lost. They traded foodstuffs with each other in better times. All of this is to say that agriculture changed the way people worked for food, but that humans employed a variety of ways of wresting nutrition from the world around them, relying on new innovations and older methods as environment, politics, and culture allowed.

THE TRANSFORMATIONS OF COMMERCIALIZATION: PLANTATIONS, IMPERIALISM, AND GLOBAL FOOD EXCHANGE

Even more than agriculture, the advent of commercialized, global European empires transformed the way that food was produced and how it was accessed. Diets changed, both in response to new foods (sugar, tea, and coffee in Europe for instance) and to poverty (dislocation of rural populations in the face of conquest, enslavement, or systems of enclosure and industrialization). New social systems and politics, in particular new ways of extracting work, catalyzed the commercialization of food and also came to depend on it; for instance, the enormous amount of labor that lay behind new systems of food production was made particularly visible and particularly ugly in the global enslavement that centered on plantation production. Plantation agriculture, embedded as it was in far-off industries and global economies, open a window onto the role of coerced labor in the commercialization of basic foods.

In Europe, commercialization of food grew out of new coercive systems of labor. One of most infamous, serfdom, emerged in the late Roman Empire and spread across much of Europe over subsequent centuries. Although there was enormous variation in serfdom, serfs—like subjects of other empires—produced their own food on land they farmed. However, they also typically provided food to the noble family from their plots and provided labor on larger tracts of farmland that nobility operated directly. The surplus that serf families produced on lords' lands were traded or shipped abroad.¹⁰

Middling farmers and peasants, as well as powerful elites throughout Europe and Eurasia, increasingly produced for exchange and the market, rather than simply for subsistence. Current research suggests that over time it was these

colonizing or otherwise advantaged agriculturists who expanded their farming and produced foodstuffs for export to cities and abroad (especially vegetables, grains, and dairy).¹¹

Foods of the Americas became commodified through other forms of unfree labor. Sugar and coffee plantations in the Americas, tea plantations in Asia, and cocoa bean plantations in Africa all powered European commercial empires—and expanded systems of coerced labor and enslavement to a global scale. The labor techniques to produce foods such as coffee, tea, sugar, and chocolate were extreme. In Central and South America, infamous sites of exploitative colonial labor relations around food production and other tasks, indigenous peoples were often forced to forego work on their own plots to labor on Spanish mining projects and to produce food for elites through the *repartimiento*—a forced labor draft of indigenous subjects. Denied the chance to produce enough food for themselves, native people were particularly vulnerable to the diseases and abuse of colonizers, and populations declined precipitously. Owners of sugar plantations soon began enslaving African people, transporting them to the “new world.” Over time, the European demand for sugar led many overseers to employ gang labor systems adapted from contemporary military discipline, beating slaves who lagged in their tasks of planting, weeding, fertilizing, and harvesting cane. Meanwhile, work in the mills and boiling houses was regimented and dangerous but also relied on enslaved workers’ considerable skills to maximize productivity. It is important to note that this sort of forced work around food depended on skill as well as simple force. Judith Carney’s work on rice agriculture in the Americas shows that West African slaves supplied both the labor and the technology of levies and milling that made rice production possible.¹²

Enslavement and forced plantation labor proved crucial to far-flung food supplies—and especially to European workers. Sugar, once a rarity, eventually became a staple on the tables of much of Western Europe.¹³ Rum, coffee, and tea also all became common features of even working-class Europeans’ diets, depending on the unfree labor of workers in the Americas, the Caribbean, the Pacific, Africa, and Asia. Meanwhile, other foods traveled the opposite direction, feeding settler colonies formed by Europeans’ enormous Atlantic empires. In all of these cases, new kinds of political power transformed agricultural food production.¹⁴

THE TRANSFORMATIONS OF COMMERCIALIZATION: SELLING LABOR, BUYING FOOD

The emergence of European empires in the Americas and their networks of trade transformed the relationship between work and food. Slowly, eating came to require, not farming or gathering or hunting, but rather engaging in commerce

and industrial production. In the increasingly commercialized landscapes of the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, more and more impoverished European peasants became migratory populations that roamed rural areas and cities in search of wage work. The enclosure movement of Europe nearly obliterated the possibilities of hunting, foraging, or pasturing animals for most rural people—practices that had been crucial for supplementing household food supplies. In the Western hemisphere more and more indigenous peoples were brought into relations of trade for everyday cooking implements such as metal pots or forced to work for Europeans on plantations that exported commodities. Exchange, or labor that created exchangeable goods, became the conduit to food. When the market first entered families’ lives, it was often through food. Medieval traders had sustained global trading networks through which spices and preserved foods flowed.¹⁵ In some places, like European cities, alcoholic drinks, bread, and many baked goods had long been purchased. Jams, butter, and other heavily processed foods were often traded between neighbors, sometimes (although rarely) purchased for cash. Certainly the increasingly prevalent imported foods such as sugar were almost always purchased, rather than produced by the ultimate consumer. Finally, in all commercialized and industrialized places, food was increasingly purchased rather than grown and processed within a household.

Although would-be sellers obtained different levels of wealth as a result of market endeavors, work in and around food sales remained crucial to almost every region of the world. This was particularly true in the wake of the migrations and urbanization from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, when new occupations around food opened up. Market stalls and stands offered vital work to otherwise itinerant or marginally employed urbanites, and sometimes also to unfree workers who lived in cities. The financial possibilities of small-scale food distribution were felt globally; one of the most common entrepreneurial occupations for women in nineteenth-century Mexico was selling tortillas and tamales from house to house. Similarly, oysters seem to have been commonly sold by both free and enslaved African Americans in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century coastal U.S. cities.¹⁶ African markets have long been home to women food sellers; in some markets women have been the exclusive purveyors of foodstuffs.¹⁷ The low entry costs and relative availability of some food allowed people with little or no capital to add to their income by selling both raw and cooked provisions in these spaces. Peddling prepared foods into densely settled residential areas often provided one of the few opportunities for people of limited means to supplement family income and occasionally amass the capital for more lucrative commercial endeavors.¹⁸ Their work, in turn, became crucial to the variety, quality, and sheer availability of food.

It was not only sellers whose labor provided food in crowded urban settings. To their efforts we should add that of fishermen, sailors, porters, barrel-makers, and countless others whose work formed new links in the food chain. These far-flung networks of people, many of whom did not (and still are not) understood as doing food work, were nonetheless crucial to luxuries and necessities in urban diets.

INDUSTRIALIZATION: MAKING FOOD OUTSIDE OF HOMES AND CREATING DOMESTICITY

These changes were, as it turned out, only the beginnings of the ways that industrialization would transform the work done around food. New foods were consumed in industrialized societies, created by industrialized processors, and grown on farms that were increasingly embedded in industrial supply chains. Industrialization accentuated the differences between regions and nations that were heavily based on manufacturing and mechanization, and those that were not. It raised new possibilities for, and enormous anxieties about, some of the oldest forms of food work—cooking and consuming in family groups. In all these ways, a focus on industrial production and industrial labor point especially to historical change. The industrial era, however, continued to reflect social systems through which work is accomplished and cultural beliefs about the relative significance of that work; lines of classed, raced, and gendered authority run through and help structure these spaces.

The foods at the center of European commercial empires were of particular importance in the diets of industrial workers. Sugar, rice, tea, and coffee were eaten in greater amounts than ever before by both rich and poor, but high-calorie foods and stimulating drinks occupied places of enormous importance in the diets of workers in industrialized countries. Their consumption helped their eaters to survive the requirements of wage labor, since these items offered the calories, energy, and, in the case of alcoholic beverages, the emotional release that facilitated long and sustained periods of monotonous work.¹⁹

The emergence of modern industrial manufacturing methods applied to food goes back at least to the mid-nineteenth century, when systems for canning meat cheaply and quickly were developed in Europe. Flour milling, too, became increasingly mechanized (and efficient) over the course of the nineteenth century. The techniques of vacuum sealing, glass jarring, and the slow invention of safe tin cans all became part of entrepreneurs' desire to meet large orders—first from governments (for soldiers) and then from civilian distributors. The result was that more and more people in industrialized areas worked at food to get wages, rather than to produce food for themselves. This also entailed a loss of control over the production process, transforming independent craftspeople such as bakers or jam makers into factory workers and shop clerks.²⁰

The transformation of the work of food processing into wage labor is illustrated especially clearly by looking at meat. Originally meat had been butchered in relatively small quantities, and smoked, dried, processed into sausage, or simply cooked by individual households or small artisanal shops. In early modern and modern cities, butchers were well organized, and maintained licensing requirements to regulate the trade and restrict entry. Nonetheless, wage labor and industrialization took hold early in commercial meat processing—and with dramatic effects.

Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, a large-scale meatpacking industry emerged in the midwestern United States, first in Cincinnati and then in Chicago.

The industrial division of labor utilized the famous "disassembly line," in which teams of workers systematically killed and dismembered animals at rapid speeds, sending the various parts off for a nausea-inducing number of products. Salted, canned, and eventually refrigerated meats and other products were then shipped across the United States and, increasingly, the world. Indeed, workers in many of the extractive and transportation industries that supported large businesses and mass production, such as sailors, railway workers, and miners, were important consumers of processed, canned meats.²¹

Employees in these sectors have worked in notoriously unsafe conditions. Upton Sinclair's famous 1906 account of the hazards of meatpacking (and meat eating) epitomized the disastrous working conditions of meatpacking; it is worth noting that the story has been retold in slightly different forms in recent exposés of chicken and beef production. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, a pattern in meatpacking emerged in which immigrant workers performed highly repetitive and difficult tasks, often under circumstances that led to meat contamination and their own injuries. Indeed, late twentieth-century centralization of poultry processing has made it one of the most dangerous industries in the United States. As numerous scholars have documented, divisions of language, class, and ethnicity complicate efforts at unionization—and these have been compounded by sporadic policing of workers' immigration status and the disruption of families and communities.²² Unlike independent butchers, these processors have little control over the conditions of their work and less hope of achieving economic independence or exercising political influence.

However, industrial food work cultures are also sites of resistance. Food processing plant workers of different ethnicities sometimes find common ground and coordinate ways to control the work process. Vicki Ruiz points to Chicanas who worked in early twentieth century canneries as important mediators of U.S. culture for children, people who formed some of the most effective unions in any part of the food processing industry and instilled ethnically distinctive identities in the midst of the pleasures of mass culture and consumption.²³ And as historians have documented, meatpackers overcame barriers of race and ethnicity to mount powerful organizing campaigns in the 1930s and to operate powerful unions for decades afterwards.²⁴ Even among the lowest-paid workers, social networks can reshape work.

In this new landscape of food work, restaurants and restaurant labor emerge as especially important. These sites became common options for urbanites in the nineteenth century. Taverns, saloons, restaurants, peddlers, and delicatessens populated working-class neighborhoods, while restaurants in business districts and the increasing number of hotels catered to upper-class men.²⁵ Urban residents, in other words, purchased whole meals as well as ingredients to make them.

Kitchen workers in such establishments have experienced a transition similar to that of other wage workers. As in other businesses, restaurants became more likely to be parts of centrally controlled chains, rather than small stalls, taverns, or peddlers' carts. As with other food workers, kitchen workers in wealthier parts

of the world came from less wealthy rural areas. And although high-end serving and cooking remained an important route to professionalization and living wages, such jobs were also often routinized, subject to tayloristic notions of efficiency, and given to workers who had few other options.²⁶ Still, in restaurants, as elsewhere, kitchen labor provided workers with moments to perform and create identities, form important cultures of support and solidarity, and push back against guidelines from above. As the historian Robin D.G. Kelley recalls of his and his high-school shiftmates' refusal to wear hairnets, insistence on commanding the restaurant's radio, and attempts to impose their own work rhythms on pre-set routines, "the employees at the Central Pasadena McDonald's were constantly finding new ways to rebel." In the midst of profound change in where and how people got food, the work remained embedded in socialities and solidarities that both facilitated and disrupted food's production.²⁷

Commercialization and industrialization moved the site of food production outside of homes, even as it also created the conditions under which "home" emerged as a separate category of space from "work." Over time, a gendered discourse of the separation of public and private spaces obscured the actual work that went into such domestic tasks as cooking, tending fires, and washing dishes for one's own family. Of course, household food production and processing was the crucial step in survival for most people—but it was precisely this sort of activity that, under industrialization, became a category of work that seemed curiously untouched by the technologies and the power relations of modern economies.²⁸ Home, one 1830s pastor explained, was "where . . . a man seeks a refuge from the vexations and embarrassments of business, an enchanting repose from exertion . . ."²⁹

INDUSTRIALIZATION AND PROVISIONING: MAKING WORK VISIBLE

As the preceding discussion suggests, and in spite of the pastor's words, it is profoundly misleading to identify "domestic" labor, including cooking or preparing food, as restful activities contained in the home. These tasks have always required effort and exertion, and between 1500 and 1900, this work became embedded in outside wages, large-scale economic systems, and far-flung labors. Indeed, one of the most visible and important marks of the effects of industrialization is the way that most intimate and small-scale food work—preparing and serving food within homes—came to rely on economics and exchange.

Commercialized food became the mainstay of diets not only in industrialized places and among the well to do, but also in places far removed from industrialization and among the far less wealthy. Canned meats and milk were integrated into

cuisines in India and Britain, albeit in ways that reflected differences in preference and resources of local eaters. From India to Asia to Mexico, colonized peoples also found ways to process and preserve foods that then were distributed locally and also globally, often via diasporas and migration. Adopted and adapted by its users, such food has reshaped menus even when, as in the modern Caribbean, it has contributed to distinctive ethnic and nationalist identities.³⁰

As some families purchased food outside of their homes, others kept workers in their homes to prepare food. Domestic service was another way that wage work seeped into food production—in this case by modifying older patterns of service and social order. Modern domestic service took on different functions across time, space, and population, but cooking was long at the center of the work servants performed—and was also an important route to paid labor for impoverished or displaced women. Those female servants changed what their employers ate, resulting in hybrid cuisines that, although claimed and often promoted by elites, reflected the labor and ingenuity of paid employees.³¹

In all cases, paid domestic work had complicated meanings—serving as vital jobs for people in need of them, sometimes as stepping stones to authority within their employers' households, and also as sources of autonomy for women involved, who often chose this work over more dangerous industrial occupations or as a way out of impoverished families of origin. Immigrant, racialized, rural migrant, and colonized women took these positions—in places from Europe to the Americas to Asia—as they entered a world that increasingly rewarded wages rather than labor itself. Although family or household cooks have become less common in industrialized nations, in much of the world, hiring someone to cook or clean is a predictable life course event for middle-class families. Many women continue to turn to domestic service in areas that are undergoing rapid economic dislocation.³²

The actual tasks required to prepare and serve food remained remarkably stable in spite of who did the work. Although nineteenth-century urbanites might procure food differently than rural inhabitants, they still cooked food. And although the accoutrements and styles changed, the work of serving still had to get done. Cooking techniques themselves changed relatively little over the modern period; women were still expected to perform the lion's share of domestic food preparation using cookstoves, fires, and enormous amounts of their own labor in the process (for instance, grinding corn for tortillas in Mexico and Central America or pounding tubers into fufu in West Africa).

This changed somewhat in the early twentieth century as part of a new prescriptive discourse that reframed kitchens as modern spaces where methods of efficiency and science could and should be applied by women doing their own cooking. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth and through the twentieth century, professional nutritionists, cookbook authors, and home economists claimed new authority over home food preparations. Rooted in western and industrialized nations, this new media had global ambitions and reach. Many experts sought to Americanize female immigrants by teaching them to replace traditional foods with food deemed healthier and also by imparting new techniques for cooking;

other texts and teachers traveled along with missionaries and western educators to colonies.¹³ The prescriptions forwarded were contradictory. On the one hand, women were consistently urged to adopt labor-saving devices so as to make their food labor more efficient and less demanding. On the other, they were encouraged to plan cooking and meals as if they were operating businesses—introducing taylorist conceptions of time-management and efficiency into kitchen design and meal planning.

This advice did not always transform how women worked but it did have an impact on food preparation.¹⁴ In industrialized parts of the world, many home cooks used the discourse and the material possibilities of industrial systems to ease the work of cooking and overseeing a household's food. The invention and distribution of coal or kerosene stoves promised a dramatic improvement over open hearth cooking, which was often dangerous and required constant tending of the fire; later gas and electric ovens offered equally important changes—eliminating the need to mind the stove to be sure coal didn't run out, for instance. Similarly, refrigerators and freezers limited the need to spend days canning and preserving food so that it would last the winter. Dishwashers simplified another time-consuming task that followed eating. Finally, in a continuation of the much older trend of purchasing foods commercially, more and more families began purchasing food in its final, consumable form and also having it served and cleaned up—by going to restaurants. Increased use of restaurants and fast-food establishments have further reduced the work families expend preparing their own food. By the 1950s, when even middle-class families began to frequent restaurants and diners, U.S. women spent an average of less than twenty hours a week in meal preparation and clean-up; by 1998, 47 cents of every dollar spent on food was, on average, spent away from home.¹⁵

Nevertheless, these changes have certainly not eliminated the work of cooking. Poorer households and poorer regions of the world have seen less use of commercially prepared food and cutting-edge appliances. Indeed, one mark of the difference between wealthy and non-wealthy households (and regions) is the degree to which cooks use appliances and modern technology and prepare food indoors. Even in industrialized societies famous for their use of new technologies, the tasks involved in cooking food and procuring changed, but were hardly eliminated. As time spent cooking or preparing food decreased, far more time was spent provisioning (shopping), planning meals, and procuring food. Marjorie DeVault studied women in late 1980s Chicago who sometimes spent whole days planning meals and procuring food for households, even if they sometimes purchased much of it. Joanne Vanek argued that, although families in the mid-1960s did spend less time cooking than in earlier times, time spent shopping for food and carrying it home had dramatically increased. Even this shopping, celebrated as a pleasure under mass retailing, remained effortful. Elsewhere I have argued that post World War II supermarkets were premised on women's traveling, planning, buying food, and carrying it home again; even "streamlined" mass retailers required significant labor from women.¹⁶ Finally in much of the world (including western industrialized

nations such as Italy and France), shopping and cooking were, and were expected to be, central elements of women's days.¹⁷ Domestic production, then, offers a sense of the limits as well as effects of industrial systems on food work.

AGRICULTURE: ANCIENT FOOD PRODUCTION MEETS INDUSTRIAL LOGIC

Farming tells an even more dramatic tale of transformation. Arguably to a larger degree than was true in household cooking and food work, the nature of agricultural labor was remade in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It has been particularly marked by what many have called the "industrialization" of agriculture over the course of the twentieth century. Briefly, this can be described as an expansion of the trend of specialization of farms around particular crops (from sugar, coffee, rice, and tea to almost all grains and vegetables) and the widespread use of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and carefully bred (and corporately controlled) types of plants and animals to increase yields. The industrialization of agriculture has both effected and reflected most farmers' decreased leverage over the food system and often over their own farms; in this way, agriculture remained central to food production even as nonagriculturalists increasingly offered the logic and resources with which work was accomplished. The tasks required to cultivate food remained strikingly similar to earlier periods (planting, fertilizing, irrigating, and harvesting plants; feeding, rearing, and slaughtering animals for meat; rearing and milking cows). And in much of the world, farming techniques continued as they long had—as did the importance of domesticated animals and agriculture to their proprietors' own diet and the local food supply.

Over time, however, both the logic and techniques of farming changed. For most of human history, farmers increased the size of their harvests by increasing the size of land they farmed, relying on more workers (both paid and unpaid), or both. Industrialization and the "green revolution" changed this. Yields were no longer limited by the size of land operated or the number of workers in a farmers' household, but by their investments in equipment, chemical fertilizers and pesticides, and, more recently, bio-engineered seeds.

Changes proceeded slowly at first. For example, plows gradually changed into heavier, more expensive, and more effective iterations that eased the back-breaking working of tilling fields. Farmers also increased, and began importing, fertilizers as a way to stabilize and predict yields. Many Western hemisphere farmers had imported guano and nitrates from Peru and Chile since the early nineteenth century. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, even small agriculturists in industrialized places began to use phosphate fertilizer and the fertilizers offered by reprocessors of industrial waste products. In the post World War II period, the

use of these fertilizers exploded and farmers all over the world had access to the products of agribusiness, and often strong encouragement to use them.

Farmers' adoption of new techniques, and their focus on markets and the technologies of capitalism, was encouraged by prescriptive literature and, over time, by policies like those adopted during the green revolution. Indeed, "buying into" a particular technology often led to ancillary mechanization and a greater focus on market production for commercial processors and equipment. For instance, dairy farmers who purchased expensive milking equipment also often acquired significant debt. They then increased the size of their herds in part to pay off these debts.³⁸ New and popular seed varieties often must be purchased every season rather than, as had been the practice, growing from seed saved from previous years.³⁹

Some agricultural work continued to require enormous amounts of hand labor (harvesting for instance). Even here, however, the transformative effects of a new labor model were felt. While small-scale agriculturalists continued to work in household and communal groups on these tasks, only occasionally supplemented with paid workers, large farmers, particularly in industrialized settings, increasingly hired displaced rural people as waged workers. Paid agricultural workers, long an important supplement to family labor, have now become the mainstay of the global agricultural labor force. The result is that people who will not eat it, and cannot afford to purchase it, under conditions of very limited political and social power, harvest much of the world's food supply. Even recent sustainable and organic movements, designed to encourage smaller scale production, have come to rely on large-scale, wage-labor forces.⁴⁰

Changes in production often did quickly increase yields, particularly in the wake of the green revolution in Asia and mechanization in the Americas. There is no question that farmers' work and planning, including their investments in fertilizers and machinery, have increased the amount of food in the world. However, the proceeds from farming (and in Africa, also of animal husbandry) did not, in general, proportionately increase. In many places farmers chose to or were forced to produce for export markets, and foods for home markets consequently became relatively expensive and in short supply. Indeed, in some areas of the world, this has resulted in more production but also dramatic inequality in wealth and ongoing poverty and malnutrition and enormously difficult work lives for many farmers, farm workers, and pastoralists.⁴¹

RETHINKING THE WORK OF FOOD

The tasks with which human food work began—procuring food from the environment—remain central to people's ability to eat. However, unlike the first peoples, in the new food regime many, many people who do this work most directly (farmers, commercial foragers, people who hunt, gather, or scavenge their own

food) also rely on the work of far-away people growing and processing foods under industrial methods. This reliance has come with inequality: the people doing much of the labor for the world's food supply often, themselves, work in unhealthy conditions with very limited food to eat. These sorts of productive tasks epitomize the ongoing centrality of labor to food supplies—and the some-times problematic and inadequate routes by which food travels to those who do food-related work.

But straightforward production-oriented tasks are only the beginning of the dissonance created by contemporary food work. For instance, home cooking is often not done in the home, and certainly not using ingredients that have been sourced from household members' labors. Often, the lack of food labor informs current discourse. Contemporary efforts to encourage people to eat locally grown foods and improve their diet often focus on the need for families—and especially mothers—to cook at home and from scratch.⁴² By the late twentieth century, popular texts featured celebrations of labor-intensive cooking and lamented its demise.⁴³ Home-prepared family dinners have been credited with everything from reducing obesity rates to limiting drug use and premarital sexuality among teenagers.⁴⁴ Both in the current moment, cause for concern for many observers in wealthy countries, Eating food one has not labored to cook or to grow has always come with complex baggage, and never more so than in the contemporary world.

Amidst the injustices of the present, it is easy to forget that some things about food work have not been transformed by systems of commercialization or industrialization. The scale of agricultural production has increased, but agricultural labor also continues to exist, as it always has, in unpredictable and small-scale but enormously important ways. For instance, some historians have drawn our attention to farmers' resistance to exhortations that they produce for an export market and the limited efficacy to undo collective land ownership.⁴⁵ Nor is agriculture a self-contained sector in an industrialized era. All over the world, agriculture was carried with rural populations into cities and keeping livestock for food, gardening, and small-scale farming remained part of urban landscapes through much of the nineteenth century and in many cases into the twentieth and twenty-first. Examples include the wartime gardens, neighborhood plots, and other informal and private gardens tilled by individuals of many different classes. These have provided, and continue to provide, food to households. Finally, renewed interest in organic food and food-justice has resulted in a surge in small-scale farms. Even when these farms make use of migrant labor, they do so on a limited scale, sometimes in concert with community supported agriculture programs, in which consumers of produce help with harvests.⁴⁶ As these examples demonstrate, the work of growing and finding food remains part of many peoples' lives, even as the amounts produced by individuals and its proportion of peoples' diets varies widely.

Other things, too, disrupt the narratives of modernization that we so often use. For instance, public food markets remain important sources of income for impoverished peoples; recent research on Africa, Latin America, and parts of Eastern

Europe points to the ongoing importance of public markets and food sales, particularly for women's incomes.⁴⁷ And regardless of the particular tasks and the distribution of labor, gender orders often stand, as they have long done, at the center of food work.

Just as we might use labor to rethink food, I would argue that food can also be used to rethink typical (and problematic) categories of work. Food bridges neat divisions of chronology, space, scale, and organization that are often used to talk about workers. Despite the ostensibly progressive advance of civilization from foraging to farming to industry, older methods of food preparation have persisted, often using technologies (mortar and pestle; grilling on an open fire) that have changed only slightly since the Neolithic era. Even more modern arenas see the interconnectedness of industrial and farming practices. Nor, as Siegfried Giedion first observed, have discourses of rationality and efficiency transformed food processing that, by its organic nature, is inevitably inefficient and unpredictable.⁴⁸

Perhaps most striking, the modern separation of "home" from "work" disintegrates when the discussion turns to family or household meals. Certainly, "food labor" in homes is a task without neat boundaries, encompassing much more than simply cooking food and washing the dishes. This has broad implications. While Marxist thought holds that industrial work is by definition waged work, unwaged home cooking is no less embedded in capitalism. However, it and other tasks done for one's own family (provisioning, shopping, dishwashing) are often omitted from the category of work and from labor history as a whole. This obscures the alienation of domestic labor and the centrality of unpaid work to economies and exchange. Placing food work at the center of our attention reveals new truths about economic systems as a whole.

In short, thinking about the histories of food and labor usefully disrupts the constraints on whose work and what work scholars examine, and the spaces where they look for labor. Analysts of food and how it is obtained, from modernization theorists of the green revolution to Karl Marx, seek neat separations between historical epochs and labor systems. But empirical studies of food do not allow for that. Rather, these point to the way that work happens everywhere, and that theories of work need to account for paid and unpaid labor, for affect as well as hard-nosed self interest. Thinking through food and labor allows us to integrate into scholarly analyses what people have long enacted in daily life; integration of public and private, thinking always of the many different kinds of work required to keep ourselves going.

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CHAPTER 5

PUBLIC HISTORIES OF FOOD

RAYNA GREEN

WITHIN the arena of what is customarily called "public history," archivists, cultural resource and historical interpreters, museum professionals, and government and academic scholars (primarily archaeologists, scientists, and historians) engage a broad audience with food history. While no comprehensive list of public history practitioners or institutions follows this introduction to food history in the context of public history, what does follow is a description of the types and styles of food history found in public institutions and some discussion of notable examples of that history in practice in the United States. This essay also offers some examples of what is missing, and why, in the institutional (or public) recollection of major stories in food history.

In sites as diverse as museums, historic houses and communities, national parks, and food production facilities, these public historians collect, document, preserve, and present knowledge and practices, known as foodways, in the historical production, preservation, service, distribution, and consumption of food. Though ordinarily in service of presenting a larger social, cultural, and environmental or natural history, some food histories have more limited (and often, more commercial) goals. In most places, the histories can be presented in a highly accessible, often theatrical form of public education (e.g.: "living history"); in others, the presentation is more conventionally didactic and academic. Indeed, some sites produce a more complex activist or advocacy food history, directed toward, for example, gaining public understanding of and support for biological and cultural diversity, sustainability, improvements in community health, and recognition of the contributions of indigenous knowledge to the general health and nutrition of all.