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## The Political Economy of Meat: Food, Culture and Identity

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### Introduction

Anthropologists have long explored the relationship between culture, food and eating. Recent work in sociology has also addressed these themes. Research into food in political economy, on the other hand, remains located in discussions revolving around the production of commodities. When consumption is investigated, it is rarely from a perspective which includes cultural factors. This chapter is an excursion into the linkages between food, culture and identity through a discussion of the political economy of meat. It explores the history of thinking about meat, paying particular attention to shifts in ways of thinking about meat over time, and to contemporary conflicts over meat and meat products. Perceptions of the importance of meat are not restricted to its nutritional value but extend to non-food issues. Representations, and consumption, of meat (and blood) encode cultural messages about selfhood and group identity.

Conventional economics analyses changes in the meat market in terms of two key variables: income and price. Demand for meat, as a whole, is perceived to be a function of rising incomes. In other words, meat is a superior good and as our incomes rise we demand more meat, substituting this improved form of protein for more inferior sources. And the shift in demand between one type of meat and another is analysed in terms of relative prices. That is, consumers shift from one meat source to another type of meat largely in response to movements in prices so that the type of meat with a competitive (price) advantage will increase its market share. However, the market conditions of supply and demand are not the only factors which determine production and consumption. Extraneous, that is non-price, factors do influence consumption and

production. Recently, economists and meat industry analysts have become cognizant of the influence of non-price and non-income (that is, non-economic) factors in production and consumption (Burton and Young 1990; Spitters 1994). In noting the marked changes in the meat industry over the last 30 years, some neoclassical economists have widened the scope of their analysis to examine changes in consumers' tastes or preferences. Non-economic factors such as values, lifestyle, social class and personality are increasingly recognized as important in determining the demand for meat. The impact of variables such as consumer attitude and taste factors, consumer lifestyle and structural changes, industry marketing and promotional activities, and supply factors on the meat market is, however, held to be less significant than economic factors (Bansback 1994).

Nevertheless, the 'comparative advantage' held by meat over other sources of protein is taken for granted. It is excluded from analysis as a subject unfit for human deliberation. In other words, standard economic analysis accepts uncritically the 'good taste of meat', and the desirability of meat as a source of protein. And yet, of all the foods we eat, meat is probably the most controversial. In some respects, meat may hold a dominant position in the 'food chain' of most societies, but it has attached to it more taboos than any other food source. It is not the intention of this chapter to declare redundant the analyses of conventional economics or to dispute the findings of nutritional science. Rather, it is to introduce in a preliminary fashion a set of considerations absent from standard analyses of the production, distribution and consumption of meat, and, in so doing, to uncover and expose a set of assumptions inherent in conventional economic analyses. While economic analyses of the meat industry are common, little attempt has been made to link this analysis with the cultural reasons behind meat-eating. Unlike the standard economic argument, this chapter does not consider these non-economic factors to be external to production and consumption.

The starting point of the chapter is an attempt to uncover and expose the sets of assumptions inherent in conventional economic analyses. It examines the linkages between food, culture and identity through a discussion of the political economy of meat. How people think and feel about their bodies influences how and what they consume and eat. Eating is not only a nutritional act, it is also a social act (Mennell, Murcott and Van Otterloo 1992). What we eat is not so much a 'given' as a social category, with different meanings composed, imposed and developed by individuals and groups. I have chosen to concentrate on meat

because of the historical dominance of meat in so many cultures and societies. Moreover, if we are what we eat, then an analysis of food is an important topic for students of political economy and the body. Key questions posed for the analysis are generated by the relationship between culture and food. How does culture shape our eating habits? What forms of competence has culture invested in our diet?

One starting point for this analysis is an awareness that the body/subject is constructed in relation to food, itself contextualized in a world of multiple meanings. The practices constitutive of the political economy of meat are embedded in a wider discursive terrain.

Thus, within the context of a political economy of the body, this study of the production and consumption of meat raises certain issues hidden from view in standard IPE analyses. First, the chapter suggests the need to integrate cultural issues into the study of the production and consumption of commodities. Second, the chapter implicitly criticizes the assumption made in a number of studies of globalization that the construction of a global culture means the shrinking of difference. On the contrary, the arguments presented here demonstrate that in the contemporary world, images of the body and attention to image is heavily conditioned by access to material resources. Economic inequalities between the North and the South are reproduced in the agri-food system with resultant implications for health and the body.

Four main themes articulated in the project to bring the body into IPE are explored in this chapter. First, we are centrally concerned with the construction of value, that is, how value is formed. In contemporary global culture (and conventional economic analysis) the value attached to meat has been abstracted from its historical origins. The section 'The dominant meat culture' is an attempt to remedy this defect through an historical reconstruction of the development of the modern meat industry. Moreover, we show in the section 'Challenges to the culture of meat' that the value attached to the production and consumption of meat is open to dispute. Second, the chapter explores time and space relations particularly through its attempt to situate the production and consumption of meat within the framework of a changing international division of labour. Both neoclassical economics and mainstream IPE base their analyses on abstract notions of state and market. It is precisely an attachment to fixed notions of time and space which restricts analysis to standard conceptual schemes and admits so-called non-economic factors to the explanation as, at best, second-order considerations. The fact that the units of analysis and the relations among the units may have been changed by historical forces cannot be incorporated

into orthodox viewpoints when fixed notions of political processes and economic processes provide the starting point of analysis. Third, the chapter provides an introduction to the body in IPE through its focus on the construction of the self. In exploring the links between food, culture and identity, the chapter addresses how the consumption of meat is implicated in individual and societal selfconceptions. The actualization of self through the practice of eating is, of course, relevant to considerations of power and the gendered nature of social discourse. Finally, in the context of the political economy of the body, the chapter is explicitly concerned with the issue of human agency, that is, the transformative capacity of human action. The ability of humans to resist dominant structures is highlighted in the discussion of vegetarianism as resistance to the dominant ideology of meat.

The chapter begins by providing a brief overview of recent developments in the production, international trade in, and consumption of meat. In so doing, the intention is not to provide a comprehensive analysis of recent trends in global meat production and consumption but a brief overview of selected developments. The section on the changing structure of meat production supplements an examination of statistical evidence with a broad framework indebted to writers who stress the development of a global agro-food system. The production, distribution and consumption of meat is affected by developments in technology, the policies of national governments (for example, regulation, subsidies) (North 1993), and bilateral and multilateral policies (for example, tariff reductions) (OECD 1988; WTO 1995b). Hence, the supply and demand for meat will be influenced by the application of cost-efficient methods of production, changes in transport, governmental regulation, trade liberalization and a number of other factors.

The second section of the chapter explores the dominant meat culture. First, it provides a brief introduction to the increased consumption of animal protein in the western diet. Secondly, attention is focused on cultural meanings attached to meat.

The third section of the chapter discusses challenges to the dominant ideology. Modern vegetarianism developed simultaneously with the increased availability of meat. Meat is not only subject to restriction and taboo, its production and consumption is also contested. The dominance of meat is asserted not on the basis of the existence of a global culture, although the globalization of production and consumption provides a material basis for such an argument. It is not possible in a chapter of this length to discuss the wide range of practices which exist (and have existed) across diverse cultures. We are aware that the

arguments in this chapter can be developed in a fashion which gives greater attention to the specificities of diverse cultural practices. While accepting that the specific societal context will determine how the interrelationships between food and identity develop, the importance attached to meat has been widespread in human history and certain similarities in the manner in which meat is perceived are apparent across a number of societies.

### **The changing structure of meat production**

The production, distribution and consumption of meat and meat products have become increasingly global since the Second World War. The production of meat is part of an agro-food production system in which agriculture has been severed from its local origins. The internationalization of production in the agro-food sector has affected both the quantity and type of meat produced. Friedman (1993: 34) argues that profits in this sector 'depended on larger restructuring of the post-war economy towards mass consumption, especially increased consumption of animal products and high value-added manufactured foods ...'

Although the subject under scrutiny may appear obvious, it is perhaps helpful to define meat before proceeding further. Meat includes the trade in live animals, fresh, chilled and frozen meat, and manufactured meat products. Four main types of meat can be identified – beef, poultry, pig meat and sheep meat. In 1994, the three major sources of global meat production were pig meat (40 per cent), beef (28 per cent) and poultry (26 per cent) (Henry and Rothwell 1995: 22). And total world meat production stood at 191.7 million tons, representing an increase of 1.8 per cent over 1993 levels. (WTO 1995a: 8) The main sources of growth in the past 25 to 30 years have been in pig meat and poultry. And between 1984 and 1994, 84 per cent of the increase in world meat production was the result of increases in pig and poultry production (see Table 7.1).

*Table 7.1* World meat production annual growth (percentages)

<i>Year</i>	<i>Beef</i>	<i>Pig meat</i>	<i>Poultry</i>	<i>Sheep/goat</i>	<i>Meat total</i>
1970–80	1.6	4.0	5.6	0.7	3.1
1980–90	1.6	3.0	4.7	2.8	2.8
1990–94	-1.0	1.8	4.6	0.3	1.5

*Source:* Henry and Rothwell 1995: 22

The development of what Sanderson (1986) calls the 'world steer' represents a new phase in the internationalization of production. Key features of this phase are the development of contract farming and the input of new technologies. Changing land-use patterns have resulted in the integration of traditional peasant farmers into the cattle complex (Raynolds *et al.* 1993: 1106). The international cattle market has also become increasingly standardized. Global restructuring is based on specialized feedstuffs, medical technology and innovations in refrigeration and transport (McMichael 1992). The world steer is a product of the foodgrain-feedgrain-livestock complex, where land is brought out of cultivation as foodgrain and turned over to feedgrain for consumption by cattle. The result of cattle ranching is grain deficits. Hence beef, a product for those with higher incomes, displaces grain consumed by the world's poor.

Changes in the poultry meat sector provide a microcosm of the developments in the global meat industry in the past 30 years. Poultry (meat from broilers, turkeys, chickens, ducks and geese) has been one of the fastest growing sources of meat production. In 1988 world poultry production accounted for 22 per cent (Bishop 1990: 6) of total meat production, but in 1994 this had risen to 26 per cent (Henry and Rothwell 1995: 22). World poultry meat production tripled between 1968 and 1988. The expansion in world poultry production shows little sign of slowing down. In 1994, production increased by four per cent over 1993 and reached 49 million tons (WTO 1995a: 50). Most poultry production is confined to the local market, with only some nine per cent of total production (seven per cent when intra-European Union (EU) trade is excluded) entering international trade. In 1988, the advanced industrial countries' share of the market was 54 per cent of total global production, but this had increased to approximately 60 per cent in 1994 (Henry and Rothwell 1995: 23; Bishop 1990: 7). The growth in poultry production has been stimulated by growing demand in the advanced industrial countries (AICs) as consumers shifted down the food chain, and also by higher incomes in the developing world. The US is the largest poultry producer in the world, with a 27 per cent share of global output in 1994 (Henry and Rothwell 1995: 24). Apart from the US, other key producers are the EU, Japan, Canada, Brazil, China and Russia. Technical advances in poultry production gathered pace during the 1960s. Production technology allowed companies to reduce feed required per pound of weight gain. In 1988, two pounds of feed were required to produce one pound of weight gain, whereas in 1940 it required four pounds of feed in order to produce the same weight gain. Moreover, the

time required to 'grow out' a broiler has declined from 14 weeks in 1940 to 6–7 weeks in 1988 (Bishop 1990: 9). This more efficient grain to meat conversion has enabled poultry producers to maintain profit levels, even though selling broilers at declining prices in relation to other meats. The costs of production of poultry has been dramatically reduced. Developments in technology have made it possible to construct modern, efficient poultry production complexes anywhere in the world. Costs of production are not uniform across the world. For example, in 1988 the US cost of production was 29.9 cents per pound whereas in Taiwan it was 62 cents per pound. (Bishop 1990: 10)

The transnational corporation has dominated the changes in the meat complex (Heffernan and Constance 1994). Flexible corporate strategies have led to increasing rationalization, concentration and centralization of firms. For example, in the US the number of firms producing chickens declined by nearly one-third between 1959 and 1988 (Bishop 1990: 8). The organization of the modern cattle, pig meat or poultry industry is radically different from that at the end of the Second World War. Production has shifted to vertically-integrated firms in which production and marketing decisions are centralized and production complexes are either owned directly or controlled through contracts. This integrated production structure covers all stages of operation, although it can be argued that no single corporate strategy exists since there are multiple strategies that companies can use in order to become global players. But one notable development has been the creation of large food conglomerates, for example ConAgra, hence meat becomes one component in the value-added processed foods market (Gouveia 1994: 131).

## **The global pattern of meat consumption**

The global pattern of meat consumption is intricately linked with production. An overview of consumption patterns reveals two major changes in the post-Second World War period: an increase in total meat consumption and the changing sectoral composition of consumption. Consumption parallels production; thus the share of beef, veal, mutton and lamb has declined and that of poultry and pig meat has increased. These trends are especially noticeable in the US and the EU (FAO 1989). Table 7.2 shows the changes in meat consumption between 1981 and 1993 in the major consuming countries. This reveals some variation in national markets but (apart from Japan) confirms the gains made by poultry consumption at the expense of beef.

Table 7.2 World meat consumption trends: percentage changes, 1981–93

<i>Country/area</i>	<i>Beef and veal</i>	<i>Pig meat</i>	<i>Poultry meat</i>	<i>Sheep meat</i>
Canada	-17.9	-8.6	39.6	15.7
US	-10.4	-5.0	55.5	-4.3
EU	-10.8	13.2	32.1	17.6
Australia	-24.5	18.8	42.9	3.2
Japan	78.6	17.7	31.7	-46.7
Argentina	-21.3	-28.1	28.2	-31.3

*Source:* WTO 1995a: 13

Since the end of the Second World War, total protein intake, and animal protein as a proportion of this total, has increased in both developed and developing countries. Meat remains the main source of animal protein in developed and developing countries but there are wide variations between countries and regions. The developed world consumes roughly two-thirds of world meat production, whereas the developing world with three-quarters of the world's population consumes only one-third of total meat production. Meat provides the main source of animal protein in all developed countries with the notable exception of Japan, where fish remains dominant. In 1991, per capita consumption of meat in the EU was 70 per cent higher than in 1960 (Bansback 1994).

The long-term trend is one of rising global meat consumption, although this general trend masks a decline worrying top producers and retailers. Per capita meat consumption has risen in the past 50 years but the rate of increase has been decreasing in the past 30 years. The slowdown in consumption has been most marked in the developed countries. Within the overall increase since the Second World War, a major shift has taken place in the structure of demand in favour of poultry, and products derived from the pig. This increase in demand for poultry and pig meat has been at the expense of beef and veal. Economists have explained this changing demand – the shift from red meat to white meat – in terms of income and price. The overall demand for meat is a function of income and the shift between different types of meat is seen as a response to relative prices. In the past two decades, the retail price of beef has been higher than chicken in most countries (WTO 1995a: 13). But pig meat is the most important type of meat consumed in both developed and developing countries. Beef ranks second for both groups, with poultry in third place.



Marked growth in consumption has taken place in the developing countries. Increases in consumption have been significantly below average in the more developed countries. In the past 20 years, total consumption of meat has increased faster in developing countries but the absolute consumption per capita still remains far below that in the developed world (FAO 1989: 18). Indeed, during this period the gap in consumption between the North and the South has grown despite the rising trend in the developing world. Average meat consumption in the developing world is less than a fifth of the pattern in the developed world. In the period 1980–82, for example, per capita meat consumption in the developing world stood at 13.5 kg but for the developed world the figure was 75.5 kg (FAO 1989: 3).

The increased consumption of meat in the post-war period can be explained by growth in average income per person. Historically, as people have become more affluent the demand for meat has risen. The regular consumption of meat was both a symbol of increased wealth and a source of nutrition (Spitters 1994). Economic growth in the Third World and the concomitant urbanization creates an expanding but diffuse urban use for meat and meat products. High income elasticities of demand for meat in the South accounts for the growth in demand and consumption. On the other hand, in the 1980s, the demand for meat in a number of AICs has been stagnant. At higher levels of income and consumption the income elasticity of demand tends to decline as the market approaches saturation levels. The shift away from beef towards poultry and pig meat can also be explained in terms of changing price elasticities of demand, since the decline in the consumption of beef has been most marked in the US, the most efficient producer of poultry and pig meat in the world. As I hope to show later, the decline in meat consumption in North America and the increased share of poultry meat is to some extent a consequence of affluence in that region.

This discussion of the production and consumption of meat has, I hope, served three purposes. First, in providing a clear overview of recent changes in the global meat industry. The two key developments have been increased meat production and consumption (although consumption patterns have been declining in the advanced capitalist countries), and a shift from beef to poultry. I will argue below that both the decline in consumption in the North and the decline in red meat consumption, the preference for white meat and for lean meat, is linked to issues of power (reflecting class and status considerations, and resistance to meat-eating) and changing images of the body (changing standards of health and beauty).

Secondly, in documenting the developments within the production structure. The role of technology and changes in the production structure are crucial determinants of the political economy of meat which must be understood in an historical context as the next section demonstrates.

Thirdly, in raising the issue of inequality. In the context of international production and consumption this theme has been mentioned in relation to differences between the developed world and the developing countries. The centrality of inequality to the political economy of the body will be explored below. The subject of inequality cannot be confined to the statist dimensions of North–South relations since inequalities arise at the national and international levels, between men and women, and between humans and animals.

### **The dominant meat culture**

If meat-eating is related to affluence, why is it that consumption is falling in the most affluent countries? Not only is consumption falling in the richer countries but the fall, especially in red meat consumption, is more marked among the wealthy and better educated social classes (a neat parallel with cigarette smoking). The standard economic explanation for this is (as I have noted above) in terms of the elasticity of demand. But recourse to the income elasticity of demand is limited since it merely describes what is happening rather than providing an explanation. Elasticity of demand is a positivistic, asocial concept unable to take account of historical, political, social and cultural factors. The standard economic approach is based on an assumption which is subject to question. If meat is highly prized and valued, this is a natural result not of some inherent qualities attached to the substance but rather of the meanings attached to the consumption of meat within society. The eating of meat is cultural and investigation of demand and supply needs to be placed in a cultural context. Economic analysis is not redundant but whereas it can, perhaps, explain exchange value and use value it cannot explain how value is derived. Economic analysis, for example, cannot explain prohibitions on eating meat, either particular types of meat or meat in general. These so-called extra-economic factors are not only present when humans decide not to consume but also affect choices over what to consume. In other words, it is necessary to ask why certain foods are esteemed (Fiddes 1991: 173).

How does culture shape our eating habits? What forms of competence has culture invested in our diet? Is the shift to eating meat the result of superior protein or the superior position meat has held in many

cultures? This dominance of meat is partly related to the fact that for a long time meat was relatively expensive, and also to the fact that meat is associated with a number of myths. Meat's contemporary dominance has been historically constructed. It is the result of developments in the 19th century, and age-old myths about meat. In the first part of this section I will examine the impact of industrialization on the western diet. Next, I will turn my attention to the ideology of meat.

### **Industrialization and meat for all**

Meat has long held a dominant position among foodstuffs in most cultures. The majority of consumers value meat and meat products as a desirable and healthy part of their daily food intake. The importance of meat arises from its use as a source of nutrition, especially protein (Jensen 1994). In the modern world, it is the prime source of animal protein in both rich and poor countries (FAO 1989: 1). And, meat is often the prime item in a meal in contemporary western homes. Meat's dominant position is intricately linked with the fact that, for most of recorded history, meat has been a very expensive item to produce. Meat is an expensive source of protein. From the 14th century until the mid-19th century the European diet was 90 per cent grain (Cockburn 1996). It is only with increasing real wages that it becomes possible for the majority of the population to consume meat on a regular basis. The modern consumption of meat is a result of socio-economic and technological changes attendant on industrialization. For example, consumption of livestock products in Europe fell in the 16th century and was restored to 15th-century levels only in the mid-19th century. Moreover, until the end of the 19th century, livestock products rarely provided more than 15 per cent of total calorific intake (Grigg 1995: 247–8). Grigg provides some examples of the changes in European consumption patterns from the early 19th century to the early 1960s. For example, German per capita consumption of meat per annum rose from 16kg in 1816 to 51kg by 1907, and 67kg in the 1960s. Belgian per capita consumption of meat per annum rose from 15kg in 1880 to 60kg in 1960 (Grigg 1995: 254).

Nineteenth century developments in the meat industry were part of what Goody (1982) refers to as the creation of 'industrial food'. Goody (1982: 154) argues that four factors – preserving, mechanization, retailing (and wholesaling) and transport – were responsible for the development of an industrial cuisine in the west. Modern food preservation was initiated by Nicholas Appert's successful demonstration of bottling in 1804. The subsequent development of canning in the 1820s was important in

preserving perishable foods. These developments in preservation were complemented by technological advances in mechanization and transport. Technological advances brought the steam locomotive, steam ships and, later, the combustion engine. These inventions facilitated the growth of a transport system that could deliver enormous quantities of food over vast distances in a relatively short time. Technological advance succeeded in shortening both time and distance. Moreover, the mechanization of food production helped to reduce costs. Increasing industrialization with the concomitant rise in working class incomes created both the necessity for a link between the rural area and city, and the purchasing power to demand new products. There is general agreement in the literature that the role of agriculture in the expansion of industrial capitalism was to 'relieve downward pressure on the rate of profit by furnishing staple foodstuffs or "wage goods" at low real wages to the urban industrial sector' (Goodman and Redclift 1991: 87). This gave rise to changes in retail and wholesaling, with grocery moving from a minor food trade to a pre-eminent position in retailing (Goody 1982: 170).

Goody's analysis of the rise of what he terms 'industrial food' is supported by studies of the development of the meat industry in the US in the 19th century. The disassembly line developed in Cincinnati pioneered mechanization. The disassembly line division of labour ensured that pigs were processed for various body parts separately, and byproducts such as lard, candles, glue and soap were made efficiently (Walsh 1982: 81–2; Cronon 1991: 228–9). In her study of the mid-western meat packing industry in the US, Margaret Walsh (1982: 39–54) has demonstrated the importance of improvements in the transportation network in the creation of a permanent industry. And Cronon (1991: 212) argues that the creation of the stockyard not only transformed Chicago's role in the meat trade, it also remade 'international meat markets with new technologies for selling and distributing cattle and hogs'. Moreover, it

... established intricate new connections among grain farmers, stock raisers and butchers, thereby creating a new corporate network that gradually seized responsibility for moving and processing animal flesh in all parts of North America. One long-term result of this new network was basic change in the American diet, and in that of people in other parts of the world as well.

(Cronon 1991: 212)

The rise in refrigeration from the middle of the century was important in the growth of the meat-packing industry. Walsh (1982: 85) claims

that ice packing and curing was the 'most important innovation in the process of modernising the meat-packing industry' in the decade after the end of the American Civil War. The creation of the refrigerated railroad car in the late 1870s led to beef outstripping pork (Cronon 1991: 234), and the transport of frozen meat from Australia and Argentina to Europe led to a fall in the demand for canned and salted meat (Goody 1982: 162–3). The marketing of meat was transformed in the light of these developments. Advertising played a critical role in promoting the availability of meat and overcoming customer reluctance. Customers had previously bought recently killed meat directly from the butcher. Now, they were buying a product that had been killed some time previously.

### **Meatology: the ideology of meat**

Before analysing how meat or any food fits into the diet of a particular nation or group it is useful to inquire into the meanings attached to that food source. In *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, Carol Adams (1990: 14) argues that 'the texts of meat which we assimilate into our bodies include the expectation that people should eat animals and that meat is good for you'. She rejects the naturalization of meat and situates meat-eating within a cultural context. Adams' central aim is to expose what she terms the patriarchal texts of meat. In so doing, she traces links between meat-eating, male violence and war. For Adams:

...meat's recognisable message includes association with the male role; its meaning recurs within a fixed gender system; the coherence it achieves as a meaningful item of food arises from patriarchal attitudes including the idea that the end justifies the means, that the objectification of other beings is a necessary part of life, and that violence can and should be masked.

(Adams 1990: 14)

My concern is not with the 'truth' or persuasiveness of Adams' argument but with the insight she provides into the beginnings of a cultural approach to meat-eating. A noted anthropologist has stated that 'each meal is a structured social event which structures others in its own image' (Douglas 1975: 261). This is a useful starting point from which to recognize that the production and consumption of meat is a social event. Douglas' analysis of forbidden meats leads her to the conclusion that 'whenever a people are aware of encroachment and danger, dietary rules controlling what goes into the body would serve as a vivid analogy of the corpus of their cultural categories at risk' (Douglas 1975: 272).

This resonates with one approach to the body in anthropological theory – the issue of pollution.

A number of reasons, which do not rest on nutritional arguments, can be suggested to explain meat's status as the most highly prized of foods. First, within the dominant culture, the eating of meat is equated with the possession of power. The ingestion of animals gives to humans some of the power of the animal killed and eaten. To eat meat is to seize the strength, aggression and potency of the animal.

'Belief in human dominion does not merely legitimate meat eating – the reverse is also true: meat reinforces that presumption. Killing, cooking, and eating other animals' flesh provides perhaps the ultimate authentication of human superiority over the rest of nature, with the spilling of blood a vibrant motif.' (Fiddes 1991: 65)

Meat as a symbol of power, of potency, is deeply ingrained within western culture. The image of strength through meat is intimately connected with what Adams calls the patriarchal texts of meat. Meat is frequently represented as masculine, as a symbol of virility. The consumption of meat, particularly red meat, is traditionally a vital ingredient in the diet of sportsmen and soldiers. Thus, restricting meat (or types of meat) for women or invalids is commonplace, but within the male diet meat is held constant (Adams 1990: 26–9; Twigg 1983: 24–5). This symbolic value even had resonance for Gandhi, who once remarked: 'It began to grow on me that meat-eating was good, that it would make me strong and daring, and that, if the whole country took to meat-eating, the English would be overcome.' (Quoted in Fiddes 1991: 67)

In meat-eating cultures, meat is linked with human power. From the image of the hunter, suggesting skill, daring and bravado, to the preparation and cooking of meat, a distinction is reinforced between humans and non-human animals. The symbolic significance of blood is particularly important in this context. The importance attached to blood in human thought is central to its role in the ideology of meat. Twigg (1983: 22–3) has identified three central motifs, deeply embedded in human thought, underlying the widespread attachment to blood. Blood is the carrier of life itself. And life ends when too much blood is spilled. Significant loss of blood leads to the loss of life. The terror held by blood can cause us to faint. Moreover, blood plays a role in our collective sense of belonging. It is blood which is used to signify race and kinship. Related to this is the special bond created when individuals cement their friendship through the ritual mingling of blood. Blood is also used as a trope of the passions. When we call someone hot-blooded, the term is used to signify vigour, impulsiveness, spiritedness. On the

other hand, to designate an individual as cold-blooded is to label that person mean, cruel and lacking in warmth and affection. In other words, hot-blooded is vital, a sign of the life-force, whereas cold-blooded designates inhumanity and the absence of emotions. It is not surprising that in the meat chain red meat stands at the apex.

The power of meat is also discernible through cooking. Cooking, as Lévi-Strauss noted, represents the fundamental distinction between nature and culture. Cooking sets us apart from other animals. Humans are the only species to use fire, and apart from a few exceptions in some cuisines, meat, unlike vegetables, must be cooked. Of course, vegetables are cooked, but whereas it is accepted that vegetables are frequently eaten raw, the consumption of raw meat (for the most part) is considered barbaric. 'Throughout the dominant scheme cooking increases the status of food' (Twigg 1983: 26), and the semi-cooked meat through the preservation of blood is rendered more prestigious. Methods of cooking are also hierarchically ordered, ranging from roasting (high) to boiling (low).

Meat is a source of prestige and wellbeing in our culture. As meat has become cheaper and more plentiful, its symbolic importance has not declined. Nevertheless, changing consumer behaviour, especially in the AICs, is noticeable. Recent writers have emphasized the importance of non-price factors as an explanation for the declining consumption of meat. These changes have to do with the place of meat in the agro-food system and the meanings people give to meat. But the meanings consumers give to meat arise under conditions largely prescribed and determined by the producers.

So far, we have accounted for the pervasive hold meat has in our culture and this is, I am arguing, an important reason behind the substitution of animal for vegetable protein. Of course, the argument is more complex than indicated above. The proposition that increased consumption of meat did not take place because of some innate liking for meat does not in itself lead to any firm conclusions concerning the mechanisms which translated the symbolic meanings attached to meat into mass consumption. Certainly, imitation of the habits of the rich came into it, as did liberation from a monotonous diet. It does not, however, fully explain the changing trends in meat consumption noted above. In order to develop this argument we need to turn to challenges to meat-eating.

## **Challenges to the culture of meat**

Dominant ideologies rarely determine the entire construction of social and political space. The terms of cultural engagement are as much marked

by antagonistic and conflictual relations as by consent and cooperation. In this section, I explore one of the most persistent challenges to the ideology of meat. The decline in the consumption of meat and meat products cannot be reduced to the espousal of vegetarianism, but modern vegetarianism remains the most focused opposition to meatology.

To coin a cliché, we are what we eat. The connection between consumption and identity finds an apt expression in the politics of vegetarianism. It is significant that modern vegetarianism developed in the 19th century at exactly the moment meat was becoming more accessible to all members of society. Vegetarianism as a social movement was created by and in response to the greater availability of meat. In many respects, vegetarianism shares many of the assumptions of the ideology of meat but rejects the positive connotations placed on values such as masculinity and aggression. For example, the rejection of blood is a central motif in vegetarianism. The *Vegetarian Messenger*, in an article published in 1850, claimed: 'Blood is perhaps the most objectionable form of nutriment; flesh being principally composed of blood is next to it in its gross, stimulating and exciting qualities' (quoted in Twigg 1983: 26). In her seminal article, Twigg argues (Twigg 1983: 28) that vegetarianism 'challenges and disrupts the meaning' contained in the dominant discourse on meat. Vegetarianism is thus not a negative reaction to something undesirable but has positive connotations. Price probably plays a minimal role in the decision to become a vegetarian, although it cannot be discounted. Moreover, it is likely that such price-induced vegetarianism will be short-lived.

Four major reasons are frequently given for the decision to abandon meat. Some people abandon meat-eating on the grounds of health. In the current context in the United Kingdom, such reasons are all too familiar. Scares over BSE and the e-coli virus have led consumers to rethink their dietary habits. The uncertainty, confusion and fear felt by millions of people has resulted in a decline in the demand for meat and meat products. But the connection between vegetarianism and good health did not have to wait for modern food scares. Catherine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote, in the last century, that reduced consumption of meat would 'greatly reduce the amount of fevers, eruptions, headaches, bilious attacks, and many other ailments which are produced or aggravated by too gross a diet . . . The popular notion that meat is more nourishing than bread, is a great mistake' (quoted in Adams 1990: 158). The decline in the consumption of red meat and the rise in the demand for white meat is linked to health concerns. Another reason for the change in diet arises from concern for the welfare of animals.



Perhaps the most popular view of the vegetarian is that of someone with animal welfare uppermost. Increasingly, economic/ecological arguments are made by many converts to vegetarianism. The inefficiency of converting grain into animal protein (Lappé 1975) coupled with worsening food shortages and deforestation lead many to reject the dominant culture. And vegetarianism has also long appealed to those seeking a higher moral plane. Lady Paget, writing in the 19th century, captured the social purity sentiment behind vegetarianism:

Since I have adopted the diet, I have experienced a delightful sense of repose and freedom, a kind of superior elevation above things material...it has a decided effect on moral character, rendering people docile and more *spirituelle* and if spread among the masses would make them less coarse and brutal. It refines the lower instincts...and reduces sensuality.

(Quoted in Twigg 1983: 27)

These different challenges to the dominant culture indicate that the rejection of meat is often linked with wider social considerations. Indeed, it can be argued that in the structuring of identity vegetarianism has long been associated with radical movements (Hitler's vegetarianism notwithstanding). The different ways in which rejection of meat-eating is portrayed needs to be located in the wider context of social protest. The idea of vegetarianism as a dissident, critical stance is central to an appreciation of the hegemony of meat-eating. Vegetarianism can thus be seen as an attempt to (re)construct an identity. If, as a critique of meat-eating, vegetarianism begins by accepting many of the assumptions of the dominant ideology, its critique is not confined to mere oppositional politics. This difference in consumption is frequently linked with countercultural movements.

The American New Left's critique of corporate America included a rejection of America's food habits (Levenstein 1993: 180–4). Vegetarianism became a strong strand in American 'liberal' political circles in the early 1970s.

It should be evident from what has been said above that the body is not a physical given prior to history or culture but rather is subject to cultural forces which, in turn, reflect wider notions about class, ethnicity, gender and so on. The human body and the biological process of nutrition are indisputably basic to survival but they are socialized, that is, put into a cultural category. Eating is not only a biological process but a social one. Not only is what we eat controlled, for example cannibalism,

it is also socially constructed. Western Europeans think eating animals kept as domestic pets is barbaric, but why that should be more revolting and repulsive than killing pigs or sheep is not readily apparent. In relation to food, the body is ordered and regulated. In the hierarchical food chain certain kinds of meat are prohibited; for example, we do not eat human beings or carnivores. Poultry's low ranking on the food chain of consumable meats is at odds with its increased share of the market in the last 30 years. But apart from the cost efficiency of producing broilers, the marketing of poultry benefited from the cultural stereotype of the domestic fowl.

Of all edible creatures (with the exception of insects, which are still nutritious and popular complements to the diet of many people) domestic fowl are probably least likely to arouse affection in us. Chickens are without exception mean-tempered, cowardly, and stupid in our folk tales and idioms . . . All of which is extremely useful to us since chickens make delicious, versatile and delicate meat, which we can easily eat without a shred of compunction to mar our pleasure.

(Visser 1989:144)

We not only have social codes which restrict diet but food is intimately connected with body image. The eruption of eating disorders is symptomatic of crises concerning who we are and how we should look (Donellan 1996). In contemporary western societies, the standards of health and beauty have become intertwined. There is, of course, no such thing as a standard western society, and the impact of the general trends discussed below will be subject to the specificities of time and place. Western societies do exhibit many features in common but also differ in their approaches to food and consumption. Conspicuous consumption (especially) of flesh was, in the pre-industrial age, the privilege of the wealthy. A person's wealth and status could be deduced from his or her size. Large size was sought after as a demonstration of superior (purchasing) power. But the democratization of animal protein forced the rich and powerful to invent other symbolic ways of exerting their power. In the realm of food this has been evident in a stress on limited consumption (*nouvelle cuisine* represented this movement at its zenith) and healthy eating. When bulk could no longer be held to be a convenient sign of affluence it had to be replaced. If industrialization brought 'food for all' then satisfaction of appetite no longer had the same resonance it once held. It was a fairly logical step to invest the control of appetite with the functions previously performed by the

pursuit of excess. In practice, it is the educated and wealthy who first follow nutritional advice. Medical opinion in the 20th century has consistently promoted non-fatty foods, and emphasized the link between food and cardiovascular problems. As far as meat is concerned, this privileges lean cuts and white meat over red meat. The rejection of fat and cholesterol in the diet has changed attitudes towards meat. This re-evaluation is not a rejection (since meat is still held to be the best source of protein) but it has affected the total consumption and the relative share of different meats in the market. It is not accidental that it is in the most affluent countries that the most marked change in consumption patterns has been noted. If knowledge is power, the ability to act on that knowledge remains a function of wealth and socio-economic class.

Changing dietary advice is also linked to changing ideal body types. It isn't so much that we conform to these ideal shapes and sizes but rather that the standards of perfection are culturally inscribed and constantly reiterated. The shift to leaner meat consumption has been accompanied, especially for women, by a fetish for thinness. Bulimia and anorexia nervosa are primarily diseases of affluent societies. Healthy young women (for the most part) in their quest for the fashionable shape dictated by society become the victims of eating disorders. The price they pay in pursuit of flat stomachs, thin legs and slender hips is their own body. In the midst of plenty, concern for body image becomes entangled with food consumption. It is ironic that in an age of overconsumption, the body shape, for women, promoted by many western magazines equates with that of the undernourished in the Third World. It should also be noted, however, that the vision of women as victims of the dictates of fashion is only partially correct. Indeed, many women are driven to seek the body shape deemed desirable by men. But it is also the case that for many western women (I am assuming that these women have greater 'choice' in determining body image related to diet) control of diet, and hence control over their body, is part of a quest for power, and control over their life. In other words, the assignation of victim status is inappropriate and misleading.

## **Conclusion**

In the course of less than a century, western consumers formerly subsisting almost exclusively on grains became prodigious eaters of meat. This is an astonishing development which is often lauded as a triumph of progress. A recent article by a self-proclaimed meat eater casts some

doubt on the unalloyed benefits of this change in diet. 'Humans are essentially vegetarian as a species and insatiable meat-eating brings its familiar toll of heart disease, stroke and cancer' (Cockburn 1996). In the course of this dependence on animal protein, the distance between farm and table became greater. This intensification of space between the animal and its appearance on the table radically transformed the cut, style and shape of meat. The presentation of meat has increasingly been divorced from any likeness to the animal killed.

Conventional economic analysis, although demonstrating awareness of the role of non-economic factors in the production and consumption of meat, argues that shifts in patterns of production and consumption are best explained in terms of income and price. This chapter has attempted to show not only that are non-economic factors important but that they have to be understood in the context of what has been termed the dominant meat culture. I have suggested that the production, distribution and consumption of meat is encoded within a cultural context. Anthropologists and sociologists have studied food and eating. This short chapter is a preliminary attempt to go beyond comparative statics. It suggests that the production and consumption of meat is closely interwoven with an ideology of meat.

We are producers and consumers, and through engaging in both kinds of activity we not only provide meaning for our lives but also shape our bodies. One of the central issues of contemporary society is that of control. Through our daily acts as producers and consumers we attempt to control our lives. And in the realm of food, society offers us a sense of control absent in other areas of our lives. Prepackaged convenience foods increase our leisure time; the availability of fruits and vegetables throughout the year banishes notions of seasonal availability and, therefore, increases our range of culinary choice. What we eat and how we eat provides scope for creativity and individuality. And yet these seemingly individualistic acts are shaped by the dynamics of market capitalism. The meat complex has produced the world steer and the modern broiler. Modern technology and the rationalization of industrial processes has significantly affected the production of meat and meat products. Our choice of food is not simply consequent upon a demand which results in an attendant supply, but is created by the economic and marketing strategies of large food conglomerates. As I have tried to show, this economic system does not exist in a vacuum but produces and reproduces certain cultural forms. Thus, the ideology of meat was not created by capitalism but has been instrumental in the industrialization of food.

This study of the political economy of meat has argued that we need to think of meat (and other commodities) in terms of the ways in which they are socially constructed. Key questions pertaining to continuity and change were explored in the context of the motifs and texts of meat. From the perspective of the body, a number of conclusions can be drawn. First, this study reinforces a perspective which focuses on the centrality of food in constructions of the body. These constructions are neither universal nor neutral but, among other things, reflect power relations within human societies. Thus, gender and class considerations are crucial variables in the determination of what is produced and consumed. Furthermore, the dominion of humans over animals is based in this instance on the erasure of the animal body. Animals are seen solely as commodities and not as rights holders. It is this erasure which justifies the consumption of animal flesh. Eating meat is the embodiment of the contempt humans feel for animals.

This chapter has argued that meat's position in the contemporary political economy has been historically constructed. In terms of the production structure, it is the result of developments in 19th-century capitalism. The spread of industrial society was concomitant with the growth of industrial food. These changes were linked to the development of nationalism in a number of ways. First, the nationalist project was based upon an improvement of material conditions, and the success of 'meat for all' part of the movement to greater democracy and a mass society. Secondly, modern armies also required 'modern' food, and the military in North America and Europe were early supporters of refrigeration and key consumers of the new industrial food. But we have also argued that myths about meat – the ideology surrounding meat – have played a crucial role in creating and preserving its status in the food chain.

This analysis of the production and consumption of meat has attempted to bring the body into IPE. We can now return to the four themes identified at the outset of this chapter and examine the conclusions which can be derived from the evidence presented above. The first theme we noted, previously, was that of the construction of value. Our discussion suggests that neither use value nor exchange value can be properly understood without giving significance to the cultural context within which meat is encoded. This is directly related to the body. In conventional terms this can be clearly discerned in terms of nutrition but, as the evidence presented above suggests, a much wider set of considerations relating to identity, taboo and myth are also relevant. The second theme concerns spatiality, and in its focus on the historical

embodiment of the subject this chapter contends that abstract and separated categories of political and economic analysis are seriously deficient. Consumption is a social process, and since the construction of the body and the satisfaction of its needs are historically contingent, attention to the body challenges abstract and asocial conceptualizations. This study of the inter-relationship between food, culture and identity has brought the question of selfhood and group identity to the fore. It has shown that individual identity and group identity affect our consumption decisions. Body image conditions purchases of meat both in terms of quantity and type. And myths about meat and blood are crucial to the creation and maintenance of religious and national difference. Finally, the theme of human agency was explored through opposition to the dominant meat culture. In this context vegetarianism can be seen as resistance to organized and officially sanctioned violence. But a violence which is legitimized because the bodies of the victims are accorded value only in relation to their ability to satisfy human desires.

## Notes

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