

INTRODUCTION

Pouring Ourselves a Large Gin

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sichuan Stir-Fried Potato Slivers

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

Sichuan Stir-fried Potato Slivers

[炒土豆丝 *chao tudousi*]

A. Ingredients

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



B. Method

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

C. Distinguishing features

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

NOURISHING THE COMMONWEALTH

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

STATES AND INDIVIDUALS

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

sufficient to convert them into a healthful and satisfying meal, observed one French agronomic handbook. ‘No plant is as universally useful,’ it concluded.²⁶ French officials before and after the Revolution encouraged potato consumption through prize competitions, publications and exhortation, and they were not alone. Individuals across eighteenth-century Europe experimented with schemes to improve the nutritional health of working people because such projects were believed to increase national prowess. (See figure 1.)

Promotional schemes were all very well, but translating new political convictions into real behavioural change was no easy matter. From the moment that daily diets first attracted the attention of political theorists, debate began over who was responsible for ensuring that people followed these recommendations, and who was to blame if they did not. Eighteenth-century scientists, politicians and social commentators frequently lamented the failure of the working classes to eat properly, and disputed whether blame lay with the fecklessness of the poor, or the economic structures that limited their purchasing power. Peasants, complained the Scottish physician William Buchan in 1776, ‘are extremely careless with respect to what they eat or drink, and often, through mere indolence, use unwholesome food, when they might, for the same expense, have that which is wholesome’.²⁷ Buchan recommended potatoes as a highly suitable and economical foodstuff. Others challenged such criticisms, variously lauding existing working-class eating practices as perfectly healthful, or redirecting blame towards the merchants and officials who pushed food prices to unaffordable heights. More radical voices suggested that the exploitative distribution of power and wealth was the true reason working people so often ate miserable and unhealthy diets.

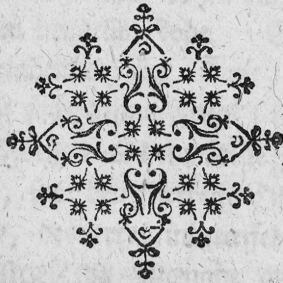
Disagreements about whether poor diet resulted primarily from ‘carelessness’ or from poverty persisted. A century after Buchan condemned the eating habits of peasants, the nutritionist Max Rubner critiqued the ‘irrational’ behaviour of German industrial workers who wasted their limited resources on buttery sandwiches, instead of more nutritious foodstuffs. Others, such as the socialist alderman from Bradford who authored a pamphlet advocating free school meals, blamed unjust economic structures. From York, the philanthropist

Underretning
for
Bønder i Norge,
om
Den meget nyttige Jord-Frugt
P o t a t o s

At plante og bruge.

Af
Egen Erfarenhed forestillet;
ved

P. H. HERTZBERG.



Andet Oplag.



1 B E R G E N , 1774.

Trykt i Hr. Mag. H. Mossins privil. Bogtrykkerie.

Figure 1 Frontispiece of Peter Harboe Hertzberg's 1774 guide to growing potatoes. This pamphlet provided Norwegian farmers with guidance on cultivating the 'very useful' potato. Similar texts were published across Europe in the late eighteenth century. New ideas linking the health of the population to the wealth and grandeur of the state made nutritious staples such as the potato appealing to political theorists and patriotically minded individuals.

Seebohm Rowntree calculated that many of the city's poor lacked the financial means to eat even a minimally adequate diet. He nonetheless believed that 'some improvement might be effected in their diet, without increasing its cost, if they possessed greater knowledge of the relative value of different food stuffs, and were prepared to profit by such knowledge'.²⁸ Today's proposals to offer cookery classes to recipients of welfare are the latest instalments in a long-running debate.²⁹

What unites these varied opinions is the shared conviction that individual eating habits are not simply a matter of individual concern. Of course, the impact of diet on individual health has long been recognised, and physicians have for millennia offered guidance on what to eat to stay well. Those who failed to comply, doctors warned, were digging their graves with their own teeth.³⁰ William Buchan and the Bradford alderman, however, perceived a broader, political, risk to such individual failings. Buchan believed that Britain's 'real wealth, the happiness of her people, and the stability of her government' were connected to the everyday eating habits of ordinary people. The Bradford socialist blamed 'under and improper feeding' for the poor physique that rendered 40 per cent of the men who volunteered to fight in the Boer War so puny that they were 'not good enough to be shot at'.³¹ When workers made careless or irresponsible dietary choices that affected their health they reduced the nation's security and productivity. Mothers who fed children inappropriate meals were critiqued for weakening both their bodies and their moral fibre, and probably also increasing the likelihood of labour unrest. To counter these evils, eighteenth-century philanthropists published collections of economical recipes that aimed to show poor women 'the way to do much good with little money', and nineteenth-century social analysts recommended that working-class girls be equipped with the basic principles of budgeting, plain cooking and nutritionally informed menu planning. By the twentieth century 'domestic science' had made its way onto the curricula of many state-funded educational systems.³²

For eighteenth- and nineteenth-century political writers, encouraging the poor to adopt recommended eating habits through such educational campaigns was an appropriate exercise in governance. Most, however, rejected the proposition that the state had an outright responsibility to

guarantee a minimum diet.³³ ‘To provide for us in our necessities is not in the power of government,’ stated the political philosopher and statesman Edmund Burke in 1795.³⁴ The emergence in the late nineteenth century of welfarist philosophies that ascribed this responsibility to the state marks a new development in political thinking. It does not, however, reflect a new appreciation of the importance of diet to the body politic. The belief that individual health and national strength were connected was born much earlier, in the eighteenth century. The potato’s career as an Enlightenment super-food helps tell this story.

PEASANTS AND POTATOES

The South American potato has nourished ordinary people for millennia, doing so long before statesmen in Europe began contemplating its potential to build hearty populations. Wild potatoes were being eaten, from Chile to Utah, some 12,000 years ago. Their domestication probably dates from around 7800 BCE.³⁵ Villagers along the Andes grew potatoes for their daily sustenance, creating an enormous corpus of agronomic knowledge, and a great variety of potatoes, which were used in diverse ways to provide year-round nourishment. When Europeans and West Africans reached South America’s Pacific coast in the 1530s, they instantly identified the potato as an essential staple, the local equivalent of European bread or West African millet, sorghum, or yam porridge. They were the ones who brought potatoes to Europe, thereby initiating its global spread. Colonists moreover associated the potato with the indigenous locals who grew and ate it, and speculated whether a potato-rich diet might in some way explain the distinctive characteristics they believed Andean peoples to possess. Potatoes, and dietary practices more generally, were thus of interest to early modern colonisers, who relied on this sort of medical and ethnographic information to understand and interpret the unfamiliar peoples and polities they aspired to rule.³⁶ (See figure 2.)

In early modern Europe the potato attracted less attention from representatives of the state. Uninterested as they were in the everyday eating habits of European labourers, few political theorists assessed the novel plant’s potential as a foodstuff for Europeans. Those who did complained that the potato was excessively nourishing and so facilitated laziness.

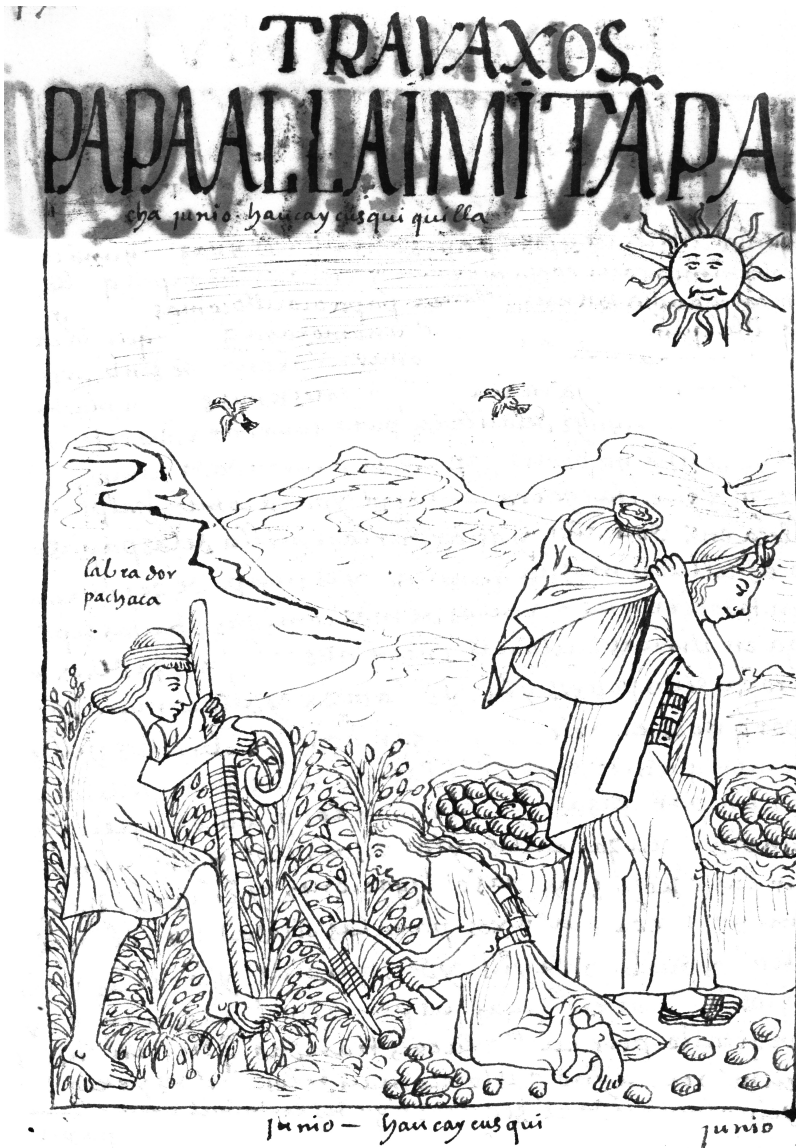


Figure 2 Seventeenth-century drawing of an Andean potato harvest. Potatoes formed the backbone of the Andean diet, alongside other tubers, maize and quinoa. This drawing by the indigenous chronicler Felipe Guaman Poma shows villagers at work harvesting potatoes. The man uses a *chakitaqlla* or foot-plough. Similar tools are still used, as they facilitate the cultivation of steep and uneven land.

Ordinary people, in contrast, embraced the potato, which possessed a number of advantages over existing foodstuffs. Potatoes can produce a prolific harvest even in poor soil, and make a sustaining meal, especially when combined with milk or other dairy products. Moreover, precisely because states were not interested in the everyday eating habits of poorer folk, it took many decades for the potato to attract the attention of tax-collectors and other representatives of the fiscal order. Potatoes thus allowed peasants and labourers to evade some of the less welcome aspects of state control. It is they who are responsible for the potato's entry into the European diet. Chapter 1 tells this history. The central role of early modern peasants and small-scale cultivators in horticultural and dietary innovation has important implications for programmes of agricultural reform today; the Conclusion returns to the contemporary resonance of this earlier period of agricultural and dietary change.

The potato's political invisibility ended in the eighteenth century. The nourishing qualities that had once drawn criticism began to be viewed more positively. As a result, the potato became the object of intense scientific and political interest across Europe. From Norway to Naples, St Petersburg to Geneva, officials, local societies, agronomists, priests, and many other organisations and individuals promoted potato consumption in word and deed. This extensive, pan-European potato investigation and propaganda resulted in the publication of hundreds of texts extolling the potato's potential as a superior staple for working people, one whose greater consumption would help ensure the strength and success of the nation. Chapter 2 traces the potato's unprecedented political prominence during the Enlightenment. Its popularity reflected the emergence of the new models of political economy and governance that stressed the importance of a healthy, well-nourished population to the power and wealth of the state. Integrating the slower history of the potato's conquest of European dietaries with its frenetic promotion in the eighteenth century illuminates the central role that food came to play in modern models of statecraft.

Chapter 3 connects eighteenth-century potato-promotion to the new ideas about political economy that were emerging in the same period. Just as Adam Smith believed that allowing individuals to pursue their own interests would ultimately result in a flourishing economy, so potato-enthusiasts (Smith included) argued that the best way to build a robust

population was to empower individuals to make sound dietary choices through campaigns of information and exhortation. Enlightened potato-promoters believed the tuber's merits were so overwhelming that self-interest alone provided sufficient motivation for increased consumption. Both markets and public health could thus be left to organise themselves in ways that would result in the optimal outcome for both individuals and the nation-state. Potatoes offer a concrete, everyday example of how this confluence of private interest and public benefit was imagined to occur, at the very moment when these ideas were first theorised.

This history reveals the eighteenth-century origins of the current, neoliberal, insistence that healthy eating is best understood as a form of individual consumer empowerment that at the same time builds a stronger economy and body politic. For the eighteenth-century philosopher Immanuel Kant, determining one's own diet was an essential feature of intellectual maturity, just as characteristic of an enlightened existence as other forms of critical thinking. The ability to think and act autonomously, whether about diet or anything else, remains an essential component of all liberal definitions of freedom. Echoing Kant, the liberal economists Sebastiano Bavetta, Pietro Navarra and Dario Maimone insisted in a 2014 study that 'the highest development of one's human abilities ... results from making autonomous choices', including choices about personal consumption.³⁷ Making choices leads to greater personal happiness, and that leads to a happier and fairer society, or so it is argued. It is precisely through this sort of idealised convergence that the free choices of individuals have come to form the theoretical foundations of the modern, liberal state. Chapter 3 explores the role of dietary choice within this liberal model of statecraft.

Chapter 4 addresses the potato's global history. The expansion of trade and colonial conquest in the early modern era propelled the tuber around the world, but the processes that made it a global staple reflect not only these forces but also the varied local circumstances that it encountered on its travels. European diplomats, missionaries and colonial officers congratulated themselves on bringing the nutritious potato to the supposedly backward inhabitants of Bengal and Botany Bay, and viewed its adoption as an index of the overall level of civilisation attained



Figure 3 'The Aga and the Potato'. Potatoes travelled all around the world from the sixteenth century. This nineteenth-century illustration depicts a (doubtless apocryphal) scene in which a Turkish governor, or Aga, samples a raw potato found in the luggage of an English traveller.

by locals. For gardeners in Tehran and Māori entrepreneurs in New Zealand, potatoes served other purposes. The transformation of eating habits that followed the global dissemination of American foodstuffs after 1492 was always the result of complex interactions between local environments, patterns of agriculture and landholding, commercial structures and existing foodways. Chapter 4 both explains the place of potatoes within European discourses about imperialism, and also attends to the ways in which ordinary people around the world interacted with this new food. It thus provides a global counterpoint to Chapter 1's attention to the agency of peasants and smallholders in embedding potatoes into local diets. (See figure 3.)

The potato's changing status in China demonstrates well the simultaneously local and global nature of the modern foodscape. For centuries the potato has provided an important resource for villagers in peripheral regions, yet was almost invisible to the state. Since the early 2000s, however, the potato has been incorporated into an extensive national programme aimed at bolstering China's food security. This transformation in the potato's political role coincides with the Chinese state's embrace of the market economy. Consequently, vigorous state promotion of potatoes has emphasised individual choice and personal benefit. 'Let's all be rich potatoes', promises one advertising campaign aimed at encouraging potato consumption. In China, as in Europe, capitalism, individualism, and personal eating practices are closely intertwined with modern forms of statecraft.

These associations between potatoes and political economy born in the eighteenth century endowed the tuber with a powerful political and economic resonance. As a result, potatoes became deeply embedded in nineteenth-century arguments about the merits of capitalism. Chapter 5 charts these debates. Political radicals condemned the tuber as a tool of exploitation. 'We will not live upon potatoes', read a banner unfurled by agricultural labourers in Kent in 1830.³⁸ These men and women did not object to potatoes per se; their quarrel was with the potato as an ideology. 'Living on potatoes' offered a shorthand for the entire system that the protesters rejected. The potato's contested nineteenth-century status emerges clearly in discussions about Ireland. In the eighteenth century, Ireland had served as an unambiguous illustration of the potato's beneficial role in furthering population and economic growth. By the mid-nineteenth century it had become an alarming illustration of the perils of economic autarky. To successive British governments, the Irish potato facilitated not a flourishing commerce but rather the refusal to enter the modern world. A population of self-sufficient potato-eaters was no longer an attractive proposition when what the nation required was a large pool of proletarianised workers.

At the same time, as urbanisation and industrialisation advanced, the conviction that the population's eating habits had a material impact on the body politic only deepened. The new language of nutrition provided a vocabulary for expressing this relationship. From the mid-nineteenth century the potato's growing importance within the working-class diet

attracted not praise but instead the worried attention of nutritionists and statesmen, who condemned the joint effects of ‘lazy potato blood’ and the lumpen attitudes of potato-eaters: the potato’s popularity with working men was blamed for lacklustre economic growth.³⁹ Talking about potatoes provided a way for working people, scientists, economists and politicians to discuss the enormous changes that were reshaping nineteenth-century Europe in ways that stressed the close connections between economic practices and the everyday eating habits of the population.

The twentieth- and twenty-first-century history of the potato’s relationship with the state forms the topic of Chapter 6. From 1900, the potato began to regain its lustre as a political instrument. Developments within the field of nutritional science led dieticians to reverse their earlier condemnations of the tuber as an inferior foodstuff. Their more positive assessments coincided with a substantial increase in the capacity of modern states to influence everyday eating habits. The First and Second World Wars were particularly important in developing the technologies and institutions that made this possible. Concerned to provide for the wartime needs of their populations, European governments actively encouraged potato consumption as a patriotic effort, supported by national agronomic programmes of potato breeding. Some of today’s best-known varieties are the result of these state-supported schemes.

Although the commercial breeding and consumption of potatoes thus formed part of national programmes of food security in the twentieth century, the economic development models that emerged in the post-war years paid little attention to potatoes, as part of a larger neglect of small-scale, less commercialised agriculture in the developing world. Only recently has this sort of agriculture been incorporated into international models of food security. Just as the peasant know-how that spread potato cultivation across early modern Europe remained largely invisible, so the smallholder expertise that allowed the potato to preserve its genetic diversity has only begun to be appreciated by international organisations concerned with development. The UN’s decision to declare 2008 the International Year of the Potato reflects this new appreciation. Potatoes are now heralded as an essential resource against hunger. They have also become a source of gastronomic pride, and many

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countries have registered specific varieties as part of their national patrimony. The contemporary history of the potato recapitulates both the eighteenth-century conviction that potatoes could play a role in national security, and also the reality that small farmers, as well as agronomists, possess expertise relevant to building a viable food system.

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This book explores the genealogy of a particular way of thinking about the relationship between eating and the state. It offers an account of how everyday eating practices became part of modern politics, and argues that ideas born in the Enlightenment influence how we view the relationship between our dietary choices and the strength and economic success of the state. In particular, the roots of our idea that what we eat is at once an individual concern and a matter of public interest lie in the eighteenth century. I am scarcely the first person to observe that in Europe tensions between individual choice and the public good emerged with particular force in the late eighteenth century; these tensions form a central topic of political theory. I am interested here in how our analysis of these tensions is inflected if we consider food alongside the state, politics and the rise of individualism. *Feeding the People* does this without pretending that eighteenth-century modes of thought are identical to ours, any more than eighteenth-century systems of food provisioning, agriculture or political organisation coincide with those of today. Neither do I propose that following the potato is the only way to tell this story. Since this larger story is (I believe) correct, it should be equally possible to trace it out using some other food, or method. Potatoes, however, provide an effective tracer precisely because their penetration into the kitchens of ordinary people does not coincide neatly with their prominence within political discourse. Their sudden elevation within eighteenth-century political discourse throws a spotlight onto new features of modern statecraft. Moreover, because they are such a fantastically successful global foodstuff they allow us to sketch a more global story about the links between everyday diets and the modern state.

Certainly political potato-talk was not everywhere identical; differences in political structures, food systems and many other factors produced both significant variations on a single theme, and, at times,

entirely different tunes. Nonetheless, I've sought to identify the underlying harmonies, where these exist, which allow us to appreciate how 'a certain set of beliefs became common and . . . how those beliefs influence our practices'.⁴⁰ What is more, the potato's story reminds us of other ways of thinking about the relationship between people, food and the modern state. Since the real work of making potatoes a global food was carried out in large part by ordinary people, rather than political philosophers, a potato-centred history balances out the ebbs and flows of the modern state's interest in what people were eating, with an important *basso continuo* of smallholder innovation and peasant expertise. A single object, writes the historian Emma Spary, can possess 'completely distinct meanings and uses in different hands'.⁴¹ The potato's dual status as a tool of the modern state, and as an emblem of the historical agency of ordinary people, is a case in point. *Feeding the People* tells the story of how eating became part of statecraft, and provides a new account of the global spread of one of the world's most important food crops.