



Late 18th and Early 19th
Centuries Material Culture

Food and Drink

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF FOOD & DRINK

Rebecca Earle - *The Political Economy of Nutrition in the Eighteenth Century* (2019)

1. Large volume of historiography relates food to the productivity as well as urbanisation of society in the 18th and 19th centuries. Highly relevant to society generally.
2. Enlightened discussions emerging in late 18th century regarding nutrition - Note its importance to the nation, such as Thomas Malthus essays on population or the Wealth of Nations. Highlights the role of food in governance.
3. Leads to a fascination with the nutrition of workers, leading to elite schemes in science to develop understandings of calorific content and food chemistry to maximise productivity and thus the strength of the nation. Culture of abundance.
4. Results in classification of foods by their nutritional value. For instance, French Physician Pierre Buc'hoz claimed sweet potatoes were superior in nutrition to asparagus which was merely healthy..

NUTRITION IN POPULATION DEVELOPMENT?

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1. Arguments emerge that the time praising the potato for its nutritional value in improving fertility, conflating large Irish families with the fact that potato was a national staple.

NUTRITION AS PRODUCTIVITY?

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1. Good example of this discourse surrounding food is Thomas Bernard's assessment of rice. Writes about the quality of food given to orphans, noting the beneficence of rice for its goodness as a food on which 'work can be done.'
2. Other studies conducted on slaves and naval men indicated the benefits of Maize and wholemeal breads.
3. Earle therefore argues that elite ideas regarding nutrition at the time were principally guided by its productive utility, and suitability to power the working people.

NUTRITION AS CLASS AND OCCUPATION?

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1. Further discourses emerged surrounding digestion, noting that the process amounted to cooking, or heating. Thus, food that was dense and difficult to heat was only suited to working people and lesser dense foods to others..
2. Idea that food should be directed according to the capacities which it is powering, meaning labourers and rural people were best suited to meats, cheeses and such, and the sedentary to more delicate things. Ideas driven by preoccupation with the nourishment of the worker. Extended to armies and navies.

NUTRITION AS CLASS AND OCCUPATION?

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1. Ideas amongst the poor and servant classes that some foods highlighted differences between people. Many clung to white bread and meat during famines or their status over potatoes and vegetables, which were also believed to have been less good nutritionally as well.

NUTRITION IN POLITICAL CONTROL?

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1. Amid the failure of harvests during the 1790s in Britain, William Pitt and other politicians feared revolt. In the wake of the French Revolution, there had been anarchist sentiments.
2. In order to promote productivity and ensure that people were adequately satisfied, the consumption of wholemeal breads and other starches such as potatoes was encouraged. It was believed that their nutritious value kept people contented.