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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (Summer 2007), pp. 45-52

Published by: [University of California Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/gfc.2007.7.3.45>

Accessed: 31/10/2011 10:43

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# Kills a Body Twelve Ways

## Bread Fear and the Politics of “What to Eat?”

*The question of what to eat is one of the most important practical considerations of life. To know what to eat, how much and how often would go far toward solving some of life's gravest problems—poverty, weakness, disease, crime, and ultimately death.*

—Health columnist W.R.C. Latson, *Los Angeles Times*, 1902

“BREAD,” MR. AND MRS. EUGENE CHRISTIAN wrote in their 1905 book, *Uncooked Foods and How to Use Them*, “rises when infected with the yeast germ because millions of these little worms have been born and have died, and from their dead and decaying bodies there rises a gas just as it does from the dead body of a hog.” In 1894 Shirley Dare, equally alarmed by the life within the staff of life, had reported in the *Los Angeles Times* that “The early decay and death of our most promising American families unquestionably are due to [the] almost universal use of new fermented bread.” “Neither alcohol nor any other cause has as much to do with the ill health and ill-looks of American people as their habitual use of bread,” she argued. “Wide open expressionless eyes, a pinched nose, and contracted jaws,” another health writer penned in 1926, were “typical characteristics of the woman who [had] been disfigured by the use of [white bread].”<sup>1</sup>

These not-so-toothsome depictions hardly evoke the sentimental fluff and warm hearth glow one generally associates with writing about baked goods, but for a substantial number of nutrition experts, health columnists, and social reformers between 1890 and 1930, the smell of fresh bread was the stink of death. Anti-bread sentiment tapped into several food fears, including anxiety about yeasty fermentation and chemical adulteration, but increasingly set its sights on the dangers of highly refined white flour. By the late 1920s, when anti-bread activism peaked in American popular culture, the modest, ordinary loaf of white bread

had been accused of some extraordinarily immodest deeds: critics pinpointed bread consumption as a leading cause of anemia, cancer, diabetes, criminal delinquency, tuberculosis, polyneuritis, neurasthenia, gout, bursal rheumatism, childhood blindness, choked intestines, overstimulated nervous systems, acidosis, “morbidity of mind and body,” and “white race suicide.” It was said to have caused “more deaths than whiskey” and to have left the country morally stunted, physically deformed, and unprepared for war.<sup>2</sup>

Almost a century later, bread is no longer the stuff of any great anxiety—even counting the Atkins blip and anti-gluten crusades. In a world where the question, “What should I eat?” spawns a dozen books a year, bread receives only passing note. Michael Pollan, shocked by low-carb calumnies, sets the question to rest on page two of *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, calling bread one of the “most wholesome and uncontroversial foods known to man.” Marion Nestle allows her “nutritional correctness” to “weaken” for good white bread, and Peter Singer sees no need to weigh in on the ethics of baking. With bread, it seems, we are on safe nutritional, political, and moral ground—as long as we steer clear of the soft white stuff in supermarkets. That bread, as Sheri Brook Vinton and Ann Clark Espuelas remind us in *The Real Food Revival*, is still taboo among those in the know: “To call someone ‘white bread’ is not to give them a compliment. The food symbolizes the bland, the typical.”<sup>3</sup> We may still have occasional bouts of amylophobia (fear that starch is fattening), but, really, could any food be less scary? What could possibly be more absurd than worrying about bread?

More to the point, how could so many late nineteenth and early twentieth-century food writers have actively encouraged Americans to fear their most basic food? In this article, I want to reflect on that historical puzzle and then flash forward to think about what “the war on white bread” might reveal about how food writers today approach the very same question of what to eat.

Science finds  
that **WHITE BREAD**  
helps develop  
**CRIMINALS!**

In today's Graphic Week-  
End Magazine Section

This is the kind of false propaganda that is hurting  
the bakery business. It is to counteract statements like  
this that Washburn Crosby is carrying on the Gold  
Medal educational campaign to tell the public the real  
"Facts about Bread and its Rightful Place in the Diet."

NEW YORK EVENING GRAPHIC MAGAZINE SECTION, SATURDAY, JUNE 1, 1929

M-7

# Criminals Are Made By the Food That They Eat As Children!



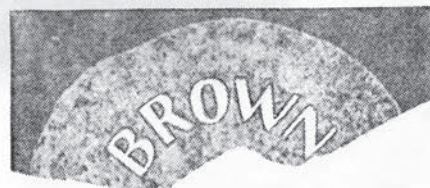
This kind of bread, which food experts say is devitalized, may be the reason for the growth and development of criminal minds, scientists now assert.



AST, summer's Olympics, which, as far as the "crack" American track team was concerned, was a flop, were a good proof of the menace of white bread.

The circumstances surrounding the training of the defeated American athletes were pointed out in the columns of magazine at the time, and food

fault at all that your brain does not work, or that you have committed a crime. It may be due entirely to your diet before and after birth. You have neglected to eat and be wise. "Intelligence is not constant, nor is it entirely heredity," says Dr. Monroe of Long Island University, who has stated the



## Baked Antinomy: The Purity Politics of Bread

If bread was the first food of civilization, it was probably also the first subject of food fads and spats. Plato sets up one such alimentary exchange in *The Republic*, pitting Glaucon against Socrates: the ideal polis, Socrates reasoned, could only be built on a hearty rural diet of whole grains. Glaucon parried that this diet was fit only for a city of pigs.<sup>4</sup> Typically, bread ardor had a strong class. Romans carefully assigned bread grades for every caste (from aristocratic white to pauper dark), while Jacobite slogans urged the masses to wrest white bread from royalty: "I'll have none of your nasty beef / Nor I'll have none of your barley / But I'll have some of your very best flour."<sup>5</sup>

By the mid-nineteenth century, however, new technology in Europe and the United States had, for the first time in history, made highly refined flour cheap and available to all classes. At the same time, rapid advances in chemistry, biology, and physiology gave rise to the field of "scientific nutrition," which quickly emerged as a national obsession in the United States. In this context, public discussions of bread were increasingly couched in the language of medical and scientific expertise. These debates were still about

Above: New York Evening Graphic Magazine article, June 1, 1929, as reprinted in *Bakers' Weekly*.

COURTESY OF THE RUTH EMERSON LIBRARY AT THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF BAKING

politics and morality, but in science and health they had found a new source of ultimate authority.

John Harvey Kellogg's and William Sylvester Graham's mid-nineteenth-century campaigns to build the nation's moral fiber by giving it more fiber are perhaps the best-known examples of these debates, but struggles over the staff of life really hit the mainstream later. Between 1900 and 1930, nutrition experts filled the pages of *Good Housekeeping*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *The American Magazine*, *Scientific American*, and newspapers from Los Angeles to New York with expert advice on bread. Arguments about bread echoed from the podiums of suffragette rallies and the pages of leading chemistry journals to city council chambers and the halls of the United States Supreme Court. By 1930, when it came to dietary advice about bread, there was little middle ground and there were no minced words. Bread, as it had come to be made in the United States, was either a biochemical nightmare unleashed on an innocent and ignorant population

by dangerous bakers or it was an avatar of industrial utopia, science and industry's Promethean contribution to human vitality, and a modern miracle food.

In the early twentieth century, Americans ate more bread than any other single food item, and among poor Americans, bread could represent well over half the calories consumed daily.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, as with today's discussions of "the obesity epidemic," debates about bread were matters of intimate and urgent concern for the nation. As with obesity debates today, they weighed heavily in deliberations about the meaning of progress, America's ability to fight and win wars, the country's class and racial divides, and the moral fortitude and physical stamina of its people.

The social origins of this bread uproar are no great mystery. Between 1890 and 1930 the country's single most important food underwent rapid and irrevocable change. In 1890 women home-baked more than 80 percent of all the bread eaten in the United States. The country's few commercial bakeries were nearly all one-oven shops with three or fewer employees located within walking distance of their patrons' homes. Bread was—as it had been for millennia—a brownish, heterogeneous, and unruly product of nonstandardized artisan labor and unreliable technology. Between 1850 and 1900, however, the number of commercial bakeries grew by 700 percent, far outpacing population growth. By the turn of the century, the country's largest bakeshops could produce 15,000 loaves a day, and by the late 1920s commercial bakeries, employing an almost exclusively male workforce, produced 94 percent of the country's daily bread. In a phenomenal gender and economic shift, home bakers had gone from producing 80 percent of the country's bread to 6 percent in less than forty years. Large bakeries regularly churned out 100,000 loaves a day, and a model bakery set up by the American Bakers' Association at their 1925 meetings in Buffalo was said to have topped one million loaves in twenty-four hours.<sup>7</sup>

Thanks to new milling technology, advanced cereal chemistry, and industrial bakers' unprecedented ability to control temperature, humidity, time, ingredients, and the biology of fermentation, the new bread was whiter, softer, and more consistent than anything Mother ever made. In an age obsessed with concerns about purity, hygiene, and sanitation, the new loaves were engineered to appear streamlined, sparkling clean, and whiter than white. After decades of enduring a reputation for filth, contamination, and foot dragging around pure-food legislation, commercial bakers had turned purity into their greatest selling point. Sidelining taste, aroma, and even price, bread advertising touted cleanliness and hygiene above all else. Scientific

baking promised to deliver perfectly hygienic bread—untouched by human hands from dough to dinner table. Mirroring larger developments in modern fashion, design, and architecture, the new "model palaces of automatic baking" were as white and sleek as the bread they produced.

While the baking industry congratulated itself for its explosive growth and modern practices, criticism mounted in popular nutrition books and health journalism. In growing chorus, the country's expert dietary advisors complained that bread industrialization had produced flavorless, adulterated, and unvital sacks of hot air. It was clean bread, to be sure (a major improvement over past commercial baking practices), but now, as Dr. Martin Fisher of the University of Cincinnati Medical College reckoned in his local newspaper, it was "so clean a meal worm can't live on it for want of nourishment." The new bread, Dr. Harvey Wiley, the United States' leading pure-food campaigner, wrote, was "white and waxy as the face of a corpse."<sup>8</sup>

Health writers labeled white bread "the food that doesn't feed," and Dr. P.L. Clark popularized the ditty, "The whiter your bread, the sooner you're dead" on his weekly American Federation of Labor radio show. Critics gleefully reported on laboratory experiments in which rats that were fed a diet of pure white bread died terrible deaths, and nearly everyone referenced "The Madeira-Mamoré Case." In 1914, the story went, four thousand railway workers who were stranded while laying track between Madeira and Mamoré on the Brazil-Bolivia border died of "white bread acidosis" after eating nothing but refined flour for weeks.<sup>9</sup>

After a long fight, even baking industry insiders admitted that something was lacking, freely conceding that white bread carried fewer nutrients than whole wheat. White bread was not a perfect food capable of sustaining life all by itself, they argued (at least until the advent of bread enrichment during WWII), but what food was? A provocative minority within the industry even warned that bakers had focused too much on their loaves' streamlined, uniform texture and appearance and not enough on flavor. They were right. Molding bread into a world of competitive industrialization required serious sacrifices, but for the most part, consumers tended to act as if the results—cheap, clean, and convenient bread—were worth it. Mountains of fiercely critical dietary advice seem to have had little impact on people's bread choices.

Yet, the "war on white" raged on, perhaps because it was, in the end, much more than simply a question about what to eat. The discourse surrounding bread was shrill and uncompromising, filled with calls to save the entire nation from imminent danger. The exact nature of the threat

varied by writer—some targeted corrupt corporations, weak-minded citizens, or the foreign-born, while others faulted Progress itself—but the stakes were always high. National virility hung in the balance.

A lot had gotten rolled up in bread. Temperance advocates leaped from the presence of alcohol in fermenting dough to fears about class ferment and unruly masses. Another columnist, unhinged by women's rapid move into the workplace, argued that store-bought bread was a female plot to "choke the intestines of men." Agrarian romantics, wrestling with unprecedented urbanization, pined for a lost world where mothers' bread steamed from rural wood stoves. Progressive Era political reformers held up chemical flour bleaching, unsafe bread additives, and other industrial baking shortcuts in debates about the role of government regulation.

Race and class anxieties filtered through all of these claims. Pro white-bread voices contended that the whiteness and fineness of a people's bread marked its place in the hierarchy of civilizations. Dirty homemade bread, they warned, was the stuff of immigrant kitchens and tenement bakeshops staffed by swarthy foreigners. Dark bread—"the coarse unsophisticated cake of crushed corn enjoyed by the Neanderthal baby," as one industry writer put it—was stuff for savage stomachs.<sup>10</sup>

Many anti-white-bread crusaders accepted the racial order of these propositions wholeheartedly but reversed the argument. In works still cited on assorted raw-food, anti-gluten, and whole-food Web pages, prominent diet writers such as Alfred W. McCann and William Arbuthnot Lane celebrated the unrefined "natural" diets of Hottentots and Orientals. Reserving special ire for refined bread flour, these writers accused modern diets of causing cancer, national frailty, and racial degeneration. Alfred W. McCann, who espoused a fascinating combination of Christian fundamentalism, white supremacy, and populist trust-busting, put it bluntly: Unless "the white races of all lands" rejected the wheedling of rich industrialists and returned to a more godly diet of whole grains, they faced "race suicide on a colossal scale." Echoing many of his contemporaries, McCann argued that much of the vice and immorality plaguing the United States as it underwent rapid urbanization and an unprecedented influx of immigrants could be traced to "depraved...foodless foods."<sup>11</sup>

In sum, early twentieth-century food writers took this essay's epigram quite seriously: "To know what to eat, how much and how often would go far toward solving some of life's gravest problems—poverty, weakness, disease, crime, and ultimately death." As a result, although they reflected a wide array of Progressive Era and interwar political posi-

tions—some quite unsavory and exclusionary—they placed the question of "What to eat?" in the context of broader social and political change. These were arguments about ethical eating—about the connections between individual dietary choice, moral character, and the health of society.<sup>12</sup>

Looking back from the present, it is easy to laugh at this political vision and right to critique its exclusionary underpinnings. But once we have contained our smug rebuff and kitschy chuckle, it's worth asking: how much have things really changed? Or, stranger still, are there things about early twentieth-century bread crusades that we might actually want to emulate today?

There is certainly not much to recommend in early twentieth-century understandings of food safety: seemingly innocent advice about choosing the healthy bread doubled as racist diatribe because writers never questioned their categories of social and dietary purity. Similarly, bread eaters earned a bad reputation from writers like Shirley Dare because of their inability to fit dough's microbial life into a worldview where food safety and moral character were defined as freedom from contagion. In other words, these writers' political imaginations came up against a terminal roadblock because of their inability to see past a particular racialized and classed understanding of an American population that needed to be defended against the ills of contagion and impurity. Indeed, all of the early twentieth-century discussions of white bread portrayed ethical eating as a response to threats against individual bodies and the larger social body. A medical language of contagion, purity, hygiene, and imperiled vitality loomed large. This framing had serious consequences. Defining good eating in relation to impending threat meant that one's response must be swift and certain. There isn't much room for creative engagement here: You don't try to "work with" or "transform" a threat like this; you build up the barricades and batten down the hatches.

This kind of ethic doesn't deal well with ambiguity. Bread is a case in point. Bread only happens when grain gets infected by microorganisms whose dying gas, rising "just as it does from the dead body of a hog," balloons dough into loaves. Indeed, as 1920s bread chemists discovered, the wilder and more unruly the strains of infecting yeasts were, the better the flavor of the bread. What a wonderful contamination! But how do you fit this kind of complexity into a binary framework of purity and contagion? Shirley Dare and her compatriots couldn't.

What would happen if we approached complex questions—such as food safety—from a radically different perspective, a perspective that directed our attention to

## MODERN FAIRY TALES



the very social and political ways in which the boundaries of safe and unsafe, good and bad eating get drawn and defended? Can we learn from Shirley Dare et al.? Can we question our own taken-for-granted binaries of safe and unsafe food without having to embrace *E. coli* or the nefarious corporate practices that put it on our tables?

### What to Eat Today?

Every age is an anxious age, of course, but the first decades of the twentieth century and our own post-millennial moment seem to fret to the same beat. The two periods represent historical high-water marks for both economic globalization and the proportion of foreign-born people in the US population. Both are marked by heightened fears about immigrant “invasion,” rapidly changing labor markets, imperial politics, and food safety. They both also spawned national obsessions about germs and contagion unrivaled in any other periods of American history, as public health historian Nancy Tomes notes.<sup>13</sup> Not surprisingly, present-day concerns about food safety, contagion, and dietary health frequently overlap with larger social anxieties, just as they

Above: Baking industry promotional cartoon, ca. 1929.  
COURTESY OF THE RUTH EMERSON LIBRARY AT THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF BAKING

did eighty years ago. Lourdes Gouveia and Arunas Juska, for example, powerfully show how current fears of beef-borne *E. coli* and anxiety about “dirty” immigrants feed one another in debates over the regulation of the meat-processing industry.<sup>14</sup>

In this context, a binary understanding of ethical eating reigns supreme today, just as it did one hundred years ago. Whether our experts are supermarket scientists like Marion Nestle, soulful guides to our country’s food underworld like Eric Schlosser, or the latest celebrity diet doctor, discussions of ethical eating almost always come down to the Manichean question, “Is this okay to eat?” Indeed, Michael Pollan suggests that a dualistic vision of good and bad food is hardwired into our omnivorous nature—an essential element of human biology.<sup>15</sup> That seems a bit simplistic, but the question certainly does seem hardwired into food writers’ brains.

The question “What should I eat?” has become a *shibboleth* for our times. In its original biblical context, a *shibboleth* was a test that winnowed “us” from “them”;

it was something designed to sort the “pure” from the “impure” in a time of crisis. Today, the word more commonly refers to an unquestionable and tenacious moral formula, but the contemporary food writers’ question of “What to eat?” is a shibboleth in both the ancient and modern sense. They wield it like Jephthah at the Jordan, judges in search of a litmus test that would divine “the perfect meal” or “the perfect diet,” oblivious to the ways in which this search for perfection has its own exclusionary divides.

The best popular food writers occasionally steer a different course. Instead of offering guidelines for “the perfect meal” or “perfect diet,” they spin stories that complicate the taken-for-granted in the hopes of sparking new ways of thinking about food politics. We could think of this alternative to shibboleth as the writerly art of fermentation. What is intriguing about the biochemical stew that so scared Shirley Dare is that fermentation requires extreme care, caution, and discipline yet is, at the same time, premised on willful disregard for basic notions of purity and impurity. It is a magical alchemy that turns filth into gold, opening up new horizons of flavor and possibility through its disregard for clear-cut boundaries. The same can be said about some food writing.

Eric Schlosser, for example, influenced by Upton Sinclair’s famous adage “I aimed for the public’s heart and by accident I hit it in the stomach,” works hard to open space for imagining food safety in a radically new way, one that encompasses the political and economic conditions necessary to ensure the safety of food workers’ bodies, not just the purity of consumer intake. It is not clear whether Schlosser’s blow will hit hearts or stomachs, but it is, at least, a dramatic departure from the consumer-centered binary logic of “What to eat?” *Vogue*’s contrarian columnist, Jeffrey Steingarten, on the other hand, is hardly a theoretical food writer, but few others are as at ease with sowing ferment. His comic writing deftly lays bare the social construction of some of our most taken-for-granted food phobias (e.g., MSG) and boundaries (e.g., raw versus pasteurized). And although Michael Pollan has increasingly donned the mantle of what-to-eat arbiter for the haute bourgeoisie, his early work still bubbles with the brewer’s art, brilliantly muddling boundaries between nature and society and shaking up taken-for-granted concepts such as “natural” or “organic.”

On the other hand, where our present-day popular food writers fail us—almost completely, I would say—is precisely where early twentieth-century bread nuts got something right: the ability to link “What should I eat?” with “What should I do to change the world?” in as broad and imaginative a way possible.

Michael Pollan hypothesizes that our obsession with the question of “What to eat?” speaks most deeply to something essential and timeless about our omnivorous nature. I suspect that this anxiety tells us more about the particular historical moment in which we find ourselves: a moment in which food politics—our whole ethical engagement with eating—is conceived through the narrow lens of market-based consumption choice. In this sense, the recent explosion of best-selling critical food writing (*Omnivore’s Dilemma*, *Fast Food Nation*, *What to Eat*, and *The Way We Eat*, to name only a few titles) reflects not so much a revolutionary emergence of new ways of thinking ethically about our lives and world—a new way of imagining the politics of food—but rather a mind-numbing repetition of the same old atomized and egocentric vision of *Homo economicus* engaging the world through solitary acts of consumer choice.

Today’s food writers seem unwilling or unable to imagine political change occurring through anything but the reasoned, rational consumer choices of an informed population, a political vision nicely summarized in Eric Schlosser’s blurb on *Omnivore’s Dilemma*: “What should you eat? Michael Pollan addresses that fundamental question with great wit and intelligence... Eating well, he finds, can be a pleasurable way to change the world.”<sup>16</sup>

Even Marion Nestle, whose book *Food Politics* offered a broad and complex vision of the need for activism and social change, seems to concede defeat in her latest work. Real change in the food system, she admits in *What to Eat*, would require government regulation, lawsuits, and collective action aimed at changing the political and economic terrain on which food is produced and consumed—but, “while waiting for the arguments about such measures to be resolved, you are on your own.”

“You still have to eat,” she continues, “but once you recognize the vested interests behind food marketing, your choices become real: you can decide for yourself whether to accept, ignore, or oppose what marketers are trying to get you to do.”<sup>17</sup> What is striking and discouraging about this statement—the one statement gesturing toward a broader political approach to food—is that there is absolutely no hint that you, the reader, might actually take part in that struggle for social change. In *What to Eat*, Nestle, like nearly all other popular food writers nearly all the time, addresses you as an active consumer and passive citizen who effects change only through purchases or other provisioning choices.

My goal is not to debate whether or not we can actually change the world through our food choices but rather to

suggest that our popular food writers seem to have given up on all other ways of thinking about political change.

This was not the case with early twentieth-century bread crusaders. Their muckraking dietary advice was addressed to readers as both active consumers who needed help figuring out how to access safe food, and as active political subjects capable of working for change in arenas other than their individual consumption choices. Even though their relentless pens churned out steady streams of popular magazine articles and bestselling books, these men and women were more campaigners than “food writers,” as we use the term today. To call arch white-bread critic Harvey Wiley a food writer, for example, hardly does justice to the breadth of his political vision.<sup>18</sup> Working in and out of government, Wiley was probably the single most important figure in the campaign for sweeping food safety legislation in the United States—even as he helped fill the pages of *Good Housekeeping* with practical answers to the question of “What to eat?” Indeed, this type of double life and broader political vision threaded its way through the whole way bread critics approached the question of “What to eat?” F.J. Schlink’s widely read *Eat, Drink, and Be Wary*, for example, was a trenchant guide to safe eating dedicated largely to exposing the evils of industrial bread. But instead of urging consumers to combat the threat of “chemical fluff” by baking their own bread or through niche market purchases of Shredded Wheat, Grape Nuts, or other “healthy” wheat products, Schlink roused them for a different task: “Nothing short of a consumer boycott of the product of mass production bakeries can bring this industry to terms.”<sup>19</sup>

Alfred W. McCann, cut from the cloth of both the fiery preacher and muckraking journalist, also laid down guidelines for good eating. Indeed, stripped of its Christian fervor and narratives about progress and racial evolution, McCann’s opus is not much different from Nestle’s *What to Eat*—a sensible self-defense manual for consumers swimming in a sea of food-industry deceit. Like Nestle, he cites lists of shady ingredients, offers critical readings of advertising, and walks readers through industrial practices of food adulteration, but he rarely addresses readers as individual consumers. Rather, they are addressed as potential militants, a latent political movement. For McCann, “scientific eating” meant individual adherence to God’s laws, but it also meant collective action. Companies had to be forced into accord with God’s laws, not through enlightened consumer choice, but through movements demanding enlightened government regulation, standards, and labeling. McCann himself worked with New York city and state officials to seize loads of “unsound” flour, brought suit after suit against

millers, and urged readers to lobby against food standards that permitted the “sham, fraud, [and] make-believe” of bleached flour. Consumers must be vigilant about what they eat, but they must also form local vigilance committees.

Progressive Era food politics—from which Shirley Dare, Harvey Wiley, F.J. Schlink, and most of the bread critics mentioned in this article emerged—was nothing if not ambiguous. It offered a sweet-and-sour stew that combined both powerful efforts to improve lives and ameliorate the burgeoning harms of industrial capitalism with downright frightening exercises in paternalistic and elite-driven social control. It was a contradictory assemblage of political orientations that could give us both the landmark Pure Foods Law and the eugenics movement; Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* and anti-immigrant fervor. Today, watching the explosion of evangelical excitement around elite-driven inner-city community gardens, farm-to-school programs, and nutrition boot-camps for the poor, it is clear that the Progressive Era is alive and well, with all its ambiguities and contradictions. Yet, with the exception of Eric Schlosser, the broad political vision of the Progressive Era seems largely missing from mainstream popular food writing. Instead, the model here seems to be Michael Pollan, who, with his *Food & Wine*-ready elegies to luxe eating, appears more and more a lifestyle guru than a muckraking campaigner. Indeed, Pollan’s latest *New York Times* Sunday magazine feature article is telling.<sup>20</sup> The piece is a thoughtful, systematic critique of the way the “institutional imperative” of nutrition science and capitalist agribusiness have combined to make the question of “What to eat?” deadly and difficult—yet his *only* idea of how to address this deep, structural constellation of social power relations is through individual dietary decisions spelled out in nine egocentric bullet points. To this I would respond with the words of the late rancher, philosopher, and social movement leader Jim Corbett. Corbett offers city folk now-familiar advice about how to eat ethically—know where your food comes from and “cease to eat anything defiled by violence; serve nothing that is produced by harming the land and its life”—but then he throws us a curve: “This entails study, investigation, and deliberation that can only be done well by a community...Alone in the global marketplace, one simply can’t know and do enough.”<sup>21</sup>

Last year, students in my food politics class had made their way through 170 pages of *Agrarian Dreams*, Julie Guthman’s critique of the organic agriculture industry, and were aching to ask whether or not it was still good to buy organics. To their initial dismay, Guthman completely sidestepped the question, offering no guidelines for good



eating.<sup>22</sup> Instead, she committed herself and her readers to collective political action aimed at transforming government agricultural policy as a whole. Steeped in affluent Pacific Northwest food politics where ethical eating equals correct consumer choice (“Do I buy the organic apple from Chile or the conventional one from down the road?”), the students were stunned. The language of individual consumer choice—the ethics of “What do I eat?”—had so dominated their understanding of food politics that they had never even considered the possibility of a collective social movement aimed at changing government policy. They had never conceived of politics outside individual choice. By shifting the terms of debate in an unexpected direction, Guthman opened space for thinking about ethical eating as a never-ending cycle of deliberation, creative action, and critical reflection, not a yes or no answer to “Is this okay to eat?” In the end, that moment of imaginative leap and mental ferment probably had a far greater impact on my students than all the graphic kill-floor revelations and french fry exposés they read over the semester—even though (or perhaps because) it offered no answer to their most pressing question.

By 1930 industrial white bread had triumphed over the dusky loaf, and universal adoption of bread enrichment during World War II cemented its place as a “perfect food”—an undisputed bread hegemon for the country’s wonder years. Anti-bread campaigners could not counter the modern, sanitary glamour of industrial bread, and serious critiques of the stuff would not emerge again until the mid-1970s.<sup>23</sup> When they did, bakers would respond very differently than they had at the start of the century. Rather than mount another no-holds-barred defense of high modernist baking, the industry—plagued by declining consumption and better equipped to meet the technical challenge of mass-producing whole-wheat breads—simply adopted “health bread” as its most lucrative new product line. Since then, a logic of niche marketing has steamrolled the language of ethical dissent. Our bread wars (just like our food writing) have, in a sense, been comfortably resolved into a stratified world of free choice: artisan bread for urban elites, supermarket whole-wheat or mass-produced specialty bread of the Panera-Breadsmith-LaBrea variety for suburban upper-middle classes, and, of course, soft white bread for the poor. And there we stand, alone in the global market place. ●

## NOTES

1. Mr. and Mrs. Eugene Christian, *Uncooked Foods and How to Use Them* (New York: Health Culture, 1905); S. Dare, “Long life and youth,” *The Los Angeles Times*, 25 March 1894, 13; *Chicago Journal of Commerce*, 22 Feb 1926, as found in “Résumé of statements against white bread,” a collection of news clippings and excerpts from speeches compiled by L.A. Rumsey of the American Institute of Baking, November 1927. Collection housed at the Institute’s Ruth Emerson Library.

2. This list draws from many sources, but especially Rumsey’s “Résumé of Statements.”

3. Michael Pollan, *Omnivore’s Dilemma* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 2; Marion Nestle, *What to Eat* (New York: North Point, 2006), 494; Sherri Brooks Vinton and Ann Clark Espuelas, *The Real Food Revival* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 135; Peter Singer and Jim Mason, *The Way We Eat and Why Our Food Choices Matter* (New York: Rodale Press, 2006).

4. Plato, *The Republic*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 372a-d.

5. Robert Alexander McCance, “Old thoughts and new work on breads white and brown,” *The Lancet*, 30 July 1955.

6. W.J. Panschar, *Baking in America*, vol.1 2 (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965).

7. Panschar, *Baking in America*; “Flavor of today’s bread is much better than many critics are willing to admit,” *Western Baker*, January 1937, 21–22; T.E. King, “Largest and most wonderful bakery in the world,” *Baker’s Helper*, 1 September 1925.

8. Martin H. Fisher, March 12, 1927 as reported in Rumsey, “Résumé of Statements”; Harvey W. Wiley, “The end of the bleached flour case,” *Good Housekeeping*, June 1914, 832.

9. See, for example, Alfred W. McCann, *The Science of Eating: How to Insure Stamina, Endurance, Vigor, Strength and Health in Infancy, Youth and Age* (New York: George H. Duran, 1918), 170.

10. “Improvements in bread reflects development of human race,” *Everybody’s Health* 15, no.5 (1930): 27.

11. McCann, *The Science of Eating*; Claib Price, “Cancer is traced to faulty modern diet,” *New York Times*, 10 May 1925, 13; William Arbuthnot Lane, quoted in Rumsey, “Résumé of Statements.”

12. Today, with the exception of Christian diet books, the notion of ethical eating has been narrowly defined around progressive concerns and a few political arenas (e.g., environmental impact, workers’ rights, producer livelihoods, and animal welfare). Looking back at the bread debates reminds us that the concept of ethical eating can take many forms and is not always progressive.

13. Nancy Tomes, “The making of a germ panic, then and now,” *American Journal of Public Health* 90, no.2 (2000): 191–199.

14. Lourdes Gouveia and Arunas Juska, “Taming nature, taming workers: constructing the separation between meat consumption and meat production in the U.S.,” *Sociologia Ruralis* 42, no.4 (2002): 370–390.

15. Pollan, *Omnivore’s Dilemma*, 3–4.

16. Eric Schlosser’s blurb appears on the 2006 hardcover edition of *Omnivore’s Dilemma*.

17. Nestle, *What to Eat*, 14.

18. For an engaging discussion of Wiley’s work and its political context, see James Harvey Young, *Pure Food: Securing the Federal Food and Drugs Act of 1906* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

19. F.J. Schlink, *Eat, Drink and Be Wary* (Washington: Consumers’ Research, Inc., 1935), 162.

20. Michael Pollan, “Unhappy Meals,” *New York Times*, 28 January 2007.

21. Quote from *Sanctuary for All Life: the Cowbala of Jim Corbett*, ed. by Daniel Baker (Berthoud, Colorado: Howling Dog Press, 2005). On Corbett’s historical role in shaping the terrain of human-sustainable cattle ranching in the West, see Nathan Sayre, *Working Wilderness: the Malpai Borderlands Group and the Future of the Western Range* (Tucson: Rio Nuevo Publishers, 2005). On Corbett’s role as founder of the Central American Sanctuary Movement, see Miriam Davidson, *Convictions of the Heart: Jim Corbett and the Central American Sanctuary Movement* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1988).

22. Julie Guthman, *Agrarian Dreams: The Paradox of Organic Farming in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

23. For an account of the triumph of white bread over its critics, see Aaron Bobrow-Strain, “White Bread Bio-politics: Purity, Health, and the Triumph of Industrial Baking,” *Cultural Geographies*, forthcoming.