

Reading Food Riots: Scarcity, Abundance and National Identity

Amy Bentley

At the end of the twentieth century the world witnessed a wave of severe global crises: the collapse of economies, particularly in Asia; devastating drought, floods and fires due to El Niño weather patterns; and strict economic austerity plans forced on developing countries by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and other international banks. The public's frustration with high prices, deflated wages, scarce resources, shrinking food supplies, and empty bellies as a result of such phenomena led to a series of food riots in many developing countries, including Indonesia, India, Mexico and Brazil. These food riots usually consisted of looting and pillaging stores, fast food restaurants, and supply depots, blockading farm and supply trucks, or protests in town squares which erupted into mayhem and often violence. Newspaper accounts frequently mentioned that the protests and riots centred on one food item, usually a staple or key ingredient (often with a tradition of subsidisation by the government) integral to the culture's cuisine and consumed by rich and poor alike: rice, tortillas, onions, bread. The item functioned as a symbol of people's intense frustration and anger at being trapped in a global economic web in which they seem to have no agency. Government officials have been rightfully terrified of the potential for anarchy that exists if people do not get enough to eat, particularly enough of certain foods deemed essential and irreplaceable ('A Shock to the System'; 'Protesters in Mexico City Ransack a McDonalds'; Mydans, 'Price Rises Exact a High Cost in Java'; Schemo, 'In Brazil, Despair Once Again Feeds on a Drought'; Landler, 'Living for Rice, Begging for Rice'; Dugger, 'India's Hottest Political Issue: The Price of Onions'; Thompson, G., 'Tortilla Rises: Must Belts Tighten?'). While I am saddened by these occurrences, and react (though not nearly enough) by sending money to relief organisations and donating food to the needy in my own community, more often I read about these events with a sense of resignation: it seems nothing could ever stem the tide of immense need.

As a historian who studies the intersection of food and culture in the United States, however, I find food riots compelling as a focus of scholarly inquiry. Cultural historian Robert Danton, in reference to the 1992 Los Angeles riots, posed the question: '[Can] riots be understood as something more than mindless violence?'

[Are] they saying something? [Can] they be read?' (Darrton, 1992, p. 44). Can we make sense of food riots, both those in the past and those occurring in the present, by 'reading' them like a text? Can we gain increased understanding by paying attention to the one item – the bread, meat, or rice – that is held up as a symbol? And how do the meanings of these foods change with time and across regions, cultures, and nations? What is the meaning of food disturbances set against the backdrop of American abundance, and how do these disturbances differ from those in developing nations? In short, while scholars have understood public food disturbances in a number of illuminating and important ways, including as a pre-industrial expression of collective action; as a gendered form of collective protest belying a 'female consciousness'; and as a form of nationalistic display and identity tied to the consumption of material goods, only a very few have employed a sustained, cultural exploration of the very food at the core of the disturbance (the bread, meat, rice, or milk) – the deprivation of which stirs people to the point of collective action. Such an examination can provide rich information about the connection between food and cultural/national identity.

To begin exploring these questions it is important first to examine the relationship among collective identity, food and collective protest. Food, at the base of civilisation, contains deep, multi-layered meanings. Since it is such a strong component and shaper of identity whether on the level of family, community, ethnicity, class, religion, region, or other entity, food is deeply enmeshed in a collective as well as an individual sense of identity (Narayan, 1995). Whether unprocessed or minimally processed foods (wheat, cooking oil), industrially-manufactured items (Coca-Cola or Gerber baby food), or hand-made creations (tamales, holiday cookies), people imbue particular foods with deep-seated meaning and emotion, regardless of whether they are involved in its production (farmers, processors) or merely its consumption (tea drinking in Europe or North America). How and why these foods accrue special meaning – what makes them unique to particular groups of people – can vary widely: method of preparation, long-held tradition, particular 'flavour principles,' perception of purity, religious or political significance, signification of wealth or status, or any combination of factors. The restriction in availability of these foods imbued with distinctive meaning, then, whether through government intervention or the vicissitudes of a 'free market' economy, can function as a catalyst for collective protest. This continues to prove true not only in relatively isolated communities, but in our ever-changing global villages of the twenty-first century. As the cultural geographers Bell and Valentine explain:

Other groups of people [besides tourists] in movement – migrants, refugees, guest-workers, exiles – also contribute to reshaping the global cultural (including culinary-cultural) landscape, as do other world-spanning cultural flows, including those of

technologies, media, finance and ideologies – flows which criss-cross the globe in 'disjunctive' ways, creating the 'uncertain landscapes' or 'imagined worlds' symptomatic of contemporary globalisation . . . Commodities [such as food] have a powerful role in these imagined worlds: as bearers of many of the symbols of globalisation, they are routinely used to articulate both place and movement – and, through those, identity and identification (Bell & Valentine, 1997, p. 191).

For the purposes of this inquiry 'food riot' can be defined as any gathering, whether planned or spontaneous, that may begin peacefully (which is what a 'food protest' would be) but evolves into disorder, leading to loss of control, violence, bodily harm, or damage to property. The terms 'food riot' and 'food protest' can be understood and discussed together under the phrase 'food disturbance' (Gilje, 1996, p. 4). Food disturbances occur and have occurred for obvious reasons: people will go to extreme measures to get the kind, quantity, and quality of food they feel they need for themselves and their families. Food disturbances have existed in all civilisations in history when people are not in complete control of their own food supply: they do not grow all or some of it, they are taxed by landlords or governments, prices (set by others) are beyond their notion of a 'just price,' or they are unable to freely determine the disposal of any surplus. Food riots tend to happen more frequently in developing countries than in industrialised ones for obvious reasons: countries with better transportation and communication systems, those with enough wealth to stockpile food for times of need or subsidise its price, can redistribute food geographically in relatively a brief time as needed – feats more difficult in developing countries. In many parts of the world food riots were especially frequent in the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, then declined dramatically in number until the 1970s, when riots began again in earnest in developing countries as a result of severe economic austerity measures, including the removal of subsidies on food (Walton & Seddon, 1994, p. 24).

A major subfield in social history, there exists a rich body of scholarly work both documenting and theorising about food disturbances. Riots tell us much about the political, economic, social phenomena of an era, and help us to better understand people who are neither wealthy nor politically prominent and therefore whose lives do not normally become a part of the public historical record. European social historians especially have set the standard for scholarship in the field. Scholars have argued that while food riots can happen at any time in any place, and can range in origin from the carefully staged to spontaneous eruption, there appears to be a method to their madness: food rioters are not faceless, unthinking mobs, but often act in quite logical, deliberate ways. That is, crowds do not just pillage any store, for example, but those stores that they feel have unfairly inflated prices. Rioting, moreover, is largely shaped by its historical and cultural context. While no two riots are ever exactly the same, and each contains a multiplicity of

and care of their families. Female participation in food disturbances functioned to 'politicize . . . the networks of everyday life,' as women extended their domain and sense of obligation into the public sphere (Kaplan, T., 1982, p. 545).

Dana Frank and Paula Hyman, studying early twentieth-century food riots in New York City's Lower East Side, concur with Kaplan. Hyman examines a 1902 kosher meat boycott organised and dominated by women that at one time brought crowds of up to 20,000 protesting the high prices of meat. The boycott frequently erupted into violence, including women breaking into butcher shops and flinging meat into the streets, and assaulting those who did not honour the boycott. Hyman sees the boycotting women 'articulat[ing] a rudimentary grasp of their power as consumers and domestic managers' (Hyman, 1980, p. 92). While the women 'did retain a traditional sense of a moral economy' in which food should be available at prices which the working classes could afford,' explains Hyman, in a nod to E.P. Thompson, 'they were not simply expressing traditional forms of cultural resistance to industrial society imported from the Old Country', but providing evidence of a 'modern and sophisticated political mentality emerging in a rapidly changing community' (ibid, pp. 97, 92). Dana Frank, examining the 1917 cost-of-living protests, similarly sees an emerging female consciousness. As the women protested against rising food prices by focusing on chicken, potatoes, onions and fish, explains Frank, 'New York's immigrant Jewish women demonstrated their own perceptions of political economy: who they believed was in power; what they thought should be done to alleviate their distress, and, most importantly, how they believed they as women could affect the economic system in which they were enmeshed' (Frank, 1985, p. 256. See also, Frieburger, 1984).

While some have returned to such well-researched topics as the French Revolution to employ gender as a category of analysis (Bouton, 1990), not all historians regard gender as a useful framework when determining the meanings of food disturbances (Bohstedt, 1988). For example, Iain J.M. Robertson argues that when examining women's participation in food riots, at least those in turn-of-the-(nineteenth) century Scotland, using gender as a category of analysis obfuscates the fact that men and women held notions of ownership over the land equally and thus when denied ownership of farmland deemed to be theirs, rioted in the same way for the same reasons. Assuming that women's protest is distinctly different from "normative" masculine protest, and derived from their household role rather than from an underlying legitimizing ideology shared with their male counterparts', argues Robertson, does a disservice to the women who fully participated as equals with men (Robertson, 1997, p. 187). Robertson neglects to discuss, however, those food disturbances that were comprised largely or exclusively of women.

Along with the moral economy thesis and gender as an analytical framework, another avenue through which to gain insight into the meaning and nature of food riots is the examination of cultural meanings of consumption and their connection

to nationalism. Two American colonial historians, Barbara Clark Smith and Timon Breen, have examined food disturbances before and during the American Revolution as evidence of a growing sense of nationalism. In her study of over thirty food riots during the American Revolution, Smith sees such disturbances 'at intersection of several streams of historical experience,' and acknowledges pertinent both the moral economy and the female consciousness theses (Smith 1994, p. 3). Not only do they contain 'elements of "the common people's political in England and America', in their focus on the just price, but since women conducted nearly one-third of riots, Smith argues, they also must be examined in light of 'women's substantive, routine participation, not strictly "public" and "private in nature, in the life of their communities' (ibid, p. 5). Yet, explains Smith, riots must be read as entwined directly in the Revolution, as 'a patriotic activism much like facing redcoats in the battlefield' (ibid, p. 6). Whether 'sustaining buying power of Continental money or dressing "like Indians" in reminiscence the crowd that had thrown tea into Boston harbor in 1773', Smith argues that food rioters 'situated themselves as participants in the patriot cause' (ibid, p. 8).

While Smith uncovers elements of nationalism in the act of rioting itself, Timon Breen recognises a growing sense of nationalism developing through the riots (including food items) being rioted over as well. In his 1988 article, "'Baubles of Britain": The American and Consumer Revolutions of the Eighteenth Century Breen explores the relation between the growth of national consciousness and American rejection of the 'Baubles of Britain'. While noting the importance of women in colonial food disturbances, Breen focuses his attention on the fact that manufactured goods imported from Britain, for the first time readily available to so many people, resulted in 'the standardization of taste' (Breen, 1988, p. 82) so consumer goods became politicised in the decades leading up to the Revolution they took on 'a radical, new symbolic function'. This politicisation provided 'shared language of consumption' that colonists of all regions and classes could understand and identify with, hence providing a common experience and knowledge base that united them enough to wage war against the mother country (ibid, p. 8). While Breen does not limit his analysis to food but explores the meaning of consumer goods of all kinds, he does focus on the struggle over tea - for Americans, one of the best-known and loved stories of the Revolution. Breen explains:

The Tea Act . . . united the colonists as they had never been before. The reason for new solidarity was not so much that the Americans shared a common political ideal but rather that the statute affected an item of popular consumption found in almost every colonial household. It was perhaps *the* major article in the development of eighteenth-century consumer society, a beverage which . . . appeared on the table of the wealthiest merchants and the poorest labourers. For Americans, therefore, it not difficult to transmit perceptions of liberty and rights through a discourse on (ibid, pp. 97-8).

'Throughout America,' Breen relates of the infamous Boston Tea Party, 'the ceremonial destruction of tea strengthened the bonds of political solidarity' (*Ibid.*, p. 99).

While this admirable work on food riots and protests contributes much toward explaining people's *mentalités* and motives for rioting, missing is an in-depth examination, a Geertzian 'thick description,' of the foods themselves. A sustained, cultural exploration of the very food at the core of the disturbance – the tea, meat, milk, or even such modern industrialised products as Coca-Cola, as will be described – can provide rich information about the connection between food and cultural/national identity. A foray into the meanings of the foods themselves in their historical and cultural context can add yet one more layer, one very important layer, of understanding. In addition to Breen several of the works previously discussed do give a hint of such analysis. Although Dana Frank focuses on gender, for example, she does spend a paragraph touching on the symbolic significance of the foods being rioted over. While the price of food seems to have been high in general, according to Frank, the Jewish women were focusing in particular on the boycotting of chicken, onions, potatoes and fish. Frank writes:

Many women initially joined out of a sense of limits reached, as in the case of the woman who asserted her continuing right to butter. Those limits boiled down to an unwillingness to altogether abandon traditional foods. Potatoes, onions, and chickens were dietary staples to which they believed they had a basic right if they were to fulfill their responsibility to truly sustain their families. More importantly, the rituals of preparing kosher foods played a crucial role in the religious and cultural self-definition of New York's immigrant Jewish people . . . Women bought and served traditional foods not only out of mere habit, but also because those foods expressed their commitment to a religious life' (Frank, 1985, pp. 276–7).

When Frank describes the cultural and religious importance of the foods being boycotted in terms of the women's self-definition she notes their cultural significance: chicken, potatoes and onions were important, even crucial, parts of the Shabbat dinner. Without them, could there even be a Sabbath, seems to be the unspoken question. Fish, Frank somewhat inadequately explains, was boycotted because it could not be served without the boycotted onions. A thick description of these foods in their historical and cultural context could provide further compelling analysis. Moreover, the foods city officials tried to introduce as substitutes reveals all the more how culturally important chicken, onions, potatoes and fish were. The large quantities of rice, smelt, Brazilian beans and hominy that the city provided as substitutes were (not surprisingly) unequivocally rejected. Explicitly linking both cultural/religious identity and her new national identity with food, one protester's sign read, 'We American [sic] Can Not Live on rice' (quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 277).

Similarly, Paula Hyman, in her gender-focused analysis of the New York City kosher meat boycott of 1902, also briefly points to cultural elements. 'The neighborhood, a form of female network, thus provided the locus of community for the boycott,' Hyman explains. 'All were giving up meat together, celebrating dai shabbosim together, and contributing to the boycott fund' (Hyman, 1980, p. 99). Fortunately for scholars of food, historian of United States immigration Hasi Diner in her forthcoming work examines the cultural and social meanings of the turmoil and contestation that existed among Jewish immigrants, including such food disturbances as boycotts and riots (Diner, 2001). Finally, while T.H. Breen gets as close to such a cultural examination of the foods as any of the works I have discussed, moving tea and its place in colonial American history squarely within the realm of cultural history, as anthropologist Sidney Mintz illustrates in his exceptional work on the historical, cultural, political, and economic meanings of sugar, there is much more that could be done on the cultural meanings and functions of tea – itself purely a product of British colonialism – in colonial America that can provide even more evidence of its centrality to life at the time and thus the catalyst for boycotts, riots, and even revolution (Mintz, 1985).

While my extensive survey of the literature of food disturbances is not exhaustive I have found only one sustained cultural analysis of a riot in terms of the food being rioted over. Benjamin Orlove, in a fine article entitled 'Meat and Strength: The Moral Economy of A Chilean Food Riot', builds on Thompson's moral economy theory to argue that in 1905 the middle classes of Santiago, Chile rioted over rising food prices because it prevented them from purchasing their accustomed amount of meat. In this particular historical and cultural context, in this particular 'moral economy' (Orlove, 1997, p. 255), consumption of meat – or the lack thereof – reflected one's place in the rigid social and political hierarchy where powerful *hacendados* (plantation owners) controlled much of the power, including the animals eventually showing up on the table for consumption. Not being able to afford meat anymore 'undercut a deeply held sense of [Santiaguans'] social position' (*Ibid.*, p. 256). Taking time to carefully develop and articulate the social, political, economic and cultural fabric of Chilean society at the beginning of the twentieth century, Orlove argues convincingly, 'It is the distinctiveness of the specific moral economy [of Chile in the early 1900s] that allows a piece of beef to make the difference between an acceptable and unacceptable pot of stew' (*Ibid.*, p. 260).

Cultural Meanings of Food in Food Disturbances: An American

Backdrop

As a United States historian with a specialisation in the twentieth-century, it is possible to point to only a few food riots (other than those discussed by Frank & Hyman) during this century on which to focus a sustained cultural analysis of

foods involved. The United States has always been regarded as an overflowing cornucopia, and while there certainly have been and remain many people without enough to eat, in comparison to most other countries in the world, the United States ranks high if not the highest in the number of calories per person available for consumption in the food supply. Thus food problems in this country are less about hunger and more about health deficiencies resulting from too much food, or too much of the wrong kinds of food.

Any cultural analysis, then, of food disturbances in the United States must be made within the backdrop of the long and deeply held notion of abundance. I have written elsewhere about what I think is an important study of American culture and politics in light of this profusion of material wealth, economic historian David Potter's 1954 study, *People of Plenty* (Bentley, 1995).¹ In his economic analysis of what used to be unselfconsciously called the 'American character', Potter argued that the United States and its citizens have been shaped, blessed, but also at times intellectually and socially hindered by inhabiting one of the most resource-rich and economically successful countries in the world. The United States' long history of plenty – a product of both natural resources and technological innovation – has molded who Americans are and how they see the world. This wealth, in turn, has shaped notions of such abstract terms as 'freedom', 'democracy', as well as immigration, foreign policy, and assumptions about individualism. Because 'abundance' and 'democracy' are often conflated, many Americans (and, indeed, many immigrants to the United States) (mistakenly) equate such political notions as liberty and equality with capitalism. Other countries' experiences do not suggest the same equation. Even though all Americans have not partaken of this abundance, Potter insists nevertheless that the promise of this prosperity still affects the culture at large as well as individuals in particular. This overarching culture of abundance helps explain low political activism and voter participation, the lack of a viable socialist movement, and the American myth of classlessness, despite the ever-growing economic disparity between rich and poor (Potter, 1954).

Of course food is a central element of this abundance. Thus the backdrop of material wealth affects the kind and frequency of food disturbances in the United States, especially since the 1920s. Food disturbances differ in this country (and in other industrialised countries) from those in developing countries, such as the riots mentioned at the beginning of the chapter. In the 1930s and 1940s, for example, farmers protested the removal of price supports, women boycotted dairies over high milk prices, and the public decried the destruction of edible grain and pork during the Depression (in the attempt to prop up falling food prices). Other food disturbances have occurred since then, but most often in the form of boycotts and hunger strikes to protest and publicise a particular social or political cause (Bentley, 1998, pp. 56–8; Gilje, 1996, pp. 149–69; Poppendieck, 1986). While significant and worthy of study in their own right, these are not the food riots of hungry,

angry people hoping they have enough food to feed their families. For example late-1990s riots on college campuses over restrictions on alcoholic beverage ('Student Rioters Demand the "Right to Party"?') need to be analysed as 'food disturbances', not only within this context of abundance, but against the unique backdrop of the history and culture of alcohol in the United States: the temperance movement, Prohibition, American Protestantism, fears of non-Protestant immigration and social and symbolic meanings of alcoholic beverages (For example, Edmund 1999; Fuller, 1996).

While Potter's ideas are significant and compelling, they are subject to debate however. For example, Mark Weiner, in his fine exploration of Coca-Cola's rise becoming a totem drink during the Second World War, effectively details the cultural, social, political and economic significance of Coke in the United States during the War, and addresses the connection between consumerism and democracy. In his article, 'Consumer Culture and Participatory Democracy: The Story of Coca-Cola during World War II', Weiner queries: can the promotion of a highly sugared caffeine-laced soft drink comprise something more than just clever marketing designed to increase consumption? Can drinking Coca-Cola hold meaning for people beyond that of a mild, stimulating thirst quencher? Exploring both what corporate image-makers wanted Coke to represent to Americans, and what Coke actually meant to civilians, distributors, and soldiers, Weiner describes the influence commercial capitalism on democracy not as largely negative, as Potter and others generally conclude, but as complex and layered in its meanings. As advertisers American corporations, and the US government co-operated to rally the American home front firmly behind the war effort, Weiner provides us with compelling evidence of how corporate conglomerates defined war aims in terms of commodification. Yet, Weiner argues, the soft drink gained this prominence in part because Coca-Cola held important personal meanings for many Americans, to the extent that it stirred political action and symbolised powerful ideas about American democracy. Because he so thoroughly demonstrates the iconic nature of Coca-Cola, Weiner convincingly argues for the cultural importance of the soft drink in the lunch counter sit-ins of the post-Second World War Civil Rights era. Following Breen's lead Weiner sees the possibility for 'participatory democracy' existing in consumer goods, in this case, meaning the right to sit at a drugstore lunch counter and order a cold, sweet glass of Coke. By the 1950s Coca-Cola had become such a prominent symbol of American-ness, that for many African Americans equal access democracy, explains Weiner, meant being able to order and consume a Coke, just as any other American would, at a public eating establishment. Being denied access to the lunch counter at Woolworth's symbolised in part the denial of full citizenship to African Americans (Weiner, 1996).

Like the symbolic meaning of Coca-Cola in lunch counter sit-ins, there is plenty of work to be done exploring the cultural meanings of foods in food disturbance

not only in the United States but globally as well. Historians of Europe, for example, have employed the backdrop of the two World Wars to detail fine accounts of bread riots in Russia, and of women's protests over food scarcity in First World War Berlin and in 1942 Vichy France (Davis, 1996; Engel, 1997; Ryan, 1989). But there is room for so much more. One cannot think of food disturbances in European countries without mentioning the late-1990s protests by the French over American tariffs on foie gras. Images of a ransacking of a McDonald's, and of French chefs and restaurant owners throwing food at the French Parliament to demand lower taxes, are prime moments for cultural analysis ('Chefs Protest Tax'; 'Farmers Protest'). Also, ripe for exploration are the cultural and symbolic meanings of the rice, tortillas, onions and bread of the 1990s food riots, as well as such food disturbances in history as the salt demonstrations in 1940s colonial India. The possibilities are numerous, and the results, I argue, most illuminating.

Note

1. Portions of this paragraph were taken directly from Bentley, A. (1995), 'American Abundance Examined: David M. Potter's *People of Plenty* and the Study of Food', *Digest* 15, pp. 20–4. I would also like to thank Trish Lobenfeld and Jon Deutsch for their research assistance.

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