
LPSS Spring conference report, 2010

Famine, diet and nutrition

On a beautiful sunny day, the tenth Spring conference to be held at the Law Faculty of the University of Hertfordshire in St Albans started with the usual welcome cup of coffee and a browse through the bookstall. The conference proper started with an introduction from Nigel Goose, and in particular a round up of the transport issues of the day, including motorway hold ups and airport cancellations. The latter of these, unfortunately, meant that Violetta Hionidou, speaker of the second paper of the morning on the 'Famished Greek Islands 1941-43', was stranded in Paris.

Panel One focused upon food, famine and warfare. The first paper from Rachel Duffett of the University of Essex was entitled 'What do we want with eggs and ham? Food and the soldiers of the Western Front 1914-1918', and looked at the significance of food to British soldiers in the First World War. Very little was written in letters or in diaries on the soldiers' feelings or experiences, but they did write about their food. She went on to outline the reliance upon provisions from the British army as well as the huge amount of food which was sent from the UK. However, complaints regarding the food rations were censored due to issues of morale. Records outlining specifics are difficult to find and, as such, detailed analysis is not possible. Individual battalion records are also extremely limited. Personal sources, such as the previously referred to letters and diaries, are available but present their own issues of interpretation. The British army was not well known for the quality of its food provision. However, it was noted that the current army guidelines are for an intake of 4,200 calories, whereas in 1917-18 the frontline ration was 4,193. This figure was actually high for the period and above the typical working class intake at home.

Dr Duffett went on to talk about the practicalities of supporting the troops in the field, which included substitution of various parts of a meal, as well as the enforced differences between planning and delivery in the field due to time and transportation. Photographic examples of the use of field kitchens and field bakeries were also shown. One of the key issues to emerge was that of the poor strength of teeth of the field personnel and the need to substitute hard biscuits and tough meat. The front line was supplemented by the use of parcels, including those raised by the public, but also advertising campaigns to supplement this, though these did not only include food components. Importantly, home-made items were particularly welcome, highlighting the emotional connotations which accompanied them.

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In the absence of Violetta Hionidou Professor Derek Oddy kindly agreed to give an impromptu talk on war and famine in the twentieth century. Professor Oddy spoke about the role of food and diet and highlighted national differences. This was illustrated by a reference to the German military commanders who did not want to occupy the British trenches as the troops moved forward because of concern over their well equipped nature and, in particular, the availability of alcohol. The three nations which collapsed at the end of the First World War did so over the problems of food. Germans nutritionists in the period believed in the need for a high content of meat in the diet. Inevitably, the reliance upon cattle to supply meat involved a significant time lag in its production. In contrast the British concentrated on the use of cereals and bread in their diet. The use of these carbohydrates provided energy as well as ensuring a quicker turnaround. Professor Oddy also noted that the British used frozen meat and its accessibility to Southern America would have helped in this area. There was some evidence of scurvy and other diseases which are prevalent in periods of poor or restricted diets.

The end of the war saw famine in Russia and parts of central Europe. The charity Save the Children was launched at the end of the First World War as a direct result of the starvation of children in Eastern Europe. Professor Oddy highlighted the impact on the British public of cinemas using films of famine. The period also saw the start of the study of dietary and nutritional principles, highlighted by Harriett Chick, who served as secretary of the League of Nations health section committee and was a founding member of the Nutrition Society. In addition Britain dominated the frozen food arena, with freezing plants in Australia, South America and New Zealand. Britain was the only country with a substantial number of refrigerated ships and had the ability to offer freezer storage. This contrast was illustrated by the case of the Italians, who had not been provided with meat on a daily basis in their diet. In conclusion he described the post-war period as one that recognised the need for large calorie intakes and, more importantly, appreciated that famines were a major issue which required international cooperation.

Panel Two dealt with surfeit. The third paper was given by Dr Peter Razzell, from the University of Essex, on 'The hazards of wealth: adult mortality in pre-twentieth century England'. Dr Razzell's presentation used a range of statistics to illustrate the central thesis of his presentation: the hazards of wealth. His hypothesis was that there was no correlation between poverty and mortality in the adult population before the twentieth century, and a number of explanations were offered. While the rich might have been able to afford to flee from urban contagions to the countryside, this might have resulted in a lack of immunity which produced more devastating effects in the longer term. Breast feeding may also have been more common among the poor than the rich, with further health benefits, while wet nursing may have had negative health implications. Perhaps most important of all was diet—the 'richer' diets of the wealthy being inherently less healthy—while excessive use of tobacco and alcohol may also have taken its toll.

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Dr Razzell circulated a range of statistical analyses to support this position. Table 1 presented data from Kentish marriage licences, and showed that where fathers of the bride were already deceased by the date of the licence, fewer of them were husbandman than higher status occupations. Another comparison made use of parish registers in combination with census data, the results suggesting that it was place rather than class which impacted most heavily on the mortality rate. Further, the use of height data from the Dorset Militia Ballot list 1796–1799, which registered occupation and height, shows very little variation between different occupations. Neilson's work has illustrated that in the 1860s the mortality rates were lower for friendly societies compared with the insurance companies, the former being likely to have had a more clearly working class membership. Further investigation has illustrated that contemporaries were aware of the issues surrounding the importance of physical activity, and the effects of consuming large quantities of tobacco and alcohol. There is much evidence from satire and quotations and the session was concluded with a range of contemporary illustrations.

The fourth paper was given by Professor Avner Offer from Oxford University and entitled 'Obesity—the welfare regime hypothesis'. He outlined the initial results of some of his statistical work, though he emphasised that it is not local in its outlook. As an introduction to the paper he looked at body weight and body mass index (calculated in the US and England/Wales) and where a healthy body mass index (BMI) does not exceed 25. The graph clearly illustrated that the BMI is rising. Professor Offer then looked at this phenomenon and its timing and raised the following questions. Is there a reason for the timing? Why should we care? This led to a discussion of the relevant issues, which included: current health policy; interest in physical appearance; the role of discrimination and the economic implications of weight. For Professor Offer the intellectual challenge revolves around why is it happening and whether we should be concerned. He illustrated this by introducing frequently voiced arguments such as 'it's not a problem', 'it's not my problem', and 'it's their choice'.

The market interpretation suggests that the reasons behind these changes relate to availability and price of food, the emergence of fast food and the decline in physical activity. The role of diet is also, he explained, an issue of time inconsistency where decisions made in the present are not consciously related to future consequences. These issues are illustrated by welfare regimes and expanded by Esping-Anderssen in his *Three worlds of welfare capitalism* (a book read by this author as an undergraduate many years ago!).

Professor Offer explained that these regimes diverge from the 1970s onwards and the rise of market liberalism corresponds with the rise in obesity. The hypotheses were outlined as:

- a. supply shock (the arrival of cheap pre-processed food)

and responses to stress outlined as

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- b. Insecurity—more competitive, less secure—comfort food
- c. Inequality—subordination is stressful

In conclusion Professor Offer explained that he has looked at 96 studies taken between 1994 and 2004 containing data from 11 countries. This data has examined obesity prevalence, where the BMI is above 30, and he highlighted insecurity as the main driver.

The afternoon session focused on diet in industrial Britain, and featured three papers with a statistical bent. All three engaged with the way that changes in the industrial economy affected the diets of, predominately, the working classes. Sara Horrell (University of Cambridge) gave us a statistical appraisal of the diets of labouring families collected by Frederick Morton Eden in his 1795 work *The state of the poor*. Eden had been much concerned with the quality of diet in different parts of the country, based on a rather impressionistic assumption that the northern fare of milk, barley, potatoes and oatmeal hasty puddings was superior to the alternative grains found elsewhere. Sara's paper demonstrated that regional patterns were more complex than a simple north-south divide (although diets in areas in the north-west were, as Eden thought, the most nutritious), and that nutritional standards were affected particularly by women's work and the availability of fuel. Where women worked from home, the nutritional value of their principal grain source was much higher than where they worked elsewhere (and thus bought in food); the same negative result was produced where land was enclosed and fuel and pasturage for dairy animals was limited. The paper thus demonstrated the way that several key trends in the industrialising economy interacted with diet.

The second paper in the session also picked up the theme of working patterns and diet. Bernard Harris (University of Southampton) reported his findings (arising from a collaborative team, and shortly to be published in a co-authored Cambridge University Press book), based on a number of interpretive surveys of food availability in England and Wales between 1700 and 1914. His paper demonstrated how difficult it is to garner reliable figures on this topic, and his approach has involved analysing and collating several different series of domestically produced and imported foodstuffs. His results showed that there was generally an increase in food availability in the second half of the eighteenth century, but a much larger-scale rise in the second half of the nineteenth, by which point England and Wales was also much more reliant on imported foods. The new figures also suggest that the average food availability was in the order of 2,000 calories per person per day, but Harris stressed how important it is to consider environment and working patterns before making assumptions that food demands were met. Where the environment was epidemiologically challenging and work patterns were intensive, many people may still have been deficient. The corollary of this, however, is that any increase in food availability *may* have directly enhanced working capacity, so indicating a clear link between nutrition and the industrial workforce.

The final paper of the session—and the day—was given by Ian Gazeley of the University of Sussex, who was reporting the early findings of an ESRC-funded project on changing

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poverty in Britain between 1890 and 1961. Using a 1904 survey of working-class income and expenditure, he was able to show that diets were more varied than is often thought—albeit still heavily based on bread and meat. Nonetheless, this analysis puts 18 per cent of the households in the dataset in poverty; higher than that found by Joseph Rowntree in his contemporary surveys of poverty. Gazeley was able to take this further, however, by showing us brand new figures on the proportions of the households who were under a nutritional ‘poverty line’, broken down by different nutritional measures. While the majority had sufficient levels of protein in their diets, most were very deficient on important minerals and vitamins, especially among the very poorest classes.

The session, like those in the morning, produced a lively array of questions, many based on the nature of the sources, and whether they allowed of further breakdown by region. Regional and local variation was of obvious importance to a conference such as ours. Others were concerned with the way that individuals dealt with their diets, for example, the nature of the access to common land in Eden’s England, and the reliance on allotments and other forms of self-provisioning. The number of questions was testament to the new insights all three papers had given into the way that the labouring sorts lived, ate and worked in this period of great economic change.

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