

The Changing Significance of Food

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We live in a world today where the state of nutrition in each country is relevant and important to each other country, and where the state of nutrition in the wealthy industrialized countries like the United States has profound significance for the role that such countries can play in eliminating famine and providing for adequate nutrition throughout the world. In a world in which each half knows what the other half does, we cannot live with hunger and malnutrition in one part of the world while people in another part are not only well nourished, but over-nourished. Any talk of one world, of brotherhood, rings hollow to those who have come face to face on the television screen with the emaciation of starving children and to the people whose children are staring as they pore over month-old issues of glossy American and European magazines, where full color prints show people glowing with health, their plates piled high with food that glistens to match the shining textures of their clothes. Peoples who have resolutely tightened their belts and put up with going to bed hungry, peoples who have seen their children die because they did not have the strength to resist disease, and called it fate or the will of God, can no longer do so, in the vivid visual realization of the amount and quality of food eaten—and wasted—by others.

Through human history there have been many stringent taboos on watching other people eat, or on eating in the presence of others. There have been attempts to explain this as a relationship between those who are involved and those who are not simultaneously involved in the satisfaction of a bodily need, and the inappropriateness of the already satiated watching others who appear—to the satisfied—to be shamelessly gorging. There is undoubtedly such an element in the taboos, but it seems more likely that they go back to the days when food was so scarce and the onlookers so hungry that not to offer them half of the little food one had was unthinkable, and every glance was a plea for at least a bite.

In the rural schools of America when my grandmother was a child, the better-off children took apples to school and, before they began to eat them, promised the poor children who had no apples that they might have the cores. The spectacle of the poor in rags at the rich man's gate and of hungry children pressing their noses against the glass window of the rich man's restaurant have long been invoked to arouse human compassion. But until the advent of the mass media and travel, the sensitive and sympathetic could protect themselves by shutting themselves away from the sight of the starving, by gifts of food to the poor on religious holidays, or perpetual bequests for the distribution of

a piece of meat “the size of a child’s head” annually. The starving in India and China saw only a few feasting foreigners and could not know how well or ill the poor were in countries from which they came. The proud poor hid their hunger behind a facade that often included insistent hospitality to the occasional visitor; the beggars flaunted their hunger and so, to a degree, discredited the hunger of their respectable compatriots.

But today the articulate cries of the hungry fill the air channels and there is no escape from the knowledge of the hundreds of millions who are seriously malnourished, of the periodic famines that beset whole populations, or of the looming danger of famine in many other parts of the world. The age-old divisions between one part of the world and another, between one class and another, between the rich and the poor everywhere, have been broken down, and the tolerances and insensitivities of the past are no longer possible.

But it is not only the media of communication which can take a man sitting at an overloaded breakfast table straight into a household where some of the children are too weak to stand. Something else, something even more significant, has happened. Today, for the first time in the history of mankind, we have the productive capacity to feed everyone in the world, and the technical knowledge to see that their stomachs are not only filled but that their bodies are properly nourished with the essential ingredients for growth and health. The progress of agriculture—in all its complexities of improved seed, methods of cultivation, fertilizers and pesticides, methods of storage, preservation, and transportation—now make it possible for the food that is needed for the whole world to be produced by fewer and fewer farmers, with greater and greater certainty. Drought and flood still threaten, but we have the means to prepare for and deal with even mammoth shortages—if we will. The progress of nutritional science has matched the progress of agriculture; we have finer and finer-grained knowledge of just which substances—vitamins, minerals, proteins—are essential, especially to growth and full development, and increasing ability to synthesize many of them on a massive scale.

These new twentieth-century potentialities have altered the ethical position of the rich all over the world. In the past, there were so few who lived well, and so many who lived on the edge of starvation, that the well-to-do had a rationale and indeed almost a necessity to harden their hearts and turn their eyes away. The jewels of the richest rajah could not have purchased enough food to feed his hungry subjects for more than a few days; the food did not exist, and the knowledge of how to use it was missing also. At the same time, however real the inability of a war-torn and submarine-ringed Britain to respond to the famine in Bengal, this inability was made bearable in Britain only by the extent to which the British were learning how to share what food they had among all the citizens, old and young. “You do not know,” the American consul, who had come to Manchester from Spain, said to me: “you do not know what it means to live in a country where no child has to cry itself to sleep with hunger.” But this was only achieved in Britain in the early 1940s. Before the well-fed turned away their eyes, in the feeling that they were powerless to alleviate the perennial poverty and hunger of most of their own people and the peoples in their far-flung commonwealth. And such turning away the eyes, in Britain and in the United States and elsewhere, was accompanied by the rationalizations, not only of the inability of the well-to-do—had they given all their wealth—to feed the poor, but of the undeservingness of the poor, who had they only been industrious and saving would have had enough, although of course of a lower quality, to keep “body and soul together.”

When differences in race and in cultural levels complicated the situation, it was only too easy to insist that lesser breeds somehow, in some divinely correct scheme, would necessarily be less well fed, their alleged idleness and lack of frugality combining with such matters as sacred cows roaming over the landscapes—in India—or nights spent in the pub or the saloon—at home in Britain or America—while fathers drank up their meager pay checks and their children starved. So righteous was the assumed association between industriousness and food that, during the Irish famine, soup kitchens were set up out of town so that the starving could have the moral advantage of a long walk to receive the ration that stood between them and death. (The modern version of such ethical acrobatics can be found in the United States, in the mid-1960s, where food stamps were so expensive, since they had to be bought in large amounts, that only those who have been extraordinary frugal, saving, and lucky could afford to buy them and obtain the benefits they were designed to give.)

The particular ways in which the well-to-do of different great civilizations have rationalized the contrast between rich and poor have differed dramatically, but ever since the agricultural revolution, we have been running a race between our capacity to produce enough food to make it possible to assemble great urban centers, outfit huge armies and armadas, and build and elaborate the institutions of civilization and our ability to feed and care for the burgeoning population which has always kept a little, often a great deal, ahead of the food supply.

In this, those societies which practiced agriculture contrasted with the earlier simpler societies in which the entire population was engaged in subsistence activities. Primitive peoples may be well or poorly fed, feasting seldom, or blessed with ample supplies of fish or fruit, but the relations between the haves and the have-nots were in many ways simpler. Methods by which men could obtain permanent supplies of food and withhold them from their fellows hardly existed. The sour, barely edible breadfruit mash which was stored in breadfruit pits against the ravages of hurricanes and famines in Polynesia was not a diet for the table of chiefs but a stern measure against the needs of entire communities. The chief might have a right to the first fruits, or to half the crop, but after he had claimed it, it was redistributed to his people. The germs of the kinds of inequities that later entered the world were present: there was occasional conspicuous destruction of food, piled up for prestige, oil poured on the flames of self-glorifying feasts, food left to rot after it was offered to the gods. People with very meager food resources might use phrases that made it seem that each man was the recipient of great generosity on the part of his fellow, or on the other hand always to be giving away a whole animal, and always receiving only small bits.

The fear of cannibalism that hovered over northern peoples might be elaborated into cults of fear, or simply add to the concern that each member of a group had for all, against the terrible background that extremity might become so great that one of the group might in the end be sacrificed. But cannibalism could also be elaborated into a rite of vengeance or the celebration of victories in war, or even be used to provision an army in the field. Man’s capacity to elaborate man’s inhumanity to man existed before the beginning of civilization, which was made possible by the application of an increasingly productive technology to the production of food.

With the rise of civilizations, we also witness the growth of the great religions that made the brotherhood of all men part of their doctrine and the gift of alms or the life

of voluntary poverty accepted religious practices. But the alms were never enough, and the life of individual poverty and abstinence was more efficacious for the individual's salvation than for the well-being of the poor and hungry, although both kept alive an ethic, as yet impossible of fulfillment, that it was right that all should be fed. The vision preceded the capability.

But today we have the capability. Whether that capability will be used or not becomes not a technical but an ethical question. It depends, in enormous measure, on the way in which the rich, industrialized countries handle the problems of distribution, or malnutrition and hunger, within their own borders. Failure to feed their own, with such high capabilities and such fully enunciated statements of responsibility and brotherhood, means that feeding the people of other countries is almost ruled out, except for sporadic escapist pieces of behavior where people who close their eyes to hunger in Mississippi can work hard to send food to a "Biafra." The development of the international instruments to meet food emergencies and to steadily improve the nutrition of the poorer countries will fail, unless there is greater consistency between ideal and practice at home.

And so, our present parlous plight in the United States, with the many pockets of rural unemployment, city ghettos, ethnic enclaves, where Americans are starving and an estimated tenth of the population malnourished, must be viewed not only in its consequences for ourselves, as a viable political community, but also in its consequences for the world. We need to examine not only the conditions that make this possible, to have starving people in the richest country in the world, but also the repercussions of American conditions on the world scene.

Why, when twenty-five years ago we were well on the way to remedying the state of the American people who had been described by presidential announcement as "one third ill-housed, ill-clothed, and ill-fed," when the vitamin deficiency diseases had all but vanished, and a variety of instruments for better nutrition had been developed, did we find, just two short years ago, due to the urgent pleading of a few crusaders, that we have fallen so grievously behind? The situation is complex, closely related to a series of struggles for regional and racial justice, to the spread of automation and resulting unemployment, to changes in crop economies, as well as to population growth and the inadequacy of many of our institutions to deal with it. But I wish to single out here two conditions which have, I believe, seriously contributed to our blindness to what was happening: the increase in the diseases of affluence and the growth of commercial agriculture.

In a country pronounced only twenty years before to be one third ill-fed, we suddenly began to have pronouncements from nutritional specialists that the major nutritional disease of the American people was overnutrition. If this had simply meant overeating, the old puritan ethics against greed and gluttony might have been more easily invoked, but it was overnutrition that was at stake. And this in a country where our idea of nutrition had been dominated by a dichotomy which distinguished food that was "good for you, but not good" from food that was "good, but not good for you." This split in man's needs, into our cultural conception of the need for nourishment and the search for pleasure, originally symbolized in the rewards for eating spinach or finishing what was on one's plate if one wanted to have a dessert, lay back of the movement to produce, commercially, nonnourishing foods. Beverages and snacks came in particularly for this demand, as it was the addition of between-meal eating to the three square, nutritionally adequate meals a day that was responsible for much of the trouble.

We began manufacturing, on a terrifying scale, foods and beverages that were guaranteed not to nourish. The resources and the ingenuity of industry were diverted from the preparation of foods necessary for life and growth to foods nonexpensive to prepare, expensive to buy. And every label reassuring the buyer that the product was not nourishing increased our sense that the trouble with Americans was that they were too well nourished. The diseases of affluence, represented by new forms of death in middle-age, had appeared before we had, in the words of Jean Mayer, who has done so much to define the needs of the country and of the world, conquered the diseases of poverty—the ill-fed pregnant women and lactating women, sometimes resulting in irreversible damage to the ill-weaned children, the school children so poorly fed that they could not learn.

It was hard for the average American to believe that while he struggled, and paid, so as not to be overnourished, other people, several millions, right in this country, were hungry and near starvation. The gross contradiction was too great. Furthermore, those who think of their country as parental and caring find it hard to admit that this parental figure is starving their brothers and sisters. During the great depression of the 1930s, when thousands of children came to school desperately hungry, it was very difficult to wring from children the admission that their parents had no food to give them. "Or what man is there of you, whom, if his son ask bread, will he give a stone?"

So today we have in the United States a situation not unlike the situation in Germany under Hitler, when a large proportion of the decent and law-abiding simply refuse to believe that what is happening can be happening. "Look at the taxes we pay," they say, or they point to the millions spent on welfare; surely with such quantities assigned to the poor, people can't be really hungry, or if they are, it is because they spend their money on TV sets and drink. How can the country be overnourished and undernourished at the same time?

A second major shift, in the United States and in the world, is the increasing magnitude of commercial agriculture, in which food is seen not as food which nourishes men, women, and children, but as a staple crop on which the prosperity of a country or region and the economic prosperity—as opposed to the simple livelihood—of the individual farmer depend. This is pointed up on a world scale in the report of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations for 1969, which states that there are two major problems in the world: food deficits in the poor countries, which mean starvation, hunger, and malnutrition on an increasing scale, and food surpluses in the industrialized part of the world, serious food surpluses.

On the face of it, this sounds as foolish as the production of foods guaranteed not to nourish, and the two are not unrelated. Surpluses, in a world where people are hungry! Too much food, in a world where children are starving! Yet we lump together all *agricultural* surpluses, such as cotton and tobacco, along with food, and we see these surpluses as threatening the commercial prosperity of many countries, and farmers in many countries. And in a world politically organized on a vanishing agrarian basis, this represents a political threat to those in power. However much the original destruction of food, killing little pigs, may have been phrased as relieving the desperate situation of little farmers or poor countries dependent upon single crop exports, such situations could not exist if food as something which man needs to provide growth and maintenance had not been separated from food as a cash crop, a commercial as opposed to a basic

maintenance enterprise. When it becomes the task of government to foster the economic prosperity of an increasingly small, but politically influential, sector of the electorate at the expense of the well-being of its own and other nations' citizens, we have reached an ethically dangerous position.

And this situation, in the United States, is in part responsible for the previous state of our poor and hungry and for the paralysis that still prevents adequate political action. During the great depression, agriculture in this country was still a viable way of life for millions. The Department of Agriculture had responsibility, not only for food production and marketing, but also for the well-being from the cradle to the grave, in the simplest, most human sense, of every family who lived in communities under 2,500. Where the needs of urban man were parceled out among a number of agencies—Office of Education, Children's Bureau, Labor Department—there was still a considerable amount of integration possible in the Department of Agriculture, where theory and practices of farm wives, the education of children and youth, the questions of small loans for small landowners all could be considered together. It was in the Department of Agriculture that concerned persons found, during the depression, the kind of understanding of basic human needs which they sought.

There were indeed always conflicts between the needs of farmers to sell crops and the needs of children to be fed. School lunch schemes were tied to the disposal of surplus commodities. But the recognition of the wholeness of human needs was still there, firmly related to the breadth of the responsibilities of the different agencies within the Department of Agriculture. Today this is no longer so. Agriculture is big business in the United States. The subsidies used to persuade farmers to withdraw their impoverished land from production, like the terrible measures involving the slaughter of little pigs, are no longer ways of helping the small farmer on a family farm. The subsidies go to the rich commercial farmers, many of them the inheritors of old exploitive plantation traditions, wasteful of manpower and land resources, often in the very countries where the farm workers, displaced by machinery, are penniless, too poor to move away, starving. These subsidies exceed the budget of the antipoverty administration.

So today, many of the reforms which are suggested, in the distribution of food or distribution of income from which food can be bought, center on removing food relief programs from the Department of Agriculture and placing them under the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. In Britain, during World War II, it was necessary to have a Ministry of Food, concerned primarily in matching the limited food supplies with basic needs.

At first sight, this proposal is sound enough. Let us remove from an agency devoted to making a profit out of crops that are treated like any other manufactured product the responsibility for seeing that food actually feeds people. After all, we do not ask clothing manufacturers to take the responsibility for clothing people, or the house-building industry for housing them. To the extent that we recognize them at all, these are the responsibilities of agencies of government which provide the funds to supplement the activities of private industry. Why not also in food? The Department of Health, Education, and Welfare is concerned with human beings; they have no food to sell on a domestic or world market and no constituents to appease. And from this step it is simply a second step to demand that the whole system of distribution be re-oriented, that

a basic guaranteed annual income be provided each citizen, on the one hand, and that the government police standards, on behalf of the consumer, on the other.

But neither of these changes, shifting food relief programs from Agriculture to Health, Education, and Welfare, or shifting the whole welfare program into a guaranteed income, really meet the particular difficulties that arise because we are putting food into two compartments with disastrous effects; we are separating food that nourishes people from food out of which some people, and some countries, derive their incomes. It does not deal with the immediacy of the experience of food by the well-fed, or with the irreparability of food deprivation during prenatal and postnatal growth, deprivation that can never be made up. Human beings have maintained their dignity in incredibly bad conditions of housing and clothing, emerged triumphant from huts and log cabins, gone from ill-shod childhood to Wall Street or the Kremlin. Poor housing and poor clothing are demeaning to the human spirit when they contrast sharply with the visible standards of the way others live.

But food affects not only man's dignity but the capacity of children to reach their full potential, and the capacity of adults to act from day to day. You can't eat either nutrition or part of a not yet realized guaranteed annual income, or political promises. You can't eat hope. We know that hope and faith have enormous effects in preventing illness and enabling people to put forth the last ounce of energy they have. But energy is ultimately dependent upon food. No amount of rearrangement of priorities in the future can provide food in the present. It is true that the starving adult, his efficiency enormously impaired by lack of food, may usually be brought back again to his previous state of efficiency. But this is not true of children. What they lose is lost for good.

What we do about food is therefore far more crucial, both for the quality of the next generation, our own American children, and children everywhere, and also for the quality of our responsible action in every field. It is intimately concerned with the whole problem of the pollution and exhaustion of our environment, with the danger that man may make this planet uninhabitable within a short century or so. If food is grown in strict relationship to the needs of those who will eat it, if every effort is made to reduce the costs of transportation, to improve storage, to conserve the land, and there, where it is needed, by recycling wastes and water, we will go a long way toward solving many of our environmental problems also. It is as a responsible gardener on a small, limited plot, aware of the community about him with whom he will face adequate food or famine, that man has developed what conserving agricultural techniques we have.

Divorced from its primary function of feeding people, treated simply as a commercial commodity, food loses this primary significance; the land is mined instead of replenished and conserved. The Food and Agriculture Organization, intent on food production, lays great stress on the increase in the use of artificial fertilizers, yet the use of such fertilizers with their diffuse runoffs may be a greater danger to our total ecology than the industrial wastes from other forms of manufacturing. The same thing is true of pesticides. With the marvels of miracle rice and miracle wheat, which have brought the resources of international effort and scientific resources together, go at present prescriptions for artificial fertilizer and pesticides. The innovative industrialized countries are exporting, with improved agricultural methods, new dangers to the environment of the importing countries. Only by treating food, unitarily, as a substance necessary to feed people, subject first to the

needs of people and only second to the needs of commercial prosperity—whether they be the needs of private enterprise or of a developing socialist country short of foreign capital—can we hope to meet the ethical demands that our present situation makes on us. For the first time since the beginning of civilization, we can feed everyone, now. Those who are not fed will die or, in the case of children, be permanently damaged.

We are just beginning to develop a world conscience. Our present dilemma is due to previous humanitarian moves with unanticipated effects. Without the spread of public health measures, we would not have had the fall in infant death rates which has resulted in the population explosion. Without the spread of agricultural techniques, there would not have been the food to feed the children who survived. The old constraints upon population growth—famine, plague, and war—are no longer acceptable to a world whose conscience is just barely stirring on behalf of all mankind. As we are groping our way back to a new version of the full fellow-feeling and respect for the natural world which the primitive Eskimo felt when food was scarce, so we are trembling on the edge of a new version of the sacrifice to cannibalism of the weak, just as we have the technical means to implement visions of responsibility that were very recently only visions.

The temptation is to turn aside, to deny what is happening to the environment, to trust to the “green revolution” and boast of how much rice previously hungry countries will export, to argue about legalities while people starve and infants and children are irreparably damaged, to refuse to deal with the paradoxes of hunger in plenty, and the coincidences of starvation and overnutrition. The basic problem is an ethical one; the solution of ethical problems can be solved only with a full recognition of reality. The children of the agricultural workers of the rural South, displaced by the machine, are hungry; so are the children in the Northern cities to which black and white poor have fled in search of food. On our American Indian reservations, among the Chicanos of California and the Southwest, among the seasonally employed, there is hunger now. If this hunger is not met now, we disqualify ourselves, we cripple ourselves, to deal with world problems.

We must balance our population so that every child that is born can be well fed. We must cherish our land, instead of mining it, so that food produced is first related to those who need it; and we must not despoil the earth, contaminate, and pollute it in the interests of immediate gain. Behind us, just a few decades ago, lies the vision of André Mayer and John Orr, the concepts of a world food bank, the founding of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization; behind us lie imaginative vision and deep concern. In the present we have new and various tools to make that vision into concrete actuality. But we must resolve the complications of present practice and present conceptions if the very precision and efficiency of our new knowledge is not to provide a stumbling block to the exercise of fuller humanity.

NOTES

The Proctor Prize given by the Scientific Research Society of America (RESA) was designed in 1969 to fit in with the emphasis on hunger and malnutrition in the program of the annual meetings in Boston of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. The subject, “The Changing Significance of Food,” was selected before the White House Conference on “Food, Nutrition, and Health” was announced, and therefore the Association-wide symposia, of which the symposium based on the RESA lecture was one, came as a follow-up of the White House Conference rather than as a prelude. The chairman of the session was Dr. Jean Mayer, whose vision

had piloted the White House Conference through very troubled waters, and the panel consisted of Mr. Robert Choate, crusader for a recognition of hunger in America; Nick Kotz, whose book *Let Them Eat Promises* was to appear in two weeks; Dr. Effie Ellis, Director of Maternal and Child Health, Ohio State Department of Health; and Mrs. L. C. Dorsey of the North Bolivar County Farmers' Cooperative Inc., of Mound Bayou, Mississippi, to which Dr. Mead had asked that the RESA prize money be given in recognition of an effort which promised increasing strength and experience for black people in the rural South and which was also directly related to providing food now.

During World War II, Margaret Mead was executive secretary of the Committee on Food Habits of the National Research Council, where she developed a theoretical and practical background for the relationship between the behavioral sciences and the nutritional sciences. She has twice brought this material up to date: in *Cultural Patterns and Technical Change*, which she edited, published by UNESCO, in 1955, and in *Food Habits Research: Problems of the 1950s, Special Publication 1225 of the National Research Council*, 1964, Address: American Museum of Natural History, New York, NY 10024.