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The everyday economy and the right to food

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Introduction

We argue in this essay that the production, distribution, and consumption of food is central to the everyday economy. More than this, thinking about how we make, acquire, prepare, and eat food in the present highlights the importance of communal, local and workplace action in the constitution of the everyday economy as a vehicle of economic, social and political change. These forms of action lie at the heart of current ideas and campaigns around the right to food.¹ This right is best understood not simply as an entitlement to enough affordable, safe, and nutritious food to allow for the living of an active and rewarding life free from dietary-based disease, but also the guarantee of the conditions which allow citizens as food producers and consumers to have effective participation in the food system. While an incoming Labour government must address the redistributive aspects of the liveability crisis, and the crucial issue of the rights of workers in the food sector, it should also recognise the value of promoting active citizenship in the food system as a central plank of a strategy to democratise the everyday economy.

We first set out the general political and economic conditions of the food system in the UK. Problems of food security and sovereignty have been of central importance for the state over the last two centuries, and the particular solutions that have been adopted – sometimes involving widespread intervention by the state and public agencies while at many other points largely leaving problems of food supply to the ‘free’ market – have shaped the character of the everyday food system. Yet, as we go on to explore in the subsequent two sections on problems of (re)production and consumption respectively, the principal features of the contemporary everyday food economy limit the solutions that can be provided by central government. As we show, the idea of the right to food places the crucial interconnections between workplace, household and community at the core of the problem of systemic food insecurity in the UK. If Labour is serious about the need to prioritise the everyday

¹ Championed politically in the UK by Labour MP Ian Byrne’s campaign to enshrine the right to food in law.

economy, it must have a food strategy that seeks to curb the exploitative and extractive practices of big food suppliers and retailers, while empowering direct producers and consumers by extending their effective rights to participate at various sub-national scales in a food system that is currently over-dependent on precarious global supply chains. It must do all this with open eyes about the huge material and ideological challenges such a strategy entails, faced with entrenched agribusiness interests and, with a few notable exceptions, a historical neglect for food politics from the UK left.

The food system and the everyday economy

The problem of acquiring and maintaining a supply of food is basic one for all states. In the modern world, the emergence of national economies was only made possible by the activity of sovereign territorial states in both raising tax revenues on the production and sale of food and in providing the infrastructure necessary for internal and external food transportation and trade. The regulation of the private consumption of food has also been a central feature of state activity in relation to the economy, whether involving policies to promote the health of the population through diet, or prohibitions on eating and drinking to police public order and suppress political challenges to established elites.

It is not possible, then, to form a clear picture of the 'everyday economy' without a serious consideration of the role of the state in the making and consuming of food. In a fairly obvious way, the maintenance and reproduction of modern capitalist economies requires that the large majority in national populations have sufficiently nutritious food for survival and the performance of useful work. Nation building in the modern world relied more on the successful securing of a food supply and its regularised and regulated consumption through patterns of everyday living than it did the widespread conscious adoption of nationalist ideology. In industrialised and urbanised societies, household economic activity has centred on the acquisition of food within the space of the town and city, cementing a (gendered) distinction between unpaid domestic and wage labour. From the late nineteenth and into the early twentieth centuries in Britain, much of female domestic labour centred around

the obtaining and preparation of food, with the bulk of household income from (predominantly) male wages devoted to it.

Understanding the everyday food economy of the UK today in part requires a recognition of the long-standing effects of early industrialisation and Empire. Since the first Industrial Revolution, the country has been heavily reliant on food imports. Compared to other European economies, the agricultural sector in the UK is small and continues to diminish in its contribution to national wealth. Early urbanisation and industrialisation meant that industrial workers were reliant on retailers for food provision, and these retailers sold many goods that originated outside the UK. Empire consolidated this reliance on external agricultural production and effectively stymied the development of domestic primary food industries (compare, for example, Britain's relatively weak fishing fleet with that of Japan, where post-Meiji imperial aspirations involved an active expansion of domestic fisheries and the development of a large pelagic fleet supported by the Japanese navy.² Napoleon's supposed jibe about the English, 'a nation of shopkeepers', rests on an important truth that was maintained through the industrial and post-industrial period. Not only did a profusion of food retail outlets mark the urban landscape, but significant numbers of British workers have historically been employed in food retail and processing (including in the handling and domestic distribution of imports by dock, warehousing and transport workers.).

These long-standing features centring on the importance of imports, the processing of primary food goods, and the ubiquity of retail are key for an appreciation of the structural conditions of the everyday food economy, and the challenges facing a government committed to its extensive reform. Entrenched reliance on food imports make it unlikely, for example, that a policy of substantial self-sufficiency in primary agricultural goods is achievable, or at least it would require a concerted state-led drive lasting far longer than a single electoral cycle.

However, as Tess Lanning and Rachel Laurence's contribution to this issue indicates, there are creative ways for local and regional authorities to leverage procurement powers in favour of shorter, more equitable and sustainable food-

² L. Campling and A. Colás, *Capitalism and the Sea: The Maritime Factor in the Making of the Modern World*, London, Verso, 2021, pp. 189-94.

supply chains which generate and retain wealth within communities, whilst also building the sort of retail and service infrastructure with enduring social value in town centres and high streets. This is what Preston City Council and Food for Life Scotland, among others, have been doing through their local anchor institutions. Similarly, recent Foundational Economy Research has itself outlined specific ways in which the devolved nations can harness public policy when increasing the stock of Small and Medium Enterprises in food and drink processing, thereby rebalancing the overwhelming power of the supermarkets.³

A right to food can be framed as an entitlement to accessing sufficient safe, affordable, nutritious and culturally-appropriate food for everyday bodily production, or as a right to participate in a socio-economic system of food production, distribution and consumption. And, of course, it can also be regarded, as it largely has been in the history of capitalism in England/ Britain, as a (legal) right over the means of production in food (from land to industrial food plant, and High Street retail spaces to taxpayer-funded meals in hospitals, schools or prisons) and the right to profit from exchange on the (global) food system. The question is how we can shift from these renditions of the right to food to one that also encompasses everyday participation in the reproduction of the food system – or, put in Froud and Williams’s terms (see their article in this issue), to an understanding of the right to food that interconnects wages, disposable and residual income.

The everyday food economy is much more than a ‘sector’ made up of retailers and producers. It involves connections between producers and consumers that are embedded in the quotidian routines and practices of living and working. An incoming Labour government will be impelled to address problems around food that relate to general questions of liveability, including food prices and the ready availability of healthy diets. But it needs to move away from thinking of producers solely as wage-earners and consumers as passive price-takers if it is serious about the prospect of reshaping the everyday economy. This requires thinking about how food producers

³ Foundational Economy Research, ‘What can Welsh Government do to increase the number of grounded SME firms in food processing and distribution?’, June 2021: <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2022-07/what-can-welsh-government-do-to-increase-the-number-of-grounded-sme-firms-in-food-processing-and-distribution.pdf>

and consumers can be empowered as citizens in a process of democratising the food system.

(Re)Production

In 2016, it was estimated that 30 million meals were eaten in London every day, of which around six million will have been consumed outside the home.⁴ In her original definition of the everyday economy, Rachel Reeves rightly included ‘the low-productivity, low-wage sectors of hospitality, retail, food processing and supermarkets’ within the category’s remit. By any conventional measure, the food and farming sector - including hospitality and retail - is a vital part of the UK economy, contributing some £127 billion, or 6.7% of national Gross Value Added and employing close to 4 million people, thereby making it the country’s largest manufacturing sector.⁵ Yet the foundational economy lens allows us to factor in two further important aspects to this equation. One is David Edgerton’s point that ‘the consumer is also the producer’ (article in this issue) in the food sector, as in other parts of the everyday economy. The second is that, alone on the London statistic just provided, much of this (re)production of the everyday economy happens as unpaid household labour. Following Edgerton’s maxim that ‘better paid carers, provid[e] better care’ it follows that ‘the Labour politics of the everyday economy, should be directed at increasing wages, reducing differentials, and increasing the quality of service’ across the food sector – including that delivered in the form of household reproductive labour.

There are at least two, complementary, ways of achieving these political aims from the (re)production-side of the everyday economy. The first revolves around the advance of industrial democracy across the whole of the food chain. The Bakers, Food and Allied Workers’ union-led campaign for fast food workers’ rights, and the accompanying McStrikes in October 2018 are a perfect example of how whole-chain

⁴ Mayor of London *Capital of Food: Ten Years of London Leadership*, 2016, https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/capital_of_food_report.pdf

⁵ House of Commons, *Labour Shortages in the Food and Farming Sector*, Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, 2022, <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/9580/documents/162177/default/>

unionisation drives can begin to address the labour segmentation and worker super-exploitation that sustains a broken food system. As the Bakers' quickly learnt, organising such a diverse workforce, spread geographically across very different workplaces, with sharp contrasts in job profile and staff composition, as well as employers' practices and power, is a daunting task.⁶ But if the democratisation of our food system is to be a radical, root-and-branch project, it needs to replicate the system itself, with union density from farm to fork, as well as generating national institutions like producer and consumer cooperatives that can shadow or even challenge the tight oligopolistic grip of agribusiness and supermarket power.

Yet there is another, formally uncoded side to the food system, namely the work involved in shopping, cooking, feeding and cleaning at home. It would be analytically weak and politically irresponsible to ignore reproductive labour in any account of the everyday economy. Here the right to food moves beyond mere welfare provision (important as this is), and becomes an instrument in radically reconfiguring time and energy socially allocated for these essential everyday tasks. Facilitating a routine 'social eating' outside the household, in the form of all-year universal school meals, neighbourhood community restaurants, subsidised workplace canteens or employee luncheon vouchers can both decommodify some of the millions of meals eaten outside the household every day in the UK, and shift daily eating practices from private households to public spaces, with all the democratic potential this has for workers' rights, environmental sustainability, gender equality and racial justice.

Clearly, adequate and effective welfare provision remains an important part of the right to food – especially if the crucial peri-natal and early-years development, and then care for the elderly or the disabled is to be properly supported. But disposable and residual *time*, not just income, becomes essential here: the right to food is not just about eating and feeding, but about all the time-consuming processes that *lead up to* and *follow* from the ingestion of food. This takes us back to the centrality of work, and workplace organisation of time, in conditioning the quality and quantity of food consumed in households and communities. Put plainly, no amount of cookery

⁶ A. Colás, 'Internationalism Under Platform Capitalism: Brexit and the Organisation of UK Fast Food Workers', *The Political Quarterly*, 90, 2019, pp. 620-62.

classes or budget recipe websites are going to do away with the structural causes behind food insecurity, which are so closely connected to irregular, precarious yet intensive working patterns that leave little disposable and residual time to fashion nutritious, affordable and appealing meals on a daily basis, either for individuals or their dependents. This is even more so for those unemployed or on Universal Credit, whose five-week wait compounds the enduring anxiety, stress and guilt that food poverty generates around the kitchen table for parents, carers and dependents alike.

The interdependence between points of production and sites of consumption, filtered through the workplace-household-community triad we're proposing, is also present in the ongoing battle over the future of cities, and the role of the everyday economy in shaping our built environment. The pandemic lockdowns accelerated some of the pre-existing tendencies toward 'privatised' eating of meals ordered through food-to-go platforms. Food-aggregators like JustEat or Deliveroo have in the past few years aggressively invested in the UK's fast-food sector, aiming to capture data and therefore markets through apps that lock in home, student or workplace diners. From the upstream 'ghost' kitchens cooking from branded restaurant menus in peripheral industrial estates, to just-in-time home delivery, fast food platforms seek a vertical integration which reduces food consumption to a transactional – and eventually, automated – exchange between client and kitchen, directly mediated through a private app and 'self-employed' riders.

However, fast food platforms are not restaurateurs, and do not seek to train and apprentice staff into the hospitality trade, nor to contribute to high-street footfall by managing bricks-and-mortar eateries. Neither, despite claims to the contrary, is the core component of their business model to foster small, local cafes and restaurants. One social consequence of all this is the growing displacement of public eating (with others, as part of a daily routine) to lunching *al desko* (alone in the office, or in a room of one's own). The other result is the seemingly unstoppable reconfiguring of urban Britain as public life in town centres is hollowed out, and gig economy workers return from unsociable shifts in central business districts to cramped houses of multiple occupancy in city outskirts with poor public infrastructure.

It has taken a global pandemic to underline how vital public institutions are to social survival, and how geographical proximity can act as proxy for collective welfare.

Corner shops and neighbourhood grocery stores proved during the worst of the pandemic to be a critical lifeline for the most vulnerable in the community as on-street restaurants repurposed their skills and kitchens to feed nearby NHS workers and the homeless. However incidental and anecdotal, these lockdown experiences offer a glimpse into the potential of the right to food to change our daily eating routines – and in particular how our towns and cities are provisioned, fed and cleared up – as part of a wider recalibration of the everyday economy.

Consumption

The campaign for a right to food may seem at first sight to be focussed on questions of social equality or justice. But the British left has long emphasised that issues of equity cannot be divorced from issues of efficiency. Conceiving of the right to food as an encouragement to active participation in the food system helps to redress the major drivers of low productivity and waste in the everyday economy, namely food poverty and diet-related disease. The issue of food insecurity has become prominent in recent times, and was amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic. Public awareness of the increase in the use of food banks in the UK has grown alongside highly visible campaigns like that led by the Manchester United footballer, Marcus Rashford. Rashford's actions in 2020 successfully pressurised the government into accepting an extension of free school meals to eligible children outside of school terms and an increase in the value of Healthy Start vouchers. Food poverty has come to be seen as part of a more general crisis of liveability encompassing among other things housing, social care and health inequalities. These are strongly conditioned by class, but also cut across other forms of social stratification.

Labour is squarely focused on matters of access to food resources, and no doubt this chimes well with public concerns. But there is a danger here of glossing over the systemic character of the root causes of food insecurity. Without doubt, the rise of the foodbank has been occasioned by the stagnation of wages since the financial crisis of 2007 and an increasingly harsh benefits regime, with 'in-work poverty' a particularly significant part of the problem. Foodbanks are widely regarded on the left as an inadequate third-sector response to a structural economic crisis that only the state can properly address. But the use of foodbanks raises important systemic questions about the architecture of food acquisition. Food poverty will be not solved

by getting foodbank users back into the supermarkets – a solution which entirely overlooks the question of participation in the food system. Insufficient as food banks are, they draw attention to the mutual and cooperative forms of food retail of a kind that were common in the working-class civic economy of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the provision of public funds to promote local associational food retail, including relatively decommodified initiatives such as community kitchens and pantries, should form a key part of the strategy to redress food poverty. Importantly, such support networks cannot rely solely on volunteers with disposable and residual time, or forms of social enterprise that were promoted under the Coalition's 'Big Society' agenda, but must be delivered by professionals through experienced organisations with local knowledge, financially supported by central government.

With respect to school meals, it is right that there should be a focus on matters of affordability for children whose families are struggling to put food on the table at home. At the same time, while it is correct to challenge the discourse on the right that blames food poverty on a lack of individual knowledge and (parental) will, the left is sometimes too quick to dismiss the importance of food education in school and beyond. A concern for food education is not prompted by Jamie Oliver-esque dismay at the Turkey Twistler or the inability of young children to be able to name and distinguish between artichokes and asparagus, but rather recognises the significance of knowledge about food and food preparation for the everyday economy. There was a traditional (sexist) lampooning of Domestic Science in schools for not being a 'real' academic subject, just as – much more justifiably – it came under criticism by second-wave feminists for reinforcing stereotypical gender roles. The rebranding of Domestic Science as Food Technology (now GCSE Food Preparation and Nutrition) was in part meant to address these criticisms, but the loss of the 'Domestic' shifts the focus away from the centrality of the connection between household, locality, city, and region. A truly 'Domestic' science taught in schools would involve a consideration of the political, spatial and cultural factors involved in the constitution of food systems, and not reduce it matters of technique and metabolism.

The other major point of concern about food consumption in the everyday economy relates to the impact of health on diet, and in particular the prevalence of obesity and type-2 diabetes. The disabilities related to these epidemics have an obvious enough effect on economic productivity, but proposed solutions again tend to discount the importance of participatory rights in the everyday food economy. The knee-jerk response of much of the right is to account for diet-related disease in terms of individual choice. More sophisticated conventional approaches are prepared to recognise the systemic character of poor diet, but offer answers that tend to focus on the state-market relationship in the food system. The leading recent example is the independent National Food Strategy (or Dimpleby Report) commissioned by the government in 2019.⁷ Dimpleby accounts for widespread dietary ill-health in terms of the 'Junk Food Cycle', the incentives within the food system for manufacturers to churn out cheap food containing large amounts of salt, sugar and saturated fat. The headline proposal of the report is a wholesale tax on sugar and salt in food manufacture, thus prompting large food producers to reformulate their products to reduce the use of harmful ingredients (a proposal since roundly rejected by the government). But Dimpleby sees consumers as passive takers of market prices. While he rejects the free-market right's emphasis on individual responsibility, he nonetheless thinks that the most effective policy measure is to nudge the producers into making unhealthy food less affordable. This portrays individuals as being in thrall to biologically-determined desires for highly calorific food and denied its consumption primarily through mechanisms of market exclusion. At times, Dimpleby wants to point to the value of participation of citizens in the food system, but the related proposals he advances are marginal and likely ineffective. The extensive, and successful, lobbying push-back from food manufacturers on Dimpleby's proposals show that a food system that enshrines the position of the big producers and supermarkets, by Dimpleby's own admission caught up in the production of numerous negative externalities affecting health and the environment, is unlikely to be the source of a solution to dietary ill-health. It is against that background that Labour needs to reflect more seriously on how participation in local associative schemes of food production

⁷ H. Dimpleby, *National Food Strategy, Independent Review: The Plan*, 2021, <https://www.nationalfoodstrategy.org/>

and distribution can diminish reliance on the large producers and supermarkets, which is, with little doubt, at the root of the dietary-borne disease.

Dimbleby's approach to the food system shows the limitations of thinking about diet in the abstract as pure consumption or ingestion of resources. Diet is a complex practice that takes place across a range of relationship associated with the home, workplace and in public or quasi-public spaces. Ultimately, the everyday food economy is the sum of such practices, and common to all is their location in time and space. We tend not to pay too much attention to the temporal order of eating, but the common tripartite division of daily eating time is the product of an industrial system of production that sought to limit and order the time allotted to activities outside the sphere of production. Increasingly the everyday food economy, particularly in urban settings, operates outside these temporal limitations, in some cases (such as with workers in the restaurant industry) squeezing the time and reducing the opportunities for sociable eating, and in others (the 24-7 availability of takeaway meals and groceries, for example) practically eliminating the traditional constraints on meal times. Already existing conditions within the everyday food economy thus both threaten and present new possibilities for eating outside of the order of the industrial working day.

The spatial dimensions of the food system are also radically diverging. Practices of commensal eating in the workplace – centred most commonly in the past on the canteen – have withered, though in urban spaces there is a growth of new quasi-public spaces of consumption, often focused around street food vans and stalls as well as 'pop-up' venues. This diversification of the time and space of eating needs to be addressed by Labour, not least because it already involves working practices that are quite crudely exploitative, but also because it affords opportunities to develop greater democratic engagement between citizens in reclaimed – or reinvented – public spaces. Above all, the idea of a right to food within the context of the everyday food economy can underline the joys of sharing food in public. Eating and drinking are everyday practices which, if radically reorganised, can deliver profoundly democratic transformations of capitalist societies whilst retaining forms of 'communal

luxury'.⁸ Part of this requires a politics of pleasure that builds on, or sometimes reinvents traditions of major celebrations involving food and drink (both secular and religious) as well as more mundane habits of going to the pub or for a curry with friends and family. Politicising food consumption in ways that enhance workers' rights and the welfare of our planet without detracting from the collective joys of public sociability should be a key component of the democratisation of the everyday economy, and should be firmly on Labour's agenda for government.

Conclusion

An everyday economy needs an accompanying politics of the everyday. The right to food serves as a concrete way to bring these two together in its focus on how a basic human need like nourishment is structurally inter-connected to wider socio-political injustices and unequal life-chances that manifest daily in workplaces, households and communities. The labour movement in the UK as elsewhere has in the past nurtured institutions like working mens' clubs and cooperative consumer societies which directly addressed the politics of the everyday.⁹ Shorn of any misplaced nostalgia or romanticism, these expressions of public association can serve as an inspiration for a twenty-first century everyday economy where every high street is populated by a community kitchen, food pantry, neighbourhood pub or urban food garden. Such public associative spaces can act as 'prefigurative' practices of cooperation and mutuality in addressing basic human needs and fostering public sociability beyond the narrow logic of the market. Moreover, as we've argued here, conceiving of the right to food as a form of citizenship, where food is not just fuel, but a way of collectively reproducing quotidian life in a more just, equitable and - importantly, joyful and pleasurable - fashion, also allows us to bind everyday economics with the politics of the everyday.

Finally, the right to food framework underlines the multiple geographical scales at play in the everyday economy, and relativises the place of the nation-state in this context. In the modern world, the development of rights (in Tawney's scheme, from

⁸ K. Ross, *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune*, London, Verso, 2016.

⁹ See P. Brown, *Clubland: How the Working Men's Club Shaped Britain*, London, Harper Collins, 2022.

civil to political to social) went together with the onward march of nations and nationalism. Today we need a new way of thinking about the institutional architecture and achievement of rights, particularly those that in the past we may have (perhaps too quickly) thought of as predominantly 'economic'. Central government resources will be critical to addressing the UK's growing food insecurity, and universality in the shape of year-round free school meals or peri-natal and early-years nutrition must be a core component of the right to food. But Labour must also recognise how food injustice and inequalities are rooted in the everyday economy in a way that plays out in workplaces, households and immediate localities and communities. Effective rights of participation in the food system, grounded in the experience of everyday life and addressed through sub-national public authorities, are far more important for transforming the idea and practice of the everyday economy than any spray-on nationalism. Labour needs to embrace this, rather than reheat the idea of a national food strategy.