



Food Stories: manufacturing meaning along the food commodity chain

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Recent food scares have fuelled public concerns about food and farming. Consumers find it difficult to know where their food comes from, how it is produced, and how far it has travelled. Food provision is increasingly organised through complex supply chains, often on a global scale. This has implications for consumer confidence, food safety and public health. This project has interviewed consumers, manufacturers, retailers, and farmers to examine these issues by analysing chicken and sugar commodity chains. It reveals how food is increasingly 'sold with a story' and how food producers have to manage the changing meanings of food as well as coping with the demands of technological change and product innovation.

KEY FINDINGS

- Although the widespread taste for chicken is relatively recent (since the 1960s) in Britain, there is a nostalgic desire amongst consumers for chicken to be produced 'the way it used to be' – an imagined history which has economic consequences.
- Most poultry is sold as a cheap commodity, but retailers are increasingly seeking to differentiate their products and add value by developing slower and less intensively grown chickens sold at a premium.
- Consumers think differently about whole birds, portions and processed meats. Geographical provenance is more of an issue when consumers are buying whole birds and less so with processed foods.
- Consumer 'squeamishness' around animal production and the handling of raw meat poses challenges for retailers, especially those seeking to differentiate their product by explaining in more detail how their chickens are produced.
- In our life history interviews, domestic sugar beet production is often associated with heroic histories of national food security. Other histories, including the historical associations of sugar with slavery and Empire, are more likely to be forgotten.
- Despite recent campaigns and health concerns, sugar's mundane qualities and inertness render it relatively 'invisible' in the popular imagination. Some 75 per cent of sugar is used as an ingredient in processed food, which further obscures the commodity's public profile.
- Historically, sugar prompted the first consumer boycotts during the campaign to abolish slavery. Today, sugar is the subject of complex trade-offs between supporting domestic beet producers and moral obligations to cane producers in distant places.

HIGHLIGHTS

Chicken

Of all food commodities in Britain, chicken has been most susceptible to the intensification of agricultural production. Since the 1950s, growing cycles have almost halved in length to less than 40 days. What once was a domestic-scale industry with a few birds kept mostly for egg-laying now features large sheds housing thousands of broiler chickens grown for their meat. The development of the chicken cold chain revolutionised food processing, refrigeration, transportation and packaging, enabling mass production and consumption of ready-meals and other convenience foods. Chicken suited these innovations because of its relative healthiness and blandness and the lack of sentimentality towards chickens as animals.

The widespread consumption of chicken meat is relatively recent (since the 1960s). Still, consumers express nostalgia for chicken 'the way it used to be'. This has stimulated growth in free-range and organic production. Most consumers are far removed from chicken production, so there is less affiliation with chicken as a sentient animal – chickens are thought of just as a commodity. Consumers are also often confused about the distinction between broiler chickens raised for meat and battery chickens that lay eggs.

Consumers hold different attitudes to whole birds, portions and processed meats. Geographical provenance is more of an issue when consumers buy whole birds and less so when purchasing processed food products containing chicken. This allows retailers the commercial opportunity to import processed chicken but also justify a premium for the Britishness of whole birds.

Responding to concerns about the pace and scale of industrialisation, retailers are slowing down the chicken chain. For example, Marks & Spencer have developed

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Chicken farming in the 1920s: a cottage industry

Photo: Polly Russell



Modern day chicks in a hatchery

Photo: Polly Russell



‘The meat you worry most about is chicken isn’t it? ‘Cause it’s like you can get so many different things from it’

Consumer interview:

Flora, PhD student, mid-20s, January 2007

‘I don’t think about the production of chicken, it’s not something I want to think about, really’

Consumer interview:

Rosie, secretary, mid-30s, January 2007

the Oakham chicken range. Oakham chickens are slower growing than conventional broilers, stocked at lower densities, with specified feed regimes and environmental enhancements that allow natural behaviours.

Sugar

Sugar has been imported into Europe for more than 400 years. For most of the twentieth century, a highly interventionist agricultural policy governed sugar in Britain. Sugar is the last bastion of protectionism in the European Union. In Britain, sugar subsidies were introduced in 1925 as an exceptional measure in a laissez-faire age (to build up a domestic industry). The EU Sugar Regime was the last of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) regimes to be significantly reformed (in 2005). Sugar politics in the UK are complicated by the arrangements, agreed on the UK’s accession to the Common Market, that permit sugar cane imports from Africa, the Caribbean and Pacific Commonwealth countries. This has left two companies – British Sugar and Tate & Lyle – with monopolies over sugar beet and cane processing respectively. Sugar has become politicised as a result of CAP reform and the campaigns

of development organisations such as Oxfam. The 2005 reforms are prompting significant changes to the UK sugar industry and sugar beet factories are being closed. Our research suggests that although Tate & Lyle and British Sugar are often in competition (e.g. in sugar sales) they also form strategic alliances when there is a common threat (e.g. the sugar and health agenda).

In our life history interviews, sugar’s history and international connections featured in contradictory ways. Domestic sugar beet production was associated with heroic histories of national food security and self-sufficiency. Britain’s sense of responsibility towards Commonwealth producers continues to shape the sugar industry. Other histories were less widely invoked. Slavery, for example, did not feature prominently in our life history discussions, despite being intricately bound up with the development of the sugar industry. Histories of sugar are characterised by selective forgetfulness and remembering.

The mundane quality of sugar and its incorporation as an ingredient in processed foods render it ‘invisible’ in the popular imagination. Some 75 per cent of sugar is used as

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Sugar beet in a field clamp

Photo: Polly Russell



Raw sugar at Tate & Lyle's East London refinery

Photo: Polly Russell

'I honestly don't know what kind I buy, I just grab the white packet'

Consumer interview:

Jane, school teacher, mid-30s, February 2007



an ingredient in food processing, which further obscures sugars public profile. It is therefore not surprising that sugar producers do not invest heavily in marketing, packaging and branding their product. The 'invisibility' of sugar means that the contested meanings and histories do not have to be negotiated by sugar producers in Britain. Instead, sugar producers have to negotiate with increasing concerns about public health (such as obesity and tooth decay).

MESSAGES FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Technological changes in the food industry have been a great commercial success, but have been accompanied by growing consumer anxieties. The project suggests that there are limits to the industrialization of a natural 'product' such as chicken (with 'a live thing' at the end of the chain). In contrast to the inertness of sugar, chicken's organic properties – including its susceptibility to damp, cold and disease – constantly threaten to undermine technocratic control. In managing risks, the food industry is faced with a number of tensions including the desire to justify premium prices through

revealing more about production processes without making consumers squeamish.

The project identified limitations to the idea of 'food miles' as an effective measure of sustainable production. The project shows the need to move beyond the simple metric of distance to a greater emphasis on transparency, traceability and regulation. Our focus on the UK, coupled with the international literature on food geographies and food politics, suggests that the increasing interest in food miles and local foods is geographically and historically contingent. A key question for future research, therefore, is what are the social and cultural processes shaping the turn towards 'local foods' among different social groups in the UK and how distinctive are they in an international context?

Our project brought together geographers with oral historians and demonstrated the utility of life histories to social scientists. The approach enabled research subjects' attitudes to specific issues to be explored within a broader narrative about their lives, through their selective recourse to memory, history, nostalgia and tradition. It generated new insights about the

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interplay between personal, public and commercial narratives and about the different degrees of investment research subjects make in the production process.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Manufacturing Meaning Along the Food Commodity Chain (grant number RES-143-25-0026) ran from March 2003 to April 2007. The research involved geographers at Sheffield and Newcastle Universities, working with oral historians at the British Library's National Sound Archive. Life history interviews were conducted with people working at different points along food chains and recordings were archived at the British Library as part of its wider 'Food: From Source to Salespoint' collection. The life histories were supplemented by focus groups and interviews with policy makers and consumers.

PUBLICATIONS INCLUDE

- Jackson P., Ward N. and Russell P. 'Mobilising the Commodity Chain Concept in the Politics of Food and Farming', *Journal of Rural Studies* 22 (2006), pp.129-141.
- Jackson, P. and Ward, N. 'Connections and Responsibilities: The Moral Geographies of Sugar', in Nützenadel A. and Trentmann F. (eds.) *Food and Globalisation: Consumption, Markets and Politics in the Modern World* (Oxford: Berg, forthcoming, 2008).
- Jackson P., Russell P. and Ward N. 'The Appropriation of "Alternative" Discourses by Mainstream Food Retailers', in M. Kneafsey *et al* (eds.) *Constructing*

'Alternative' Food Geographies (Oxford: Elsevier, in press, 2007).

The project has also developed an interactive educational website, *Food Stories*, including extracts from the life history interviews:
www.bl.uk/learning/histcitizen/foodstories.

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CULTURES OF CONSUMPTION RESEARCH PROGRAMME



The Cultures of Consumption Programme funds research on the changing nature of consumption in a global context. The Programme investigates the different forms, development and consequences of consumption, past and present. Research projects cover a wide range of subjects, from UK public services to drugs in east Africa, London's fashionable West End to global consumer politics. The £5 million Cultures of Consumption Programme is the first to bring together experts from the social sciences and the arts and humanities. It is co-funded by the ESRC and the AHRC.

The aims of the Cultures of Consumption Programme are:

- to understand the practice, ethics and knowledge of consumption
- to assess the changing relationship between consumption and citizenship
- to explain the shifting local, metropolitan and transnational boundaries of cultures of consumption
- to explore consumption in the domestic sphere
- to investigate alternative and sustainable consumption
- to develop an interface between cutting edge academic research and public debate.

For further details take a look at our website
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