

Conference Report: Winter Conference 2011 'British Food Security in Historical Perspective'

by John Chartres

Displaced, by renovation works, from the normal Winter Conference venue to the panelled sobriety of the University of London Senate Chamber, fifty-one members met on 3 December 2011 to reflect upon four papers on the theme of food security. Excellent emergency action by the conference organizer happily overcame the projection deficiencies of the new venue, which did, however, offer unusual comfort and circulating space in its anteroom, easing the social intercourse of the lunch break. Four varied papers lived up to challenges of the space, and explored the major issues of the subject to give us a very interesting day.

Dr James Davis (Queen's University, Belfast) explored the dogs of famine that did not bark in "Goð or wey, corn is dere!": attitudes towards grain traders and dearth in fourteenth-century England', in which we learned that the Great Famine of 1315–22 seemed not to provoke authorities to regulatory action. Careful analysis of the chronicles rather indicated that the censorious attitudes towards middlemen visible in the literary and religious tracts of the time were not representative of actuality, and that consumers and authorities instead recognized their utility. Realism governed attitudes to grain supplies, and there was recognition of price reality without riot in the early fourteenth century: speculation against the interests of the consumer was disparaged, but price-setting was seen as unrealistic. Later attempts by Edward II to control livestock prices were unsuccessful, and were in any event motivated by the need to supply his army rather than his subjects. Increased legislation against forestallers and others after the Famine was argued to have been publicly accepted as reinforcement of protection, and food scarcity as the 'will of God'. This argued for a more general appreciation in the period of a complex commercial ethic that combined moral principle, political imperative and the instability of economic forces. Government action thus linked in

this context with a wider acceptance of the virtues and limitations of a pragmatic moral economy that helped to dampen potential social unrest between 1315 and 1322.

The second paper, by contrast, was explicitly literary in its focus and methodology, and almost reversed the approaches of the first. Dr Ayesha Mukherjee (University of Exeter), discussed 'Literatures of Dearth in the 1590s', a paper based upon her current book project on the remedial measures for dearth undertaken and imagined by the English in the 1590s. Contrasting texts were analysed to explore the cultural meanings of dearth in the decade, where they overlapped and influenced anxieties, and how assessment of causes and remedies were debated. Her five core sources began with the reception of Ludwig Lavater's sermons, published in translation in 1596, which argued God as the 'proper cause' of dearth, but also illustrated how problems of dearth-time were treated and shaped to meet pragmatic problems of resource management. Her second, Hugh Platt, was more familiar to many in the audience, and his *Remedies against Famine* (1596), which have often been disregarded in their eccentric discourses on eating: here it was argued that they were presented as practical options, with serious ethical implications that linked with the cultural discussions of dearth in literary texts. They related to her final three authorities, Shakespeare's Falstaff (1598), Robert Greene's *Defence of Conny Catching* (1592) and Thomas Nashe's *Lenten Stuffe* (1599), all of which illustrated how the divorce of ingenuity from moral imperatives could license gluttony, cheating, vagrancy, dishonest projection, and adulteration to make personal self-sufficiency out of the misery of others. The literature of dearth thus mixed prodigality and moderation, and problems of punishment in a society in which poverty could cause excess and corruption, and conflict with the virtues of ingenuity.

Contemporary writing thus drew attention to the transitory nature of plenty, and could itself participate in the remedy of dearth. Pressures of time precluded the full reconciliation of the empirical and the literary conceptualization of these first two papers.

Professor Cormac Ó Gráda (University College, Dublin) presented results from joint work with his colleagues Morgan Kelly and Bruce Campbell to cover an extraordinary range of years, 1300–1800, in ‘Harvest failures and mortality in pre-industrial England’. He was, perhaps, the principal sufferer from the wobbly IT provision in the room, since this remarkable presentation consisted of a large number of complex slides, a full re-reading of which assisted in the drafting of this report. Two important datasets were analysed and compared, to demonstrate year-to-year variability in crop yields, short-run linkages between real wages and mortality, the occurrence of major crises of subsistence, changing living standards, increasing market integration, and the lack of convincing evidence for temperature cooling, the ‘Little Ice Age’ of the late sixteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth century. His explorations made for an exhilarating journey through time, and suggested significantly lower harvest variation in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries than some scholars have postulated, with remarkably similar net yields per acre appearing over the period 1268–1480, with perhaps enhanced variation in the fifteenth century, and clear correlations of natural pairs of grains – wheat and rye, barley and oats – and lower incidence of back-to-back harvest failures than might have been expected. Medieval food security may have been a little better than sometimes thought, but the time trend also demonstrated its improvement, visible in the documentation of very clear diminution in harvest-to-harvest wheat prices from the middle of the seventeenth century. His medieval data documented clear correlations between measures of mean summer temperatures and cereal yields, 1211–1500, but the later evidence proved hard to reconcile with the ‘Little Ice Age’, and its assumed effects, reduced growing seasons, shorter working years, changing crop mixes, relatively falling wheat yields, and shifting patterns of settlement. None of these consequences appeared in England, 1350–1700, and days worked per family may have been significantly higher in 1600 or 1700 at over 400, close to the estimates for 1300 (382), but far higher than the 331 of 1380 or the 266 of 1450 estimated by Apostolides and colleagues (2008). Market integration was an important part of this story, but may have been exaggerated in its impact, but over the whole period, variation of food supply was

reduced, standards of living and nutritional levels rose, crop mixes increasingly made trading down the grain scale possible, and storage costs fell, easing the rise in capacity. Ó Gráda’s paper thus provided a heady mix, more than sufficient for analysis in another conference, but, sadly, time precluded the extended discussion it warranted.

The 700-year scope of the conference reached the late twentieth century and beyond with the final paper, by Dr David Barling (City University), ‘The security of the UK food supply: policy discourse and advocacy in an era of embedded neo-liberalism’. This explored the historical context of the late 1990s to explore the fundamentals of food policy after 2007–08, but for most of the audience it related powerfully to the policy discourses that had engaged the UK since 1947. Dr Barling identified the key precepts of policy that had characterized the 1990s: food safety, competitiveness of sectors of UK farming, and some related aspects of rural policy. The foot-and-mouth crisis of 2000 helped to lead to a wider policy review that remained framed by the ideology of the competition state as the enabler of competitiveness in international markets. The same agenda was reinforced by UK policy towards the CAP, and the wider discussions within the World Trade Organization: the policy stance of the Treasury and DEFRA was reaffirmed in 2005–06 as one seeking further liberalization. Some of the complacency about the UK free trading food system came under challenge in 2007–08, with price spikes on world markets, and pointed to risks in UK and EU policy positions on exports and imports of food. These processes exposed contradictions in policy, treating the international market as the most efficient and risk-reducing approach to the UK’s current and future food supplies. Critical among these tensions were the risks of dependence on international supply as trading competitors raise demand; the uncertain resilience of this supply strategy; and the contradictions of pressures for farm support within the UK and the Government desire for the ending or reduction of CAP support. This very recent piece of historical and policy research thus brought the conference to end where it had started, with the role of the state in securing a reliable food supply for its citizens.

As always, the day was too short, and all the members attending must have shared the buzz of new thoughts and approaches to a fundamental set of problems reviewed in this long historical perspective. All were again grateful to the conference organizer, Dr Jane Whittle, for once more arranging such a challenging and engaging programme, and to all the speakers who made it such a rewarding day.