

## Sébastien Rioux, The Social Cost of Cheap Food: Labour and the Political Economy of Food Distribution in Britain, 1830–1914

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Volume 85, printemps 2020

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1070931ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.1353/ltt.2020.0030>

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Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

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Citer ce compte rendu

Sartore, N. (2020). Compte rendu de [Sébastien Rioux, The Social Cost of Cheap Food: Labour and the Political Economy of Food Distribution in Britain, 1830–1914]. *Labour / Le Travail*, 85, 333–335.  
<https://doi.org/10.1353/ltt.2020.0030>

of Lib-Labism and those that continued to advocate the use of the strike weapon to build a socialist Britain. For Ives, “the turn from direct action towards electoralism ... was a crucial element in the stabilisation of British society in the post-war period.” (317)

The book is a significant addition to the historiography of the British coal industry. However, it has limitations. Behind the sophisticated reading of sources and the deep understanding of the politics of specific coalfields there remains a tendency to view ‘direct action’ advocates and militants as victims of a trade union bureaucracy prone to stifling alternatives to what is described as the politics of Labourism. Moreover, the text suggests that the direct actionists were themselves “hamstrung by their parochialism.” (319) Such value judgements often mask complexity, nuance, and agency. This is one of many problems with the kind of counterfactual history that is advocated in the introduction and with particular narratives that have bedevilled Marxist perspectives on labour history throughout the twentieth century. As the author notes, giants of coal mining trade unionism such as Arthur Cook, Arthur Horner and Nye Bevan made compromises “in the name of pragmatism which as younger men they had scorned.” (313) One can only wonder what these men would have thought on the evening of 12 December 2019, when former mining seats such as Bolsover, Leigh, and Wrexham elected Conservative Members of Parliament.

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**Sébastien Rioux, *The Social Cost of Cheap Food: Labour and the Political Economy of Food Distribution in Britain, 1830–1914* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press 2019)**

IN HIS NEW monograph on the political economy of food, Sébastien Rioux traces the emergence of a modern and dynamic system of food distribution in a critical period of social and economic change in modern Britain. Where other scholars have traditionally looked to production patterns and cheap imports to explain rising living standards, Rioux focuses on the infrastructures and labour practices that made possible the mass distribution of food commodities to Britain’s expanding population. *The Social Cost of Cheap Food: Labour and the Political Economy of Food Distribution in Britain, 1830–1914* is a concise yet compelling book that accounts for large structural change in the distribution sector without neglecting the diverse experiences of the working-class actors whose labours were essential to its functioning.

This study presents two related claims. First, Rioux argues that economic development in the period produced “a food-related underclass in the distributive sector capable of delivering the means of subsistence cheaply.” (8) Second, he claims that the expansion of distribution was vital to the establishment of a cheap, reliable food supply, which in turn enabled a rise in real wages and working-class living standards across urban Britain. By examining the importance of distribution to the political economy of food, the author uncovers an important link between cheap food and cheap labour that captures the dynamics of capitalist reproduction.

The first chapter of *The Social Cost of Cheap Food* provides some useful historical context and situates the emerging food distribution system within broader

shifts in production, transportation, and consumption. Chapter two then explores the evolution of the traditional marketplace, emphasizing the significance of railways and shifting geographies of food production and distribution. Rioux is particularly effective here in demonstrating the resilience of the public market in the nineteenth century. He argues that its transformation into a capitalist space made it an enduring institution, one that adapted successfully to the needs of the market-dependent working classes in London and in provincial centres like Manchester and Glasgow.

Though the author's primary objective is to demonstrate the importance of food distribution in Britain's economic development—a worthwhile intervention in its own right—his work also makes a bolder contribution to the wider social and cultural historiography of Victorian and Edwardian Britain. In his efforts to uncover the social cost of modern food distribution, Rioux gives voice to the itinerant peddlers, warehouse porters, and shopkeepers' relatives whose contributions to capitalist reproduction have, to date, remained largely absent from the historical record. Once characterized by a contemporary social reformer as "the industrial residuum," Rioux argues that "these castaways of industrial capitalism" were actually key actors in the food supply chain. (67)

The next two chapters uncover a range of experiences of members of the distributive sector. Chapter three focuses on the expanding underclass of street sellers—the underfed and underemployed costermongers, hawkers, hucksters, and pedlars who lived in overcrowded housing across urban Britain. Rioux highlights both their harsh living conditions and the significance of their role as redistributors of unsold produce from markets like Billingsgate to the urban poor. In doing so, he shows that access to cheap food,

and rising living standards for a large segment of working-class families, was secured by the continued marginalization of itinerant traders. Small shopkeepers and their employees also struggled to make a living in this period. In chapter four, Rioux traces their decline in status and describes their efforts to mitigate the effects of intensifying retail competition. He examines official committee reports, contemporary treatises, and state legislation on adulteration to shed light on the pervasiveness of fraudulent practices, including the use of false weights and measures. Big shopkeepers also began to rely on strategies of labour exploitation, including the use of child labour. Meanwhile, family-run domestic shops became increasingly dependent on unpaid family labour and extended work hours for their survival.

The final chapter consists of two case studies that demonstrate the growth of large-scale retailers after 1860: the rise of the cooperative movement and the expansion of "multiples," or multiple shops. Using examples like Lipton and the Maypole Dairy Company, Rioux demonstrates how large retailers benefited from free trade policies and developments in transport and refrigeration and built a highly competitive retail environment based on a model of high turnover, small profits, and cheap labour.

*The Social Cost of Cheap Food* shows that modern food distribution, the availability of cheap food, and rising working-class living standards relied on exploitative labour practices and organizational methods geared toward efficiency. Citing some sobering statistics on the social and economic insecurity of today's working classes, Rioux concludes by showing how access to cheap food, and especially prepared foods, continues to rely on the exploitation of cheap labour under neoliberalism. Despite the staggering profits of some of the world's

most influential food retailers, food insecurity is on the rise in the UK and a new underclass of workers is struggling to escape poverty. Like their Victorian and Edwardian counterparts, today's counter attendants, fast food cooks, and restaurant hosts, and servers endure poor working conditions and have limited access to either social benefits or opportunities for advancement. Yet, perhaps research like this will help us better understand and confront the grim realities of living under capitalism: chronic poverty, precarious employment, exploitative business and labour practices, and extreme income inequality.

One area that might have received more attention in a longer monograph is the significance of gender to capitalism and food distribution systems. Rioux briefly discusses the feminization of the retail workforce and hints at the gendered division of labour in the marketplace and cooperatives. Though Rioux writes that women were not often employed in food distribution before 1914, women's work appears to have been both visible and critical to the survival of market stalls and outside shops alike. For example, the hiring of cheap female workers was a systematic and deliberate business strategy for the then-expanding retailer, Marks and Spencer. Women also worked for meager wages as porters in the Flower Market and pea pickers and walnut shellers during the fruit season, while daughters and wives of stall- and shop-owners worked long hours for no pay. However, Rioux does not engage with more complex questions about gender's relationship to labour and the (re)production of capitalism. I wonder, for instance, how Britain's modern system of distribution and the new patterns of consumption it helped produce confronted, altered, or reproduced contemporary understandings of gender and sexuality. The answers to these questions might help us unpack

the dynamic ways that axes of oppression connect to and overlap with one another, giving rise to conditions of socio-economic precarity under capitalism.

The monograph may have also benefited from a brief discussion of primary source material and a note on the limitations of the project. Subheadings or sections in the bibliography would also be helpful for readers. These are minor quibbles, however, and do little to detract from the value of this brief but important study on the geography and dynamics of food distribution in modern Britain.

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**Toby Green, *A Fistful of Shells: West Africa from the Rise of the Slave Trade to the Age of Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2019)**

DESPITE DECADES of effort by Africanist historians, Africa remains perennially misunderstood, falsely disconnected from the stream of history. Historians of the Atlantic world and early modern globalization have made some advances in bringing Africa into their accounts, but a longstanding reductive approach remains in place. West Africa is commonly understood through the Atlantic Slave Trade and reduced to being a victim of external depredation, or set apart as a place waiting to be awoken from stasis. Toby Green's book not only pushes non-Africanists to think afresh about how they locate Africa in history but does much to push Africanists and suggest paths they might take.

Two ambitions shape this wide-ranging and sweeping treatment of Atlantic Africa from the late 14th century to the mid 19th century. Part I asks how Africa's engagement in the Atlantic economy, initiated on largely favourable terms by sovereign states, eventually put Africa