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Horsemeat-gate

THE DISCURSIVE PRODUCTION OF A NEOLIBERAL FOOD SCANDAL

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Academic and lay debates about food variously articulate the ways in which contemporary food provisioning systems are inherently problematic and unstable. Drawing evidence from the seeming prevalence of adulteration scandals, moral panics and other food crises, these debates reproduce a set of entangled moral discourses about food, its consumption and production. Within these discourses, ideological lines are drawn, and particular types of consumers (typically poor and working class), particular types of producers (those that produce for the agri-industrial food complex) and particular types of retailers (typically “budget” and “corporate” supermarkets) are vilified as the loci of all that is supposedly wrong with food. Missing, however, is a more nuanced social and cultural reading that unpacks these discourses and analyses failings within food through multiple lenses such as class, social-deprivation, and their multi-scalar geographical implications. Using the recent horsemeat scandals that dominated headlines in spring 2013, the purpose of this commentary is to unpack and disentangle these discourses of food. We argue that “what is wrong with food” is less related to its systems of provision, but rather more the ways its various agents are discursively cast and subsequently moralized as perpetrators of a globalized and industrial food system

Keywords: fraught food, supply networks, food safety, neoliberalism, agri-industrial food, buying local, food nationalism, discursive formations

Introduction: Fraught Food

Food is fraught. “Horsemeat-gate”¹—the food adulteration scandal in which processed beef products sold in the United Kingdom and other parts of Europe were found to have been contaminated with horsemeat—and the ensuing panic,

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moral and otherwise, in the form of media reporting, public comment and the actions of retailers, government and regulatory bodies—show us just how fraught food can be. As Holtzman reminds us, the scholarly study of food has verged on the Pollyannaish and tended to downplay the negative and darker sides of eating (Holtzman 2013: 140), yet food scares, such as that centered on the introduction of horsemeat into the British food chain, and the discourses that circulate and coalesce around such scares, give us, as scholars, the opportunity to unpack and illuminate the ways in which foods are sites for concern. In this commentary, we want to think more specifically and carefully about the ways in which food is discursively constructed as problematic.

We live in a time where food, at least presently for many of us in the global north and west (who end up reading these things from the privileged gaze of the academy), is abundant, relatively healthy (should we “choose” it to be as such), and of significant variety to be interesting and affordable. By these criteria, we surpass United Nations/World Health Organization mandates for food security and bask in a relative position of privilege when it comes to eating. Food should not occupy a troubled space—unless we choose to position it such. Rather it should occupy a space of comfort and ease. Paradoxically, and somewhat bafflingly, much of what we eat, and how we are seemingly coerced into eating it, does not, however, appear to bring us comfort. Many of us may well be food secure according to the normalized definition of food security in that we are able to secure food relatively easily and effectively, yet, as the horsemeat scandal shows, we are far from feeling secure in our foods and our foods do not seem to bring us much security. Horsemeat is just one of the various food adulteration scandals with which we are seemingly inundated, such that it has been argued that our worries about food are latent anxieties that exist within an affective register and are modulated as agents, actants and bodies; the sort that comprise the material, social and discursive elements of food scandals and collide at particular moments in time and space (see Jackson and Everts 2010; Milne *et al.* 2011).

Our argument is that events that suggest that food is fraught, such as bovine spongiform encephalitis (BSE)/mad-cow disease, foot and mouth disease (FMD), avian influenza (H5N1), and now horsemeat-gate, are presented through, as well as contain, a variety of discursive framings, which assemble into shared ideological positions about blame within our food systems. These ideological positions variously displace blame onto an (ir)responsible “other” located on social, economic, cultural and discursive margins. They thereby draw attention away from the inherent structural instabilities and asymmetries that characterize the ways in which food is procured, and the multiple ways in which the plurality of our food systems are organized. Thus, rather than food being fraught, we argue that the discourses that inform and reflect our understandings of foods—as well as the political, the economic, the material, social and the cultural machinations that comprise our compendium of food systems—are the things that are fraught.

It is tempting to suggest that horsemeat-gate is the result of a series of failings in the systems that govern contemporary food provisioning. These failings will no doubt be the object of enquiry for researchers, regulators and other practitioners

in coming years, and they will provide evidence, or otherwise be spun, to make particular inferences about the ways we should be provisioning our food. For instance, horsemeat-gate will for some reaffirm the notions that so-called modern food is unsafe, and that the systems upon which it relies are inherently unstable. The source for this instability will be the scales at which modern food is organized and the relative opacity through which it operates. The solution will be a “scaler fix”² and subsequent “localization” of food. For others, the speed at which regulators, retailers and others further up the supply chain acted to mitigate the possible effects of such contamination by ordering tests, recalling products and enacting import/export bans will be heralded as a success in neoliberal governance and regulation. After all, it was routine testing and inspection by the Food Standards Authority of Ireland that signaled a problem with beef/horse, and it was the rapidity with which this information was disseminated and acted upon by similar authorities and agencies around Europe, such as the UK Food Standards Agency, that meant the effects of the scandal, although somewhat widespread, were short-lived. Horsemeat-gate will consequently become another event in a long line of food scandals and moral panics from which regulators and food operators will be seen to “learn” in order to ensure that such a thing will never happen again. Simultaneously, it will also provide further evidence that incidents of adulteration are all too common, and all too likely, within “modern” food systems.

For us, as commentators, horsemeat-gate was produced through a discourse of “failings,” which can be located in numerous sites of engagement and are widely emblematic of the ways in which the organization of “modern” food can polarize debate and lead to unnecessary dualities. What we are interested in here, however, are the spatialities of blame; the co-constituent, often overlapping discourses that both marginalize and “other” actors within food, and the ways in which these discourses variously assemble, disassemble and reassemble, and/or are otherwise appropriated, to make ideological claims about not only our food, but the contemporary systems through which we provision it. Of particular concern are the ways in which the dualistic nature of debate is reproduced through similar moralizing discourses about the right and wrong ways to produce, consume and ingest food, and the ways in which these discourses each eerily rely on interwoven, often shared narratives of race, nationalism, power and class; narratives that are, in turn, predicated upon various framings, enactments and mobilizations of scale. We argue that although discourses around food scares may shape, and be shaped by, particular ideological agendas and perspectives, their similarities demonstrate broader sociological, anthropological and geographical concerns.

Recent food literature has pointed towards the semantic and subjective framing of “good” foods, which although inherently undefinable, generally signal some notions of health, justice and stewardship and combinations thereof (see Abbots and Lavis 2013; Sage 2003). Critically, the framing of “good” food makes both overt and tacit claims about foods’ production and consumption that territorialize morality by delineating spaces of good (food). But what are bad foods? How are they constituted, what does it mean to consume and produce “bad” food. If viewed through a lens of indulgence such as the food-hedonism of celebrity chefs like



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Nigella Lawson or Heston Blumenthal, then being bad is perhaps more fun than being good; but this lens also suggests an individualized trope of consumption, where consumers are ultimately responsible for their decisions to indulge and chastised if they indulge too much, or in the wrong ways. We are interested in exploring these moral dimensions that position, if not inform, discourses of food, its production and its consumption.

Buying Local and the Failed Agri-industrial Food Complex Discourse

Horsemeat may be taboo ... but it makes business sense. (Dafydd Raw-Rees, quoted in the *Swansea Sound* 2013)³

The first discursive and ideological framing that we engage with is the one that suggests that, owing to its size, position and power, the agri-food industrial complex is inherently bad. In this commentary, we by no means suggest that the current organization of the agri-industrial food industry is universally defensible, nor is it universally reprehensible; it is, after all, responsible for such taken-for-granted “good” aspects of food, such as safety, quality, healthiness, variety and security. However, both positions rely on foreshortened historical and geographical awareness, leading us to argue that the agri-industrial food complex needs to be analyzed outside the various ontological and epistemological framings that may lead to one-sided sets of *a priori* conclusions. The modern world of food is typically organized around two seemingly distinct modes of reproduction: on one hand, the agri-industrial, and on the other, “alternative.” During horsemeat-gate, agri-industrial food was characterized by increased vertical and horizontal integration of its various agents and actors, from primary production to retail; the mobilization and corporatization of capital, and a neoliberal ideology of market efficiency, which includes the implementation and integration of decentralized governance and the streamlining of post-Fordist, just-in-time supply chains that concentrate the creation of economic value in discrete locales. In addition, and paradoxically, the agri-industrial food complex was cast as both inefficient, relying on fossil fuels, large-scale shipping networks, intensive agricultural inputs etc, and as hyper-efficient, with extremely lean supply chains, and over-stretched resources. This latter discourse suggests that hyper-efficiency along with the extreme commoditization of food inevitably led to individualized moral failings among actors. After all, it was individual farmers cutting costs that led to both BSE and FMD, but it was the horizontal and vertical integration of supply chains that led to their widespread outbreak (Law 2006). Likewise, one or two “dodgy” producers, allegedly engaged in criminal behavior, were depicted by the mainstream media as key actors behind the events leading up to horsemeat-gate. These actors are the ones, larger retailers were especially keen to point out, contaminating the system.

For critics levying a broadly Marxist critique, horsemeat-gate represents an unsurprising outcome of the extreme integration and neoliberalization of food. The relations that distinguish industrialized food concentrate power into the relatively

few hands of corporate entities, which ultimately distances and obfuscates the material, social and discursive relations that bind production with consumption, or more specifically producers with consumers. In other words, the agri-industrial food complex fashions a commodity fetish that replaces social relations (between producers and consumers) with object relations. The “meta-regulatory trend” of this “food world” centers on the principles of neoliberal political economy that prioritizes “private systems of regulation” through the spread of commercial orientated material, social and discursive conventions (Morgan *et al.* 2006: 134, 166).

Alternative food networks and initiatives posited in opposition to the agri-industrial food complex, and governed through a logic, or at least employing a language, of moral economy seek to replace these obscured or obliterated relations. Mobilized through a variety of material semiotic assemblages, this alternative food “complex” deploys a familiar, geographically inflected language of “good food” that explicitly seeks to activate places and discourses of place to unravel the commodity fetish, as well as promote material production practices that are attuned to questions of social justice and environmental stewardship (Coles and Crang 2011; Coles 2013). So, while the agri-industrial food complex seems to operate through a “placeless foodscape” (Holloway and Kneafsey 2000), the alternative food complex deploys production narratives to embed itself actively into the relations of place. Following the discourse of the scandal, horsemeat enters the UK food system through leakages in the industrial food system. Because this system is already portrayed as “placeless,” which is nothing more than shorthand to describe a constellation of places that fall outside a normalized geographical reckoning for food, horsemeat effectively has no visible geography within a system characterized by geographical invisibility. This, we suggest, makes an already suspect food system even more problematic because consumers ultimately have no idea of the products that go into or come out of it. The unknowable facets of such a complex array of actors and places transform the food system into an object of anxiety and fear; horsemeat becomes another contaminant in what should be a healthy system.

Narratives of place and placeless foods do two things. First they signal that certain foods do indeed come from somewhere, and that somewhere is important as well as good. This gives “good” food a geography that contravenes the seeming opacity that is said to characterize agri-industrial food through descriptions of how particular foods and their places are reproduced. Second, as these narratives deploy place, they are making claims not just about the right ways to produce (and consume), but the right places from which to do it. In the process they are complicit in their own fetish-making—what Cook and Crang (1996) signal as the “double commodity fetish.” Place and place-making are already inscribed by moral acts (see Sack 2001; Sayer 2003). Differentiating the good, however, makes tacit suggestions about the bad, which is akin to labeling places as “bad,” and from our perspective, ultimately leads to unjustifiable conclusions about what we eat and where we eat from. Good and bad take ominous turns when it comes to their territorialization, as is often the case when it comes to food. As the horsemeat scandal played out, it was argued that contamination came from the “global” supply



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chain, and when that global was localized, and a name put to place, contamination came from Poland and Romania, the social, economic and discursive margins of Europe. Politics of scale are also at play here. “Bad” food is discursively “global,” but when that “global” was given a locus, it was subjected to a geographical “othering” based on a discursive imagination reproduced as part of the politics of representation. In this case, the “other” place is cast first as criminal and illegal, but ultimately as outside the law, and indeed, outside the jurisdiction of the law.⁴

Raw-Rees’s comment suggests that while horsemeat, for a variety of reasons, is not part of the British and Irish diets, and that its consumption in these places is “taboo”; there is the market for it, notably, continental Europe. Horsemeat and its consumption are culturally contingent (cf. Douglas 1994[1966]). Therefore defining its consumption as “taboo” or “bad,” and tacitly acknowledging that consuming beef is the opposite, likewise suggests that moral framings of food are culturally contingent. What is missing thus far, however, is that the consumption of horse was rarely the main concern. Rather, the primary issue was mislabeling and the inadvertent consumption of horsemeat as beef, which constitutes fraud. Yet, we are more interested in the part of Raw-Rees’s commentary about “business sense,” and the suggestion that market factors justify cultural transgressions and the breaking of food taboos. This neoliberal perspective devolves responsibility for horsemeat consumption from the actors who reproduce the market through “market factors” onto end consumers. Raw-Rees might as well be saying it isn’t his fault the British don’t eat horse when the French and Belgians do, and therefore that they represent a market to be exploited. Horsemeat is “bad” when it is sold as meat in the UK and Ireland and therefore transgresses those cultural norms, when it is sold as some other product, namely cow, and is the product of Europe’s social, economic and discursive margins. This latter point situates horsemeat contamination around two broken taboos. The first is eating horsemeat. The second is that the object of contamination not only comes from abroad through the opaque channels of agri-industrial food, but when those channels are revealed, they lead to presupposed criminality in some eastern European “backwater,” rather than the wholesomeness and centrality of British agriculture. It becomes good again, when its geographies are remade to be more visible. In the wake of horsemeat-gate, some consumers, citing qualitative similarities with beef, are requesting horsemeat from their local butchers as a low-cost alternative to beef, and its consumption is being further championed by a number of self-professed foodies, bloggers and critics as a sustainable alternative.

Despite its inherently problematic positioning of “local” (see Born and Purcell 2006, Brown and Purcell 2005), buying “local,” and its conflate “buying British,” has been one method through which the perceived failings of the agri-industrial food complex has been rectified by the alternative turn. “Local” suggests embedded “trust,” but likewise relies on a semiotic and imaginative framing of what constitutes local food. Despite literatures that engage with and critique the global food system (see Busch 2012; Busch and Bain 2004; Goodman and Watts 1997; McMichael 1995, 2012), the “local” food system, except as a discursive “other” to the “global,” has proven to be a somewhat more slippery concept, and we argue this

is, in part, the result of what Brown and Purcell refer to as the “scaler trap,” whereby “researchers assume that organization, policies, and action at a particular scale are inherently more likely to have desired social and ecological effects than arrangements at other scales” (Brown and Purcell 2005: 608). In this case Brown and Purcell are referring to disconnected debates within political ecology, but we suggest a similar “trap” exists within the equally fragmented discipline of food studies. What is more pressingly problematic for us in relation to horsemeat, however, are the ways in which “local” foods conflate into regional foods, which, in turn, become “British” and take on veneer of petty nationalism.

In a series of soundbites announcing the National Farmers’ Union’s (NFU) “Buy British” campaign, an advertising and marketing directive launched in direct response to horsemeat-gate, President Peter Kendell commented:

We’ve been working hard to get the message across—and reminding consumers that if they Make it British, Make it Local, Make it Happen, they ensure that they are protected by the high welfare standards and rigorous traceability met by UK farmers. (NFU 2013)

He continued:

This [horsemeat-gate] has never been a farming issue but it is certainly an issue that farmers will be taking extremely seriously. The NFU is working with the industry to uphold the reputation of British farmers who are committed to producing world-class raw ingredients into the supply chain. (NFU 2013)

Moreover:

This whole system of quality is being completely undermined by failures within the supply chain and reinforces our call for clearer labelling and a commitment from retailers to British produce. In the meantime, shoppers should look for the Red Tractor logo on their fresh meat which shows the products they buy have been produced to world-class standards, which are independently inspected. (NFU 2013)



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Kendell’s comments suggest that in the opinion of the NFU, similar to mainstream media reports that laid the blame at the door of Romania and Poland, foreign imports were the source of horsemeat contamination; that horsemeat-gate is a problem with supply chains and characters like Raw-Rees, located in marginal abattoirs and processors, not farmers; and that the “British farm” is a site of quality, safety and security that protects British shoppers from this outside threat. In the present case, of course, the “foreign” threat originates not only from the margins of the European Union, but also Ireland and, and in the case of a particular processor, Wales: locations marginal to a London and England-centric state and media. Given that Sage (2010) and Carroll (2012) make a similar argument about the conflations of “local” into a “national” “Irish foodscape” (however ironic), this suggests that the politics of

claiming “local” food and the processes where it is “localized” (or not) are deeply rooted in contentious, nationalistic claims. West (2013), commenting on the designation of geographically specific foods, suggests that high economic stakes are likewise bound-up within these political maneuverings.

Trust relations are simultaneously embedded in the “local” and mobilized by the “national.” This suggests that trust is tied into notions of visibility and visibility by proxy, which the alternative food movements, alongside organizations such as the NFU, purport to promote, never mind that Raw-Rees was a well-known “local.” Yet in this case, the “local” is the provincial, already marginalized Wales, and ultimately “contaminated” by its “global” ties to Ireland and beyond. These tangled (in)visibilities and (dis)trusts of food become even murkier when it comes to questions of meat and where meat comes from. Even alternative food narratives, that give rich descriptions and thick narratives of places of meat production and therefore seek to connect consumers with producers and the materiality of their consumption skip the bits about the abattoir, except perhaps to suggest that animals are slaughtered in “humane” and “stress-free” ways. To get these stories we must turn to the work done on industrial slaughterhouses and industrial stockmanship (see Baker 2013; Stull and Broadway 2012). Even the nomenclature employed within this commentary is suggestive of the slippage between production imaginary and material practice: we refer to horsemeat as “horsemeat,” but to cow-meat as “beef.”

Both Raw-Rees’s and Kendell’s statements further indicate, as previously suggested, that consumers are key actors in the security and safety of “modern” food systems, and that they have a moral responsibility to make “good” food decisions—in this context by buying British and/or eating foods that make business sense. This reflects a wider discursive framework in which (particular types of marginalized consumers) were constructed as being partially responsible for horsemeat-gate, and it is to this we now turn.

“What Do They Expect?”: The Irresponsible Consumer

“Honestly, what do these people expect? If you’re paying £1 for twenty burgers, you can’t expect prime beef!” a colleague surmised of the horsemeat affair, echoing a common discursive thread found in both the mainstream media’s coverage and public comments posted on food and media blogs. These observations may be casual reflections of the economic realities of food procurement but they also hint at a much deeper, class-based moral framework through which particular food practices—and those who enact them—are judged, and inevitably found wanting. As indicated above, the “dangers”—bodily, socially, culturally and morally—of eating cheap meat were explicitly and evocatively laid out during horsemeat-gate, but there was also surprising lack of sympathy or concern for those who had potentially ingested horse instead of beef, or inadvertently consumed phenylbutazone in the process. Supermarkets, producers, processors, abattoirs and regulators were all held to be, to varying degrees, responsible for horse entering the British food chain, but they are not the only actors in this saga. Individual consumers are ultimately accountable within the broader neoliberal

framings and discourses of contemporary food governance, and as horsemeat-gate unfolded, it became evident that specific classes of consumer—those who do not know the “real value of food” and buy economy meat products and ready-meals—were also deemed responsible. Consequently, in this section we unpack the implications of the “what do they expect” discourse, showing not only the class-based suppositions and cultural politics that inform the models of good and bad food on which it is premised, but also draw attention to the neoliberal paradigms that place the burden of changing the global food system on the consumer's capacity to make “good choices” (cf. Goodman *et al* 2010; Guthman 2008).

In reiterating the sentiment of “what do these people expect, if they are buying such cheap meat,” some commentators implied that consumers, rather than being subjected to regulatory shortcomings, fraud and corporate greed, were instead complicit actors in the horsemeat affair; the outcome was a seemingly unavoidable consequence of their “poor” food practices, a simple matter of cause and effect. An insatiable desire for cheap meat, the narrative suggests, inevitably resulted in processors, producers and retailers taking shortcuts and bypassing regulatory restrictions (see Price 2013). This does not excuse these corporate actors, as we have shown above, but rather has resulted in a mainstream media depiction of the global “food system” as a beast created to fulfill a consumer-led demand for cheap, processed meat products. The consumer here is, at the very least, a collaborator in, and at worst, the instigator of, a flawed system through which his or her food needs are met; the emphasis being that they are the ones driving demand, rather than retailers shaping it. As Mark Price, Managing Director at Waitrose, a higher-end supermarket, explained, “there is a requirement to hit a price point for consumers” and consequently “it is inevitable there will be a slackening of product specifications” (Price 2013).

As such, the implication, and at times the publically voiced concern, is that “these people,” who do not know the “true” value of food, were the ones at fault and therefore really only have themselves to blame. As one commentator stated:

If you want meat, buy from a butcher who sources locally ... If you want a box of slush for 99p then accept the great probability that it is rubbish ... If you would rather spend time watching the *X-Factor* etc etc than preparing food then accept the consequences. (Anonymous comment to Quinn *et al.* 2013)



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Yet, this blame, we suggest, does not stop at the individual's sovereign eating body; consumers' demand for cheap meat not only has consequences for their own eating practices, but is also represented as putting the entire British population at risk. Indeed, when a similar set of statements about meat consumption are coupled within the discursive contexts of global food crises and climate change, where blame for these worldwide events is laid at the feet of the hordes of new meat eaters in emerging economies (McMichael *et al.* 2007), the discourse of consumer accountability and blame at best suggests the dangers of merging ontologies within academic debate (see Jasanoff 1987; Mol 1999), but also more worryingly exposes an uncritical ethnocentric, class-bias among commentators.

The risks of consuming (and demanding) cheap meat are made particularly manifest within accounts of traces of horsemeat found in school meals and across the public sector, and although, to our knowledge, commentators have not gone as far as blatantly stating that consumers demanding cheap meat are responsible for children ingesting undesirable elements, the implication, especially in some sections of the media, can be discerned. As the same commentator cited above continued, “if you want your children to eat good food then control what they eat. Parents are grown-ups, and that involves taking responsibilities” (anonymous comment to Quinn *et al.* 2013). Moreover, it is in these contexts we see another theme emerging—that of the consumer as passive victim. In this representation, the consumer is naïve, somewhat hapless and has been duped by the complexities of the agri-food industry. However, although seemingly converse to the “consumer as instigator” discourse, these two models are perhaps not so dissimilar. Indeed, at their heart, they both have the prevailing sentiment that ignorance, a disconnection from the sources of our food, and misunderstandings as to the value of food are the issues at stake. What is required, then, the narrative goes, is enhanced awareness of our food chains, a reconnection to “local” and “national” foods and trusted sources, and an education that will help consumers make “better choices.”

From the NFU and supermarkets to alternative food networks and celebrity chefs, the horsemeat affair has seen multiple commentators and activists in a range of guises appropriate the scandal for their own political purposes. Horsemeat-gate has been variably used to promote calls for: the conversion to vegetarianism; the reintroduction of food technology and cookery classes into the education system (a process that was already underway at the time of the scandal); the breaking of cultural taboos and the eating of horse as a mechanism for dealing with food security issues or promoting “better business”; the management of food waste; “buy British” campaigns; a questioning of the European Union and a reassertion of British sovereignty; the damning indictment of “industrial” foods; and the “value”—socially, environmentally and nutritionally—of purchasing meat from a “trusted supplier”—the epitome of the latter being a BBC News panel in which a representative from the Slow Food movement advised viewers that the best way to avoid contaminated meat was to procure it from their local (meaning small-scale) butcher.

We have already noted the problematic regionalist and nationalist tones of horsemeat-gate and here want to draw attention to the ways in which class distinctions also emerged and were enacted. In some contexts this was explicit, with self-professed “foodies” extolling, from a position of privilege, the virtues of eating horse as a delicacy. But class differences were also evident in other, more tacit, ways. The supermarket chains, producers and products predominantly affected by the horsemeat affair are situated at the lower-end of the market; traces of horsemeat, while not exclusively, were disproportionately found in economy ranges, and the outlets that stocked them are both located in the more economically deprived areas of the UK, particularly in rural areas, and strongly associated with the lower classes. “These people,” then, who are demanding cheap processed meat

products, are generally those marginalized geographically and/or at the lower end of the British class system, and have a lower income than their middle-class counterparts. Whereas those extolling the virtues of local butchers, British produce and Slow Food—in short, those holding “these people,” at least, partially accountable for horsemeat entering the food chain—are decidedly “other”; a reflection that is perhaps not surprising given the class biases and elitism found in a number of alternative movements (see Brass 2000; West and Domingos 2012).

Yet, despite the striking class inequities, with those on the lowest incomes and living in the most economically deprived regions (ironically some of the very same regions that proponents of the alternative food complex suggest can be revitalized by expanding their “local” agricultural sector—a romanticization of the rural that potentially compounds the “immorality” of their consumption) being potentially exposed to a greater “risk” of horsemeat, not just through their own food practices and “choices,” but also through the structures of food access, cost and availability, these economic factors were, in the main, conspicuously absent from many commentaries. An estimated 4 million people in the United Kingdom currently live in food poverty (Food Ethics Council 2013), and austerity measures have seen significant cuts to the welfare state and benefits system at a time when the national economy is in triple-dip recession. Median income for low-income households fell by 12 percent in 2010–11, while food prices rose, in real terms, by 12 percent (Cribb *et al* 2012). Reliance on food banks is estimated to have doubled in 2012 and expected to do again in 2013 (Trussell Trust 2013). The gap between the haves and have-nots is widening. Yet this economic backdrop receded from view in media treatments of horsemeat consumption and did not appear to be a concern. The question “what did these people expect, buying twenty burgers for a £1” was rarely followed up with “*why* are people buying twenty burgers for a £1?” and commentaries rarely touched on issues of security (in terms of access) and poverty. Rather, the answer was assumed—“these people” are making poor, uninformed choices, they just don’t know any better, or don’t know the value of “good” food. The economic realities potentially informing these purchasing decisions were glossed over, became invisible and were rarely, if ever, acknowledged.

On the rare occasions that price was raised as an obstacle for “good” consumption, it was brushed aside and appropriated as a skills and knowledge issue, rather than a structural economic matter. “You just need to know how to stretch a chicken over three days” was a common refrain, with commentators and activists not only failing to acknowledge that, even if a chicken is stretched over three days, it is often less financially viable than many economy meals, but also not recognizing that many “local” butchers are less readily accessible than supermarkets. Thus, there was a failure to recognize that geographical marginalization and infrastructure, and time, as well as financial, poverty may be a factor in the food “choices” of some. As one commentator highlighted:

We must refuse to accept excuses such as “we don’t have the time” or “we can’t afford quality food.” You can still cook perfectly healthy food on a low budget, but it requires some reorganisation [sic] of the priorities in your life and it



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requires some effort. If you don't want to do either of these things, then take the consequences. (Anonymous comment to Quinn *et al.* 2013)

It is not our intention to replicate a supermarket convenience hypothesis (cf. Reardon and Berdegue 2002), but rather elucidate that, for many working shifts, double-days, multiple jobs and unsocial hours, supermarkets represent a more readily accessible food retailer than many local butchers (or they may be the local butcher), and microwave ready-meals take less time to prepare than stretching a chicken over three days. Likewise, as the Raw-Rees example reminds us, there are no good reasons to rely automatically on the veracity of the local supplier.

We are not stating here that people in these structural positions do not make choices or express their own agency in making their own food decisions. Rather, we wish merely to draw attention to the ways that their choices may be more limited than many commentators allow in their discursive dismissal of the consumption of inexpensive, processed or “bad” meat. Thus, we contend that, despite their seemingly comprehensive accounts of the industrial food system, media coverage of the horsemeat scandal failed to address the structural relations that inform how and why “these people” are buying twenty burgers for £1. Discourses of “good” food invoked in the affair not only enabled the chattering middle classes to position themselves as morally superior by showing that they comprehended the “value” of “good” food, but treatments of the consumers most significantly affected were also somewhat dislocated from the realities of their everyday life. Consequently the structural inequities and injustices that make some socio-economic groups more subject and vulnerable to food adulteration, risks and frauds were rendered into the background.

Concluding Reflections

The discourses surrounding horsemeat-gate are indicative of a broader characteristic emerging through the continued track of not only structural neoliberal governance in the food system and the consistent promotion of the free market economy, but also the neoliberalization of the body: that is, the emphasis on the individual consumer to make “good choices” about what she or he (inadvertently) ingests. The notion of responsible consumerism prevails across the food industry and beyond, whether it is in relation to the implementation of food and nutrition policy and regulation or the mobilization of “alternative” food movements, to name just two examples. As we have suggested, the ways in which the “good” in this equation is subjective and shaped by cultural politics, and “choices” are limited (for some more than others), is being increasingly unpacked. However, as the treatment of horsemeat by media, retailers, regulators and food activists demonstrates, the assumption remains that the “problems” (whatever they may be deemed to be) of the agri-industrial food complex can be solved by the right type of consumption—by the right type of people. The moral, ethical and responsible consumption that is promoted and valued in these discourses may appear to be a different animal to the consumption that is deemed irresponsible by certain actors and sectors in society, but it is consumption all the same. Whether

we are buying twenty burgers for a £1 or gourmet pure beef burgers from our local butcher (or, to cite other recent examples, pollock rather than cod in our supermarket or fair trade coffee over other brands), we are still buying, and activating networks of food that transcend any normalized or moralized scaler narrative. As such, regardless of constructions of particular production and consumption practices as moral or immoral, and the producers and consumers as central or marginalized—or us or other—horsemeat-gate indicates the hegemonic prevalence of formalist economic models that assume changes in consumer demand will change the system and method of production. This model not only helps ensure that consumption, ironically, becomes the mechanism for social change in a neoliberal context, but it also places the burden for change on the consumer, not the producer or retailer. This fetishization of the consumer as the agent for change and the production of discursive frameworks that “other” and marginalize, as is evident in horsemeat-gate, not only encourages the moral condemnation, from a privileged position, of certain forms of consumption and particular actors as irresponsible, but also enables the structural asymmetries and injustices of food’s political economy to be glossed over all too readily.

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Notes

- 1 We use this term to comment indirectly on the ways in which media (and public) discourse seems to affix the suffix of “gate” on to nearly any type of scandal and/or moral panic.
- 2 “Scaler-fix” denotes the ways in which discourses of geographical scales (e.g. local, global, etc) are utilized to explain the spatial organization of particular practices and to make

moral and ethical claims about that organization. See Brenner (2001) and Brown and Purcell (2005)

- 3 Welsh butcher arrested for fraud in the wake of the horsemeat contamination scandal(s).
- 4 We are drawing from legal and political philosophies articulated by Giorgio Agamben (2005).

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