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## The austerity larder: Mapping food systems in a new age of austerity

### **Abstract**

Themes of rationing, scarcity and frugality have become increasingly prominent in UK food discourses of recent years, and the historical period of 'austerity Britain' (1939-54) has proved to be a key symbolic resource in these debates. This article considers the conjunction of food, culture and 'austerity', and explores how austerity discourse might inform British consumers' understanding of global food systems. It notes that critical work on commodity de/fetishization tends to focus on geographical knowledges, and seeks to complement this research by attending to the role that historical resources play in rendering food commodity systems intelligible. Through an analysis of an exhibition at the Imperial War Museum London, and in particular the iconographic site of the 'austerity larder', the article considers the extent to which austerity discourse offers a legible index of food commodity chains, raises questions about fragility of supply, and makes food scarcity visible. The analysis reveals some of the ways in which historical geographies of consumption may shape consumer imaginaries. The article concludes by identifying some of the issues that arise from the recourse to history, and by arguing for further attention to the symbolic work that historical resources perform in contemporary consumer culture.

### **Keywords**

Austerity, British food, commodity defetishization, consumer imaginary, food security, food scarcity, geographical knowledge, history

### **A kitchen with very little on the table**

Until very recently, it would have been hard to countenance the idea that the food policies of British governments during the Second World War and postwar era would seem relevant to present circumstances, or that ideas about rationing and 'fair shares' would have any leverage at all with twenty-first-century consumers. It would have been even harder to imagine that these ideas about food and consumption could actually be made to seem acceptable, or even appealing, to certain constituencies. Yet this seems to be exactly what has happened. Returning in 2010 from a visit to *The Ministry of Food*, an exhibition about 'feeding Britain in wartime' staged at the Imperial War Museum London, a young woman posted a review on her blog:

There was a kitchen with very little on the table. I will take this as a house inspiration. (The Sneaky Magpie, 2010)

Themes of rationing, scarcity and frugality have become increasingly prominent in food discourses of recent years, and the historical period of 1939-54 has proved to be a key symbolic resource in these debates. Food policy experts concerned with sustainability have drawn on wartime history both to differentiate and to draw precedence for their recommendations. Museums and other cultural institutions have used historical resources from this period to engage audiences in thinking about the impacts of consumer food choices. Food rationing is also a recognizable theme in popular culture.

In the television series *Wartime Farm* (Lion Television/Open University for BBC2, 2012) a historian and two archaeologists experience life on a farm in the 1940s, and participate in the 'Battle for Food'. The programme depicts the team's efforts to optimize food production on the farm, a challenge that is contextualized with explanations of rationing procedures and demonstrations of the domestic practices that evolved to cope with these restrictions. Another historical television series, *Ration Book Britain* (Optomen for Yesterday, 2010), explores 'what life was really like during the war years', focusing on food practices under the rationing regime. The influence of this historical period is even detectable in the restaurant scene: Albion, a Terence Conran<sup>1</sup> restaurant and shop in East London, references austerity through its retro design and menu of modish 'comfort' food.

In this article I consider the conjunction of food, culture and 'austerity'. Through an analysis of *The Ministry of Food*, the exhibition visited by the enthusiastic blogger, I explore what austerity discourse might contribute to British consumers' consciousness of global food systems, and to their food imaginaries more generally. I evaluate the extent to which certain key challenges set out by food policy experts can be seen to be communicated in the exhibition, as well as in *Ration Book Britain* and other related texts and contexts. The analysis focuses in particular on the role of history in these processes; I suggest that the *historicity* of the signifying resources being activated in these texts is critical in creating a point of entry into food policy debates. Two introductory sections precede and provide contextualization for the analysis of the exhibition. In the first, I locate the article in the context of

scholarly debate about food, commodity fetishization and consumer imaginaries, and I set out the claim that too little attention has been paid to the role that historical resources play in rendering capitalist commodity-production, its geographies, and its moralities, intelligible. In the second, I provide some background to the meanings the term 'austerity' has accrued in British culture since the onset of the financial crisis in 2007, and offer a brief overview of the place of 'austerity Britain' and rationing in British historical consciousness. I describe some of the significant political projects to which these meanings have been articulated, and offer a more developed rationale for the analysis and approach pursued in this article.

### **Food, consumption, geography and history**

This article presents an analysis of a museum exhibition, but rather than reviewing *The Ministry of Food* solely as an exhibition, I approach it as a context in which contemporary food consumption is mediated. For its visitors, the exhibition is just one of the many such contexts they will come across, contexts which may or may not influence their food consumption practices. My approach is informed by debates in cultural geography and cultural studies about culture, commodity fetishization and consumer knowledges. In particular, it responds to some of the challenges posed in Cook and Crang's much-cited article on food culture and geographical knowledges, 'The world on a plate' (1996). Moving away from an understanding of commodity fetishism as an essentially obfuscatory process, Cook and Crang emphasize the proliferation of diverse and complex processes of commodity fetishization and defetishization (also Binkley, 2008; Moor and Littler, 2008; Morris and

Kirwan, 2010). In place of an approach that agonizes over the 'ignorances' of consumers and the 'superficiality' of their knowledge of commodity systems, Cook and Crang recommend attention to the 'productivities' of fetishisms, or 'what they are used for':

The issue becomes not, then, the authenticity or accuracy of commodity surfaces, but rather the spatial settings and social itineraries that are established through their usage. (Cook and Crang, 1996: 148)

The location of knowledge about commodity systems within the broader cultural imaginaries of consumers has emerged, then, as an issue requiring more careful consideration, with the provision of such knowledge construed as 'never simply an unveiling, rather a creative performance of reconnection' (Coles and Crang, 2011: 90). Relatedly, others working in this field have sought to problematize the relationship between the provision of 'information' about commodity chains and the constitution of ethico-political subjectivity (Barnett, Cloke et al., 2005: 26), leading to a 'growing emphasis on the networks, organizations and the material contexts that shape people's consumption practices' (Lewis and Potter, 2011: 16). These points of interest and reflection – on the 'productivities' of fetishisms, the complexity of subject-constitution, and the role of consuming contexts – inform the approach taken in this article. Finally, I also adopt the position espoused by Barnett and others that despite very clear limits to consumers' agency in relation to transforming commodity systems, it is important to pay attention to consumer imaginaries:

'if big projects for structural changes are to get off the ground, they have to fit with people's structure of feeling', he argues (Barnett, Littler and Soper, 2005: 153).

It is perhaps surprising that despite the richness of discussions about consumer culture in cultural geography and cultural studies, the role of history, historicity and the historical in these contexts remains a subject that has received little attention. In both scholarly and popular debate, the solution to the problem of rendering legible the apparatus of globalized food production is seen to lie in developing consumers' geographical imaginaries (Goodman, 2004: 896). As Barnett, Cloke et al. (2005: 24) have noted, geography's contribution as a discipline is 'premised on the claim that knowledge of distant contexts is a prerequisite for responsible action'. Questions of temporality rarely figure in these debates beyond an acknowledgement that commodity chains have a sequential dimension: commodities take time, in other words, to move from one place to another. Yet it is not difficult to demonstrate that consumer knowledge of national-global commodity systems is also informed and shaped by that mode of temporal understanding known as 'history'.

This can be demonstrated in relation to fair trade, for instance, and its efforts to 'socially re-embed' commodities (Raynolds, 2002: 415). This movement works on consumers' geographical imaginations by recommending that shelves of food, whether in the supermarket or the home, are read as indexes, or maps, of the complex routes commodities have taken in order to

reach us. A bag of fair trade coffee offers the consumer a legible story about its journey from the plantation to the supermarket shelf. In acknowledging or engaging with this story, the consumer draws on popular geographical knowledge: an understanding, however vague, of the distance between that place of production and where they are now, as well as impressions and assumptions associated with that locale, its culture, and its inhabitants. This geographical knowledge is at the same time deeply historical. A consumer's understanding of the distance between one place and another, for instance, is fundamentally shaped by the histories between nations and peoples. Indeed, the prevalence of colonial narratives in fair trade discourse, and in consumer engagement with fair trade products, is an example of one such history that has received some critical attention (Varul, 2008).

I want to suggest that it is these historical aspects of consumer food culture that have in the main escaped adequate scholarly attention. Scholars such as Coles and Crang (2011) have included observations about the role of 'tradition', 'rusticity' and 'heritage' in their analyses of spaces and places of consumption. Studies of Slow Food have recognized the importance to this movement of a sense of maintaining the past (Ritzer, 2005; Binkley, 2008; Sassatelli and Davalio, 2010), while in a discussion of embedded food products, Morris and Kirwan (2010: 135) identify a distinct category of 'geo-historical knowledges'. But little has been said about the specificity of the histories being activated in such locations, or about the kind of symbolic work that explicitly historical activations might achieve. The popular historical imagination can be made to speak to, and to shape, consumers'



understanding of food policy debates, and this article sets out to explore these possibilities.

### **The new austerity**

The phrase 'age of austerity' has been widely used to describe the present conjuncture in Britain since early 2009, when the news media began to predict that very substantial cuts in public spending were inevitable. After the general election in May 2010, when the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties formed a coalition government and pressed ahead with these cuts, 'austerity' became synonymous with a policy of deficit-reduction. As Clarke and Newman (2012: 300) note, the government has engaged in 'intensive ideological work' to reshape the crisis as a political rather than an economic problem, and to identify its cause in the 'unwieldy and expensive welfare state and public sector' rather than the banking industry. While this meaning of austerity predominates in the present moment, giving meaning to the critical position of being 'anti-austerity' currently dominant in left cultural politics, austerity also has other connotations in contemporary British culture (Bramall, 2012). Significantly, austerity has emerged as a theme in contemporary sustainability politics (Hinton and Redclift, 2009; Bramall, 2011). Indeed, this meaning of austerity as 'eco-austerity' pre-dates its articulation to welfare and public sector cuts and has been in use by diverse social actors since the mid-2000s.

The discourse of 'eco-austerity' shares with the dominant discourse of austerity as deficit-reduction a set of cultural and historical reference points. A

key idea that underpins much of the talk about austerity is the notion that there is an analogy to be drawn between today's straightened, post-recessionary times and 'austerity Britain', a period that incorporates the Second World War and postwar years, spanning 1939-54.<sup>2</sup> Indeed in the British context 'austerity discourse' might be defined as a signifying practice that perpetuates this analogy. Food rationing was introduced in Britain in 1940, and continued well into the 1950s. Sugar and meat were two of the final foodstuffs to come off rations, in 1953 and 1954 respectively. Consumption of rationed items was substantially reduced and all consumer goods were highly regulated. In British historical consciousness, a dominant 'myth of the home front' has tended to prevail, and popular representation has favoured the notion that British citizens submitted willingly to these restrictions, buoyed up by ideas of 'universal sacrifice, egalitarianism, and common purpose' (Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 2000). Contemporary austerity discourse tends to fortify rather than complicate this picture.

In sustainability politics, the analogy between austerity past and present has been used in a number of ways. Campaigner and writer George Marshall (2007) has called for a return of the 'Blitz spirit' to combat climate change, a rhetoric that has informed specific strategies and proposals. The wartime 'dig for victory' campaign has proved a resonant point of reference in land use campaigning (Crouch and Parker, 2003) and the promotion of urban agriculture and allotment keeping (Bramall, 2011). Also significant have been ongoing discussions in the UK surrounding personal carbon allowances. In recuperating concepts of rationing and 'fair shares', these discussions

implicitly reference the wartime and postwar age of austerity, while certain agents and projects have made more explicit use of signifying resources associated with this period (Nerlich and Koteyko, 2009; Cohen, 2011). The policy institute the New Economics Foundation (NEF) has been a key actor in this area, driven in particular by the work of its former policy director, Andrew Simms. Simms's efforts to use ideas about Britain's wartime experiences to communicate about climate change date back to *An Environmental War Economy* (2001). More recent NEF enterprises include 'Ration Me Up' (2009), a project that involved the issue of austerity-style carbon ration books to volunteers.

In food policy debate, the key activator of austerity discourse has been Tim Lang, a professor of food policy at City University, London and a significant actor – as a consultant, special advisor, and writer – in food policy debates for over thirty years. Lang's research often has an historical inflection, and he has a specific interest in the history of food policy (Lang, 1998; Lang and Rayner, 2003; Lang, Barling and Caraher, 2009). As a media commentator he has made use of the 'Britain at war' analogy in public debate about food security (see for example *Today*, 2010), and he has himself been described as a 'one-man ministry of food' (Harding, 2010: 7). During the war, considerable effort was expended on advertising campaigns that urged citizens to adopt thrifty domestic and culinary practices. Lord Woolton, Minister of Food between 1940-43, made personal appearances in some of these campaigns, and also had a vegetable pie named after him. One locus of the connections being drawn between Britain's food security during the first age of austerity and

today's situation can be identified in a map – created by Woolton – depicting wartime food supply routes, and a perception of its relevance to the present. It itemizes the products that had to be brought to Britain by sea, and details the distances such foodstuffs travelled. Woolton's map has been seen to prefigure Lang's influential concept of 'food miles' (Harding, 2010), which describes the phenomenon of 'the growth of long-distance food on supermarket shelves' (Lang, 1998: 20).

Despite his appreciation of the importance of cultural factors in developing food imaginaries, Lang is careful to point out the limits of historical analogy, declaring that the experience of the Second World War 'comes to us today from an era with different possibilities, a world which was untroubled by environmental externalities, or the need to protect eco-systems, or [...] the complexities of public health, a world moreover where the country had half the population it does today' (Barling et al., 2008: 46). The emphasis in this statement falls on the veridical differences between then and now. In consonance with other critical commentators on eco-austerity discourse (Hinton and Redclift, 2009; Cooper, 2011), Lang and his associates emphasize above all the unlikelihood of wartime state intervention – which included the imposition of emergency measures – being emulated in the present context. Scholarly reflection on the broader nexus of austerity discourse and sustainability has also tended to evaluate the popularization of the analogy in rather literal terms, focusing on what advocates of carbon rationing might 'learn' from the past about the imposition of rationing (Roodhouse, 2007; Cohen, 2011), or on what contemporary 'idealised'

representations of austerity Britain 'hide' about that past (Randall, 2009; Hinton and Redclift, 2009).

Rather than perpetuating this focus on similarity and difference, or truth and falsity, I want to suggest that Lang's assessment of the limitations of the 'Britain at war' analogy gives too little weight to the persuasive force he himself finds in the resources of this historical moment. Despite the changed circumstances of the present, this period of history continues to resonate with broad constituencies of British consumers, and offers an important frame through which contemporary resource-related issues are being thought, imagined and lived.<sup>3</sup> The prevalence of austerity discourse indicates that the formulation of compelling historical precedent does not depend on a genuine similarity between the two periods, but on the ways in which the past can be worked up for present needs, overcoming 'real' historical difference. In thinking about the limitations of austerity discourse in relation to food imaginaries, it may be more productive to reflect on the broader context and politics of austerity discourse than to focus on factual differences and similarities between past and present.

While it is not a view that has been clearly set out in any critical or scholarly context, commentators on the political left seem to consider the dominant discourse of austerity as deficit-reduction to have undermined, invalidated or co-opted alternative discourses of austerity. There has been very little discussion of the politically progressive possibilities that might follow from austerity discourse, broadly construed, or of the other, non-dominant, topics

and agendas that a concept of austerity might advance. It is arguably the case that in establishing a connection between notions of sustainability and thrift, the popularization of eco-austerity discourse facilitated the current, dominant articulation of the notion of austerity to an argument about the morality and necessity of welfare and public sectors cuts (Bramall, 2011). Yet this is not a reason to abandon critical reflection on austerity's other meanings. On the contrary, it remains of vital importance to interrogate the ways in which social actors have mobilized ideas about austerity for different purposes, both in order to describe their potential, and to identify where these mobilizations may shore up dominant ideological work. This post-Marxist, poststructuralist, cultural studies approach is pursued in this article. In embarking on a consideration of austerity's meanings in debates about food policy, I do not condone policies and ideologies of deficit-reduction. I engage in a process of analysing 'austerity' as a site of struggle in contemporary British culture, in which meanings and articulations other than those legislated by the coalition government remain possible.

### **The austerity larder**

Having provided some relevant background to the meanings, histories and politics of austerity, I now turn to a specific case study, with a view to exploring how austerity discourse might inform British consumers' food imaginaries. As I have already explained, the historicity of the signifying resources concerned will be a particular focus for this analysis. *The Ministry of Food* was staged at Imperial War Museum London (hereafter, IWM) between February 2010 and January 2011, marking the seventieth anniversary of the

introduction of food rationing in Britain. There was a small charge for entry, and just over 73,000 people visited the exhibition, meeting the museum's target. The exhibition was aimed in particular at two audiences: young adult 'self-developers' interested in green issues, and 'older empathizers' looking for emotional engagement (MacArthur, 2012).

This text has been selected for discussion because the IWM represents a key site in British culture of the reproduction of dominant-hegemonic history. At the same time, the IWM has played a significant role in making connections between wartime history and sustainability politics: previous endeavours have included the planting of a 'victory garden' (a garden turned over to growing vegetables for the war effort) in St James's Park, London, during 2007 and 2008. These projects illuminate the organization's attempts to negotiate the challenge of 'encouraging debate' about contemporary issues while remaining 'authoritative and impartial' (MacArthur, 2012). Finally, the exhibition is also representative of other texts and contexts in which food has been articulated to austerity, in design and iconographic terms.

The exhibition used a range of materials, objects and display methods to represent the experience of living with rationing during austerity Britain, from original items such as posters and household equipment through to period newsreel and information films, audio clips, photographs, and facsimile objects. A model kitchen, full-size greenhouse, and mocked-up wartime grocer's invited an experiential, immersive mode of engagement: visitors could sit at the kitchen table and browse replica recipe books. Much care was

taken over the design of the exhibition. Walls were either white or painted an attractive pale sage green colour, and short quotations, axioms and excerpts from songs were printed in large lettering directly onto these surfaces.

Although the exhibition's emphasis was on the kinds of domestic, food-related practices ordinary people were involved in at that time, the broader, global food system, and Britain's location in that system, was also a clear theme.

Finally, the exhibition was also keen to stress that rationing continued after the war years, with several displays dedicated to the postwar period and the end of rationing.

The analysis of this exhibition will focus on a particular iconographic site, which I am going to call the 'austerity larder'. Representations of the food provisions store have appeared across a number of different austerity-themed texts. In the exhibition it took the form of the wartime grocer's, with its shelves of familiar branded goods. At Conran's Albion, the visual impact of the 'artisan' foods store is achieved via displays of decidedly mass-produced foodstuffs, such as Marmite, Branston Pickle, and Colman's Mustard. These are exhibited alongside large jars of bottled fruits, producing a display that has strong resonances of the austerity larder. Another use of the austerity larder can also be found in a more reflective and critically informed context, in the British Library's interactive 'Food Stories' website (British Library, 2007). This educational resource examines changes that have taken place in the consumption and production of food over the last century through oral history recordings, accessed via an image of a food cupboard. An austerity-themed shopping basket, complete with ration book, leads students to memories of



wartime eating practices. A conception of the larder as a 'portal' to the complex and ethically challenging journeys foodstuffs take to reach us clearly informs the design of this site, and the recourse to historical, as opposed to geographical, resources offers an example of the impulse I want to examine.

The store cupboard is a significant trope, then, in the contemporary food imaginary. In describing the austerity larder as an iconographic site, I want to focus attention on the opportunity to engage with historical and contemporary geographies of consumption that it presents to the visitor. In the analysis that follows I will identify several distinctive features of this symbolic work, examining the way in which the austerity larder offers a legible index of food commodity chains, raises questions about fragility of supply, and makes food scarcity visible. These challenges are drawn from food policy research.<sup>4</sup> In discussing the ways in which austerity discourse accommodates these challenges, it is not my intention to underscore their legitimacy. Rather the object of the analysis is to evaluate history's elasticity – its ability to absorb and represent certain agendas.

### **Reading the shelves: geographies and histories**

The issue of legibility is a fundamental one in food policy debate. It has been suggested that there is a 'major conflict in the evidence' concerning 'levels of understanding among consumers of awareness of the food system and the life cycle impacts of food'. However, where understanding is seen to be lacking, the complexity of supply chains and their impacts is seen as a key factor (White et al., 2009: 8, 58). As I have suggested, various social actors

have popularized discourses that address this complexity by enabling consumers to read supermarket and domestic shelves as indexes of the journeys foodstuffs have taken to reach them. Representations of the austerity larder build on this capacity for consumers to read shelves of commodities as indexes or maps of commodity chains.

The idea of drawing consumers' attention to a simulacrum of a historical larder is clearly different from the activations the fair trade movement wishes to facilitate. Most obviously, visitors to *The Ministry of Food* were invited to look at an historical object: a food provisions store which was not of this moment. Yet consumers schooled in reading supermarket and domestic shelves as indexes of commodity chains would have known how to interpret this object in spatial as well as temporal terms. In viewing *The Ministry of Food's* wartime grocery, for example, differentiations between products and their commodity chains will have presented themselves: tinned salmon, Bovril, and bottles of HP sauce – the latter labelled with a familiar picture of the Houses of Parliament – might be located, in the historical-geographical imagination, as 'originating' in the British Isles, as 'British' food. On the other hand, Kellogg's corn flakes and national household dried machine-skimmed milk, marked with stars and stripes and stamped 'USA', would have stood out as transatlantic foodstuffs.

While the precise nature of the mappings each museum visitor read into these displays will have varied, the exhibition contextualized the grocery in such a way as to secure, very firmly, the historical-geographical mappings I have just

identified. This was primarily achieved via recourse to the 'Britain Alone' narrative, the hegemonic story of Britain's embattled status during the Second World War that has such a strong purchase on the popular historical imagination. Devices such as the prominent display of a reproduction of Lord Woolton's map worked to visualize and call attention to this besieged scenario. The familiarity of the 'Britain Alone' narrative and the picture it conveys of Britain as a bounded geographical entity enabled the visitor to recognize the foodstuffs displayed in the grocery as originating from either within or beyond these borders. Critical in this respect was the exhibition's emphasis on shipping as the sole transport mechanism for foodstuffs.

I have proposed that visitors to *The Ministry of Food* would have brought their experience of present-day food discourse to their viewing of the exhibition, and thus were likely to read the grocery's shelves as indexes of wartime commodity chains, an interpretation supported by contextualizing narratives and diagrams. What, then, can we note about the role of the historical in this cognitive, interpretative process, this shaping of visitors' geographical imaginaries? I suggest that wartime Britain offers a simplified and legible frame for consumer engagement in the idea of tracing food commodity chains. History – and in particular, the kind of hegemonic, 'common-sense' history mobilized in this exhibition – offers a point of entry into the process of understanding food origins that diverse social actors have sought to initiate, but which can fail to take place where those origins feel obscure, distant or incomprehensible. Indeed, the role of the historical is particularly evident in relation to the task of mapping at the *systemic* level – in relation to the

challenge, that is, of imagining the entire food commodity system. The mapping of the national-global food system audiences were being asked to get to grips with is a relatively straightforward and familiar one.<sup>5</sup> It factors out the complexities of air freight and other contemporary haulage mechanisms, thus offering the visitor an opportunity to engage in totalizing thinking: to grasp, however momentarily, the wartime food commodity system as a whole.

The question to be asked is whether this exposure to historical food geographies is likely to have a bearing on consumers' understanding of present-day food commodity systems. Why should the visitor to this exhibition make any connection at all between the past depicted here and their own historical moment? The curators of *The Ministry of Food* avoided stating the relevance of wartime practices to the contemporary situation, out of a desire to avoid an instrumentalization of history and politicization of the museum space (MacArthur, 2012).<sup>6</sup> But there are specific elements of the austerity larder, as iconographic site, that work to confirm a sense of historical precedence and relevance. Important in this respect is the presence of familiar brand names. The television programme *Ration Book Britain*, one of the exhibition's cognate texts, includes cookery demonstrations that take place in a replica 1940s kitchen. At one point the presenter invites viewers to look into the larder, which is stocked with tinned and packaged foodstuffs. This brief scene seems intended to establish continuity between past and present: pointing to tins of Glenryck pilchards and Lyle's golden syrup and picking up a Rowntree's KitKat, the presenter comments that 'some things are still recognizable today'. Likewise, the blogger who enthused about *The*

*Ministry of Food* comments that 'a lot of the brands [on display] are still available now' (The Sneaky Magpie, 2010). Brands like Rowntree's and Lyle's carry with them an idea of Britain as a major food-producing nation. They reference in particular that period from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, when a whole range of 'British' foodstuffs – Marmite, Branston Pickle, Colman's Mustard – were first invented and manufactured. The fact that these brands are recognizable helps to constitute them in our imagination as the backbone of a continuous 'British diet', and it also establishes an emotional continuity with our own pasts. The moment captured in the austerity larder thus represents a moment of challenge to a food system that is recognized as the precursor of our own.

### **Ships at risk**

I have argued that mappings of historical food commodity systems can be legible to consumers, particularly where such mappings are inserted into familiar, dominant-hegemonic histories. This observation can be developed and complicated by thinking about the contribution austerity discourse makes to communicating a further theme in food policy debate, namely the problem of fragility of supply. This is sometimes addressed in terms of the challenge of getting consumers to accept 'variability' of supply (due, for example, to seasonality or crop failure), and to rely to a lesser extent on imports (SDC, 2009: 19). Policy actors including Andrew Simms have advocated 'maximum self-sufficiency', warning that the fragility of national-global food supply systems mean that 'the shelves could be bare within three days' (2008: 15, 5). We are only ever *Nine Meals from Anarchy*, as the title of his publication on

this theme has it. Yet the issue of supply is also a site of equivocation within these debates; a report by the Sustainable Development Commission suggests that 'there are limits to using local food as a proxy for sustainable food', and cautions that reducing the import of foods 'could have negative economic impacts with developing countries' (SDC, 2009: 44; White et al., 2009: 8).

*The Ministry of Food* strongly emphasized the fact that ships were the only transport mechanism available for importing food to Britain. As I have noted, the fact that this historical transportation system is simpler than our own may have made it easier for audiences to grasp. More than this, however, the ships in question were strongly coded as 'at risk'. This was communicated, for instance, via the display of a poster titled 'The Battle of the Atlantic'. In the form of a map, the poster depicts merchant ship convoys from North America and the Empire attempting to reach the British Isles, while British planes try to protect them from German U-boats. Evidence that this kind of visual mapping of risk can facilitate thinking about present-day fragility of supply can be found in the IWM's blog. The chef in charge of the museum's café reports experiencing 'similar supply problems to those suffered during the war when the U-boats intercepted our supply ships. But in our twenty-first-century case, we have had ash clouds from Iceland stopping planes getting our produce to us' (Stephens, 2010).<sup>7</sup>

The exhibition did more, however, than simply provide a resource that animates the present-day issue of fragility of supply. It also conveyed a strong

sense of the moral or ethical complexities pertaining to food imports. The exhibition's curators used grey, angled, internal walls to evoke two freighter ships; hanging high above, a wooden cargo box, stamped 'IMPORTED FOOD', awaited loading. The issue of food imports literally loomed above the visitor, signalling a site of ambivalence in the exhibition. On the one hand, and in keeping with a familiar narrative about the drive for self-sufficiency, the risks to merchant ships were emphasized. On the other, the exhibition communicated a sense of responsibility to food producers. Significantly, these producers were strongly coded as part of the British Empire and Commonwealth. Labourers in Canada, India, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and the West Indies were depicted in a series of posters as vital 'sinews of war'. As I have already suggested, a conception of island Britain as demarcated by its sea borders played a role in ensuring the legibility of the food systems represented in *The Ministry of Food*, but the picture was complicated by this alternative, colonial version of British identity. Here, notions of Empire informed the mapping of national-global food systems through an emphasis on the historical importance of Britain's colonies and dominions to its wartime food system.<sup>8</sup>

Visitors to *The Ministry of Food* (and in particular those young adult 'self-developers') may have construed this equivocation, and the historical moralities it reflects, in terms of present-day confusions around the moralities of 'fair trade' versus 'air miles'. When visitors reached the exhibition gift shop, this interpretative context was confirmed in an encounter with a range of fair trade products that spoke much more explicitly to contemporary concerns

about trade and sustainability, and fixed the trajectory of the colonial history set out in the exhibition. The reading of the exhibition I have offered shows that mappings of historical commodity systems can animate contemporary resource-related issues such as the fragility of contemporary food supply lines, as well as the moral complexities that may be associated both with relying on imports and with espousing self-sufficiency.

### **An appetite for austerity**

A third challenge identified in recent food policy reports is the imperative to make the threat of food ‘scarcity’ evident to consumers in the global North, with a view to communicating the urgency of eating and wasting less food. Persuading consumers to buy, and eat and drink, *less* – as opposed, for example, to exchanging one product for another – is a hard sell (Harding, 2010). This is not only because of the broader imperative of capitalism, which encourages excessive consumption. It is also because it is very difficult to make a convincing case that frugality is necessary, in the face of the visual evidence of abundance with which we are daily confronted. The challenge is described thus:

if the food observatory is right, we will have to learn to doubt the evidence of our eyes: where they foresee austerity, we see abundance – the result of a flourishing, interconnected system of commerce which reaches its highest expression in the aisles of the larger supermarkets, stacked with produce like the wharves of fabulous ports. (Harding, 2010: 8)



The task, then, is one of making austerity visible, tangible and compelling amidst this abundance; opportunities are required for consumers to experience constraint and restriction, and to perceive such strictures as necessary and appropriate.

It is not hard to see that the austerity larder offers a point of entry into this challenge of visualizing austerity. As an iconographic site in contemporary austerity discourse, the larder is never empty, of course. It is well stocked, albeit with tinned, long-life, everyday 'essentials'; familiar brands are again of importance in this visualization. This plenitude is not historically accurate, but a full cupboard serves to picture austerity in a way that an empty cupboard cannot. The austerity larder can be read as 'austere' because the wartime context of rationing and 'fair shares' has also been animated within austerity discourse. Each item on the shelf thus stands in for a quantity of ration points, and the selection included in the larder marks the limits of a family's fair share. Instead of seeing unlimited abundance, we see carefully planned, constrained consumption.

In the new age of austerity, and under certain circumstances, the experience of such constraints has come to seem appealing: certain consumers have worked up an appetite for austerity. At the IWM, the museum café was given a 'wartime makeover' for the duration of *The Ministry of Food*, enabling visitors to perform some of the acts of consumption that they had seen represented in the exhibition itself. The 'Kitchen Front' menu navigated a thin

line between revulsion and attraction: to actually recreate wartime recipes and expect them to be enjoyed would be a stretch. In *Ration Book Britain*, the presenter claims to enjoy a Woolton pie, but it doesn't look at all palatable. In place of such faithful recreations, the cooks behind the 'Kitchen Front' menu offered foodstuffs that had the look and feel of austerity. A cake containing beetroot seems 'thrifty', for instance, because it uses up vegetables from the home front allotment. Yet it is carefully fashioned to suit today's palate for such adaptations. This kind of 'austere', British menu can be understood as 'restricted' only in a relational, contextual sense; by contrast, that is, to preceding trends in food culture for cosmopolitanism and exoticism (Bell and Valentine, 1997). To use Lévi-Strauss's terms, it can be described as an experience of the 'endogenous' given meaning when food imaginaries are filled to repletion by the 'exogenous' (Lévi-Strauss in Ashley et al., 2004: 28). Describing his fondness for 1950s austerity baking, one food writer puts it thus: 'there's a simplicity and modesty to it that's perfect for days when you [...] just want a soft roll or plain slice of cake' (Lepard, 2012: 69).

These attempts to generate an appetite for austerity might also be aligned with food policy experts' suggestion that the message that we should all 'eat less' could be positioned 'as a transfer from low to high quality food, with a reduction in overall quantities of food consumed' (White et al., 2009: 11). For the 'eat less' message to be assimilated, the 'positive synergies' that may follow from reducing consumption need to accompany it (SDC, 2009: 4), whether those are articulated to health, well-being, or care for the environment. Austerity Britain offers rich resources in relation to this task. In

*Ration Book Britain*, the presenter shows how a carrot should be cut right to the stalk, to avoid waste, and cites with approval a case where a couple were fined for disposing of stale bread during the war. The programme conveys the notion that 'less is more': you get more carrot if you waste less of it, and the foodstuffs that figure in contemporary representations of wartime and postwar austerity are strongly coded as 'high quality' (see Sutton, 2012). Simms (2008) recognizes the opportunity historical analogy presents here by emphasizing the fact that people were fitter and healthier under rationing. The affective experiences the austerity larder offers are not of 'real' austerity, if by this we mean the privations suffered during the years of rationing. Yet I want to suggest that these texts and contexts – as well as other consumer spaces that 'sell' austerity – do provide some solutions to the challenges I detailed at the beginning of this section. They offer a way of representing scarcity in a credible way – that is, via the offer of a 'rationed', restricted, 'national' diet – and, perhaps more importantly, they make scarcity, or austerity, appealing.

## **Conclusion**

This article has reflected on the conjunction of food, culture and 'austerity', and has sought to draw attention to the role of the historical in consumer imaginaries. *The Ministry of Food* has been analysed as a representative example of a wider austerity discourse that is shaping contemporary resource-related debates. The limits of my discussion have been clearly defined. To reiterate, it has not been my aim to assess food policy objectives, but rather to use them to evaluate history's elasticity – its ability to accommodate and represent certain agendas. I have not argued that any

specific actions – such as changes in consumption practices – will necessarily follow from an encounter with this exhibition or wider austerity discourse. My analysis has considered the ways in which these resources may inform structures of feeling related to food and national-global commodity systems, perceptions that may or may not result in specific behaviours.

Along with the suggestion that mappings of historical food systems can offer particular interpretative opportunities, the analysis of *The Ministry of Food* indicates a number of problems or challenges. First, and as I have already suggested, debates in food policy lack consensus. The policy objectives I have used in my analysis are widely-recognized ones, but they are not without controversy. The discourse of scarcity has for instance been contested by those who argue that it marginalizes debate about inequality of access to food (Mehta, 2010). For this reason, I want to suggest that the recourse to historical resources may be most productive where they are used to foreground equivocations in food policy debate, such as those around the issue of food imports and the notion of ‘self-sufficiency’. This kind of approach echoes Cook and Crang’s (1996: 148) suggestion that history can be used to create a ‘disruptive commemoration’ between past and present.

A second circumscription of this discourse is evident in relation to the constituencies of consumers that it might address. *The Ministry of Food* had a higher level of female visitors than is the norm at the IWM (MacArthur, 2012). Its appeal would have been particularly strong to middle-class women who, like the admiring blogger, had the economic capital to appreciate the

correspondences between objects in the exhibition and modish London stores (The Sneaky Magpie, 2010), and the cultural capital to engage with some of the contextual debates about food policy and sustainability. That said, these observations don't demonstrate that other iterations of austerity discourse are limited in class terms. It has extraordinary potential to broaden to wider constituencies; this, indeed, is why the coalition government's rationalization of the financial crisis and deficit-reduction has been accepted to the extent that it has (Bramall, 2012). However, in relation to broader austerity discourse, a third challenge can be noted. Do alternative discourses about austerity, such as the one I have analysed here, further strengthen the dominant, coalition government-enforced meaning of austerity as deficit-reduction, and in particular the morality associated with these policies? Or do they help to make credible inroads into consumers' understanding of other debates and issues, and to sustain alternative meanings of austerity? Relatedly, to what extent should we be concerned by the fact that inasmuch as this exhibition opens up important debates in food policy, it does so by perpetuating dominant representations of, for example, women as housewives, 'responsible' for the work of austerity, or dominant power relations between, for instance, the global North and South? Historical resources can supply legibility, but they can also drag with them highly problematic conceptual frames and associations.

I want to conclude by suggesting that these questions strengthen, rather than undermine, my argument that we need to give further attention to the role that historical resources play in rendering capitalist commodity-production, its

geographies, and its moralities, intelligible. The analysis pursued in this article illustrates both the possibilities and the challenges that inhere in the use of the past, and these implications should continue to be explored. Any further reflection on these questions will be most successful where the interplay of historical and geographical imaginaries is kept in mind, and history is understood as a resource that can be articulated to contemporary problems and dilemmas, rather than as that which delivers the ‘truth’ of the past.

### **Notes**

1. Terence Conran is a British designer, restaurateur and retailer. He founded the Habitat chain of home furnishing shops in the 1960s and a portfolio of restaurants in the 1990s.
2. Zweiniger-Bargielowska employs this long periodization of ‘austerity Britain’, yet it has been a more established practice to reserve this description for the period 1945 to 1951. See for example Kynaston (2008).
3. The Energy Saving Trust’s claim that the ‘majority of Britons believe the country should once again embrace the wartime spirit in an effort to cut down on waste’ (EST, 2009) offers one indicator of the dominance of this frame.
4. Selective reference to this field of research has meant that other important recommendations – such as the need to reduce consumption of meat and dairy products, considered by many experts to be the key issue in moving towards a sustainable and secure diet (White et al., 2009; SDC, 2009) – have not been considered in this article.

5. It is of course also Britain-centric, an orientation that is an explicit feature of UK food policy discourse. In *Nine Meals from Anarchy*, for instance, Simms (2008: 19) draws heavily upon a discourse of Britain 'as an island nation'.

6. This approach is also taken in *Wartime Farm*. By contrast, the exhibition's accompanying recipe book repeatedly comments on parallels between past and present (Fearnley-Whittingstall, 2010), and *Ration Book Britain* also makes these connections.

7. Stephens refers to the eruption of an Icelandic volcano in spring 2010, which led to the closure of European airspace. The event was comparable to the fuel protests staged by lorry drivers in 2000, in that Britain's food security emerged as one of the dominant themes of media debate about the impact of the cancellation of flights.

8. There is a no lack of historical rigour in the exhibition's communication of an ambivalence surrounding the topic of imported food. As Trentmann (2007) has shown, 'ethical' consumption has a longer historical genealogy than we might imagine, and ideas about the moralities of purchasing were a significant dimension of early twentieth-century consumers' food imaginary. Furthermore, one of this article's reviewers proposed that the accumulated historical experience of being subject to British colonial food policies – such as those promoted by the Empire Marketing Board – may have given rise to a 'unique national receptivity' to public displays designed to highlight the origin of different food products, and a heightened sense of awareness of the tensions between a national and an international food orientation. Thus the British consumer may possess an enhanced capacity to 'read the shelves', by

contrast, for example, to consumers in North America, who have not encountered similar government-issued directives.

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