

Emma Spary, *Feeding France. New Sciences of Food, 1760-1815*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. xi + 418 pp. Maps, tables, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$99.00 (C). ISBN- 978-1107031050.

Response by Emma Spary, University of Cambridge

I am delighted and honored that *Feeding France* is the subject of a forum in H-France, and even more so that the three reviewers have apparently all thought well of the book. Each of them raises most interesting points, and to preface my response, it may be worth mentioning something about the aims and scope of the research project from which it comes. Thierry Rigogne rightly notes its apparent links to an earlier publication, *Eating the Enlightenment* (as the resonance between the two titles suggests). The two books in fact began life as a single enterprise, a self-conscious attempt to move the history of the sciences away from a focus on scientific institutions, and to account for how scientific knowledge about food came to possess authority within the wider public domain. Most histories of the nutrition sciences begin with Liebig in his Gießen laboratory and move forward through the German chemists of the nineteenth century. Studies of the earlier period, with few exceptions, were limited to medical dietetics. This meant that programs of food chemistry before Liebig have received little attention: yet Liebig's success rode upon the capacity of earlier generations of chemists to present their claims about food as politically significant to an extent that governments would incorporate them into food policy. The problem was compounded by the fact that the history of the sciences in the Revolutionary period remained a contentious and understudied topic, in part because of the way that historically-defined chronological boundaries transect French historiography in general: 1789, 1794, 1804. Yet economic chemists' lives spanned the late Old Regime and Napoleonic periods, and they thus offer a useful guideline through a succession of regimes. One might have imagined these regimes would exhibit very different policies towards public diet: in fact there proved to be a remarkable longevity to radical proposals for food reform often first put forward in the last years of the Bourbon regime. This longevity was explicable through economic chemists' skill in attaching themselves to a succession of governments, usually navigating just below the radar of publicity, but constantly reappearing in the vast documentation painstakingly collated by Revolutionary administrators on almost every aspect of the relationship between industry, learning and the State, a rich but under-used collection of materials.

This intellectual continuity between the 1760s and the 1810s accounts for the amoebic fission of *Feeding France* from *Eating the Enlightenment*, in which I tried to explore the relationship between eating and knowing in literary and medical debates prior to the 1760s. Though chemistry was not absent from earlier debates over the chemistry of coffee, spices, liqueurs and *ragoûts*, at this point it was linked neither to commercial production nor to government. In the debates over economic chemistry that occurred after 1760, I thus saw emerging a new kind of regulatory, productive relationship between knowledge experts, governments and consumers, as well as a new kind of chemistry: what I want to bring to the debate, therefore, is the claim that economic chemistry was a distinct program, intervening between earlier geometrical chemistry and the separation of industrial and theoretical chemistry which characterized the early nineteenth century. Thus, while agreeing with Sean Takats about the

importance of chemistry for the whole of this period, I also want to point to important discontinuities in that science which corresponded with new kinds of relationships with governance.

The tight connection between knowledge and power in France allows us to account for the circumstances under which the State had recourse to scientific expertise to settle the growing problems of catering for the needs of a large, diverse public whose good opinion regimes needed to retain. So, unlike histories of the link between governments, publics, food manufacturers and scientists during the later period, *Feeding France* explored the initial conditions (a centralizing government, a politicizing public, an industrializing food production sector) under which scientific food experts could graft their programs, agendas and knowledge into the heart of public food policy. Although, as two reviewers note, they were not very successful in so doing, nevertheless I want to suggest that these experts were crucially involved in negotiating some of the key characteristics of the relationship between the State and the sciences from then on, even into our own time: a government-endorsed lack of transparency over the food supply; the indispensability of expert scientific advisors in food policy-making; a food science which reduced individual variation in needs and desires to an interchangeable uniformity that could be managed from the center. “The” consumer became the object of food science—not without contestation. Takats, the historian who has done so much to repopulate the world of eighteenth-century France with the expert cooks who catered to its needs, rightly asks why cooks play a low profile in *Feeding France*, while Maud Villaret asks why I do not pay more attention to consumers. One principal answer to the first question is that so few cooks actually got a look-in during debates over the virtues of scientific reforms of the food supply. Economic chemists navigated rather below the surface of public opinion, and only those cooks who became involved in similar enterprises were even aware of their activities. In other words, it took a very specialized *kind* of cook to comment upon economic projects, usually someone already involved in food manufacture rather than domestic cuisine. In *Feeding France*, I mention several who allied themselves with economic practitioners, such as Nivert, inventor of a stove. Others commented on *économie* only when things went wrong (as in the potato bread *débacle*). But cooks’ lack of a collective identity or institutional strongholds meant that they also lacked a collective public voice, unlike the economic authors—who, as I show, were all very closely linked in a series of organizations across these decades. Domestic cooks, for their part, mostly encountered economic food products as end users of products produced by intermediaries: the food manufacturers whom economic chemists were careful to enlist as “front men” (or women) who could commoditize their knowledge-claims.

Where consumers are concerned, we might note that gastronomes, ministers, ships’ crews and the others who responded to the chemists’ activities themselves ought to count as consumers. A response like that of the peasant opposition to elite fruit crops discussed by Quellier is not available for most economic foods, which were goods with limited circulation accessible to, and largely consumed by, the literate *élite*. There is archival material on regional responses to government economic poor soup programs, which I hope to discuss in a future article. The extensive discussion of potato propaganda in the Republican period might be viewed as a “consumer” response—but even here, the majority of letters to the Convention Nationale concerning potatoes were written by literate and educated individuals primed by a generation of pro-potato patriotic literature. Responses to the potato on the streets of Paris were few, and equivocal. Street riots over sugar are discussed in the book in more detail, largely to show how governments and *savants* collaborated precisely in order to address and avert future public unrest through the provision of economic alternatives. Successful

economic foods were ones which prevented food-related disorder: they could be used to redraw the boundary between necessary and luxury foods, as well as to exclude consumers from true knowledge about the origin and nature of their foodstuffs. This was not so much a case of “responses” as a dialogue with the end goal of pacifying consumer unrest, and one of the goals of *Feeding France* is to show how scientific knowledge contributed to this outcome. As such, it is perhaps important to observe that food shortage had both a polemical and a pragmatic dimension, and that consumers, governments, food manufacturers and *savants* all interwove the two in ways that make it hard, if not impossible, for historians to lay claim to possessing some privileged access to authentic consumer views, or to interpret consumer responses as transparent manifestations of inner states. In *Feeding France*, I decided to err on the side of caution in extracting reports of consumer responses from the circumstances of their production: thus, rather than make sweeping claims about “consumers” as a homogeneous body, my aim was very much to explore specific and identifiable exchanges over particular foods, at particular historical moments. It is in this light that the book seeks to attend to the broader debates going on in the period, out of which, also, new accounts of “the consumer” would emerge by the early nineteenth century.

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