



HAL
open science

**Review of Chris Otter, Diet for a Large Planet:
Industrial Britain, Food Systems, and World Ecology
(Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2020), 400pp.**

Marc-Olivier Déplaude

► **To cite this version:**

Marc-Olivier Déplaude. Review of Chris Otter, Diet for a Large Planet: Industrial Britain, Food Systems, and World Ecology (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2020), 400pp.. Food and History, 2022, 20 (2), pp.192-195. hal-03909915

HAL Id: hal-03909915

<https://hal.inrae.fr/hal-03909915v1>

Submitted on 19 Sep 2024

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution - NonCommercial - NoDerivatives 4.0
International License

Marc-Olivier Déplaud

IRISSO, INRAE, Université Paris-Dauphine, PSL University, Paris, France

Published in *Food & History*, 2022, vol. 20, n° 2, p. 192-194

Chris Otter, *Diet for a Large Planet: Industrial Britain, Food Systems, and World Ecology*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2020, 400 p., 49 USD, ISBN-13: 978-0-226-69710-9

A rising number of people around the world have a diet high in animal proteins and refined carbohydrates. In *Diet for a Large Planet*, Chris Otter investigates how this ‘Western diet’ (p. 2) has emerged over time and explores its social, health and environmental consequences. He focuses on Great Britain, the country that has played a decisive role in shaping this diet since the early 19th century. As the dominant power in the world economy throughout that century, it took control of vast food resources over a large part of the planet, providing its inhabitants with increasing quantities of meat, wheat and sugar at affordable prices. The Western diet became a symbol of power and progress in Britain, and then spread more widely around the world.

The first three chapters of the book describe the shaping of the British diet. Otter highlights three foods: meat, wheat and sugar. These three foods, along with dairy products, accounted for more than three-quarters of the British energy intakes in the early 20th century. Otter shows that the major transformations of the British diet during the 19th century were the product of multiple public or private actions, which all shared the ‘large-planet philosophy’ (p. 3). According to this conception, which was less a coherent doctrine than a worldview widely shared among British elites, the whole Earth was considered a potential source of wealth and a space for investment. The affirmation of the large-planet philosophy led to the marginalisation of the scholars and politicians who advocated food self-sufficiency and to the liberalization of the food trade, such as the abolition of the Corn Laws in 1846. Above all, it was accompanied by massive investments in many regions of the world to promote specialised agricultural production intended for export to Great Britain (Argentina for beef, New Zealand for sheep, Canada for wheat, etc.). These investments enabled the development of new, more productive breeds or varieties and the construction of infrastructures to ensure the fluid transport of foodstuffs from production sites to consumption centres (railway lines, ports, refrigerated ships and warehouses, silos, etc.). At the beginning of the 20th century, Britain alone accounted for two-fifths of the world’s food imports. Much of the imported food was processed on British soil, giving rise to new industries such as sugar refining, baking, biscuit or chocolate manufacturing, breweries, etc. The products processed by these industries thus came to represent a significant part of the British diet.

According to historians, these developments contributed to an improvement in the physical condition of the British people from the last quarter of the 19th century onwards, as evidenced by their increased height, weight and life expectancy (Humphries, 2004). Otter provides three important qualifications to this statement. Firstly, this improvement did not benefit all the British people equally, as Chapter 6 of the book reminds us with regard to meat, which was particularly prized. In the inter-war period, British workers ate less meat than the rest of the population. Women ate even less meat, as it was often reserved for the husband in working-class households. It was among these women – and their children – that the greatest nutritional

deficiencies persisted. Secondly, the improvement in British diets came at the expense of other populations. Chapter 5 shows in a chilling way how the will to develop agricultural productions in certain territories to supply Britain, such as butter and beef in Ireland or wheat, tea, jute or cotton in India, led to massive famines in these countries, all against a background of racist stereotypes. As Otter notes about India, which experienced several severe famines until 1946, ‘the British state was committed primarily to its own food security, ensuring that, like food production itself, famine was effectively outsourced to peripheral zones, those inhabited by the weakest and most politically excluded subjects’ (p. 145). Finally, the progressive institution of a diet rich in meat, wheat and sugar has had important health and environmental consequences. The lengthening and increasing complexity of supply chains has generated new health risks (such as epizootics) and facilitated fraud, which the establishment of administrative bodies of control has never eliminated (Chapter 4). While the new diet helped to improve the nutritional status of the British people, it also had negative long-term effects on their health: increased tooth decay, intestinal disorders, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, obesity, etc. (Chapter 7). It has also required the conversion of large areas of land to agriculture, leading to the destruction certain ecosystems, such as New Zealand's forests (Chapter 8). Otter uses the notion of ‘slow violence’ (Nixon, 2011) to describe how efforts to provide cheap and abundant food for the British have resulted in cumulative and long-lasting damage, first to the territories exploited outside Britain and their populations, and then to the British themselves. This slow violence has also been directed at farm animals, whose living conditions have deteriorated considerably (Chapter 8).

Throughout the book, Otter emphasises the lasting social dispositions that the institution of this diet has produced: it has generated a long-term preference for a diet rich in meat, wheat and sugar among a very large section of the British population. Associated with prosperity and progress, this diet spread far beyond Great Britain. Other states, such as China today, have made their ability to provide their population with a cheap diet rich in animal protein a major political challenge (Schneider, 2017). The global expansion of the Western diet is thus reflected in a multiplication of its health and environmental consequences, raising the question of the current sustainability of the food system on a global scale. This is the subject of the last chapter of the book, which is dedicated to the post-1945 period.

Diet for a Large Planet is an impressive book. The choice to focus on Great Britain is convincing. Otter mentions that the proponents of the large-planet philosophy referred to ancient Rome and the Netherlands as models, but neither of these political entities achieved the same political, economic and military power on a global scale as Britain in the 19th century. It was under British leadership that a world-wide food system, which involved taking control of vast agricultural resources around the globe for the primary benefit of the British population, was established. From the 19th century onwards, Britain laid the foundations of a ‘networked food economy’, *i.e.* ‘a forbiddingly complex structure through which nutritional matter flowed from its site of production to those of processing, sale, and consumption’ (p. 7). Otter's book thus provides a remarkable synthesis of the history of agriculture, food industries, storage and transport infrastructures, food science and nutrition, and food practices in Great Britain, as well as the history of the British colonial empire and the countries that specialised in export agriculture. It draws on a wealth of historical literature, as well as many primary sources (including specialised journals in economics, food science, nutrition, etc.), which are extensively cited. The book also includes a rich iconography that helps the reader to grasp the materiality of the transformations that are described and their effects – such as the photographs of the famine that allegedly caused 29 million deaths in India between 1896 and 1902 (pp. 143-144). Nevertheless, one may regret that Otter does not explain how he selected the primary and secondary sources he used and their limitations. Given the scope of the subject covered in the

book, this was certainly a crucial issue for the author. More fundamentally, Otter highlights the role of the British public authorities in these transformations – and in particular in the exploitation of the resources of the territories or countries dominated by Great Britain – but he has little to say on the economic operators. Agricultural firms, processors, trading and transport companies, equipment manufacturers... many companies and industries contributed to the construction of the British food system and benefited from its expansion. It would have offered a real gain in knowledge if Otter had described more precisely the role played by these actors in the evolution of British policy, both in its formulation and implementation, and in the way they shaped and even governed certain territories, as did the chartered companies in India, for example (Stern, 2011). These few criticisms notwithstanding, *Diet for a Large Planet* is a major contribution to the history of diets and the way in which one of them has gained global prominence, despite increasingly negative consequences, even for the populations who initially took advantage of it.

Références

- Humphries J. (2004), 'Standard of Living, Quality of Life', in C. Williams (Ed.), *A Companion to Nineteenth-Century Britain*, Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 287-304.
- Nixon R. (2011), *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, xiii+353 p.
- Schneider M. (2017), 'Wasting the rural: Meat, manure, and the politics of agro-industrialization in contemporary China', *Geoforum*, 78, pp. 89-97.
- Stern P. J. (2011), *The Company-State: Corporate Sovereignty and the Early Modern Foundation of the British Empire in India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, xiii+300 p.