

Interview with Aaron Bobrow-Strain

January 2013

1. What gave rise to the remarkable popularity of the American loaf of white bread? What ideas or trends did it represent? What misconceptions, if any, did it foster?

Two phenomena during the 1910s and 1920s tipped the balance in favor of industrial bread (away from small bakeries and homemade loaves). First, there was a widespread moral panic about supposedly dirty and contaminated bread from small urban bakeries. Newspaper headlines screamed

“dangerous bakeries menace the city” and “germs lurk in your bread”—people were really freaked out. It turns out that the bread from these bakeries was actually quite safe. The panic was really

about the new Southern and Eastern European immigrants who owned and worked in those bakeries—the supposedly “dirty” people whose hands were making bakery bread. Fears about bread safety were inseparable from rampant nativism.



From Life magazine feature on Norman Borlaug, father of the Green Revolution

When crusaders focus on saving the world by getting people to choose the “right” food, they tend to miss the root causes of problems

Regardless of how misplaced these fears were, they were a gift to industrial bakers. Big bakers began to capitalize on bread fears by advertising their product as “untouched by human hands.” For anxious consumers, shining white loaves from shining white factories seemed to offer safety in a scary world.

Then you have to consider the aesthetic allure of industrial bread itself. Early 20th-century factory loaves were literally engineered to look like edible works of modern art. Loaves were engineered to look like Zephyr trains, with a sleek Art Deco feel. For consumers, each perfectly uniform slice seemed to embody the promise of technology and industry, the conquest of scarcity and a future free from want.

2. With the apparent exception of modern-day North Korea, we could say that the central mission of every state is to feed its people. Certainly bread has been central to rulers, from Biblical times to the English “Assize of Bread” to Louis XIV of France. How important is the link between food and government?

Just ask Marie Antoinette! For thousands of years the “bread question”—whether there was enough bread and whether it was of good enough quality—was one of the central concerns

of rulers from North Africa to Northern Europe across to Northern India. The English word “lord” still carries this political history in its bones. Lord derives from the Old English title “hláford”—“keeper of the bread”—a privileged status, but also an anxious one.

The only thing that can save Europe for democracy is the American farmer (1947)

Ruling has always meant a tense dance between the power of bread keepers and the demands of bread eaters. And this continues into the present. For example, many observers argue that high bread prices (the result of a dramatic spike in global grain prices) helped spark the recent uprisings in Egypt. 3. If white bread came to symbolize “industrial” food, was there a “folk” answer to white bread? What has been its rival, or its opposite?

There are few things more “American” than arguing about food. Ever since it was invented, people have lined up to either love or hate fluffy white industrial bread. Right away, industrial white bread had its critics. Bernard MacFadden, a wildly popular health guru of the 1930s, was one of the most interesting of these early critics. He thought that modern white bread was sapping the “vital energy” of the white race, endangering what he saw as America’s white identity. And this gets at one of my book’s key points: when we argue about food, we are often arguing about a lot more than just taste or health. We are often debating much bigger social questions about class differences, gender roles, national identity, or, in this case, race.

3. One premise of your wide-scale detective narrative is that “getting America to eat the right bread could save the world.” Were there other foods in American society (or other societies) which came to represent such a cultural hope? Coca Cola? Spam? High fructose syrup?

Milk comes to mind immediately. Food crusaders of the past held up pure white milk in much the same way people held up pure white industrial bread (as either the answer to all our problems, or something that was going to destroy the country). On the flipside, the 1960s counterculture held up “natural” food like brown rice and tofu as antidotes to ill-health, corporate greed, and world hunger! I believe that there are many serious problems with our industrial food system, and I value a lot of the efforts spreading across the country right now to change the way food is produced and consumed. But the history of 150-years of food gurus and diet experts attempts to get people to eat (or not eat) white bread suggests that when crusaders focus on “saving the world” by getting people to choose the “right” food, they tend to miss the root causes of problems and often just end up demonizing people who make the “wrong” choices.

4. What we eat can represent far more than just food on a plate. What are the three most important ideas you would like a young reader to take away from your book?

First, we need to be aware that when we argue about what counts as “good food” we are usually arguing about bigger social questions. Food fights are rarely just about food or health, and I think it would be good to be a bit more self-aware about the values and social assumptions underlying each of our confident ideas about what everyone should be eating.

Loaves were engineered to look like Zephyr trains, with a sleek Art Deco feel.



Delivery trucks lined up and ready to deliver.
(The Indianapolis Bakery Building)

Second, the long history of food gurus and food reformers' arguments about white bread taught me that too much focus on individual food choices can have negative consequences. All too often moralizing about other people's "bad" or "ignorant" food choices ends up supplanting real efforts to tackle structural concerns like economic concentration, poverty, and inequality that make the food system what it is. So, as counterintuitive as it might seem, if we really want to change the food system, we should spend less time

worrying about what people should eat, and more time directly addressing things like poverty and the concentrated power of Big Food.

5. Every innovation in industry – whether it is mass-produced cars, television, or rockets – seems to have a sociological impact. What is the impact of the computer on food? The iPad?

I think my iPad is the "best thing since sliced bread!" Which is to say that, like modern bread in the 1920s, it is engineered to make me feel like I am holding in my hands the very promise of a better future. Whether it delivers on that promise or not is another question...

6. How do you view the current range of breads which Americans eat? Are there still social and economic meanings beneath the surface of our bread choices?

I'd say that the way bread gets loaded with social meaning and moral judgment hasn't changed—it's just flipped 180 degrees. Before, eating industrial white bread was a sign that you were an upstanding responsible consumer, even a good citizen. Now, industrial white bread symbolizes the exact opposite. Whole wheat and artisanal loaves represent good choices and social virtue. In many ways, this is a healthy change. I'm a big fan of whole wheat and artisanal bread. But the moralizing and judgments that go along with food choices can also end up reinforcing social divides—they can even end up giving a scientific veneer to decidedly subjective forms social discrimination. I see this when people refer to fluffy white bread as an iconic "white trash" food.

7. You mention "white bread and imperialism" as well as the ethnic influences now changing the traditional American diet. How much influence has American food played on the global stage?

Industrial white bread has had a lot of different meanings along the way, but for much of the twentieth century industrial white bread was also wrapped up in Americans' sense of their country's exceptional place in the world. Through my research, I discovered a recurring

belief that America's diet of abundant industrial white bread made us superior to other nations (as you can see in the first image above, from 1915). I also found a lot of people who believed that our system of churning out bread was a unique and important gift America had to offer the world (as you can see in the second image, from 1951).

This attitude wasn't always so explicit, but, especially after WWII, Americans increasingly began to act on it. Government officials, industry executives, and development experts set

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out to remake the world's bread production in our industrial image. I think of this as a kind of alimentary imperialism. It involved everything from massive shipments of U.S. bread wheat to prop up strategically-important countries, to the promotion of modern baking technology in the Third World, to efforts aimed at selling people everywhere on the idea that industrial food was the foundation of peace and security.

8. Where would you like to see future scholarship go to further explore the issues you bring up in your book?

There are so many topics I'd love to see people take up! Food is a great topic for research because it connects to all kinds of bigger social and political questions in a very intimate and immediate way. To eat is to take part in the world—eating is always political.

For my part, these days I'm focusing on one of the most ignored pieces of the politics of food: the stories of food chain workers—the people who pick, pack, process, and serve our food.