



French beans for the masses: a modern historical geography of food in Burkina Faso

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Much of the literature on the modern history of food and diet in Africa focuses on material dearth and cultural loss, described in overarching terms such as ‘urbanization’ and ‘westernization’. Such generalizations do not capture the complexity of the dietary and culinary changes that have occurred there. This article shows how a geographic perspective enriches the historical analysis of food and foodways, by situating changing norms and practices in spatial and ecological contexts. It examines the twentieth-century history of food consumption in Burkina Faso, focusing on the region of Bobo-Dioulasso, the country’s second largest city. It shows how the agricultural policies, dietary preferences, and health concerns of French colonials—all of which emphasized the need for fresh garden vegetables—helped to transform not just the regional diet but also the landscape and economy, and thus certain temporal and spatial patterns of daily life. The article also examines how, in recent history, Burkina Faso’s incorporation into globalized markets and media networks has resulted in both unintended gluts of luxury food (French beans) as well as growing concerns about the safety and purity of everyday food.

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In southwestern Burkina Faso, one of the poorest and least-fed nations on earth, the regional cuisine includes recipes for French green beans as well as for fried caterpillars. Although neither food is part of the staple diet, caterpillars are the rarer delicacy, because they have to be collected in the bush and prepared by a knowledgeable cook. French beans are if anything too readily available at certain times of the year. Produced primarily for export to winter-time Europe, many green beans, rejected at the airport, end up in Burkina Faso’s urban marketplaces, where they can be bought conveniently bagged, trimmed, and ready for the sauté pan.

Burkina Faso (formerly Upper Volta), like the Sahel region more generally, has hardly figured prominently in the chronicles of world culinary history.^[1] In recent history, however, it has become one of several African countries supplying the counter-season and exotic fresh vegetables found in European upscale markets and restaurants. As an example of both Europe’s increasingly globalized tastes and Africa’s efforts to profit from them, the development of the ‘Afro-European’ fresh vegetable trade has been well documented.^[2] But few studies have considered how food consumption patterns in the export regions themselves have changed as a result of their incorporation into the global ‘non-traditional’ food commodity marketplace.

On a general level, of course, the expansion of cash crop production in twentieth-century Africa has made small farmers and farm laborers more dependent on the market

for their own food, while international trade and food aid programs have made the continent a bigger consumer of imports. These broad transformations in food supply, however, tell us little about changes in specifically how, or even *what* people eat, much less about changes in food consumption as a social and cultural practice. Yet this history is not necessarily any less rich and complex in poor countries than in North America and Europe, where most historical and sociological studies of food consumption have so far focused.

The twentieth century history of food consumption in and around the city of Bobo-Dioulasso, in southwestern Burkina Faso, demonstrates this point quite well. Since the beginning of French colonial rule at the turn of the century, the region's diet and foodways have, indeed, been influenced by the 'westernizing' forces of the marketplace, missionary education, and both colonial and postcolonial agricultural development strategies. Yet these influences have differed over time and place, and especially during the colonial era they need to be assessed in light of specific European powers' ideological, scientific and strategic objectives in Africa. In addition, foodways in southwestern Burkina Faso have been affected by regional climatic and land use changes, shifts in the rhythms and places of work, and both regional and transnational flows of people, goods and ideas. The dearth of written records makes it difficult to quantify or even generalize about the effects of these forces on household consumption patterns over time. But this paper shows how qualitative research, attentive to different spaces and scales of change, can illuminate relationships between the changing geographies and meanings of food. It also suggests how geography might contribute to the historical study of consumption more generally, especially in places where many day-to-day consumption practices have taken place outside the formal market economy, and off the written historical record.

The first section briefly contrasts and critiques the dominant narratives of modern European and African food histories, and suggests how the latter could benefit from closer attention to the changing geographies of food provisioning at different scales. I then examine the scientific, ideological and practical rationales behind the food and agricultural policies that brought French beans (and other 'European' garden vegetables) to West Africa. The rest of the paper then traces the modern historical geography of food in Burkina Faso, in the two senses identified by Graham and Nash:^[3] it not only covers the modern era, including the present, but also pays explicit attention to the multiple identities and social-spatial relationships that have 'emerged from and made modernity'^[4]. The first section considers how diet and meal patterns in the Bobo-Dioulasso region have changed during and since colonial rule (1897–1960), due partly due to French cultural influences but also to urbanization and related changes in land use and daily work habits. The second section expands the scope of analysis to the national level, and examines some of the more ironic consequences of food and agricultural policies implemented during the era of 'high development' (roughly the first 25 years after independence in 1960). The final section looks at how particular forces and manifestations of 'globalization'—namely, regional trade liberalization, and the expanding reach of Western popular media—have raised popular concerns about the affordability and safety of certain foods and social customs.

This paper draws on two broader research projects conducted in Burkina Faso and France in 1993–4 and 2000–1. Due to the paucity and questionable reliability of colonial and even postcolonial documentation of regional food consumption patterns in Burkina Faso, the historical account of Bobo-Dioulasso foodways draws primarily on oral histories (which obviously have their own gaps and limits) and archival sources on the town's commercial history.^[5] It does not attempt to list or quantify the foods consumed during any particular period, but focuses instead on the different geographic

sources and scales of changing dietary norms and practices, including those in the quite recent past.

Food narratives: getting worse all the time?

On the table, the modern histories of African and European diet and foodways have long been closely linked, by crop and technology transfer as well as trade.^[6] As narratives, however, these histories appear to diverge nearly from the moment of contact.^[7] Between the fifteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the transatlantic slave trade brought labor and African knowledge to the plantation colonies of the New World, but left African agricultural societies depopulated and strife-ridden.^[8] By the late nineteenth century, Africa itself had become an important supplier of Europe's cocoa, coffee, tea and sugar. Though not nutritional staples, the tropical stimulants became central to certain European dietary habits and social customs.^[9] Along with African citrus and bananas, they were originally considered luxuries, but became goods that the working classes bought through good times and bad. The popularization of Europe's 'fruits of empire' is one chapter in a larger narrative about rising consumer expectations, and about governments, markets and industries increasingly capable of meeting them. In a word, it is a narrative of progress.^[10]

The dominant narrative of modern African food supply, by contrast, is one of nearly chronic material crisis and cultural loss. Colonial era taxation and conscription took labor and land away from food production in many agro-export regions, leading in some places (among them the Sahel) to environmental damage and repeated bouts of famine.^[11] European traders and colonizers also introduced foreign crops, some of which the locals were forced to grow, and foreign dishes and processed foods, some of which became associated with elite status. Wheat bread, for instance, became a popular if not universally affordable food in cities throughout much of tropical Africa, where agroclimatic conditions for growing wheat are hardly ideal.^[12]

Postcolonial food aid programs only deepened Africa's 'wheat trap'—that is, the dilemma faced by African governments whose politically influential urban populations had become hooked on imported foodstuffs.^[13] Corporate marketing of processed commodities (tomato paste, condensed milk, margarine) further encouraged rural as well as urban households to abandon locally produced alternatives.^[14]

Import dependency, combined with famine and drought in the 1970 and 80s, provided abundant material for an Africanist 'food crisis' literature.^[15] In much of this literature, the very indicators of European progress were portrayed as evidence of a deeply African problem: namely, big governments that intervened in food marketing, big merchants that put the squeeze on small farmers, and urban consumers who wanted to breakfast on baguettes and Nescafe, even though millet gruel would have been much more prudent. This narrative of blame in turn provided justification for the initially quite draconian economic reform policies imposed by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank from the mid-1980s onwards.^[16] The policies aimed, among other things, to correct artificially cheap urban food prices, and to force cutbacks in food imports. They provoked food riots and the fall of fragile regimes,^[17] and over a somewhat longer term they made life harder for the urban poor.^[18] Although the 1990s proved a better decade for overall food security than the 1980s in a number of countries (among them Burkina Faso), the continent's grain shortfalls continued to fuel calls for urgent measures, especially on the part of biotechnology proponents.

My objective here is not to assess either the accuracy of the crisis literature analyses or the effectiveness of the policy response.^[19] Nor do I want to minimize the severity of

the hunger and shortages facing certain regions. Rather I want to suggest that the overwhelmingly negative portrayal of modern African foodways—in terms of deprivation, resource deterioration, and undeserved urban appetites—obscures, albeit unintentionally, a much more complex alimentary history. Especially as historians and sociologists look increasingly to European cuisine and food customs for insights into broader political and social developments the absence of any comparable appreciation of African foodways contributes, I believe, to the perception of the continent as a place *still* without history.^[20]

Part of the problem lies in the scarcity of written records. While some nineteenth century explorers and traders in Africa noted what they saw in markets, or what they were served by their hosts careful documentation of different groups' diets and culinary habits are almost nonexistent prior to the twentieth century.^[21] Even colonial era ethnographies, with a few exceptions, tended to give food and cooking short shrift. Audrey Richards' study of the Bemba of Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) was extraordinary for its time because she not only recorded the prosaic details of what people ate when, where and with whom; she also linked Bemba malnutrition to changing rhythms and spaces of work, on both a daily and seasonal scale.^[22] In particular, she argued that male seasonal migration to mining jobs in the Copperbelt had undermined the traditional *chitemene* farming system (a form of shifting agriculture), without spurring the development of local food markets. Richard's detailed records (many of which were never published) enabled Henrietta Moore and Meghan Vaughn to conduct a feminist restudy of the same area, helping to make the twentieth century food history of Northern Zambia one of the most thoroughly documented on the continent.^[23] This history makes clear, moreover, how both food consumption patterns and people's understanding of them have been affected by multiple levels of geographic change. These include changes in daily journeys-to-work, in regional demography and land-use, and in the broader ideological and political economic influences under European colonial rule.

Within geography, of course, this kind of multi-scalar historical analysis is nothing new; indeed it is one of the core methodological frameworks of political ecology.^[24] Africanist political ecology, however, has traditionally focused on how the social and material dynamics of *production* (of food and other goods) transform localities and relations across space; its perspective treats changes in consumption—dietary and otherwise—as results of these processes.^[25] Yet an abundant literature on commodity culture and consumerism (in which Africa, again, makes only rare appearances) shows how the meanings of consumption act as history-making forces in their own right.^[26]

The French bean connection: acclimatizing to empire

In the history of French colonialism in Africa, the meanings that French consumers attached to particular foods mattered from an early date. They figured importantly into French colonial efforts to promote European vegetable production in the tropics, as well as into the closely linked efforts of French scientists exploring the possibilities of plant, animal and human acclimatization. The activities of the *Société Zoologique d'Acclimatisation*, founded in 1854, initially focused on enriching French agriculture and food supply through the import of exotic species, both plant and animal. But French naturalists such as Isidore Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire (the society's founder) also emphasized how much acclimatization research could contribute to the project of empire-building.^[27] The successful colonization of tropical climes required knowledge of how to adapt crop and livestock species to new environmental conditions. Settlers needed a reliable and palatable food supply, and colonial economies needed crops suitable for export.

The Society's earliest and most ambitious colonial acclimatization activities took place in Algeria, where they sought to replace a centuries-old tradition of wheat, wine and olive production with tropical crops, such as coffee and spices, which would complement rather than compete with French farm goods.^[28] Although the colony's French settlers did not share the botanists and hydrological engineers vision of a 'tropicalized' Algerian agriculture, they did begin producing counter-season crops for the Parisian market, among them green beans.^[29]

By the turn of the century, more modest experimental gardens (*jardins d'essai*) were multiplying across France's expanding colonial empire in West and Central Africa.^[30] Although modeled after *jardins d'essai* in France, the African sites typically doubled as *potagers* (kitchen gardens) for local colonial officials, and their diverse crop mix included vegetables that the officials themselves habitually ate in France, such as *haricot vert*. These were not considered luxuries, but rather dietary necessities in places where local vegetation seemed strange and savage.^[31] As one Madagascar colonial journal reported:

The cultivation of vegetables in hot countries is indispensable for the hygiene of Europeans who are called to live in them. If, in certain intertropical regions, the native is content to use the plants that he finds at his door . . . one of our biggest preoccupations when we move to the colonies is to introduce and grow at least some of the many and excellent vegetables that we possess in our temperate country. This responds to a true need. It is necessary, from the point of view of health in the hot countries, to give great priority to vegetables in the diet . . .^[32]

The idea that vegetables in the diet were necessary to 'health in hot countries'—and thus to the larger project of acclimatizing Europeans to life in the tropics—was based on early twentieth century theories of nutrition and 'moral hygiene'. It marked a significant departure from nutritional theories of a half-century earlier, when the influential German chemist Liebig briefly convinced doctors and army rations-planners that meat was the ideal human food, especially in trying climates and physical conditions.^[33] The colonial hygiene propounded in turn-of-the-century popular manuals and medical texts drew on Pasteurian bacteriology, revised theories (contra Liebig) of human metabolism, and the testimonies of colonial administrators and military men who had lived to tell about their postings in the disease-ridden zones of equatorial Africa and Asia.^[34]

The general tone of advice was overtly moralistic: good health in the tropics required moderated passions and "very careful living".^[35] But this included careful nutrition; the texts counseled Europeans to eat lightly, and consume less meat, fat and alcohol than they would at home. One British army medical journal suggested following the French example:

. . . in the Tropics, where it is desirable to restrict the amount of meat consumed, English folk might with great advantage take lessons from our neighbors across the channel, by introducing to their tables 'plats' of vegetables served up alone, and flavoured with some tasty stock, or simply a little butter. Well cooked, and served piping hot, such dishes are most tempting and wholesome . . .^[36]

Hygienists generally recommended fresh vegetables over dried, provided they were carefully washed and, as suggested above, 'well cooked'. Indeed, once germ theory made clear that fresh fruits and vegetables did not themselves cause typhoid or cholera, hygienists' warnings shifted to the need for vigilance in the garden and kitchen, where native workers' presumably dirty habits might contaminate the food.^[37] This advice nourished a whole new set of fears.^[38] But it also indicated to colonial officials and settlers that, with careful control of tropical nature and tropical labor, it was both possible and desirable to bring the European garden to the colonies.

The growth of a garden city

Colonial officials as well as missionaries planted gardens around their settlements all across French West Africa.^[39] The local agroclimatologies, however, were varied and not always ideal for gardening and eating *à la français*. In the Sahelian region, the main limiting factor was (and remains) year-round water supply, as rain falls only three months of the year. By this measure, the region around Bobo-Dioulasso offered relatively good conditions for dry-season horticulture, due to a network of small rivers.^[40] But the region's earliest known inhabitants, the Bobo, traditionally produced most of their food during the June–August rainy season.

From the sixteenth until the late nineteenth century, the town of Bobo-Dioulasso itself served as an important market for itinerant Dioula and Hausa merchants, who transported gold and kola nuts from the southern forest zones and salt from the northern desert. The Bobo, however, had little to do with this long-distance commerce. They prided themselves on their skills as millet farmers (they called themselves 'the cultivating people', or *san-san*) and also hunted, gathered wild foods, and in some places fished (the Houet river, which runs through Bobo-Dioulasso itself, was once a reliable source). Although the mid-nineteenth century explorer Binger observed Bobo village women selling shea nut butter and other prepared foods to passers-by, their own diet relied on the market for little besides salt.^[41]

Like the diets of most African agrarian societies, the Bobo's fits into the 'core-fringe' structure described by Mintz.^[42] As in much of the Sahel, this diet has historically centered on millet, typically prepared as a stiff porridge (*to*). Unlike societies in more arid Sahelian regions, the Bobo have also traditionally cultivated alternative starches such as yams, sorghum and fonio (*Digitaria exilis*), and maize especially (also made into *to*) has become increasingly commonplace since the mid-twentieth century. Rice and potatoes (both sweet and Irish) are well-liked albeit more expensive core foods, cultivated in only a few localities near Bobo-Dioulasso. Of all the starch crops, however, millet alone figures centrally in Bobo mythology and seasonal ceremonies.^[43]

In principle, responsibility for produced or purchased staple grains belongs to men. In practice it often falls to women, who are also expected to grow, gather or buy the ingredients for the daily sauce or soup. Like other 'fringe' foods, the sauce makes a bland and (in the case of *to*) grainy starch dish more nutritious and palatable. Even though it provides relatively few calories, the sauce is a critical part of a 'proper meal'—in Bobo society as in other parts of Africa—and a woman's sauce-making ability is highly valued.^[44] But the definition of a good sauce has changed greatly over the last century.

Although the Portuguese had brought tomatoes and other New World vegetables to coastal West Africa centuries before, these foods had not, by the late nineteenth century, made their way into the culinary repertoire of Sahelian peoples like the Bobo.^[45] According to the accounts of elderly Bobo women, sauces in their mothers' time were relatively simple. Except for salt and greens or peppers that some women cultivated in small kitchen gardens, everything came from the bush. A typical sauce might contain baobab leaves or a local spinach-like vegetable (fresh or dried, depending on the season), plus shea butter (made from the nut of the *shea* tree), *soumbala* (a pungent spice made from the seeds of the *neré* tree), salt, and occasionally fish or game meat.

The French first occupied the Volta region in 1897, mainly in order to secure a labor supply for plantations elsewhere in French West Africa.^[46] The early years of colonial rule intruded relatively little on Bobo food provisioning practices. Although the central and northern provinces of Upper Volta appeared too arid for export crops besides cotton, the French considered the Bobo-Dioulasso region the colony's future *panier*

(food basket). Soon after establishing a provincial administrative base in the town itself, French officials began planting imported seeds near their settlement. Agricultural ministry records from as early as 1903 reported success with a wide range of crops, from green beans and potatoes to sweet peas and strawberries.^[47]

After the outbreak of World War I, the need to feed the thousands of African and French soldiers stationed at Bobo-Dioulasso's military camp, as well as expatriates in the region's other administrative outposts, led to more systematic efforts to increase local horticultural production. Alongside the river Houet, the provincial agricultural ministry built small dams and irrigation canals, and forced nearby villagers to cultivate, among other things, potatoes and green beans. The ministry provided seeds, but forbid villagers to sell their harvests. Instead they were requisitioned by the colonial authorities.^[48]

Villagers learned a taste for potatoes and other new garden crops by eating whatever they were not required to deliver to the authorities nor able to sell on the local vegetable 'black market'.^[49] Colonial officials admitted in their records that the combination of forced labor and crop requisitions (which included millet) took a heavy toll on the local population. In all likelihood, then, the potato entered their diet under conditions of penury not terribly different from those prevailing when the potato won acceptance among wheat-eating Western Europeans in the eighteenth century.^[50] Some children also learned new tastes as part of their formal education; by the 1930s European-style vegetable gardening was a required subject at all the local schools, intended not only to teach the local peasantry 'improved' farming and nutrition, but also to provision the school canteens at minimal cost.

After the completion of a rail line to Abidjan (the capital of Cote d'Ivoire) in 1934, several trade firms opened shop in Bobo-Dioulasso. The expatriate European and Lebanese population increased, as did the availability of imported foodstuffs, such as sugar, coffee, tea, and wheat flour. Until the end of World War II, expatriates were the main consumers of these goods, as relatively few African households had much disposable income. After the war, however, forced labor and local trade restrictions were abolished, and the city entered an economic and demographic boom period.

A burst of French investment brought new schools, expanded government services, and a few light industries. Bobo-Dioulasso's population grew rapidly, fed by a combination of natural population growth, rural-urban migration, and the settlement of Voltaic war veterans.^[51] Many of the veterans invested their pensions in trade, transport companies, and commercial farming.^[52] Like the town's mission-schooled African civil servants, they had been exposed to Western (and particularly French) dietary habits, and had the means to adopt at least some of them.

To what extent these new African urban consumers did, in fact, start eating French-style meals is impossible to trace in any quantitative fashion. But as in other Francophone African cities, foods such as baguettes, omelettes and café au lait have since become standard menu items at Bobo-Dioulasso's open-air cafes, many of which consist of little more than a table, a bench, and a charcoal stove. These cafes cater mostly to working class men and students; wealthier families may also have coffee and bread for breakfast at home. But in both elite and poorer households, the 'starch and sauce' structure of the midday and evening meals has remained the same, as it has elsewhere in West Africa.^[53] Elite meals simply tend to be more abundant, and to include richer sauces.

This is hardly surprising, but also not the whole story. On one hand, the 'core-fringe' structure of meals has been the norm for most agrarian societies for most of human history. Post-war urbanization and rural commercialization in Burkina Faso was not accompanied by the industrialization and massive economic growth associated with the

North American/Western European shift to a meat-centered diet.^[54] On the other hand, the postwar decades did see significant change at the ‘fringe’ of daily foodways, as garden vegetables came to feature more prominently in both the mealtime sauce and between-meal snacks. This change must be understood in light of three distinct but interrelated social-spatial shifts in men’s and women’s seasonal and daily work patterns.

First, the supply and variety of fresh vegetables increased as Bobo men in hinterland villages converted more and more riverbank and floodplain land into dry-season vegetable gardens. Previously much of this land, which was controlled by the region’s founding Bobo lineages, had either lain fallow or been parceled out to individual men for traditional crops such as tobacco and sorghum (for beer brewing). But the provincial administration, faced with a rapidly growing and increasingly politicized urban population, encouraged peri-urban villagers to use their riverine land for dry-season commercial food production. Colonial officials wanted not only more food from the hinterlands; they also hoped to cultivate there a prosperous, politically stable peasantry. The administration offered villagers loans, seeds, and gardening instruction, and beginning in the 1950s it sponsored annual fairs, awarding prizes to gardeners with the biggest cabbages and choicest tomatoes. The city built a covered central market as well as several neighborhood markets, while hotels, restaurants and Lebanese groceries purchased top-end crops such as strawberries, leeks and *petit pois*.

Commercial gardening thus became a well-respected and potentially lucrative livelihood, at least until the region’s economic downturn in the 1980s. Garden revenue paid for relatively new needs and wants, such as bicycles, tin roofed-houses, and education for their children; it also went increasingly towards staple grain purchases. As this revenue became essential to household and individual economic security (or, at the least, sense of well-being) in hinterland villages, so did dry-season gardening become central to the daily and annual rhythms of work in those villages.

Second, the expansion of Bobo-Dioulasso’s ‘garden belt’ (by the 1980s it included villages 40 km away) not only reflected but also contributed to women’s growing participation in the regional food market, as both traders and consumers. Even during the wartime years, women from the town’s Dioula merchant families had purchased village vegetables to sell (often covertly) to resident Europeans; in the postwar era, they used their experience and capital to become powerful wholesalers and creditors.

Around the same time, Bobo women began to move out of their role as ‘helpers’ in their husbands’ gardens and into vegetable marketing. This negotiated shift in the gender division of labor—indicative of broader changes in Bobo identity and gender ideologies—gave women greater control over their time and their personal income.^[55] Women who sold their husbands’ produce could use a portion of the revenue to buy daily sauce ingredients; they could also use their time in town to sell firewood, home-prepared snacks and millet beer, and vegetables purchased from other gardeners. Urban expansion fueled demand for these goods not so much because the local population was becoming entirely proletarianized (the majority of Bobo-Dioulasso’s residents still have access to land, albeit not always nearby) but rather because it transformed the ‘time-geographies’ of both men’s and women’s daily lives. More people were eating, drinking and working away from home.

Third, urban expansion increased demand for garden produce because it transformed the ecology of the hinterlands where women had traditionally gathered both food and fuel. Although the Bobo-Dioulasso region appears relatively well forested and lightly populated compared to the hinterlands of Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso’s capital city), older Bobo women remember when thick brush surrounded their villages, and they foraged in groups to scare off wild animals. Now they live amongst orchards, fields, and

new residential zones, and certain useful shrub and trees species, such as the *shea*, have become much scarcer. So women either have to spend more time and energy walking and gathering, or they have to rely more on the market for their fuel, food and trade supplies. One dietary consequence is that women do not often prepare foods that require extensive cooking, such as dry beans. The other is an expanded market for cultivated garden vegetables, in place of gathered varieties.

This spatial shift in the source of vegetables has in turn contributed to changing local standards of a *good* sauce. Baobab leaves and other wild greens are no longer everyday ingredients, and many women among the younger generation no longer know how to prepare them. For these women, the preferred sauce is made with cultivated vegetables. Tomatoes, onions and hot peppers are standard ingredients; other vegetables added depend in part on the starch base. Okra, sorrel leaves and eggplant go well on *to*, while cabbage and green peppers are commonly served on rice. The sauce known in Dioula as *Diaba-dji* for example, contains cabbage, onion, eggplant, tomatoes, peppers, garlic, spices, parsley, oil, meat or fish, and other vegetables as taste and availability dictate, such as carrots, turnips, or courgette.

Some of the variation in sauce preparation reflects the culinary influences of immigrants from other parts of Burkina Faso and West Africa. The Gouin of southern Burkina Faso, for instance, are known for a sesame-based sauce (made with tomatoes and fish, and served on rice) while Wolof women from Senegal prepare peanut-based vegetable sauces, or sauces containing mustard-marinated meat.^[56]

Variation in the sauce composition is also highly seasonal. During the rainy season, most garden vegetables are scarce and costly, and poorer households especially may rely on dried leaves. But when the markets are glutted with garden produce during the high season (January–February), all kinds of non-traditional vegetables (i.e. carrots, courgettes, and the aforementioned French bean) become more affordable. Women vegetable traders, in particular, often end up adding perishable unsold produce to the evening meal, sometimes in unlikely combinations.^[57] Women describe a sauce rich in vegetables (as well as oil or peanut sauce, spices and ideally meat or fish) as preferable to a ‘clear’ or watery sauce, but both women and men say that a good cook, by definition, should be able to make a perfectly satisfactory meal with few ingredients, simply by artfully preparing them. They also say that a good cook does not need manufactured flavorings like Maggi bouillon cubes, but in fact this has become a very widely used alternative to locally produced flavorings, such as *soumbala*.^[58]

Although most traditional vegetable preparations are thoroughly cooked, at least three villages on the outskirts of Bobo-Dioulasso have become specialized in the production of salad greens. Lettuce is not considered a very profitable garden crop, but because it grows quickly (30 days) and the seeds can be saved from year to year, it appeals to cash-poor gardeners. During January and February, therefore, lettuce pours into the city. Originally eaten only by expatriates, tossed green salad has become a popular high-season dish both in the villages and in town, where it can be bought ready-to-eat at the central marketplace. For most households, the limiting cost factor is not the lettuce itself but rather all the other ingredients needed to make a decent salad. Oil, for example, is a prerequisite, and lettuce growers in the 1990s remarked how rising cottonseed oil prices hurt their own sales. For young women interviewed in Bobo-Dioulasso, however, a good salad also includes ingredients such as tomato, cucumber, onion, boiled eggs, garlic, parsley, and vinegar or lemon.

Garden vegetables have also been incorporated into all kinds of street foods, from rice-and-sauce dishes to baguette sandwiches to Lebanese kebabs. Even peeled raw carrots, sold by young girls who carry them on head-pans, have become a common urban snack.

As in many other parts of West Africa, street foods more generally are an important part of the diet of students, market traders, and the many workers who do not return home for the midday meal, either because it is too far or because no one is at home to cook. Studies of street foods testify to their nutritional and economic significance, but the role of street food vendors not just in preserving but also modifying local culinary traditions (perhaps partly to take advantage of changes in local supplies) deserves more attention.^[59]

In sum, a number of regional historical processes have contributed to changing foodways in and around Bobo-Dioulasso. Some of these resulted quite directly from French colonialism. The early French colonials' determination to continue eating at least some familiar foods, for example, led to the introduction of crops and cultivation methods more familiar to the countryside of Provence than to the Sahel. The French also introduced a number of manufactured foods, such as wheat flour and instant coffee, and French ways of preparing them—in baguettes rather than the square bread loaves found in neighboring British colonies.

The resulting changes were significant, but they could hardly be described as simple 'westernization'. The expansion of commercial vegetable gardening transformed the landscape and economy of the Bobo-Dioulasso region, and thus certain patterns of daily food provisioning. But not all: most households, for example, still shop for food several times a week, if not daily, and mostly at outdoor markets. The town's *supermarchés* are small, as is their customer base. And while 'French' vegetables and other foreign foods have become additional or alternative elements in the local diet, they have undermined neither its overall structure nor the central role of domestically produced millet and maize. In fact urban consumption of these staple grains, relative to imported rice and wheat, increased after a currency devaluation drove up the latter's prices in the mid-1990s.^[60]

Moreover, certain traditional dishes are valued for reasons beyond affordability. Meals at festive occasions, such as weddings, still feature *to* and sauce, and at 'Bobo-Fête' (Bobo-Dioulasso's biennial national cultural fair) recent winning recipes in the culinary contest have included a Bobo sauce made from caterpillars and *soumbala*. In cases where certain local ingredients have been replaced by introduced or imported ones, I would argue it is due at least as much to availability and other practical concerns as to a preference for things 'Western'. These concerns have arisen as urban growth has transformed the spatial and ecological conditions of daily work, particularly women's.

These geographic changes are not synonymous with the sociological understanding of dietary 'urbanization', which in Africa describes the dietary trends (more rice, processed foods and animal products) associated with educated salary-earners, who happen to live disproportionately in cities.^[61] Longitudinal quantitative dietary research in Bobo-Dioulasso would likely reveal some of these trends. My point here, though, is that an analysis of urban dietary changes is incomplete if it does not consider the geography of provisioning, which necessarily requires looking at changes in the urban hinterland. It also requires looking at food production and distribution on a national scale—the subject of Section 4.

The great green bean schemes

The first two decades after independence in the early 1960s brought drought, crop failures and hunger to much of sahelian West Africa. None of these problems were new to the region, but in the context of the Cold War and a general optimism about the possibilities of 'techno-fix' development, they provoked an unprecedented aid response from both East and West.^[62] In Burkina Faso (then still Upper Volta) much of this aid funded the

construction of irrigation projects: reservoirs, dams and irrigation canals in the country's main floodplain areas.^[63]

Although some of the irrigation schemes were intended primarily to produce rice for domestic consumption most also included some technical aid to promote dry season horticulture, and in particular green beans for export.^[64] Why green beans? First, because the target market was France, which has not only the most regular air freight connections with its former colony but also one of the highest rates of per capita green bean consumption in Europe, if not the world.^[65] The *haricot vert*, or French bean, is not a staple food *per se*, but it is a nearly ubiquitous side dish, served at neighborhood bistros, government functions, and holiday meals. Second, the French particularly like to serve the slender beans over the winter holidays, when it is too cold to grow them in France, but nearly ideal weather in Burkina Faso. Third, the labor intensive green bean production cycle generates more jobs than most commercial crops, but does not conflict with rainy-season staple food production. And finally, peasant farmers in certain parts of Burkina Faso already had considerable experience growing vegetables to French standards.

All these considerations influenced governmental and foreign donor efforts to promote green bean production even in irrigated areas more than five hours away (over rough roads) from the Ouagadougou airport. Peasant cooperatives produced the beans on small plots (typically 0.25 to one ha) worked by individuals or households, and the government controlled marketing. French import firms provided inputs and pre-season financing. Up through the mid-1980s, green beans brought modestly better living to villages that had few other sources of cash. Beans also brought the country foreign exchange (though not nearly as much as cotton, the main export crop) and recognition. Until the mid 1980s, Burkina Faso was the second largest African green bean exporter (after Kenya) and its country's label was a familiar sight in Parisian wintertime markets.

But logistical problems plagued the green bean sector from the beginning, especially in the realm of air transport. Frequent flight delays and cancellations resulted in tons of beans arriving in Paris in poor condition, or never even leaving Ouagadougou. The chronic unreliability of Air Afrique was initially tolerated by the French import market, but it generated frustration on all sides. In one now-legendary flight cancellation incident in the mid-'80s, the country's late president Thomas Sankara refused to let the stranded beans go to waste. Instead, he ordered government employees to take bagfuls of them, in place of part of their salaries.

The export sector has since been privatized and liberalized. But transportation problems persist, and some private exporters are notorious for abandoning contacted growers mid-season, leaving them with tons of beans to sell on the open market. Meanwhile production costs have increased, and the competition has intensified. Burkina Faso now competes for the French market not just with Kenya but also Morocco, Senegal, Mali, Zimbabwe and even Madagascar. Prices have dropped, and French importers have become increasingly unwilling to provide advance financing. Although some farmers have entirely given up on export green beans, on the grounds that the prices no longer justify the hard work and risk, others see few other means of earning cash.

During the December-high season, then, thousands of tons of green beans are harvested (an estimated 3500 tons in 1997), but many never leave the country. Some are simply thrown out or fed to animals, but significant (though unrecorded) quantities end up on the domestic market. Market women buy abandoned and rejected beans at the farmgate and at the airport, then sell them for little more than the price of an equivalent volume of cabbage leaves.

Export horticultural crops do not always become incorporated into the local diet. In Kenya, Zimbabwe and Zambia, for example, there is very little domestic demand

(beyond that of the white expatriate population) for green beans or other ‘white man’s’ vegetables. In Burkina Faso, however, green bean cuisine is now sophisticated and varied, albeit limited by the cost of accompanying ingredients. In Bobo-Dioulasso, Senegalese immigrants prepare green beans sautéed in butter; in Ouagadougou, they are fried with meat, and near Lac du Bam, one of the country’s biggest green bean production zones, reject beans are commonly served mixed into millet meal—a sort of Sahelian risotto.

It is worth emphasizing that green beans are not the only fresh vegetables flooding Burkina Faso’s urban marketplaces during the horticultural high season. National economic austerity policies in the late 1980s and early 1990s not only depressed urban consumer buying power; they also pushed more and more people into commercial gardening for the domestic market. In the mid-90s, market women complained that ‘these days there are more producers than consumers’. This is not the case everywhere in Burkina Faso; in the most arid and inaccessible regions, fresh produce is scarce and costly. But in the cities, an annual glut of edible greenery has become more predictable (and less welcome) than the annual rains. Green beans intended for the plates of Parisians end up amidst the piles of lettuce and tomatoes, accidental delicacies for anyone who buys them before they spoil.

Toxins near and far

Lastly, Burkina Faso’s modern historical geography of food must be understood in light of the country’s position in regional and global markets and media networks. As in Africa more generally, the formation of the World Trade Organization in 1994 raised concerns that the phasing out of preferential trade ties with Europe would leave the country unable to compete against Latin American agro-exporters.^[66] In fact, this aspect of liberalization has not significantly affected trade in minor products like green beans. But the EU’s more recent efforts to protect its consumers against the potential health risks of an increasingly globalized fresh produce trade (in particular, risks posed by pesticides) has, by contrast, placed low-income agro-exporters like Burkina Faso in an extremely perilous position. The EU has declared ‘zero tolerance’ for certain older, cheaper pesticides commonly used in Africa.^[67] So entire export sectors must either switch to new means of pest control or risk an EU-wide ban on their produce (the potential sanction if inspectors in Europe detect illegal residues on a single product).

In response to the new EU pesticide regulations, African horticultural exporters and growers (not just in Burkina Faso) have noted, rightly, that it was the European market’s aesthetic and phytosanitary standards—combined with the marketing of multinational agrochemical companies—that got them using pesticides in the first place.^[68] Yet as consumers themselves, Burkinabé men and women had no trouble understanding Europeans’ growing anxiety about invisible food-related toxins more generally.

Most of the recent food safety literature assumes that such anxieties exist only in societies no longer threatened by food scarcity.^[69] In societies where hunger is chronic and famine a not-too-distant memory, the population is presumed to be too poor and poorly educated to care much about carcinogens or other food-borne risks.

But is this assumption valid? It is certainly not based on much empirical evidence from Africa or other hunger-prone regions. It is true that market demand for certified ‘safe’ food such as organic produce is concentrated in the wealthiest strata of the wealthiest countries. Yet it is important to distinguish between people’s *awareness* of food-borne risks, their *anxieties*, and their *ability* to act upon them as consumers or, for that matter, as citizens. With this in mind, it is worth comparing the articulation of food safety

concerns in contemporary Burkina Faso to other situations where consumer buying power was limited, and where the market had not provided an immediate alternative to an unsatisfactory food supply. This was precisely the situation in mid-nineteenth century Great Britain.^[70]

To start, African journalistic accounts^[71] as well as my own interviews with women from a variety of backgrounds in Bobo-Dioulasso suggest that poverty and illiteracy do not, in fact preclude concerns about food safety. Although most Burkinabé women do not attend more than a few years of school, their sources of information about food safety are diverse and far ranging. Radio and television news stations (which include Radio France International) report foreign food scares; in early 2000, everyone knew about Europe's mad cows, dioxin chickens, and contaminated Coca Cola, and each story led to musings about what toxic European foods Burkina Faso might be importing. Closer to home, women typically learn certain food safety rules from their mothers as well as from maternity nurses or other health care workers.^[72]

Unlike some kinds of women's knowledge related to health and healing, these rules do not have a long history. Rather, they have been developed to deal with the relatively new food risks posed by urbanization, as well as international trade in both foodstuffs and agricultural inputs. Most women know, for example, that they should wash lettuce and other raw vegetables with a bleach solution, because they come from gardens irrigated with polluted river water. In addition, a number of women said that they tried to buy vegetables only from gardens upstream from the city, because the Bobo-Dioulasso hospital dumps waste in the river. Such vegetables are sold on one well-known downtown street corner at slightly higher prices than vegetables elsewhere. According to the women selling them, the premium reflects the fact that their regular clients are willing to pay extra. Buying upstream produce, unfortunately, provides no guaranteed protection against pesticides. Some women expressed concern about the occasional chemical odor on the produce they bought at market. It is common knowledge that the cheapest and most readily available pesticides are those intended for use on cotton and other non-food crops.

Carelessly applied pesticides are just one kind of risk posed by an increasingly commercialized food supply. Burkinabé consumers must also contend with unscrupulous or at least corner-cutting merchants. As in mid-nineteenth century England, an intensely competitive and minimally regulated food market has made adulteration attractive and easy, especially for artisanally processed sauce ingredients such as peanut butter and *soumbala*. Women interviewed in Bobo-Dioulasso said that rather than risk getting peanut butter made from rotten nuts or impure *soumbala*, they preferred either to make their own, or buy only from trusted suppliers. Some women even had their *soumbala* sent from villages in Mali, where they say the quality is generally much higher.

The industrial alternative to these local products is the ubiquitous 'cube Maggi'. Especially in cities, the bouillon cube has become a common sauce base, and one of the few food products widely promoted through company advertising as well as contests and free handouts (Maggi is a Nestle subsidiary). But it is also the subject of suspicion and speculation; the ingredients are not listed on the packaging (monosodium glutamate is one of the main ones), and at least some consumers are wary of any products made by a European company primarily for a Third World market. Such goods are the stuff of postcolonial urban legends, rumored to contain substandard ingredients, worms, or worse.^[73] At the least, the women I interviewed in Bobo-Dioulasso said that the cube Maggi, like any food full of *produits chimiques*, was simply not good for the health.

Dangerous chemical additives set off Burkina Faso's first twenty-first century food scare, when the national media reported in January 2000 that many *boulangeries* were

using carcinogenic leavening agents that neighboring countries had banned two years earlier. Known as Magimix and Excel, these agents produced the kind of fat, fluffy baguettes that many consumers in francophone Africa preferred, even though they hardly resembled 'authentic' French baguettes. In the wake of the media report, the Burkinabé government responded with its own ban, and then burned a mountain of Magimix and Excel boxes on national TV. In Ouagadougou, some boulangeries posted large signs stating: 'Pas de Magimix!'

In mid-to-late 19th century England, exposés documenting widespread food and drink adulteration and fraud fueled demands for legislative reforms as well as alternative circuits of provisioning. The 'pure food' activism of scientists, women's groups and other social reformers led to the passage of foundational national food safety laws and the proliferation of consumer cooperatives.^[74] The pure food movement also helped create a new market for large manufacturers and retail chains, one where guarantees of hygiene and standardized quality came to matter as much as cheap prices.^[75]

In Burkina Faso, the League of Burkinabé Consumers (LCB) has taken up the cause of food safety, along with related problems such as fraud and scale-fixing. The League seeks not only tougher regulation of the domestic market (where there is very little consumer protection legislation of any kind) but also tighter border controls. Regional trade liberalization in the 1990s, the League argues, opened up the Burkinabé market to the shoddy and potentially dangerous products of its neighbors.

As in the nineteenth century pure food movements, scientists and other intellectuals figure prominently in the LCB's 1500-person membership. But the League faces political and economic conditions much different than those of its European and American counterparts, either past or present. In the mid-to-late nineteenth century, the cleaning up of national food supplies coincided with significant improvements in consumer buying power, and the emergence of well-capitalized companies that could afford to invest in improved raw materials and production processes. Equally important, the popular and trade presses not only publicized and commented on the reform process (thus keeping pressure on legislators) they also provided venues for the companies to advertise their guaranteed-pure products.^[76]

Burkina Faso's economy, by contrast, has grown slowly and haltingly for the past quarter-century (1.2 per cent annually on average), and remains dependent on primary commodity exports. Urban consumer buying power, in particular, deteriorated in the mid-1990s, as a World Bank-mandated structural adjustment program and a 1994 currency devaluation led to higher unemployment and inflation. Unlike in countries with large European expatriate populations (such as Côte d'Ivoire), Burkina Faso has not attracted investment by any large supermarket chains. So while resident Europeans and other wealthy urbanites can find reassuringly hygienic foodstuffs in a few expensive butcheries and grocery stores in their neighborhoods, most consumers cannot easily signal their concerns about food safety by, for example, choosing 'natural' brands. These alternatives largely do not exist in Burkina Faso, except for a small number of products (yogurt, honey, cheese, solar-dried mangoes) that are made by religious communities or donor-sponsored projects, and not part of most Burkinabés' daily diet.

In addition, cronyism amongst the country's political and economic elite has made government officials reluctant to crack down on well-connected traders and manufacturers. The LCB president claimed that not even the independent newspapers would cover stories implicating large companies, for fear of losing their advertising revenue. In other words, economic liberalization and globalization have brought Burkinabé consumers more foreign foods and more foreign media reports about food dangers. But these processes have so far done little to foster the kind of democratic institutions

that consumers would need to articulate and defend their rights to safe food in their own country—namely, a free press and an accountable government.

Under these conditions the search for safe food has taken two different paths around the market. At the level of day-to-day provisioning, concerned consumers look to domestic and moral economies for trustworthy supplies. Food safety thus means extra work, especially for women. Household capacity to obtain safe food thus depends not only on income, but also on the availability of knowledgeable labor (typically that of an older kinswoman). At the level of the larger (albeit still small) consumer rights movement, the demand for a cleaner food supply has become foremost a demand for cleaner government. Put somewhat differently, the struggle for ‘consumer’ rights has become a thinly disguised struggle for basic democratic rights.

Conclusion

The modern historical geography I have constructed here clearly does not depict the totality of foodways in Burkina Faso. The country’s population remains, after all, predominantly rural, and many people never eat French beans or baguettes. A more comprehensive account would discuss, among other things, the diversity of the country’s regional cuisines and indigenous plant foods, and the provisioning practices of the country’s nomadic pastoralists. This article has instead sought to situate certain kinds of foodways in broader experiences of modernity at the local, regional and national scales. These experiences have been shaped by urban growth and landscape change, the partial commodification of food provisioning, colonial and postcolonial food security and rural development programs, and by both regional and transnational flows of people, goods and ideas. The French bean figures into the resulting modern historical geography not as a major crop, food, or foreign exchange earner, but rather as one example of the complex and ironic reasons for, and consequences of, changing food production and consumption patterns.

More broadly, this selective account has sought to show that beyond the dominant narratives of food in Africa—the narratives of imperiled custom and chronic crisis—there remains much to learn about the continent’s diverse modern foodways. More broadly still, there remains much to understand about the spatial and historical dynamics of consumption even (and perhaps especially) in societies where most people, by Western standards, consume relatively little.

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Notes

- [1] For example, R. Tannahill, *Food in History* (New York 1989), and J.-L. Flandrin and M. Montanari (Eds) *Food: A Culinary History* (New York 1999).

- [2] H. Barrett, B. Ilbery, A. Browne and T. Binns, Globalization and the changing networks of food supply: the importation of fresh horticultural produce from Kenya into the UK, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* **24** (1999) 159–174. I. Cook, New fruits and vanity: symbolic production in the global food economy, in A. Bonanno *et al.* (Eds) *From Columbus to ConAgra: The Globalization of Agriculture and Food*. (Lawrence, KS 1994) 232–248. W. Friedland, The new globalization: the case of fresh produce, in A. Bonanno *et al.*, *op. cit.*, 210–231.
- [3] B. Graham and C. Nash (Eds), *Modern Historical Geographies* (Harlow 2000) 1.
- [4] C. Nash, Historical geographies of modernity, in Graham and Nash, *op. cit.*, 13.
- [5] The archives of colonial French West Africa in Dakar, Senegal, the archives of the Bobo-Dioulasso Catholic mission, and the Bobo-Dioulasso town hall archives were all consulted. The first project, conducted in 1993–4, aimed to trace the social history of market-gardening in Bobo-Dioulasso and its immediate hinterlands, and to understand how changing meanings of work in both the gardening villages and the marketplaces were related to broader political economic, social and environmental changes. For this project I interviewed a total of 135 individuals, both women and men, in two gardening villages, and 83 urban-based market women. I also collected several oral histories from village elders. The second project focused on the trade in French beans and other vegetables between Africa and Europe, with particular attention to how particular norms, practices and relationships within this trade have been shaped by both colonial and culinary history.
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- [7] Emory Roe uses the term “development narrative” to describe the ‘received wisdom’ within the development community about the nature and severity of particular problems (i.e., environmental degradation, hunger) and what must be done about them. He suggests, moreover, that in Africa especially, ‘crises narratives’ have long substituted for genuine understanding, helping perpetuate the notion that Africa is exceptionally crisis-ridden. E. Roe, Except-Africa: postscript to a special section on development narratives, *World Development* **23** (1995) 1065–1070.
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- [10] Among the most articulate versions of this narrative is J. Burnett, *Plenty and Want: A Social History of Diet in England from 1815 to the Present Day* (London 1979). Also J.C. Drummond and A. Wilbraham, *The Englishman’s Food; A History of Five Centuries of English Diet* (London 1958); Flandrin and Montanari, *op. cit.*
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- [43] G. Le Moal, *Les Bobo: Nature et Fonction des Masques*. (Tervuren, Belgium 1999) 40.
- [44] Audrey Richards (*op. cit.*) described the nutritional and gustatory significance of the sauce (or relish, as she called it) in some detail; Gracia Clark has also written about the symbolic (and more specifically sexual) import of sauce preparation among the Ga of Ghana. G. Clark, Money, sex and cooking: manipulations of the paid/unpaid boundary by Asante market women, in H. Rutz and B. Orlove (Eds) *The Social Economy of Consumption* (Lanham, MD 1989) 323–348.
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- [55] S. Freidberg, To garden, to market: gendered meanings of work on an African urban periphery, *Gender, Place and Culture* 8 (2001) 5–24.
- [56] These recipes were collected with women from various ethnic groups, interviewed in Bobo-Dioulasso in January–February 2000.
- [57] For example, I sometimes saw women vegetable traders making sauces from wilted lettuce, cucumbers, or cauliflower (an uncommon vegetable there, typically sold only to Europeans).
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- [65] Per capita consumption in 1995 was estimated at 0.52 kilograms in France. It is actually higher in both the Netherlands and Germany, but the preferred variety in those countries is considerably thicker than the fine and extra fine varieties eaten in France.
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- [67] M.-K. Chan and B. King, *Review of the Implications of Changes in EU Pesticide Legislation on the Production and Export of Fruits and Vegetables from Developing Country Suppliers* (Chatham 2000).
- [68] This came up often in conversations with growers in both Zambia and Burkina Faso.
- [69] D. Miller and J. Reilly, Making an issue of food safety: the media, pressure groups, and the public sphere, in D. Maurer and J. Sobal (Eds) *Eating Agendas: Food and Nutrition as Social Problems* (New York 1995). This assumption also underlies Ulrich Beck's model of "risk society". See U. Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (London 1992).
- [70] Burnett, *op. cit.*, chapter five.
- [71] Syfia Press Agency, *L'Afrique, côté cuisines: regards Africains sur l'alimentation* (Paris 1994).
- [72] Menozzi, *op. cit.*.
- [73] Menozzi, *op. cit.*, 36.
- [74] M. French and J. Phillips, *Cheated Not Poisoned? Food Regulation in the United Kingdom, 1875–1938*. (Manchester 2000) I. Paulus, *The Search for Pure Food* (London 1974) P. Gurney, *Co-operative Culture and the Politics of Consumption in England, 1870–1930* (Manchester 1996).
- [75] J. Burnett, *op. cit.*, chapter ten.
- [76] *Ibid.*, French and Phillips, *op. cit.*