

FORUM

A Taste of America: How Progressive Era Marginalization of Immigrant Food Ways Defined an American Standard of Living

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The promise of a full stomach drew many emigrants to the United States. Defending an American standard of living—one that included steak dinners—was also an argument marshaled in favor of immigration restriction. By the turn of the twentieth century, food in the United States had become abundant enough for people to no longer strive for a full belly only. About half of the population was still involved in agriculture, but with a clear trend of fewer people necessary to produce more food.¹ Consumers emerged as an important political factor. Government policies and agencies concerned with consumer protection and food production mushroomed, with the Food and Drug Administration forming in 1906. Some of these agencies had opposite goals. For instance, David Fairchild headed the Office of Plant and Seed Introduction (founded 1898), scouring the world for food crops to enrich American agriculture and palates. Meanwhile, at about the same time, the Bureau of Entomology, tasked with the study of insects, became concerned about the introduction of foreign pests, leading to the Plant Quarantine Act of 1912.²

These opposite impulses—excitement as well as fear of the foreign—are integral to food and consumption habits. At the same time that nativists pushed through the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and derided the Chinese for their un-American diet, culinary tourists explored California's Chinatowns and exulted in *chop suey*, a Chinese dish adapted to white American tastes.³ Yet toward the end of the era, food, both literally and figuratively, had become an argument for nativist politics: Plant introduction was highly circumscribed and arguments about food played important roles in immigration restriction. This essay argues that food was quite literally at the center of Progressive Era debates about American national identity, with diet—a word derived from the Greek word *diata*, or “way of life”—featuring prominently in arguments about the American standard of living. Wielded by different interest groups and experts, notions of proper diet were often established through discussions of marginalized groups, especially immigrants.

Labor and the Desired Standard of Living

The debate about standards of living played out at a time when the United States transitioned from a predominantly agricultural society to a predominantly industrial society. This shift was accompanied by a transition to permanent wage work.⁴ The transition was by no means smooth; it was characterized by labor wars, the frequent strikes and lockouts that occasionally turned violent.⁵ Workers reluctantly gave up their producerist ideal—owning the means of production and sharing in profits—and formulated a new, consumption-based identity. As historian Lawrence Glickman has demonstrated, workers fought for “living wages” that afforded them not only subsistence but fair remuneration (without defining what that encompassed).⁶ One early example was Ira Steward (1831–1883), the Boston machinist and labor leader.⁷ In his advocacy for the eight-hour workday, Steward argued: “Capitalists remember us a[s] *Producers*, to be paid as little as possible; but not as *Consumers*, to be paid enough to enable us to *buy* their commodities.”⁸ As Glickman shows, the living wage was connected to the American standard of living, “making needs, rather than production, the mark of virtuous character.”⁹ The consumerist turn reinscribed dichotomies of free white workers versus black slaves and breadwinning men versus homemaking women.¹⁰ Furthermore, Steward distinguished his idea of consumer identity from the false consumption habits of foreigners: “They [the employers] remember that Foreigners *work* cheaper than Natives; but forget that Natives *buy* more of their goods than Foreigners.”¹¹ Immigrants accepted low wages, but they also lived cheaply. Capitalists’ wealth, however, not only depended on producing but also on selling goods. And here, Steward explained, “natives” excelled because they were willing to spend money. It was thus reasonable, he believed, to pay wages that allowed workers to share America’s material abundance. In the *American Workman*, Steward drove home this point, using derisive language: “A peasant of the Celestial Empire [China] can live on rats and his wages are gauged accordingly; but a Man accustomed to beefsteak, succeeds in getting work enough to buy it.”¹²

Industrialization attracted new immigrants to the United States, mainly from Eastern and Southern Europe, where they were employed primarily as unskilled laborers in factories and mines. The trade union movement arose to defend craft-based unionism and went hand-in-hand, as Gwendolyn Mink has argued, with nativism.¹³ The American Federation of Labor (AFL), founded in 1886, pursued the demand for *more*, that is, ever-rising wages to satisfy ever-growing desires. In the AFL’s view, asking for more was a prudent stance in the new market economy: it distinguished the American citizen worker from his foreign competitor.¹⁴ In the *American Federationist*, AFL writers argued that standards defined wages, and that, therefore, low standards necessarily led to low wages. Citing Scottish economist John Ramsay McCulloch, one writer concurred that “once [workers] become contended with a lower species of food, and an inferior standard of comfort, and they may bid a long adieu to anything better.”¹⁵ In effect, labor unions argued that they deserved better wages and shorter hours because they desired them. And this desire—including the “species of food” they ate—set them apart from the laboring classes of other countries.

Chinese Exclusion and the Demarcation of an American Standard of Living

Theresa McMahon agreed. In a 1925 publication, titled “Social and Economic Standards of Living,” she reviewed the existing literature and positions. McMahon argued that people of different countries were physically best adapted to different nutritional

standards: “the digestive organs adapt themselves to the habitual diet of a people ... Physical adaption may require more than the period of a lifetime.”¹⁶ Immigrants with their low standards and concordantly low desires therefore filled the least desirable, unskilled work positions in the United States, McMahon argued. There was, however, one race that mixed up low nutritional standards with aptitudes above their station. What she called the “oriental race” did not submit to an orderly progression of growing standards. Their crime, in her opinion, was to combine a “low standard of living” with “a comparatively high degree of intelligence.”¹⁷ By keeping their expenses low, they were able to establish successful businesses, outcompeting skilled American workers. Underconsumption: this was the original sin, brought forth time and again in favor of Chinese exclusion.

Food metaphors served both workers and politicians in their quest to demarcate an American standard of living.¹⁸ In a Senate debate on February 14, 1879, for example, James G. Blaine, a Republican from Maine, declared: “You cannot work a man who must have beef and bread, and would prefer beer, alongside a man who can live on rice. It cannot be done. In all such conflicts ... it is to bring down the beef and bread man to the rice standard.”¹⁹ The so-called rice standard was one of many notions Blaine marshaled in his fight to restrict Chinese immigration. In 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed, banning the immigration of Chinese workers, initially for the duration of ten years. The ban was renewed in 1892 and made permanent in 1902.²⁰ In 1902, when the renewal of the act was up for debate, Samuel Gompers of the AFL testified in front of Congress in favor of Chinese exclusion. A pamphlet published for this purpose, utilizing the food metaphor, was called “Meat versus Rice.” The AFL agreed with Senator Blaine that the Chinese and their rice standard underbid and thus threatened to destroy the American standard.²¹

The Atkinson-Atwater Connection: Prescribing the Standard of Living

Workers protested unfair laws and working conditions, seeking data to their claims. Business people, too, needed data for cost accounting. The new bureaus of labor statistics started collecting what came to be called “cost of living” data, calculating especially the price of food in relation to laborers’ wages.²² At the same time, social activists surveyed the living conditions of various populations.²³ Edward Atkinson, a businessman with a keen interest in social issues, was behind an astounding number of these early endeavors, sponsoring cooking laboratories by home economics pioneer Ellen Swallow Richards, collaborating with Wilbur Olin Atwater, the “father of nutrition science,” and tutoring Carroll Wright, the first commissioner of the National Bureau of Labor Statistics.²⁴ Cumulatively, these forays yielded some notion of what food provisions cost, what people habitually ate and spent on food, as well as the caloric profile of foods and the caloric needs of people.

Atkinson lamented that workers spent half or more of their wages on food. If food costs could be cut, he reasoned, workers’ standard of living would improve.²⁵ Atwater’s contribution was to compare what people ate with their nutritional needs. For this purpose, he collected dietaries and created a nutrition table estimating the average need for protein, carbohydrates, and fat (but neglecting vitamins and trace elements, which had not yet been discovered). Atwater found that in international comparisons, workers in the United States were well fed. Indeed, most workers ate too much, even according to the more lenient American standard, and especially too much meat and too many sweets.²⁶ If they ate less and substituted expensive beefsteak with cheaper cuts of meat, they could save money and enjoy a better lifestyle. This frugality was especially true of immigrants.

In one study, Atwater concluded that “the [immigrant] families could have obtained a more nutritious diet for the sum expended.” He recommended eating fewer fruits and vegetables, for which he saw little nutritive value, and choosing less expensive meat.²⁷

With the help of Atwater’s tables, nutrition experts developed meals that adhered to the new scientific standards—and were cheap. Atkinson provided his Aladdin Oven, an energy-saving contraption, for Richards’s cooking laboratory, the New England Kitchen (NEK).²⁸ This much-lauded effort drew sponsors like Andrew Carnegie and acolytes like Julia Lathrop, who transferred the concept to Chicago’s Hull House.²⁹ Despite their popularity with progressive reformers, NEK recipes and cooking methods failed with the targeted working class and immigrant audience.³⁰ Slow-cooked meals were much derided as robbing eaters of culinary pleasure. Working-class and immigrant women, often drawing on their native cuisines, already knew how to cook economically. In hindsight, Richards also complained that the NEK had pursued the wrong strategy: the lesser classes would always imitate their betters, and therefore the reform should have started among middle-class homemakers. Subsequently, she concentrated her efforts on the development of the new discipline of home economics.³¹

Taste and desire are powerful forces. American workers embraced wants as a marker of distinction. Immigrants, who were satisfied with cheap food, threatened American wage standards and therefore standards of living. The Chinese, especially, became the symbol of underconsuming, un-American Others. Surveying international living conditions, social scientists concurred that Americans were well-fed. Atwater acknowledged Americans’ higher needs, recommending a daily intake of 3,500 calories for a 70 kilogram man—up from the European recommendations of 3,050 calories.³² In the hands of nutrition experts, eating became a science. As Melanie DuPuis notes, eating right was both “a project of assimilation” and “a project of perfecting American society.”³³ What Americans ate set them apart from other nations, and an American standard was reason enough to dismiss foreign eating habits.

Notes

1 According to historian Paul Conkin, “By 1870, one able farmer growing wheat or corn could feed three other families. By 1900, one farmer might feed five other families; by 1930, almost ten. In 1900 agriculture was still, by far, the largest economic sector, with 40 percent of 76 million Americans living on farms. At least another 10 percent of workers were involved in agricultural services.” Paul K. Conkin, *A Revolution Down on the Farm: The Transformation of American Agriculture* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008), position 98.

2 Scholar Jeannie Shinozuka makes the argument that a biological nativism, espoused for example by Charles Marlatt of the Bureau of Entomology, was a form of “biological yellow peril” and anti-Asian racism. Jeannie N. Shinozuka, *Biotic Borders: Transpacific Plant and Insect Migration and the Rise of Anti-Asian Racism in America, 1890–1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022). Food exploration was part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s scientific mission and attempt to enrich the nation’s food crops. See Javier Francisco-Ortega et al., “Plant Hunting Expeditions of David Fairchild to The Bahamas,” *Botanical Review* 80 (2014): 164–183. For a popular treatment of Fairchild, see Daniel Stone, *The Food Explorer: The True Adventures of the Globe-Trotting Botanist Who Transformed What America Eats* (New York: Dutton, 2019).

3 Andrew F. Smith, *Eating History: Thirty Turning Points in the Making of American Cuisine* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 48.

4 See for example, Leon Fink, *The Long Gilded Age: American Capitalism and the Lessons of a New World Order* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015); Jeffrey P. Sklansky, *The Soul’s Economy: Market Society and Selfhood in American Thought, 1820–1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Robert F. Zeidel, *Robber Barons and Wretched Refuse: Ethnic and Class Dynamics during the Era of*

American Industrialization (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2020). On U.S. agriculture, see for example, “The Progressive Era” in R. Douglas Hurt, *Problems of Plenty: The American Farmer in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002), 3–40.

5 Including major strikes like the Great Railroad Strike of 1877, the 1894 Pullman strike, the eight-hour workday strike that included the Haymarket bombing in 1886, and the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory strikes circa 1909. See for example Richard A. Greenwald, *The Triangle Fire, the Protocols of Peace, and Industrial Democracy in Progressive Era New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005); Richard Schneirov, ed., *The Pullman Strike and the Crisis of the 1890s: Essays on Labor and Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999); David O. Stowell, ed., *The Great Strikes of 1877* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008).

6 Lawrence B. Glickman, *A Living Wage: American Workers and the Making of Consumer Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

7 Lawrence Glickman, “Workers of the World, Consume: Ira Steward and the Origins of Labor Consumerism,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* (Fall 1997): 72–86.

8 Ira Steward, *The Meaning of the Eight Hour Movement* (Boston: Steward, 1868), 7.

9 Glickman, *Living Wage*, 82.

10 Lawrence Glickman, “Inventing the ‘American Standard of Living’: Gender, Race and Working-Class Identity, 1880–1925,” *Labor History* 34, no. 2–3 (1993): 221–235.

11 Steward, *Meaning of the Eight Hour Movement*, 7.

12 Ira Steward, *American Workman*, July 31, 1869.

13 Gwendolyn Mink, *Old Labor and New Immigrants in American Political Development: Union, Party, and State, 1875–1920* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990).

14 As Glickman concluded, “The American Standard complemented labor’s ‘consumerist turn’ by positing a direct correlation between the worker’s character and his desires. Proponents defined the American Standard as the quality of having many wants as well as the means to fulfill them.” Glickman, “Inventing the ‘American Standard of Living,’” 225. See also Rosanne Currarino, *The Labor Question in America: Economic Democracy in the Gilded Age* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 52, 53.

15 “Advantages of an Eight-Hour Workday,” *American Federationist* 5 (Feb. 1899), 238.

16 Theresa S. McMahon, *Social and Economic Standards of Living*, (Boston: D. C. Heath, 1925), 182. On McMahon, see Laura Pflum, “Economics Faculty Member Theresa McMahon An Early Advocate for Labor Rights at UW,” Department of Economics homepage, University of Washington, Oct. 2015, <https://econ.washington.edu/news/2015/10/05/economics-faculty-member-theresa-mcmahon-early-advocate-labor-rights-uw>.

17 McMahon, *Social and Economic Standards of Living*, 226.

18 While Mink and others connect the labor movement with Chinese exclusion, Andrew Gyory claims it was “national politicians who seized and manipulated the issue in an effort to gain votes.” Andrew Gyory, *Closing the Gate: Race, Politics, and the Chinese Exclusion Act* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 1.

19 James G. Blaine in the *Congressional Record*, Feb. 14, 1879, 1303, <https://www.congress.gov/bound-congressional-record/1879/02/14/senate-section>.

20 On anti-Asian sentiment and Chinese exclusion see also Erika Lee, “The Chinese Exclusion Example: Race, Immigration, and American Gatekeeping, 1882–1924,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 21 (Spring 2002): 36–62; Erika Lee, *The Making of Asian America: A History* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2016), esp. chapt. 4; Erika Lee, *America for Americans: A History of Xenophobia in the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2021), chapt. 3.

21 Currarino, *Labor Question*, chapt. 2.

22 Thomas A. Stapleford, *The Cost of Living in America: A Political History of Economic Statistics, 1880–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), part 1.

23 Martin Bulmer et al., *The Social Survey in Historical Perspective, 1880–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

24 On the Atkinson-Atwater-Richard connection, see Hamilton Cravens, “Establishing the Science of Nutrition at the USDA: Ellen Swallow Richards and Her Allies,” *Agricultural History* 64 (Spring 1990): 122–133. On Wright, see Margo Anderson, “Standards, Statuses, and Statistics: Carroll Wright and the American Standard of Living,” *Advancing the Consumer Interest* 9 (Spring 1997): 4–12. On Atkinson’s connection to Atwater, see Harvey A. Levenstein, *Revolution at the Table: The Transformation of the American Diet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 74.

- 25 Edward Atkinson, "The Science of Nutrition," in *The Science of Nutrition: Treatise upon the Science of Nutrition* (Boston: Damrell and Upham, 1892), 12.
- 26 Wilbur Olin Atwater, "The Chemistry of Foods and Nutrition," *The Century Magazine*, May 1887, 59.
- 27 Wilbur Olin Atwater and A. P. Bryant, "Dietary Studies in Chicago in 1895 and 1896," *USDA Office of Experiment Stations Bulletin* 55 (1898), 71, 72.
- 28 Harvey Levenstein, "The New England Kitchen and the Origins of Modern American Eating Habits," *American Quarterly* 32 (1980): 369–386; Levenstein, *Revolution at the Table*, chap. 4; Nicholas J. P. Williams, "Becoming What You Eat: The New England Kitchen and the Body as a Site of Social Reform," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 18 (2019): 441–460.
- 29 Levenstein, *Revolution at the Table*, 51–54.
- 30 Levenstein, *Revolution at the Table*, 52; Michael J. Eula, "Failure of American Food Reformers among Italian Immigrants in New York City, 1891–1897," *Italian Americana* 18 (Winter 2000): 86–99.
- 31 Levenstein, *Revolution at the Table*, 58, 59; Sarah Stage, "Ellen Richards and the Social Significance of the Home Economics Movement," in *Rethinking Home Economics: Women and the History of a Profession*, ed. Sarah Stage and Virginia Bramble Vincenti (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 17–33.
- 32 Levenstein, *Revolution at the Table*, 57. Dietary guidelines today recommend between 1,600 to 2,400 calories per day for women and 2,000 to 3,000 calories per day for men. *Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020–2025*, 139. https://www.dietaryguidelines.gov/sites/default/files/2021-03/Dietary_Guidelines_for_Americans-2020-2025.pdf
- 33 E. Melanie DuPuis, *Dangerous Digestion: The Politics of American Dietary Advice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 91.

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