

Review of Joshua Specht's "Red Meat Republic"

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Joshua Specht, *Red Meat Republic: A Hoof-to-Table History of How Beef Changed America*. Princeton University Press 2019, ISBN (Paperback): 9780691209180, \$18,95/£14.99, 368 Pages.

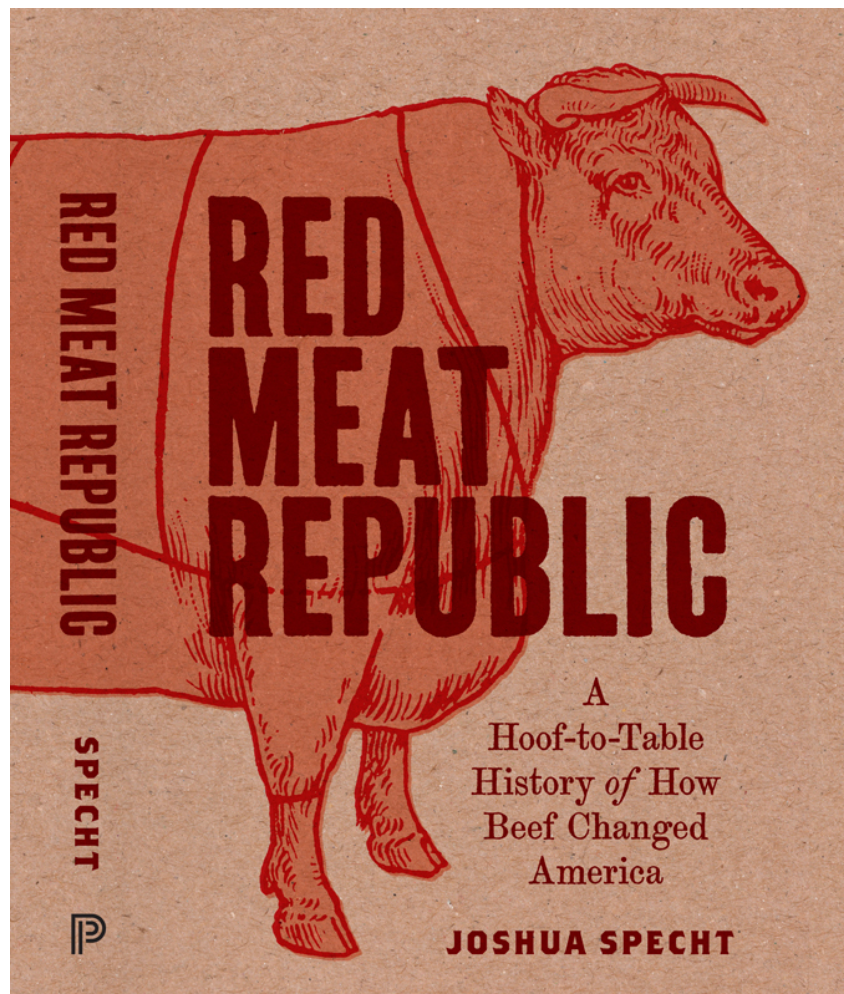
Joshua Specht's *Red Meat Republic* highlights the possibilities when producing a book with an Ivy League powerhouse publisher including innovative online marketing¹. *Red Meat Republic* is not only advertised appealingly, it is also a well-written and carefully researched book that will certainly appeal to historians interested in various subfields – environmental, economic, social, and cultural history.

The “first hoof-to-table-history of industrialized beef production,” the book tells the story of the “cattle-beef-complex” as a “set of institutions and practices keeping beef on the dinner table” in the United States during roughly the last quarter of the 19th and the first decade of the 20th centuries (4). Specht's overarching goal is to examine “the origins of industrial beef production” (260) and challenge traditional explanations. The author aims to reconcile two popular, albeit competing narratives of the history of the “cattle-beef-complex.” Especially early-20th century authors close to the industry of meatpacking have represented the system as a “consequence of emerging technologies such as the railroad and refrigeration, coupled with the business acumen of a set of honest and hardworking men.” Meanwhile, critics have provided a narrative that a “capitalist cabal was exploiting technological change and government corruption to bankrupt traditional butchers, sell diseased meat, and impoverish the worker” (2). Combining the arguments of both narratives, Specht highlights that “the national market for fresh

beef was the culmination of technological revolution, but it was also the result of collusion and predatory pricing” while the “modern slaughterhouse was a triumph of human ingenuity as well as site of brutal labor exploitation” (2-3). The author's main aim is to align “seemingly contradictory realities” and provide a history of a system that was “at once revolutionary and exploitative” by focusing on “individuals and conflicts that shaped food industrialization” (3).

To do so, the book's five chapters encompass the major stages in the commodity chain of beef, i.e. cattle ranching and marketing, slaughtering and the distribution as well as retail of meat, and finally the consumption of beef. The first chapter, War, addresses the violent westward expansion and the displacement of Native Americans after the Civil War, which represented a “story of ecological changes with profound political implications,” “national in scale and revolutionary in effect” (7). Fostered by both government policies and individual ranchers' efforts, the expropriation of territory west of the Mississippi created a space identified as an “open range” that was in reality “produced by the violent exclusion of people and bison” (23). Cattle functioned as “mobile colonizers” (35) alongside the US government's genocide of Native Americans on the Great Plains and militarized confinement of Native Peoples to reservations at the same time. As the removal and exclusion of people and bison “opened” the plains to European settler cattle ranching and remade the area “as an ecosystem as well as a political space” (18), the reservations –

¹ <https://press.princeton.edu/books/hardcover/9780691182315/red-meat-republic> (19 August 2021).



dependent on food rations supplied by the US government – served as a relatively secure outlet to dump especially low-quality meat at subsidized prices next to sales on regular markets. Narratives of Native Americans’ cultural failure and “allegedly backward practices” in turn “were as much a tool of conquest” as rifles and cattle, which provided “justification for the violence on which the cattle-beef complex rested” (23).

Chapter 2, *Range*, examines capital’s penetration of cattle ranching on the Great Plains. Wooed by large returns, investors from the United States and Great Britain moved large amounts of capital into cattle raising and created various large-scale ranching operations with hundreds of thousands of animals, “usually with more money than expertise” (77). Based on sources of such ranch corporations, Specht brilliantly highlights how “the microlevel practices of ranching – scattering cattle far and wide, allowing cattle to care for themselves – collided with the macrolevel needs of capital for precise business practices” (73). As

profitability rested on harnessing profitable ecological processes (grazing and reproduction) and eradicating unprofitable ones (fire, predators, starvation), “profitability ultimately depended on finding the cheapest means of allowing cattle to care for themselves” – letting them walk and graze freely (72). Consequently, large-scale ranch managers across the board were unable to gain and maintain exact knowledge of the numbers of cattle in their gigantic herds and developed more or less shaky methods of guestimation – “capital wanted precision but profit required uncertainty” (73).

When two hard winters with disastrous blizzards killed tens of thousands of cattle between 1885 and 1887, large mismatches between investors’ accounts and the numbers of cattle on the ground erased profits, sparked panic and led to the bursting of the cattle bubble. Cattle prices plummeted as investors aimed to secure what was left of their investments, ordering the sell off the remaining stocks of cattle at any price whatsoever. Across “the West,” the entire

system of large ranches toppled, leaving an environment of small-scale “family” ranches to dominate the business after the late 1880s. Thus, a “ranch was an ecosystem created in the interest of profit. Rancher and cattle had replaced nomad and bison in the quest to metabolize grass into salable human food. But it could never be a wholly artificial system, a factory for producing animal flesh. [...] The unpredictable Plains climate collided with not just investor psychology, but also the heart of investment and business: reliable and quantifiable inputs. [...] This story highlights important aspects of how landscapes are incorporated into commodity markets. [...] an ability to crudely, but persuasively, represent an ecosystem for investment capital may be more important for initially integrating a landscape into an economy than actually transforming that landscape” (116-117).

The failure of large-scale ranching had direct effects on the organization of the commodity chain downstream of ranching, as Specht shows in Chapter 3, Market. Rather than raised on large, centralized ranches, the production of cattle underwent a process of differentialization between various players and spaces since the 1870s, as “different regions specialized in different parts of the bovine life cycle” (125). Depending on regional ecologies, cattle were raised west of the Mississippi, especially in Texas and later fattened by specialized farmers on either the more nutritious grass plains of Colorado and Montana or by corn-belt farmers in Kansas, Illinois, Missouri, Iowa, and Ohio. Relying on hard and low paid cowboy labor, this differentialization required the mobility of cattle and people, which in turn led to a “standardization of spaces.”

“Expanding networks of commodities and capital [...] promoted a continent-spanning standardization of the built environment”: ranches, stockyards, butcher shops, etc. (7-8). Towns along cattle trails competed to grasp a piece of the pie by providing infrastructure for trade and “specific places and immobile actors appealed to mobile actors like ranchers with familiar amenities – hotels, well-regulated stockyards, and clearly marked trailing routes – that amounted to standardization, requiring correspondingly less local knowledge from market participants” (120). A consequence of mobility, when “mobile goods crossed

jurisdictions, people sought expanded federal authority to match the new scale of national markets” (120). Specht underlines this point by using the example of the Texas cattle fever during the 1880s, when “it became apparent that the scale of regulation needed to match the scale of markets” and federal sanitary regulations needed to be introduced to prevent actors from circumventing scattered local restrictions (150). Thus, “the story of modern beef [...] is fundamentally political” as its nation-wide system of production and distribution were linked inherently to the development of the federal state addressing growing needs of regulation at levels surpassing local, regional, and state competences (3).

Eventually, contrary to decentralized ranching, centralized slaughter operations benefitted massively from this development of the commodity chain. Established during the Civil War, the large meatpackers especially in Chicago profited from both the dramatic price decrease of cattle on one hand, and from the decentralized system on the other hand. By the 1880s, the big Chicago and Kansas meatpackers were able to dictate prices as they “could operate in several markets at once and had an endless number of suppliers” and “exploit the scale of their business” by operating nationally “while keeping their suppliers inescapably bound to a particular place, be it range, train car, or stock pen” (169). While ranchers could hardly afford the expense to move a herd from one market to another in case of unacceptable sales prices, helped by the telegraph Chicago buyers could quite easily (threaten sellers to) make purchases in other markets and thus play off local actors. This way, “between 1870 and 1900, western cattle markets evolved from a series of regional centers into an integrated national system” (170).

In chapter 4, Slaughterhouse, Specht addresses the way that Chicago meatpackers grew from regional players to “global behemoths” in just one decade (174). Next to exploiting economies of scale vis-à-vis ranchers, Chicago’s Big Four meatpacking companies came to monopolize the American – and to some extent even the British – market by exercising their combined market power at the expense of laborers, railroad companies and local retail butchers across the

eastern United States. With regard to labor, huge influxes of cheap, often immigrant workers, a legal regime that limited corporate liability and checked union power as well as combined efforts to curb resistance against precarious work conditions provided the meatpackers with “cheap, reliable, and desperate labor” at all times (180). Simultaneously, the Big Four also came to dominate shipments of dressed beef. By cornering the transportation market and circumventing the US-American railroads’ monopoly with the help of the Canadian Grand Trunk Railway, in the mid-1880s the meatpackers were not only able to play the railroads against each other but to deliver dressed, refrigerated meat cuts instead of live cattle to eastern butchers and European consumers. This, in turn allowed the slaughterhouses to elbow into local supply structures of beef. “Their message to these butchers was to stop slaughtering cattle and instead focus on selling meat, the packers would handle the rest. Of course, once the packers controlled a city’s wholesale market, they could set terms for retail butchers. Repeated thousands of times, this process turned the packers’ slim margins into big profits,” partly earned through “cutthroat business tactics” (203, 210.)

The meatpackers legitimized their actions with having “democratized meat consumption” and both consumers and lawmakers “embraced cheap beef” that could be controlled centrally according to sanitary needs (205, 206): “The refrigerator car might have made it possible for fresh Chicago beef to reach Minnesota, but a Supreme Court decision was necessary to sell it there” (209). Although regulators recognized the “artificial and abnormal centralization of markets, and the absolute control by a few operators thereby made possible” by late 1880s (211), “because judges, politicians, and bureaucrats all accepted the argument that low prices were the most important goal, meatpacking would thereafter be regulated in a way that ensured cheap beef at the same time that it promoted centralization and tolerated both rancher precariousness and worker exploitation” (215).

Indeed, consumer demand was key to this development, as Specht points out in chapter 5, Table. “Even if markets are deeply political,

the cultural history of consumption is closely tied to how and why markets are regulated”, he argues (15). Demand for fresh rather than cured beef highly affected the whole supply system that came to be regulated around sanitation, not labor. Because the meatpacking companies were highly successful in integrating local retail butchers as mere “handlers or selling agents for Meat Trusts” into the commodity chain, this facilitated the “invisibility of industrial production” and the “democratization of beef” (219). Democratization, chapter five argues, “brought new burdens and expectations” (221). On the one hand, “limits of consumer politics” (221) foreclosed certain kinds of political intervention into the production processes upstream; if beef was cheap and sanitary consumers and politicians alike were satisfied. “Addressing issues that might ultimately increase the cost of meat—such as labor exploitation or animal abuse—require a high bar of consumer sacrifice. This sacrifice becomes correspondingly greater as an ingredient gains importance in consumers’ lives” (221).

On the other hand, using recipes, cookbooks and analyzing consumer debates, Specht highlights that the democratization of beef consumption both fostered the differentialization of consumer practices and sparked debates over who should be able to eat what. While new elite ways of consuming meat – “French-style cooking and elaborate dinner parties” at exquisite restaurants – “became crucial to the consolidation of the elite social world,” beefsteak dinners during which young males ate “vast quantities of steak washed down with beer” became a way to express “the period’s gender ideals, away from restrained manliness and toward an aggressive and sometimes violent masculinity” during the 1880s and 1890s (244, 245). In short, “consumption was a way of asserting hierarchy, whether of men over women, American-born over immigrant, or colonizer over colonized” (221).

Due to the “importance of cultural meaning and sanitation to commodification” (223), beef consumption and preparation was, remained, and increasingly became an issue deeply connected to gender, class, and race; it might even include “social Darwinian thinking about food” (239). Concluding the

book after highlighting the entire systems' relative persistence up to the present day, Specht again underlines the book's central claim, that "this method of producing our food is a question of politics and political economy, rather than technology and demographics" – therefore, systems that are "more equitable" are feasible (260).

Well in line with other recent publications like Gergely Baics's *Feeding Gotham* (2016) or Jan de Vries's *The Price of Bread* (2019)², Specht's book represents a further contribution that underlines the importance of politics to (the history of) food systems. While throwing neither out of the window, it is thus another account that combines political, economic and environmental factors vis-à-vis narratives that center on cultural histories of food. This way, in the face of the accelerating global issues of climate change and inequality, Specht's contribution might be considered part of a "neo-materialist" turn that refocuses the attention of historians to topics different from the focal points of cultural-turn historiographies of the last decades. However, Specht demonstrates that such a reorientation does not need to be a refutation; it can be an advancement by adopting more encompassing perspectives.

In this lies *Red Meat Republic's* brilliance. The book's quality derives from Specht's ability to convincingly connect the several links of the food chain of beef and explain the interplay and power relations between the ranching, marketing, slaughtering and consuming of beef. Not at all an easy task, *Red Meat Republic* can therefore be an excellent model for other histories aiming to adopt a Wallersteinian commodity chain approach. However, the focus on the narrative comes at a price. While the narrative approach is thoroughly convincing, Specht's theory behind the story is rather weak. Neither does the author address any theoretical concepts of the

commodity chain approach he terms a "hoof to table" history. This is especially disappointing as the book's quality would very well allow Specht to contribute to the advantages and disadvantages of such approaches and enter conversation with various concepts presented by e.g. Immanuel Wallerstein or Gary Gereffi³.

Second, Specht's terminology at times remains rather blurry – especially when it comes to "commodification." While his hint that the "ability to crudely, but persuasively, represent an ecosystem for investment capital may be more important for initially integrating a landscape into an economy than actually transforming that landscape" opens an interesting point of departure for further research into commodity frontiers (116-117), his aim to develop a "theory of food as a commodity to understand how consumers' relationship with their food influence production" somehow disappears over the course of the book (20). While scholars like Karl Polanyi or E.P. Thompson have offered important concepts on exactly such an issue – (struggles over) the marketization of (fictitious) commodities and bread as a commodity with certain specifics – such theoretical approaches are hardly called on by Specht. Moreover, although recognizing "the importance of cultural meaning and sanitation to commodification" (223), it remains unclear what Specht understands by that term. Karl Marx maintained a "good" only becomes a "commodity" through exchange in Volume I of *Das Kapital*; since beef was a product exchanged on (local) markets before the Chicago meatpackers forged industrial beef processing and a national, centralized market in the 1870s/1880s, Specht's story is not at all one of the commodification of meat in the Marxist sense, it is much more a story about power in and regulation of a commodity market.

Thus, while *Red Meat Republic* aims to contribute to debates over capitalism, market

² Gergely Baics, *Feeding Gotham. The Political Economy and Geography of Food in New York, 1790–1860*, Princeton University Press 2016; Jan de Vries, *The Price of Bread. Regulating the Market in the Dutch Republic*, Cambridge University Press 2019.

³ See Terence K. Hopkins/Immanuel Wallerstein, Commodity Chains in the World-Economy Prior to 1800, in: *Review* (Fernand Braudel Center) Vol. 10, No. 1 1986, 157-170; Gary Gereffi/Miguel Korzeniewicz (ed.), *Commodity Chains and Global Capitalism*, Praeger Publishers, Westport, CT 1994.

and state *en passant*, a closer reading/ incorporation of theoretical literature would have allowed a wider contribution to more general debates on capitalism, marketization, etc. that exceeds the challenging of rather US-specific historiographies. Nevertheless, Joshua Specht has presented a well-written, entertaining and most rewarding book that

tremendously connects often individually-treated links of meat's commodity chain. Therefore, *Red Meat Republic* will certainly become a standard reference for both academics and non-academic readers interested in the history of food and capitalism.



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