

Putting Meat on the American Table: Taste, Technology, Transformation. *By Roger Horowitz*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006. xiii + 170 pp. Illustrations, tables, notes, index. Cloth, \$35.00; paper, \$19.00. ISBN: cloth, 0-801-88240-0; paper, 0-801-88241-9.

Reviewed by Timothy B. Spears

In *Putting Meat on the American Table*, Roger Horowitz tells a familiar story of production and consumption as he describes how nineteenth-century farmers, butchers, and merchants, operating in regional and local markets, gave way to large, efficiently organized corporations whose relentless efforts to control the national food chain have made the United States one of the top meat-eating nations in the world. Historically speaking, the nation's fondness for meat may be measured by the pound: according to one survey, in 2002 the average Americans ate 215.5 pounds of meat, compared with 150 to 200 pounds during the nineteenth century—a significant boost, especially when one takes into account the increased popularity of fish and other sources of protein among contemporary eaters. Horowitz notes with alarm the disproportionate amount of resources that Americans consume, but he is primarily concerned with the economic and technological forces that helped construct these tastes. As he is largely interested in the challenges faced by managers, scientists, and laborers in trying to control the unruly forces of nature and transform inherently “perishable” meats into stable commodities with extended shelf-lives (p. xi), Horowitz brings a materialist's perspective to his subject. The conceptual prompt for this approach, as he notes in the preface, is Sigfried Giedion's *Mechanization Takes Command*, a work that continues to exercise influence long after its publication in 1948. Given its focus on the transformation of natural resources, *Putting Meat on the American Table* also evokes comparisons to William Cronon's *Nature's Metropolis* (1991).

Horowitz's materialist approach is evident in the titles of his chapters, which focus on different kinds of meat: beef, pork, hot dogs, chicken, and “convenient meat.” The latter chapter is a discussion of efforts—from the use of antibiotics in animal feed to the development of packaging materials, like cellophane, to highlight the color and

freshness of meats—to compress animals' growth cycles and increase the marketability of meats in general. Here, and throughout the book, he highlights the tension between meat as a natural nutrient and meat's status as a readily accessible, commercial product. To speed and rationalize the process of putting meat in stores and on tables, manufacturers increasingly altered and reshaped animal flesh and its byproducts. "Implicit in the very notion of convenience," Horowitz explains, "was using technology to help mankind claim victory over the organic, subduing animals and their parts to the imperative of the human race" (pp. 151–52). Although the examples of creative entrepreneurs like Gustavus Swift and Frank Perdue suggest that Americans have largely succeeded in conquering nature, the federal government's ongoing need to regulate the meat industry and protect consumers from chemical additives underscores the difficulty of accommodating animal-food production to the dictates of the modern consumer economy.

The processes that butchers and industrialists developed to bring their products to the table varied from one sort of meat to another. As one early-twentieth-century economist remarked after seeing a Chicago slaughterhouse in action, "Skill has become specialized to fit the anatomy" (p. 53). Horowitz's own analysis follows a similar logic: each chapter shows how the attributes of a particular animal (and the resulting meat products) guided the development of particular butchering procedures, labor practices, employment preferences, technological innovations, packaging techniques, cooking styles, and consumer tastes. Horowitz acknowledges the impact of cultural factors on this process—through the intersection of racial, ethnic, class, and regional identities with consumer preferences—but his overriding concern, following Giedion, is with the steady rationalization of the meat industry and the related development of a national consumer market for meat. His discussion of hot dogs, for instance, shows how manufacturers transformed the centuries-old handicraft of sausage-making (apparently the ancient Egyptians ate sausage) into an assembly-line production of ground and compressed meat byproducts. Ultimately, the hot dog became a leading American "meat" and an icon of modern popular culture.

A little over one hundred and fifty pages in length, *Putting Meat on the American Table* is a good deal shorter than most monographs that find their way into college

classrooms. Although Horowitz may not break much new ground in his study, he deserves credit for covering a range of complex transformations in a compact, clearly written volume. Students who get their history of meatpacking from Upton Sinclair's 1906 novel, *The Jungle*, will discover that there is more to that business than the killing floors of Chicago, and they will learn from Horowitz's effective use of primary documents (images as well as written texts) that the practice of slaughtering animals and transforming their flesh is a vital part of American history. Professional historians may wish Horowitz had pursued his subject for another one hundred and fifty pages—perhaps by expanding his discussion of the cultural significance of meat eating or by addressing the impact that animal-rights activism has had on the meat industry. But these are just suggestions, prompted by a useful book.

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