

Meat Matters: Butchers, Politics, and Market Culture in Eighteenth-Century Paris. By Sydney Watts. New York: University of Rochester Press, 2006. x + 232 pp. Illustrations, appendix, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$29.95. ISBN: 1-580-46211-1.

Reviewed by Kolleen M. Guy

Anyone with even a cursory knowledge of the grim life of a cow on a feedlot might look back with nostalgia at the days when cows grazed on grassy hillsides until they were driven to the abattoirs at the center of town. The invisibility of both the cow and their slaughter, as Sydney Watts chronicles in *Meat Matters*, is relatively recent. The eighteenth century marked the beginning of a process of removing and containing the killing, inspired by considerations of economics and sanitation. Industrial meat production would follow in the next century.

The threat that a seemingly obscure British veterinary problem—bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), or mad cow disease—could turn into a global public-health crisis has brought meat processing back to public attention and raised urgent questions about the role of government in protecting the food supply. Our goal for much of the modern period has been to eat at a distance and to trust that a system of oversight serving the public interest is in place.

Watts makes a convincing case that consumers have been at the losing end of unregulated meat markets and that the desire for basic protections from governments is long standing. Provisioning of foodstuffs formed the basis of the social contract between kings and their subjects in the early modern period. Failure to assure an adequate food supply could jeopardize public trust, and the crown intervened in markets to ensure both quantity and quality of food. Meat was not about subsistence; nonetheless, it came to be seen, first by elites and then by commoners, as a necessary good. The crown intervened, particularly in urban areas, to ensure a level of health and safety in its supply. Government regulation was not limited to the point of sale, assuring that the beefsteak, for example, was not rotting goat. Policing the herding of large numbers of cattle through

crowded city centers and regulating the environment where the animals were slaughtered were equally critical.

Yet there were then, as there are now, limits to bureaucratic intervention. Livestock markets, for example, moved outside urban centers, and new systems of credit made it more difficult for officials to trace and regulate transactions. Guilds of butchers, in theory granted a monopoly by the crown for the sale of meat, were challenged by itinerant rural merchants, peddlers, and foreign butchers who came to the city to feed the growing urban appetite for flesh. Inspectors and police were better able to regulate markets when producers and consumers remained in close proximity. Containing markets within geographic space, as Watts demonstrates, was no longer feasible as new networks of supply and distribution exploded along with urban demand in the eighteenth century. By the eve of 1789, the crown and the guilds had become ineffectual in controlling markets. Long before that famous night of August 4, 1789, when the National Assembly opened the way for a dramatic reform of the old absolutist, corporate structure, the meat markets of Paris revealed the extent to which the government could no longer control the economy. "Regulation served the public good in word," Watts notes, but "its reach remained incomplete in deed" (p. 162).

The new free-market system and the limits of regulatory reach of the post-1789 era were, thus, not so new. Parisians were long accustomed to seeking out supplies of meat from more competitive nonguild meat sellers. Consumers were aware of fraud and prepared to demand regulation, whether by an absolutist or a democratic state. Producers and distributors responded to consumer demands for more standard classification of meats and more uniform cuts to correspond to shifting culinary fashions. "The contrast between the Old Regime corporate system and the new free market system," Watts concludes, "can too easily deceive historians" (p. 163). Regulation was not the hindrance to economic growth and dynamic markets that so many have supposed.

The book also reminds us that food has a symbolic function that can often surpass its nutritional value. Meat matters, as the title suggests, in a myriad of ways. One could argue, after reading Watts's book, that meat matters were more affected by shifts in the social and cultural spheres than by the economic changes that occurred in the aftermath of the revolutionary upheaval. Meat does not comprise all animals. We apply the term

specifically to the flesh of an animal that we have determined is edible. And, in the Atlantic world at least, we don't eat suffocated animals or, for the most part, strangled animals; we don't eat family pets, familiar animals, or, generally, other carnivores. We like our meat "sculpted," in a sense, so that it bears little resemblance to the original body part or muscle group. These are norms that were solidified in the nineteenth century and are thus beyond the scope of Watts's study. It is interesting to note that while she uses *abattoir* throughout the book in discussing the eighteenth century, the term did not make an appearance until 1806, when it was became a euphemism for the old words, *tuerie* or *écorcherie*, which were judged as too brutal. The new postrevolutionary language for meat was borrowed from the world of lumberjacks or *bûcherons* who *abattent les arbres*. In other words, there was a shift to using language from the world of work associated with vegetable matter. The language of gentle herbivores masked our brutal carnivore nature.

Watts explores the prodigious trade and growing consumption of meat in this thoroughly researched, well-written study. Hers is a social history of the functioning of guilds, the strategies of family business, and the shifting nature of credit on the eve of the Revolution. And she deftly demonstrates how issues of regulation of food markets in the interest of public health and safety are consistent across shifting economic and political regimes. The Revolution would bring a renewed sense of urgency to the regulation of meat markets within urban space that reflected a desire to create a city, in the aftermath of the Terror, without the blood and violence that animal slaughter came to represent. Changing sensibilities meant that "the visible presence of slaughterhouses evoked disgust and engendered complaints because of the polluting nature of butchers' work" (p. 83). Butchering would gradually move outside the public gaze, in keeping with new sensibilities. Yet, regardless of regime, government regulatory action remained because meat mattered.

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