

## Article REVIEW

**Nick Cullather.** “The Foreign Policy of the Calorie.” *American Historical Review* 112.2 (April 2007): 337-364.

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Ten years ago diplomatic historians were complaining that they were all but shut out of the *American Historical Review* (AHR), the most prestigious journal in the profession. Nick Cullather’s article shows how and why they have been storming back. It is not because the editors suddenly realized there was a large audience just waiting to hear about the various doings of the U.S. State Department as revealed by the documents it deigns to declassify thirty years later. Quite the contrary. It is because many more historians – some with a background in diplomatic history, others coming from different fields – are producing fascinating work that is redefining the study of world politics.

Virtually every number of the AHR now includes something new in international and global history. Just in the last six issues, there have also been presidential addresses on sovereignty and statelessness by James Sheehan and Linda Kerber, review essays on military history and the League of Nations by Robert Citino and Susan Pedersen, research articles on Wilsonianism in Asia and “diplomatic history from below” in Latin America by Erez Manela and Rafe Blaufarb, and testy but entertaining forums on anti-Americanism and transnational history. The study of inter-state diplomacy is enjoying a revival, but only because it is now understood to be part of a much bigger and bolder agenda, one that is no less concerned with migration and citizenship, the circulation of ideas and norms, the rise of international and non-governmental organizations, and much, much more.

When we do not begin and end with the assumption that nation states run the world, we can discover some startling things, including “continents of human welfare,” as Herbert Hoover put it, that have been terra incognita to most diplomatic historians. In this new terrain, the League of Nations, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), and the Rockefeller Foundation turn out to be rather important, at least if one agrees that it is important to know how large numbers of people eat, or how they starve.

Nick Cullather’s article is also a brilliant illustration of how expanding our field of inquiry does not necessarily entail neglecting subjects like war, revolution, and state-building. Instead, shifting our perspective to something mundane but fundamental puts them in a whole new light. It is not that a unit of measurement, as such, can have a foreign policy, but that it makes new kinds of politics seem possible, even natural, and can transform

diet and domesticity into international affairs. Quantifying and commodifying what farmers cultivate, what governments ration, what aid programs provide, what doctors prescribe, and what people eat had the effect of connecting all of them in a global network of unequal relations.

“The Foreign Policy of the Calorie” is also a model for the judicious and unpretentious use of theory. Rather than substituting for research, it helps us to interpret a body of evidence. Cullather explains the statistical analysis of food and the science of nutrition in terms of Michel Foucault’s concept of governmentality. Whatever his failings as an historian—especially the anachronistic application to Early Modern Europe of insights that were most germane to the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century—Foucault illuminated one of the more striking aspects of contemporary life: people police themselves, accepting and enacting definitions of normalcy without realizing where they come from, or where they can lead.

The way we count calories – or carbs, or fats, or “good” and “bad” cholesterol – can be compared to how we measure, compare, and then begin preaching about fertility rates, “developmental milestones,” school test scores, carbon footprints, personal credit ratings, et cetera. As Ian Hacking argued in *The Taming of Chance*, the discovery of statistical distributions made normalcy something to strive for.<sup>1</sup> It remains remarkable how eager people are to participate in the process, instructing one another in how they should think and talk about their food, or their children, or their finances. If the need for markets chases capitalists around the world, as Marx and Engels observed, the need to feel and seem normal can drive everyone up the wall.

Yet if all this can be oppressive, it also makes possible things that most people—after eight hours rest and a nutritious breakfast—would consider quite progressive. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the claim that Chinese immigrants could live and breed on less food than their European counterparts was an argument to keep them from settling in the Americas and Australia. Scientifically demonstrating that better nutrition has a leveling effect on IQ, height, and healthiness not only undermined racism, it made hungry people harder to ignore. That’s why League of Nations nutritionists were unwelcome in India under the Raj. One British minister later greeted a Food and Agriculture Organization report with incredulity: “That means the people of India would have the same diet that we have,” to which Director-General John Boyd Orr answered “Why not? We have to think of the world as a whole.”<sup>2</sup>

As Fred Cooper and others have shown, preaching norms and standards can serve to rationalize rule over other people, but it also provided those same people with the moral

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<sup>1</sup> Ian Hacking, *The Taming of Chance (Ideas in Context)* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> Orr, “World Resources,” *Proceedings of the International Congress on Population and World Resources in Relation to the Family* (London: H.K. Lewis & Co., 1948), 4-9.

standing to insist on results, or to promise that they could do better if allowed to do it for themselves. Thus, Cullather shows how counting calories led some to realize that they might exploit hunger to give the U.S. more power over poor countries. At the 1974 World Population Conference, one speaker warned that all of humanity had less than a month's supply of food, and the U.S. would decide which nations starved. But counting calories also allowed Amartya Sen to demonstrate that self-governing peoples do not generally let citizens go hungry.<sup>3</sup>

As historians, we know that we need to take the measure of all these different metrics, and point out when they do not add up. There is complexity inherent in individual nutrition that cannot be summarized on the back of a cereal box, or even an FAO report comparing consumption in different countries. It is not just the statistical "outliers," but everything that cannot be counted "per capita," such as how fathers often take the lion's share in many households. Conversely, a fertility rate based on the number of children born to each woman – another statistical measure with incalculable consequences – can be misleading in places where extended families shape reproductive decisions, and many children are raised by relatives.

But if this posed a problem for global governance, it is no less a challenge for global historians. As exciting as it is to begin to explore these "continents of human welfare," and use the records that U.N. and non-government organization officials left behind to guide us along our way, it is still not clear what we can learn about all the other people we meet. What was the foreign policy of those who waited for nutritional supplements in the World Food Program depots, or the woman lining up for a Depo Provera shot outside a World Health Organization mobile clinic? No one article – indeed, no one journal – can begin to cover this.

The story of epistemic communities, global norms, and international aid will allow us to write a new history of the world. But it will not be a history of all the world's people unless we bring in the perspectives of those who found themselves on the receiving end of all this altruism. They may not have realized that they needed to be discovered, but they understood before long that they had much to gain or lose from the encounter.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Malcolm W. Brown, "Expert Says World Has 27 Days' Food," *The New York Times*, August 21, 1974, 2; Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981).

<sup>4</sup> I raised similar questions, without really answering them, in "Population Control is History: New Perspectives on the International Campaign to Limit Population Growth," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 45 (Winter 2003): 122-147.

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*Commissioned for H-Diplo by Jonathan Reed Winkler, Wright State University*