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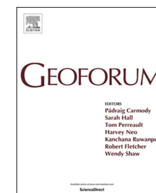

Meat consumption and capitalist development: The meatification of food provision and practice in Vietnam

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

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A B S T R A C T

The global consumption of meat and animal products has increased dramatically in recent decades, particularly due to rising consumption in so-called developing countries. This increase has popularly been explained as part of a "nutrition transition" driven by rising income, urbanisation and foreign culinary influences. From the supply side, the increase has been approached as part of a "livestock revolution", or alternatively as the outcome of capitalist agricultural processes. This paper argues, however, that these explanations have given insufficient attention to how and why consumption of meat changes. The paper analyses the case of Vietnam, where meat consumption has increased very rapidly since the initiation of market reforms in 1986. In understanding how meat consumption and development have co-evolved, the paper argues that consumption should be approached at the intersection between systems of provision and everyday practices. With this backdrop – and partly combining, partly going beyond standard explanations – the paper locates four main contributing factors towards increasing meat consumption in Vietnam: (1) changes in systems of provision for meat, (2) the meat intensification of traditional meals and the import of meat-intensive eating practices from abroad, (3) the increasing prevalence of eating out; and (4) the positive social connotations attached to meat as a symbol of development and progress. The paper goes on to argue that the dramatic meatification of food provision and practice in Vietnam should be understood as the result of capitalist development processes and their associated economic and social changes, rather than the 'natural' and inevitable outcome of development.

1. Introduction

Over the last decades, global consumption of meat and animal products has increased dramatically. By 2013, total global meat supply reached 302 million tonnes, and global annual average meat consumption per capita hit 43 kgs, compared to 23 kgs in 1961 (FAOSTAT)[1], despite the global population more than doubling in that period. As FAO pointed out in the seminal report *Livestock's Long Shadow*, until the early 1980s daily consumption of meat and dairy products was mainly an OECD privilege (Steinfeld et al., 2006). Then in the subsequent two decades, total global meat supply almost doubled from 133 million tonnes in 1980 to 239 million tonnes in 2002. In developing countries, total annual meat supply tripled (from 47 million tonnes to 137 million tonnes) while annual per capita meat consumption doubled (from 14 kgs to 28 kgs) in the same period (Steinfeld et al., 2006). The upwards spiralling trend has continued and is expected to persist over the coming decade (OECD/FAO, 2016; Henchion et al., 2014).

From a food, nutrition and well-being perspective, some increase in meat consumption in developing countries can have very positive effects. However, meat production is a highly inefficient way to provide food to a growing population and current consumption levels and production processes have serious environmental consequences (Weis, 2013a; Neo and Emel, 2017). For example, livestock systems already emit up to 18 per cent of total greenhouse gases and use 25–32 per cent of global fresh water (Herrero et al., 2015). While it is certainly possible to make livestock processes more efficient and more environmentally friendly (e.g. Kristensen et al., 2014; Herrero et al., 2015), current trends in meat consumption are unsustainable, and a further global-scale increase in consumption is thus deeply problematic.

The increases in meat consumption in developing countries have popularly been seen as part of a "nutrition transition"[2] (Popkin, 1993; Popkin et al., 2012) and a "livestock revolution" (Delgado et al., 1999; Delgado, 2003). While capturing important general trends, both ideas have been criticised for their simplicity and for being partly misleading. For example, as a global average, diets may not be changing as much as

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[1] This massive growth has been driven mainly by consumption of poultry followed by pork (Henchion et al., 2014).

[2] In addition to meat and other animal source food, the nutrition transition refers to shifts towards more processed food, more sugar and more fats in a wide range of low- and middle-income countries (Popkin, 1993; Popkin et al., 2012).

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the “nutrition transition” suggests (Pica-Ciamarra and Otte, 2011). As for the livestock revolution, it may be more of a gradual evolution than a dramatic revolution (MacLachlan, 2015a; Pica-Ciamarra and Otte, 2011). More importantly, as indeed acknowledged by Delgado (2003), these are not global as much as spatially uneven phenomena occurring in some regions and not in others. The livestock revolution, for example, has been very strong in parts of East and Southeast Asia, and non-existent in most of Africa (Delgado, 2003) where only southern parts of the continent have seen any increase in per capita meat consumption (OECD/FAO, 2016). Furthermore, Weis (2013a,b) has criticised how these concepts make escalating meat consumption seem a natural and inevitable outcome of growing affluence, along the lines of old-school linear development thinking. Instead, he argues, we should be looking at how specific capitalist development trajectories, and most importantly industrial livestock production and associated industries, make what he terms the “meatification” of diets possible (Weis, 2013a,b). A similar argument is made by Schneider (2017) based on the study of what she conceptualises as China’s “industrial meat regime” (see also Schneider and Sharma, 2014; Sharma, 2014).

While the abovementioned scholarship has produced valuable insights on the political economy and economic geography of meat, a gap in both mainstream and critical accounts of surging meat consumption is consumption itself. More precisely, consumption trends are discussed, but the drivers of these trends are mostly assumed or generalised. In the literature on the nutrition transition and the livestock revolution, common explanations for changes in consumption are first and foremost increasing affluence, but also urbanisation and an associated convergence towards ‘Western-style’ diets (Kearney, 2010; Delgado, 2003; Popkin, 1993). In critical accounts, consumption is often mentioned, but it is production regimes that are studied. All of these are undoubtedly important factors, as will be discussed below. But they are also insufficient explanations. Decades of research on consumption has shown that although consumers are far from autonomous agents, they – or we – do possess considerable agency. Affluence makes more consumption of certain things possible, but not inevitable. As Weis (2013a) argues, there are few reasons to believe we as humans are programmed to eat as much meat as possible. Instead, as is discussed below, our eating habits, and consumption patterns in general, are shaped by both systems of provision and everyday practices. If the unsustainable global surge in meat consumption is to be confronted, we need to understand not only the forces and processes that have led to increased production but also the reasons why people eat more and more meat.

This paper analyses different developments contributing to escalating meat consumption in one rapidly growing economy, Vietnam, combining a focus on changes in production and provisioning with analysis of changes in everyday food practices. Through this study, the paper aims to contribute towards a more empirically grounded understanding of meat-intensive development trends. The paper makes three main contributions: First, in support of contributions by scholars such as Weis (2013a,b) and Schneider (2017), it brings further evidence to the idea of meatification of food provision and practice as being the outcome of capitalist development strategies and processes, rather than inevitabilities based on human beings’ insatiable hunger for meat. Second, it provides a contextualised analysis of rapidly increasing meat consumption in Vietnam. And third, it shows the importance of taking consumption seriously in order to understand how and why diets become meatified.

After an explanation of methodology, the paper starts with a discussion of the relationship between development and meat consumption based on existing literature, before zooming in on development and consumption in Vietnam. In the subsequent section, the paper analyses what I argue are the four main factors contributing to escalating meat consumption in Vietnam: increasing availability of meat, meat intensification of everyday food practices, increasing prevalence of eating out and the social significance of meat as a symbol of development and social status. Crucially, the paper goes on to argue, these are not ‘natural’ development trajectories, but the outcome of specific policies and of the spatial expansion of capitalism.

2. Methodology

The paper draws most directly on two periods of fieldwork in Hanoi in 2017, from March to May and in October. During this period I interviewed government officials, food and agriculture analysts, market vendors, restaurant owners, specialty food producers, farmers and representatives of abattoirs and villages engaged in livestock slaughter, as well as members of 20 middle-class households[3], about food and meat consumption. Interviews varied in length, with the interviews with busy market vendors the shortest, sometimes as brief as a few minutes, and the household interviews the longest, usually around one hour. All interviews were semi-structured. The household interviews were more in-depth than the others, and functioned as a form of semi-structured food conversation about everyday food purchases and preferences, cooking practices and eating practices, with particular emphasis on meat. Some were conducted in Vietnamese with an assistant translator, and some in English. For the sake of clarity, some quotes in the paper have been slightly altered grammatically.

With an epistemological starting point valuing the importance of understanding local contexts and engaging in the everyday lived experiences of interviewees, interviews have been combined with an ethnographically oriented approach to food practices. From this perspective, while it is essential to talk to people in order to understand their worlds and lives (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009), it is necessary to go beyond “sayings” and also consider “doings” in order to understand social practices (Halkier and Jensen, 2011). I thus also engaged directly in an extensive range of food practices, including shopping and eating at a wide variety of food spaces frequented by the city’s middle classes. Through this engagement, as well as through the experiences of everyday life in Hanoi, I also had frequent informal food conversations with friends, colleagues, and acquaintances that have informed my understanding of the Vietnamese food scene. Crucially, and related to the latter point, the paper also draws on eight years of working in and on Vietnam in shorter and longer periods, where food has all along represented a central interest. My research is thus also informed by a large number of informal conversations about food, an estimated couple of thousand restaurant and street food meals all over Vietnam, as well as lunch and dinner meals at the homes of friends and acquaintances in several parts of the country.

The qualitative approach outlined above has been combined with secondary data from FAO, UN Comtrade and the General Statistics Office of Viet Nam. The following discussions thus draw on secondary data to outline macro trends of meat production and consumption as well as expert and policy-maker interviews to better comprehend Vietnamese food policies and priorities, interviews with producers and retailers to study systems of provision, and household interviews combined with a sort of ‘eating ethnography’ to approach and engage in everyday food practices.

3. Meat and development

There is a clear correlation between increasing meat consumption and increasing affluence, although only up to a point and with considerable variation (Grigg, 1995; Sans and Combris, 2015). Fig. 1 shows the relationship between GDP and meat consumption (measured as food supply[4]). Statistical analyses support the inverted U-shaped

[3] ‘Middle class’ is here simply understood as neither belonging to the poorest nor richest segments of the population. While none of my informants were poor, some clearly belonged to the upper parts of the middle class.

[4] In FAO statistics, food supply refers to the food available to consumers (production plus imports minus exports). It does not mean that the food is eaten. Therefore it likely exaggerates final consumption.

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