

## WHAT CAN YOU TRUST THEM TO DO?

The Judith Wright Address by Humphrey McQueen at the Two Fires Festival, on the theme of 'Food and Healing', Braidwood, Saturday, 6 April 2019.

If you can't trust them to sell fresh milk for children what can you trust them to do? Billy Hughes put that rhetorical question in making 'The Case for Labor' during the 1907 Federal elections. As a reminder of the lost art of how politicians could inform while entertaining here is Hughes in flight:

If private enterprise cannot sell fresh milk and cheap fresh fish, what in the name of all that is manly and independent can it do? According to Upton Sinclair it cannot sell potted meat fit to eat, and with difficulty is induced to refrain from labeling tuberculous and cancerous beef as prime sirloin. It playfully persists in calling fusel oil and while spirit "Three Star Brandy" and puts plaster of Paris into lollies to give them a body. It is notoriously very shaky in its idea of how many ounces make a pound of jam or candles ...<sup>1</sup>

The answer to 'What can we trust them to do?' is, in brief, that we can trust them to do whatever they have to do to take enough profit to be able to expand sufficiently to ward off competitors. To move towards that conclusion we have to be clear about who were the 'them' in Hughes's day, and, towards the end of our presentation, who 'they' are now.

### Then – and now

Upton Sinclair's 1906 novel *The Jungle* had an immediate impact with the U.S. Congress passing a Pure Food Act before the end of the year.<sup>2</sup> The horrors exposed in *The Jungle* are not the ones we face today. Instead, we have the problems from how burger mince is made fit to eat. The 2010 documentary *Food Inc.* shows cattle in slaughter yards with shit half way up their legs before their carcasses are purified in vats of chlorine. That's when I became a vegetarian.

Nestle is another repeat offender, rising from the grave every time a stake has been driven into the spot where a heart should be. Its infant formula, Nestrogen, has to be mixed with water, which increases the risks of diarrhea, the proximate cause of death for 1.5 million babies and infants every

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<sup>1</sup> William Morris Hughes, *The Case for Labor* (Sydney: Worker Press, 1910), p. 142; K.T.H Farrer, *A Settlement Amply Supplied, Food Technology and Nineteenth-Century Australia* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1970), for contaminated milk, pp. 231-6; *Lone Hand*, 1908 and 1911 for reports of adulteration.

<sup>2</sup> Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1936); W. Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis, Chicago and the Great West* (Chicago: W.W. Norton, 1991).

year. Far from giving up in the face of decades of exposure, Nestle keeps coming up with new marketing schemes. For instance, it got around limited restrictions on promotion in the media by giving away samples and then by handing out gifts to motherhood volunteers in the Philippines.

Just when campaigners thought they had total support for a World Health Organisation plan to promote breast-feeding and restrict the promotion of infant formula, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services intervened at the ratification meeting. The U.S. representative alleged that the proposals 'placed unnecessary hurdles for mothers seeking to provide nutrition to their children.' Its delegation bullied Ecuador, and several other smaller nations, into withdrawing as sponsors before Russia stepped up.<sup>3</sup> Early in 2018, litigants re-filed court cases in the U.S. against Nestle, Hersheys and Cargill in relation to child slave-labour supply chains for cocoa from Cote d'Ivoire and Ghana.<sup>4</sup>

Early in August last year, the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission caught Heinz promoting infant food as healthy when it has 66 percent sugar. It was truer to say that the junk was sugar to which some vegetable matter had been added. The ACCC wanted a fine of \$10m., a fraction of company profits, and a pittance compared to the harms such frauds exact.

Executives at Johnson & Johnson had talked for decades about the risk to its bottom line if it came out that their talcum powder included asbestos. The risk to the mothers and infants was not high on the boardroom agenda. They had their priorities right since exposure late last year wiped \$A55.7 bn off J&J's market capitalisation.<sup>5</sup>

Throwing up horror story upon horror is too easy. Instead of competing with the celebrity chefs in dishing up food porn, I shall weave my comments about 'Food' around the twin themes of socialism and Marxism. Billy Hughes thought of himself as a socialist but never as a Marxist. Few socialists are or ever have been Marxists. Yet one cannot remain a Marxist in terms of advancing a critical analysis of the political economy of capitalism without being committed to social equality.

In structuring my presentation on socialism and Marxism, I do not expect to convince, let alone 'convert' anyone. Rather, I shall suggest patterns against which you can make sense out of a silo filled with 'for instances'.

### Omissions

Before plunging into those matters. I should mention three omissions: water, work and 'the news'.

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<sup>3</sup> *New York Times*, 8 July 2018.

<sup>4</sup> *Canberra Times*, 19 August 2018, p. 10.

<sup>5</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 December 2018.

*Water:* Water could be the theme for any number of Festivals. Everything we eat exists only because of the water used in its production. 'Food miles' are 'water miles'. The success of 'Lock the Gate' drew on the need to protect ground-water. Aboriginal 'land' rights are always about 'water' rights – look at the imagery. Waterholes are important for fishing and for hunting as animals come down to drink.

*Work:* Sinclair's *The Jungle* is about how its protagonist is converted to socialism because of the combination of the conditions of work and the vileness of its products. This intimacy is highlighted when a worker falls into a vat of boiling offal, fats, etc to be ground up into sausage meat – the epitome of alienation, the reification of living labour into a commodified thing.<sup>6</sup>

When we speak of food we are talking about a chain of its direct producers, from farm to meal plate. Women in chicken factories and other food processing plants are our domestic servants on whose industrialised labour we all rely.

The twelve million chattel-slaves from Africa to the Americas went onto sugar plantations before a majority worked the cotton fields. If a slave stopped work to chew on a piece of the cane, punishments included having his mouth wedged open so that another slave could be made to shit into it.<sup>7</sup> These connections underpin the triumph of marketeering behind the expression a 'sweet tooth'. We shall return to how sugar rots those teeth.

### All 'news' is fake

In yet another topic deserving a weekend of discussion, all 'news' is fake, because those items are torn out of context. The orphaning of bits of information leaves ABC interviewers with nothing to say about the marshaling of evidence beyond bleating 'That's just a conspiracy theory.' The 24/7 cycle of the 'news' is a force for stupefaction, keeping us more ignorant than nature intended. Assume that we had heard every 'news' item on the ABC about the implosion in the expansion of capital that began in mid-2006. Even if we could recall a tenth of them, what would they let us 'explain' about the origins and unfolding of that run of disruptions?

As I stud this inquiry with case studies, they remain illustrations – not proofs.

### Social equality

As a socialist, my criterion for separating 'reforms' from 'deforms' is to ask whether a change is more or less likely to increase 'social equality' across

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<sup>6</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, I, (London: Penguin, 1976), pp. 63-77.

<sup>7</sup> Trevor Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, & Desire, Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-American World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), pp. 140-51.

three generations. The three bases for that working rule are: 1. most reforms turn out to be 'deforms'; 2. 'more or less likely' is included since there will always be unanticipated consequences; 3. 'social' stresses that our hope is neither for individual equality nor for sameness. Indeed, the obverse is true since individuality is the outcome of our social connections. Our species is a 'social animal in the most literal sense ... an animal which can be individualised only within society. Production by a solitary individual ... is just as preposterous as the development of speech without individuals who live together and talk to one another.'<sup>8</sup> The richer the lives of others are in terms of their capacities, the richer will our individualities become. The ideology of individualism is the enemy of individuality as a flowering of shared creativities.

'What you eat today walks and talks tomorrow' was an advertising slogan for a New York milk vendor in the 1920s.<sup>9</sup> As a caution, that claim is a crude first approximation of how our bodies and brains interact, one which needs supplementing with the recognition that, as a species and as individuals, we become what we do. Further, those precepts deserve to be extended in time, back into the consumer's family tree, and forward into 'Tomorrow, Tomorrow and Tomorrow'.

When the three criteria for social equality are applied to food, the issue turns into a question of what effects could flow from equal access to the most nutritious diets across three generations. Policies for social equality are not evaluated by dangling offers of 'equality of opportunity' but must be judged by their outcomes. If we cannot predict results to the last decimal place after sixty-years, we can be pretty sure that the band of inequality will be a lot narrower.

Equalising the quality of food will be possible only if other elements in the social environment are changed: education, housing, health care and incomes. In addition, their effects are cumulative. What happens to children before and after the school gate has more impact on their educational outcomes than standardised testing. Needs-based funding for schools will not maximise its benefits if childhood diets disturb concentration, and if housing is not conducive to sleep and study. The same is true if dental, hearing and eyesight needs are beyond the budgets of their carers and outside the provisions of Australia's third-rate Medicare. Health funding has to be biased towards the preventive and the social, as well as being community-based. One example is the elimination diet, which identifies intolerances, whether to

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<sup>8</sup> Karl Marx, *A Contribution to a critique of Political Economy* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970), p. 169.

<sup>9</sup> The phrase reappeared on a billboard between Redfern and Central stations for Teague's small goods.

the specific food or additives, both natural and artificial, that provoke disabling behaviours.<sup>10</sup>

Even in fairly short-terms, dietary changes have measurable outcomes, with no more striking instance than pellagra, the symptoms of which were used to support allegations that Afro-Americans were 'unfit'. The fact is that their mental deficiencies were one consequence of poverty causing a want of niacin, from the vitamin B complex. A 1916 study of textile workers in South Carolina demonstrated the cause; the condition was remedied by adding protein to the diet of prisoners, orphans and those who had been confined to mental asylums because of the symptoms.<sup>11</sup>

In 1940, fifty students at the most deprived inner-Melbourne primary school received the 'Oslo lunch', made up of whole meal bread, butter, cheese, milk, wheat germ and an orange. The physical and educational improvements were so obvious that Mothers' Committees across the country adopted the meal.<sup>12</sup> Today, the 'Oslo' would be an advance on what is in many a lunch box. Instead, we fiddle around the edges. Some schools provide breakfast as a pre-condition for learning.

We know about the negatives from smoking during pregnancy and the extremes of fetal alcohol syndrome. Less attention is given to physiological and psychological changes from the right quantities of the best quality foods from conception on. Viewed in that perspective, the sources of our capacities roll back to the health of each parent producing sperm and ova before the moment of conception.

Perth-based epidemiologist, and socialist, Professor Fiona Stanley, points out in her 2003 Australian of the Year address that the 'real brain drain' happens before children reach the age of five, not after a tiny fraction of them earn a Ph.D.<sup>13</sup> She led a campaign to have foliates restored to bread to protect the developing fetus against *spina bifida*. Dr Kellogg advocated his cornflakes to prevent constipation from heavy breakfasts for people no longer engaging in physical labour. To prolong shelf-life, he had remove the wheat germ that carries most the goodness in grain, which is why the cereal processors now boast about their adding vitamins and minerals.<sup>14</sup>

### Un-natural selections

Jean-Baptiste de Lamarck (1744-1829) gets a bad press, despite coining the terms 'biology' and 'invertebrate.'<sup>15</sup> He was traduced in Restoration France as an atheist and in the Anglophone world as a rival to Darwin – who, to the

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<sup>10</sup> Sue Dengate, *Fed Up* (North Sydney, Random House, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> J. Goldberger *et al.*, *Public Health Reports*, 35, no. 2 (1920), pp. 2673-2714.

<sup>12</sup> R.A. Gardner, *The Value of the Vitamin* (Kew: Opportunity Clubs for Boys and Girls, 1941).

<sup>13</sup> Fiona Stanley, "The Real Brain Drain," *Seeing Red*, no. 1 (2004), pp. 26-31.

<sup>14</sup> Felicity Lawrence, *eat your heart out* (Camberwell: Penguin, 2008), chapter 1.

<sup>15</sup> L.J. Jordanova, *Lamarck* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 1 and 6.

continuing embarrassment of his devotees, endorsed Lamarck's passing mention of inherited characteristics, giving the example of giraffes' stretching for the top-most leaves as the cause of their long necks. 'Natural selection' does not deny that outcome but identifies a mechanism by which it takes place. Nonetheless, the battle-lines were drawn between biological determinists and social interventionists. From 1900, these differences divided eugenicists between those who wanted to eliminate the unfit by mass sterilisation and those who strove to improve the stock through cleaning up the social environment – an instance of a deform against a genuine reform.

The lines of disagreement were never clear-cut. Alfred Russel Wallace, the co-discoverer of evolution by natural selection and a socialist, contended that the consciousness to produce the mental 'tools' of literacy and numeracy which gave our species capacities to alter our physical environments to we nonetheless had to adapt.<sup>16</sup> Frederick Engels drafted a posthumously published essay with a title summing up the historical-materialist vantage point: 'The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man.'<sup>17</sup>

The Curator of Invertebrates at the New York Museum of Natural History, Professor Niles Eldridge, reminds us that our species long ago stepped outside one of Darwin's key determinants for speciation, namely, isolation:

Taking control over production of our own food supply, we became the first species in the 3.5 billion-year history of life to live outside the confines of the local ecosystem. ... in substituting cultural devices for physiological and anatomical adaptations, we have unwittingly changed the rules of the evolutionary game.<sup>18</sup>

We began that aspect of our un-natural selection some 10,000 years back with the agricultural, Neolithic, revolution and stepped it up 7,000 years later by shifting grains across the Mediterranean. From 500 years ago, the European empires broke down much of our environmental isolation by transferring plants and animals around their colonies, in what Alfred W. Crosby calls *Ecological Imperialism*.<sup>19</sup> Those transfers are focused through what he names as *The Colombian Exchange* with tapioca from the cassava plants introduced by Iberian traders to strengthen Africans before twelve-million captives were

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<sup>16</sup> Andrew Berry (ed.), *Infinite Tropics, An Alfred Russel Wallace Anthology* (London: Verso, 2002), pp. 175-220; John R. Durant, "Scientific Naturalism and Social Reform in the Thought of Alfred Russel Wallace," *The British Journal for the History of Science*, 12, no. 1 (1979), pp. 31-58.

<sup>17</sup> Frederick Engels, *Dialectics of Nature* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964), pp.172-86. Engels lambasted Wallace for falling for 'Spiritualism' (*Dialectics*, pp. 51-62), not acknowledging that Wallace was driven to these frauds as part of his commitment to social reform.

<sup>18</sup> Niles Eldridge, *Dominion* (Henry Holt, New York, 1995) pp. xiv and 139.

<sup>19</sup> Alfred W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism The Biological Expansion of Europe 900-1900* (Cambridge: Canto, 1992).

kept alive on another import, corn, during the Middle Passage across the Atlantic.<sup>20</sup>

Not all our efforts to control the supply of food result in a permanent advance. In the words of Frederick Engels:

The people who, in Mesopotamia, Greece, Asia Minor and elsewhere, destroyed the forests to obtain cultivable land, never dreamed that by removing along with the forests the collecting centres and reservoirs of moisture they were laying the basis for the present forlorn state of those countries.

That caution points to how a law of diminishing returns from the soil can be extrapolated to every human endeavor. Our first effort delivers total success; the second is even-Stephens; the third bites us on the bum.<sup>21</sup> The Green Revolution's heavy reliance on fertilisers and pesticides makes it one case in point.

A technological advance is never more than one strand in a process shaped by social, political and financial factors. Were sugar still being cut by hand and shipped in bags lumped on and off ships would there be the pandemic of diabetes? Not from cane fields, but there would still be High-Fructose Corn Syrup from the U.S. mid-west which Coke and Pepsi substituted to gain powerful allies in lobbying.<sup>22</sup>

### Not in our genes

In the past twenty years,<sup>23</sup> a new element has been added to our understanding of how we adapt: epigenetics, referring to phenotype changes outside the DNA sequence which affect how genes do their work. Life scientists continue to become Nobel laureates in medicine for unravelling aspects of the RNA, sixty-five years after identifying the Double Helix for the structure of the DNA. They have a long way to go and a lot to learn about our bodies, and more about consciousness, despite all the pretty pictures from MRI scans. At the moment, there is a flurry of interest in exchanges between the gut and the brain.<sup>24</sup> One does not have to be a Nobel Laureate to suspect that the maxim of 'garbage in: garbage out' might well extend to the epigenetic effects that poisonous foods have on our mental capacities.

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<sup>20</sup> Alfred W. Crosby Jr, *The Columbian Exchange Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1972) chapter 5, "New World Foods and Old World Demography"; Elizabeth DeLoughrey, "Globalising the Routes of Breadfruit and Other Bounties," *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, 8, no. 3 (2007) – Bligh was collecting a staple to grow in the West Indies for slaves.

<sup>21</sup> Engels, "The Part Played by Labour," *Dialectics*, pp. 182-3.

<sup>22</sup> see my *The Essence of Capitalism* (Sydney: Sceptre, 2001), pp. 303-6.

<sup>23</sup> No mention of them appears in Charles Cockell's *The Equations of Life How Physics Shapes Evolution* (London: Atlantic, 2018).

<sup>24</sup> Giulia Enders, *GUT the inside story of our body's most under-rated organ* (Melbourne: Scribe, 2015).

Notwithstanding the gaps in our knowledge, genetic determinists carry on as if there were a gene for each and every human behavior. They also talk about genes as if they were like germs or microbes that can 'give' us a disease. Genes process proteins. Their failing to do so is the source of conditions linked to our genetic inheritance. A fault in a gene, inherited or acquired, not the gene itself, is one root of problems. Genetic functioning is affected by changes in our physiological environments, notably the rise in the level of background radiation since 1945 and by levels of lead in the atmosphere. Generational shifts in social practices, not faulty genes, account for the current explosion in short-sightedness across East Asia.<sup>25</sup>

Late in 2016, ABC TV interviewed a Sydney neuro-scientist reporting on his identification of genetic 'pathways' for the rising intakes of salt. He did not claim that we are hard-wired for taking in three times as much salt as is recommended. But he did not distinguish between our bodies' need for some salt and the recent spike in intake. He said not a word about marketeering.

The ABC interviewer and her producers did not know enough to question this hole in the neuro-scientist's research strategy. When she asked what could be done to lower the proven risks, his reply was as misleading as it was predictable: his lab was developing an anti-salt drug. That solution confirms what the Professor of Zoology at Harvard, the Marxist Richard Lewontin, reported in his 1991 Massey Lectures: 'No prominent molecular biologist of my acquaintance is without a financial stake in the biotechnology business.'<sup>26</sup> All had money on the Human Genome Project. An anti-salt pill is one more instance of the medicalisation and commodification of every human experience, from sadness to the insomnia induced from capital's making us time poor.

We can wean ourselves away from salt by re-educating our palates and reviving our taste buds. Dr Trevor Beard did that for himself so successfully that he came off his blood pressure medication, and his advocacy earned him the honour of Senior Tasmanian in 2006.

### As a Marxist

If you expect a Marxist to talk about exploitation and profits you won't be mistaken. However, Marx's key discovery is that neither exploitation nor profit-taking is an end in itself for capital. 'Accumulate, accumulate! That is Moses and the Prophets!'<sup>27</sup> But accumulation is not the end either. Capitalists and their agents do not build up a miser's hoard of gold bars under their beds. If that is all they do, they will cease, sooner rather than later, to be

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<sup>25</sup> Ian G. Morgan, *et al. Lancet*, 379, no. 9827 (2012), pp. 1739-48.

<sup>26</sup> R.C. Lewontin, *The Doctrine of DNA* (London: Penguin, 1993), pp. 72-75.

<sup>27</sup> Marx, *Capital*, I, p. 742.



capitalists. For Marx, capitalists are rational misers while a miser is a capitalist gone mad.<sup>28</sup>

If not profit and if not accumulation, what is the point of exploitation? Or, put differently, to what end do capitalists and their agents strive to 'Accumulate, accumulate!' Part of their aim is to luxuriate in their ill-gotten gains. Certainly, they can afford to indulge themselves. J.P. Morgan almost sent his banking house bust by collecting the manuscripts now displayed in the New York museum bearing his name. However, 'there develops in the breast of the capitalist a Faustian conflict between the passion for accumulation and the desire for enjoyment.'<sup>29</sup> Yet, as George Bernard Shaw observed, there is a limit to the quantity of peacock's brain pate that one plutocrat can devour.

### Why accumulate?

The distinguishing characteristic of the capitalist system as it has come into being in the last 200 years is its need to expand. That is why I have come to think in terms of a 'revolution inside capital'; that revolution opened the way to the dominance of a new kind of capital, one, which for want of a keener neologism, I am stuck with calling 'capital-within-capitalism'. I have coined that lump to distinguish the capital within capitalism from the forms of property that came and went during the 6,000 or so years before capitalism gained dominance after 1800.

In the hands of the Phoenicians or the Song Dynasty, capital equipment and goods for sale or barter, pots of gold, landed estates, slaves and trading fleets were manifestations of capital. All were accumulations that their owners put to work to reproduce their systems of power and wealth. Capitals did not always have to expand in order to persist. And more significantly, they did not have to expand in the ways that capital-within-capitalism has to do. Slavery and the several serfdoms required different kinds of expansions. The former had to expand geographically to keep up the number of slaves since breeding one's own was slow, expensive and uncertain. Slave systems also had to expand geographically to find virgin soil, as the several serfdoms did into the late 1800s. (The great exceptions were the River civilisations where floods deposited nutrient rich silt.) Vital as these expansions were to each of those modes of social reproduction, they did not require a relentless increase in the total output. Slavery and serfdoms could and did survive as static, even stagnant, systems, with little or no improvement in the productivity of labour. Capitalism is the opposite.

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<sup>28</sup> Marx, *Capital*, I, p. 254. Marx notes that when Balzac's usurer Gobseck enters his second childhood he starts to hoard commodities, *Capital*, I, p. 735, n. 14.

<sup>29</sup> Marx, *Capital*, I, p. 741.

### Monopolising

Not only has the magnitude of capital multiplied but it has become ever more centralised, entering its monopolising stage around 1900. That development is revealed at every link in the food chain: from thousands of corner stores in the 1950s to a supermarket duopoly today; from local dairy producer co-ops to New Zealand's Fonterra with 10,500 members and exports of \$17bn yet still only in fifth place, well behind Nestle as Number One; from hundreds of suburban and rural cordial-makers to the duopoly of Coke and Pepsi;<sup>30</sup> the concentration of the mass media that promote the food and beverage industry; a clutch of financial houses to bankroll all these conglomerates while running the 'tough-and-go' cards that people use to provision their households.

This cataloguing of monopolising does not take us past the surface. Science, Marx insists, is in the effort to penetrate appearances to specify inner dynamics.<sup>31</sup> We have to burrow past the evidence that establishes the expansion of capital and ask 'why?' and 'exactly how?' A research program would delve into both.

The need that capital-within-capitalism has to expand is far from being mono-causal. Three forces crisscross, propelling each other: *i.* beating off competitors; *ii.* holding down unit labour costs; and *iii.* selling the increased volume of products.

Two of the elements in the expansion of capital are quantitative. The first concerns what happens to particular capitals, firms or trades. Competition means that not all can succeed at continuing to expand. Indeed, the survival of the system depends on failures which allow more efficient, more ruthless, producers to fill those niches. The second element is the sum total of all the particular capitals. In this case, the aggregate must expand over time. Here, failures are built into the system's drive for over-production, triggering crises which purge the system of excess capacity, to set the scene for a new bout of expansion: 'This is not a defect', Marx realizes, 'but, on the contrary, it makes this form the adequate one for a mode of production whose laws can assert themselves only as blindly operating averages between constant irregularities.'<sup>32</sup>

### The wealth of nature

Expansions of capitals engaged in processing could get underway from the later 1700s because of prior transformations of agriculture when improvers added lime, grew pulses, enclosed farms along with the commons, shifted

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<sup>30</sup> see my "Pop goes the Bottler! The Australian Soft-Drink Industry 1945-65," *Journal of Australian Political Economy*, no. 46 (2000), pp. 126-45.

<sup>31</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, III (London: Penguin, 1981) p. 428.

<sup>32</sup> Marx, *Capital*, I, p. 196.

sheep and crops to the most appropriate soils, and introduced new breeds. After 1840, the soil science of Justus von Liebig alerted farmers towards restoring nitrogen, with a breakthrough by 1913 when the Haber-Bosch process delivered an affordable way of producing ammonia for fertilisers and explosives in the Great War.<sup>33</sup> We are now well and truly into the era of monopolising capitals.

English working people endured no widespread famine after 1745,<sup>34</sup> although dearth persisted in the Highlands and on the Islands. Extreme weather events, leading to higher bread prices, remained as flashpoints for wider discontents, as in France in 1788-9 against an increasingly unequal tax regime and the revival, from 1750, of feudal dues and obligations.<sup>35</sup> Like all 'natural' disasters, the Great Hunger in Ireland in 1847 has to be understood through the prism of social, cultural, political and economic forces, such as the morcellisation of family plots and the regime of absentee landlords.<sup>36</sup>

### MALTHUSIAN TRAPS

'What about Malthus?' I hear a strangled cry. That's a very good question, and I'm glad I asked it. The boost in per capita farm yields had been achieved well before Parson Malthus plagiarised his *Essay on Population* in 1798 to propagandise against any kind of social reform. He contended that the number of mouths would grow geometrically, i.e. 1,2,4,8 .... while the supply of food would grow only arithmetically, i.e. 1,2,3,4,... The result would be famine and a driving back down of the population to start the vicious cycle again. That is the familiar face of his nostrums. Too many babies and not enough infant formula sums up the Malthusian trap.

A lesser-known Malthus brings together the two pillars of this presentation: social equality, and, the need that capital-within-capitalism has to expand.

In attacking social reformers and followers of the French Revolution, Malthus took aim not just at William Godwin's dreams of perfection but at

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<sup>33</sup> See my 2017 V. Gordon Childe Memorial Lecture, "Dr Marx, Professor Childe and manure: some rather vulgar materialism" [www.surplusvalue.org.au/mcqueen/marxism](http://www.surplusvalue.org.au/mcqueen/marxism)

<sup>34</sup> B.H. Slicher van Bath, *The Agrarian History of Western Europe A.D. 500-1850* (London: Edward Arnold, 1963), especially pp. 211ff.; David Grigg, "The nutritional transition in Western Europe," *Journal of Historical Geography*, 21, no. 3 (1995), pp. 247-61; John D. Post, *Food shortage, climatic variability, and epidemic disease in preindustrial Europe: the mortality peak in the early 1740s* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985); Cormac O Grada, "Markets and Famines in Pre-Industrial Europe," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 36, no. 2 (2005), pp. 143-66.

<sup>35</sup> For one region see Robert Forster, *The House of Saulx-Tavannes Versailles and Burgundy 1700-1830* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), chapter II.

<sup>36</sup> Redcliffe N. Salaman, *The history and social influence of the potato* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985 edition), chapters XI to XVIII on Ireland; K.H. Connell, "The Potato in Ireland," *Past & Present*, no. 23 (1962), pp. 57-61.

the mildest of ameliorations. His specific target, however, was the Poor Law paid for out of the parish rates, which, between the 1780s and 1803, doubled to £4 million a year.<sup>37</sup> To relieve poverty, he argued, was to encourage the poor to produce more offspring, thus making their situation worse in the medium-to-long term. Contraception was doubly sinful. First, it was defiance of the Biblical injunction to 'Go forth and multiply.' No less offensive was that birth control would limit the size of the rural workforce and thereby make it easier for farm labourers to win higher wages to the detriment of his tithe-paying parishioners, to wit, landlords and their capitalist tenants.<sup>38</sup>

Important as it is to spotlight the class bias in Malthus we need to recall that his arithmetic had been refuted by the industrialisation of food production before he put quill to paper. That refutation has become ever more obvious. The world is now producing enough food for seven billions against not even one billion when Malthus launched his propaganda campaign on behalf of landlords. Today's famine regions result from mal-distribution driven by the arms trade, an alliance of the Merchants of Grain with the Merchants of Death.

Malthusian doctrines retain their purchase on debates about the global Population Bomb and around a Sustainable Australia. How to define over-population? Is it too many people who barely get 1,600 calories a day or is it too many people for whom spending \$24,500 each on a two-week tour of Western Australia's fine food-and-wine districts is chicken feed?<sup>39</sup>

The second missing strand in discussions about Malthus is that he glimpsed that the emerging capitalist system would generate a novel kind of crisis. In place of dearth and recurrent famine, capitalism was in danger of producing too much. Having recognised that likelihood, Malthus proposes a solution in conformity with the interests of the fraction of property-owners whose pockets he had set out to protect with his under-production/over-population *Essay* of 1798. In 1821, his *Principles of Political Economy* asks how to find enough mouths to devour the excess produce. His solution was to over-produce people like himself, people who consumed but did not produce – landlords, the armed services, the clergy, whom Marx calls 'gluttonous drones'.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage, 1963), pp. 220-1.

<sup>38</sup> Ronald L. Meek (ed.), *Marx and Engels on the Population Bomb* (Berkeley: Ramparts, 1971); Thomas Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970).

<sup>39</sup> Advertised in *The Monthly*, March 2019, p. 7.

<sup>40</sup> Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus-value*, Part III (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1971) p. 52; for Malthus as the precursor of Keynesian under-consumptionist explanations for economic crises, J.M. Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (London, Macmillan, 1936), pp. 362-71 *passim*.

Forty years later, in the 1860s, capital had expanded sufficiently for Marx to be able to triangulate the causes of crises from over-production. First, he sees that their origins were no longer confined to floods, droughts and wars. Secondly, he points out that the level of demand is shaped by the supply of purchasing power, which is decided by the rate of exploitation. Thirdly, he breaks away from the cheeriness of an economy forever finding its way back to a point of equilibrium. Instead, he specifies the dynamics that keep capitalism unstable if it is expand: 'This is not a defect, but, on the contrary, it makes this form the adequate one for a mode of production whose laws can assert themselves only as blindly operating averages between constant irregularities.'<sup>41</sup>

That third element opens pathways into a consideration of the imbalance between the quality and quantity of food.

### 2 + 2 = 5

The arithmetic of how each capital strives to expand its output shines lights into the entire system since the devices for pushing soft-drink, also apply to health foods and hand guns, though not to stealth bombers which have to be sold before construction starts.

To sustain the initial rate of return on investment becomes nigh on impossible as capital outlays rise with mounting volumes. Hence, maintaining the absolute sum of profit becomes the minimum need.

Assume that the average effective demand for all cola drinks in the first quarter of 2019 was one million units a day. Next assume that Coca-Cola's average share is 600,000 units while its competitors divvy up the rest. Assume further, in a gross underestimate, that there are 1,000 points of sale, each selling an average of 600 units of Coca-Cola. For Coca-Cola to get a larger share, it goes without saying that it must produce more than its previously proven total sales volume. Its rivals will be doing much the same. Those increases are not the whole story. Each beverage-maker will have to supply a larger volume to each outlet to be sure of catching as many sales as possible. With all producers aiming to move more bottles and cans at every outlet, the excess of supplies over effectual demand will expand ever more.

Coca-Cola could lower its price to attract a fraction of Pepsi fans who are not addicted to the taste of either of those Colas, although that cohort is never more than 10 percent. Price competition is only a short-term tactic. An oligopoly can use its power to undercut and thus exclude a newcomer. Hence, price-cutting is not a long-term solution – probably not even a solution in the medium-term across one sales zone.

Each soft-drink maker might sell more were the total demand for all colas to grow from one million to 1.1 million units. To attract and then to hold

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<sup>41</sup> Marx, *Capital*, I, p. 196.

customers is the domain of market-eering. Its practices, and how to conceptualise them, will take up the final third of the 2019 Judith Wright Address.

### Free-market totalitarianism

President Ray-Gun's Ambassador to the United Nations, Jeanne Kirkpatrick, distinguished right-wing authoritarian regimes from left-wing totalitarian ones. The latter penetrate every corner and crevice of civil society. Stamp collectors could share their hobby only inside the state-sanctioned Society of Philatelists. The same control applied to trade unions, religious groups and sporting bodies. There was to be 'no outside the state.'<sup>42</sup>

Bourgeois democracies like Australia's are a million miles from a totalitarian state. 'Free markets' keep us safe from overt totalitarianisms. Is that the end of the story? Or should the definition of totalitarianism as 'no outside the state' be brought up to date by confronting what it means to live in a social order where every aspect of life has been commodified until there is 'no outside marketeering.' The masters of that universe will denounce this hypothesis as mad Marxist propaganda while justifying their every 'de-form' by saying that 'the market' rules.

### Market-eering

My recognising of how marketeering works came in two stages. Before the mid-1970s, I could spot some of the intimacies between the mass media and mass marketing. I grew up supposing that ads were selling us this or that product, a Holden or a Ford, a chocolate or an ice-cream. I began to sense that their combined impact was to make us eager to buy, irrespective of the product – a feed or a frock, a car or a cruise - so that some of the satisfaction came from the act of purchase as well as from using our newest possession. And I came to see that hire-purchase,<sup>43</sup> and the 1974 issue of bank cards, was greasing us into over-consumption.

What do marketeers do? They begin before a product exists by asking what novelty might a firm be able to sell. They then design a range of samples to road test. If one shows appeal, they prepare a strategy to create a demand. Packaging plays its part. Compare the cheap Black-&-Gold house brand against the fake brands of the same priced goods at Aldi. Prices are set in terms of what the marketeers can convince us to pay. They bump up the price

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<sup>42</sup> Jeanne Kirkpatrick, "Dictatorship and Double Standards," *Commentary*, 68, no. 5 (1979), p. 44.

<sup>43</sup> Martha L. Olney, "Credit as a Production-Smoothing Device: The Case of Automobiles, 1913-1938," *The Journal of Economic History*, 49, no. 2 (1989), pp. 377-391; Lendol Calder, *Financing the American dream: a cultural history of consumer credit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); T.M. Fitzgerald, "Ian Jacoby," R.T. Appleyard and C.B. Schedvin (eds), *Australian Financiers, Biographical Essays* (Sydney: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 364-87.

to make some items seem exclusive, as with Johnny Walker Blue and Black labels for gifts in Japan.

In writing *Australia's Media Monopolies* during 1976, I encountered a deeper truth about the mass media. They are not selling things to us. They are packaging and selling us to other marketers.<sup>44</sup> In addition, the marketers package and sell some us more than others. For several years, *Gunsmoke* had the highest audience ratings on U.S. television, and still had 16 million fans when CBS cancelled another series in 1975, its having survived the 'rural purge' conducted by all the networks in 1970-71. The reason? *Gunsmoke's* devotees were rural, poor and old, falling into the lowest quintile of sales prospects.<sup>45</sup> As Adam Smith almost observed: what is the point in spending your marketing dollar trying to sell a straight-eight to a dirt farmer? Human wants and needs are of no use to capitalists unless backed up by Smith's 'effectual demand'.<sup>46</sup> I was seeing through the blizzard of ads to marketing. Advertisements are the pimple on the pumpkin. Hershey's did not advertise its chocolate bars until 1970. Instead, they held their lead against Mars by securing prime spots for impulse buying at the candy counter.<sup>47</sup>

To put the matter sharply: If we want to know what the mass media think of us, their audiences, don't read the editorials in *The Age* – read the ads promoting the *Australian Home Journal*: 'If you're selling Toilet Paper, you need to communicate with all the bums in Australia. But when you are selling to a specialist market, the same rules do not apply. Work on cost per thousand of identified, about to buy, prospects.'<sup>48</sup>

From the mid-1930s, Market Research firms had conducted extensive and intensive surveys into patterns of radio listening; they divided audiences into quintiles, but also into the times of listening. These early efforts sound as quaint just as their updating is familiar when Google, Facebook and Apple give away apps so as to package and dice us up for other marketers. Supermarkets do the same with Frequent Flyer Cards. Our every purchase adds to our resale value as the commodity known as data, whether Big or personal.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> see my *Australia's Media Monopolies* (Camberwell: Widescope, 1977), chapter 1; Jean-Louis Servan-Schreiber, *The Power to Inform Media: The Business of Information* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974), chapters 1-3.

<sup>45</sup> Steve Craig, "The More They Listen, the More They Buy': Radio and the Modernizing of Rural America, 1930-1939," *Agricultural History*, 80, no. 1 (2006), pp. 1-16.

<sup>46</sup> Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970) pp. 159-60.

<sup>47</sup> Joel Glenn Brenner, *The Chocolate Wars* (London: HarperCollins, 1999).

<sup>48</sup> *B&T Advertising, Marketing and Media Weekly*, 29 July 1976.

<sup>49</sup> Dallas W. Smythe, "Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, 1, no 3 (1977), pp. 1-28; Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: the Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019).

### Indoctrination

Indoctrinating taste buds has been physiological and not just psychological.<sup>50</sup> Our palates have been industrialised, taught to forget what food and drink tasted like, past the threshold of 'yuck'. Marketeers have inscribed the equivalent of 'bliss points' for each addictive substance. For sugar, the bliss point is that percentage of sugar to make a product just sweet to the point that the consumer is put off from swallowing more. Artificial sweeteners, even if not bad in themselves, keep up the acceptance level of sweetness in our mouths. Is the bliss point educable upwards as Shakespeare suggests in *Hamlet*: 'As if increase of appetite had grown/ By what it fed on.'<sup>51</sup>

As more machines were driven by water-power, and later by steam, more mothers could operate them for seventy-two hours a week, leaving them with little of the time and energy needed to maintain a household.<sup>52</sup> The long-term outcome has been the 'industrial diet',<sup>53</sup> as one thread in spreading commodification of food and clothing far beyond the purses of 'gluttonous drones'. This flow of money wages helped to underwrite the expansion of capital by realising profits from the needs induced by capital.<sup>54</sup>

### Four ploys

How this marketeering is worked can also be seen through looking into our shopping trolleys.

The shift in the consumption of hot beverages from tea towards coffee is wrongly attributed to post-war Mediterranean immigrants. Coffee came thanks to Nestle and Maxwell House which, like the tea bag, was time-saver compared with the pot in its knitted cosy.<sup>55</sup> Instant tea was a flop, proving that we are not always mugs.

Marketeers latch onto healthy eating advice. Only a small percentage of the population are **celiac** yet the marketers have baited their hooks with 'gluten-free' as a way to push higher priced breads, cakes and cereals. Coles, for instance, promotes a line in Salted Caramel pop-corn. But don't you worry about its three poisons - salt, sugar and fat – it's 'Gluten free'.

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<sup>50</sup> In the 1920s, Freud's nephew worked on manipulating desire and the Behaviourist J.B. Watson on the conditioning of reflexes, Merle Curti, "The Changing Concept of 'Human Nature' in the Literature of American Advertising," *Business History Review*, 41, no. 4 (1967), pp. 335-57.

<sup>51</sup> see my *The Essence of Capitalism*, chapters 16 and 17.

<sup>52</sup> Marx, *Capital*, I, pp. 517-26.

<sup>53</sup> Michael Symons attributed Australia's 'industrial diet' to the Imperial heritage of sea-going salted meat, *One Continuous Picnic A History of Eating in Australia* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1982), pp. 15-23.

<sup>54</sup> Michael A. Lebowitz, "Capital and the Production of Needs," *Science & Society*, 41, no. 4 (1977-78), pp. 430-47.

<sup>55</sup> see [www.surplusvalue.org.au/mcqueen/post\\_war\\_australia/mass\\_market](http://www.surplusvalue.org.au/mcqueen/post_war_australia/mass_market)



Sanitarium Weet-Bix provides a kids cereal with under 3 percent sugar, which is as low as you go. In the past five years, Sanitarium has added flavours to its other offerings – blueberry and coconut. Why would so health-conscious a provider do that? The answer follows from a seemingly unrelated question: where is the most expensive real-estate in the country? Answer: the hottest selling spot on a supermarket shelf. To secure ‘Location. Location. Location’, a brand must either outsell its rivals or pay a differential rent. That rent is one part of the silence of the marketeering wolves.

In the days when I was still eating fish, the TV in the gym showed a celebrity chef preparing a salmon mousse to which he added salt at each and every step. Only when the credits rolled could viewers glimpse that he had been sponsored by ‘sacks of salt’ – Saxa.

### The more things change

The poisonous food and beverage corporates are repeat offenders, not just in their peddling of hazardous ingredients but in their scheming to disguise the harms they inflict. Each of the poisonous-food majors has more than three strikes against it yet never goes to gaol. None of them can afford to give up as is demonstrated by Big Coke’s manipulation of ‘evidence’ from tooth decay in the 1950s to the current pandemics of obesity, cancers and diabetes.<sup>56</sup>

Tooth decay presented Atlanta with a dilemma. As much as its executives welcomed fluoride as a way of evading Coca-Cola’s role in causing tooth decay, they could not afford to antagonise anti-fluoride campaigners who denounced its addition to municipal water supplies as socialised medicine. So, the Board had to discredit scholarly evidence about the harm its beverage was doing:

We must find some way of presenting our case over and over again at frequent intervals. The most effective way of accomplishing this would be first of all to find an entrée into the good graces of some influential people in Associated Press, International New Service, and United Press.<sup>57</sup>

To do so, Coca-Cola joined forces in 1951 with the National Confectioners’ Association to fund fortnightly interviews between journalists and ‘experts’. Corporate executives used their political connections to block school boards and the Boy Scouts from moving against sugar hits. They funded academics to ‘refute’ studies about the damage that Big Sugar was doing.

When attention switched back to obesity,<sup>58</sup> Coca-Cola funded the U.S. Global Energy Balance Network before withdrawing in 2015 after leaked

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<sup>56</sup> The need that capital has to expand extends to over-servicing by medical corporations as with ‘prediabetes’, Charles Piller, “Dubious Diagnosis,” *Science*, 8 March 2019, pp. 1027-31.

<sup>57</sup> Detailed in *The Essence of Capitalism*, pp. 148-9.

<sup>58</sup> Nicolas Rasmussen, *Fat in the Fifties America’s First Obesity Crisis* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019).

emails showed that its hired guns were five times more likely than neutral researchers to report no link between sugar and obesity. The academic perjurers pushed the line that exercise, and not diet, is the solution.<sup>59</sup>

At the same time, Coke joined the International Life Science Institute, funded by Nestle, McDonalds', Pepsi Co., Yum! and a dirty dozen more peddlers of poisonous food and drink. Starting in China in late 1990s, the Institute bought its way inside the regime's Centre for Disease Control and Prevention. 'What they have been doing in China is insidious', says Professor Popkin from University of North Carolina. The Institute never mentions junk food and drink but promotes a ten-minute exercise for kids, which is no bad thing but is no remedy for drinking a can of sugar at least once a day.<sup>60</sup>

### The nagging market

The nanny state is the daily target for the paid agents of capital. But what of the nagging market? Corporates spend a billion on the marketeering of poisonous food and beverages for every million going into government campaigns to promote healthy living.<sup>61</sup>

Another report this week tells us that poor food choices are responsible for more deaths than any other cause. The assumption is that everyone is 'free to choose', as if we face no constraints of time, and of cash. More importantly, the range on offer has been decided behind our backs. One instance is the British Colour Council, which was setup in 1930.<sup>62</sup> Under Royal Patronage, the Council portrayed its channeling of preference in colours for women's clothing as a service to the consumer who would be able to coordinate her ensemble with greater ease. Each season, the Council's charts

make it possible for you to buy French silks that will match Scottish tweeds, an English umbrella or match Viennese shoes, Czechoslovakian jewelry to tone with your evening frock, and even the sewing silk for making up your new season's model.<sup>63</sup>

The Council nominated three colours for each autumn and spring season to limit losses from unsalable frocks and accessories.

Behind the call to take personal responsibility for healthy choices looms the rational consumer of marginal utility economics. This ideal shopper makes decisions on the basis of the qualities of all the products on offer and of all the comparative prices. Armed with this encyclopedia of information, it is possible to make 'free choices', if you're also got enough to spend. That image

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<sup>59</sup> "The Hidden Power of Corporations," *British Medical Journal*, 9 January 2019; NYT, 10 January 2019, A1.

<sup>60</sup> NYT, 9 August 2015 and 1 December 2015; Marion Nestle, *Taking on Big Soda (and Winning)* (Oxford: OUP 2015).

<sup>61</sup> Stanley W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986).

<sup>62</sup> *The Drapers' Organiser*, reprinted in *Gibsonia Gazette* (Perth), 3, no. 4, March 1929, p. 2.

<sup>63</sup> *Australian Women's Weekly* (AWW), 25 September 1937, p. 9.

is what textbooks on 'free markets' tell us. The winner of the 1982 *faux* Nobel Prize in self-styled Economic Science, George J. Stigler, points out that our knowledge approaches perfection as our choices approach zero: 'A perfect market is one in which the traders have full knowledge of all offer and bid prices ... Those conditions are possible only where the supply is in the hands of a single supplier, that is, absolute monopoly.'<sup>64</sup>

### 'They'

We began by asking who 'they' were in 1907. Now it is time to ask who are 'they' in 2019. Judith's poem 'They' is about the political police who harassed her out of Queensland: 'They look like people/ that's the trouble.'<sup>65</sup> In this era of Surveillance Capitalism,<sup>66</sup> the 'they' include enforcers on farms where every move by soybean growers is monitored by Monsanto and Pioneer. Satellites allow for as much oversight by Big Pharma on a 'family' farm as Henry Ford held over his production lines. Bound down as growers are by debt, the U.S. Department of Agriculture reinforces the corporate clout through its allocation of subsidies.<sup>67</sup>

The 'they' are also the four grain-majors – ADM, Bunge, Cargill and Louis Drefus – known collectively as ABCD – each more than a 100 years old.<sup>68</sup> As the newcomer, China's state-owned COFCO is depicted as the 'invader', disturbing the rule of these earlier conquerors.<sup>69</sup>

### Conspiracies

'That's just a conspiracy theory', journalists will bleat when an interviewee offers the above information. In defiance of the collective wisdom of the press gallery, two London bankers were sent to gaol a few days ago for conspiring to fix the LIBOR, London Interbank Offered Rate; Julian Assange faces extradition on 'conspiracy' charges. The double-dealings that journalists scorn as nothing but 'conspiracy theory' are taught as Organisation and Management (O&M) at universities in their Schools of Business. Celebrating the visible hand of management, their textbooks are replete with 'conspiracy facts'.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> George J. Stigler, "Perfect Competition, Historically Contemplated," *Journal of Political Economy*, 65, no. 1 (1957), pp. 14-15.

<sup>65</sup> Judith Wright, *Collected Poems*, p. 324.

<sup>66</sup> Zuboff, *Surveillance Capitalism* (2019).

<sup>67</sup> Ted Genoways, *This Blessed Earth: A Year in the Life of an American Family Farm* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2018).

<sup>68</sup> James B. Lieber, *Rats in the Grain. The Dirty Tricks of the 'Supermarket to the World'*, Archer Daniels Midland (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1999); Vandana Shiva, *Stolen harvest: the hijacking of the global food supply* (Cambridge, Mass.: SouthEnd Press, 2000).

<sup>69</sup> *Economist*, 2 February 2019, pp. 53-4.

<sup>70</sup> Alfred du Pont Chandler, *The Visible Hand* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press, 1977).

One truth about free markets from Adam Smith is not carved over their portals: 'People of the same trade seldom meet together, even for merriment and diversion, but the conversation ends in a conspiracy against the public, or in some contrivance to raise prices.'<sup>71</sup> The oligopolies form cartels to contain cost pressures from monopolising competition – but they fall apart because the signatories know better than to trust each other.

## PUSHING BACK

When the Tory Dean of St Patrick's, Dublin, Jonathan Smith, presented the reading public with *A Modest Proposal, for preventing the Children of poor People in Ireland, from being a Burden to their Parents or Country; and for making them beneficial to the Publick* (1729), its anonymous author was confident that fattening the infants before the age of two to feed to the rich, whom he saw having the best title to them after devouring the parents, had the virtues of being 'innocent, cheap, easy and effectual.'

As much as I admire Swift's rapier, I propose assault with blunt instruments. When children of all ages are being fattened to gorge corporate coffers, we need to outrage the corporates by naming them as mass poisoners and to alert the public to pandemics from eating and drinking our way to a premature death or to a decrepit old age, in what might be diagnosed as 'chronic suicide.'<sup>72</sup>

My hat-trick of Modest Proposals are:

*First*, establish crime scenes around every processed food aisle and outlet.

*Secondly*, set up a permanent People's Commission – not a 'Royal' Commission - into the poisonous food industries with terms of reference to blow the cover on their everyday operations and not be confined to their multitudinous 'malpractices', a condition which hobbled the Hayne inquiry into the financial system.

Revelations about Aged Care 'malpractices' have brought on another Royal Commission. To be worth the effort, its legal counsel will have to dig into the everyday operations of the corporate providers via their business model on how to cut costs, for which their talk of 'culture' is a blind.

Food is a prime issue in institutions, whether prisons, hospitals or aged care. A ninety-year-old life-long Communist resident at the Cardinal Freeman Retirement Village told me that class struggle there centered on the tedium of the menu. The 'inmates' won a prolonged battle to get two pieces of fresh fruit a week. Mass-produced frozen meals are shipped to facilities across New

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<sup>71</sup> Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, pp. 232-3.

<sup>72</sup> Karl Menninger, *Man Against Himself* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1938).

South Wales. Constipation results from a 'malpractice' which is cheaper to treat with a laxative than to reduce with a balanced diet.

*Thirdly*, place the same restrictions on the marketing of saturated fats, salt and sugar as have been won against tobacco – and are still needed for alcohol.

That trio will be what you might call 'a good start'. But what of the ten-percent sugar tax on beverages? Is that a step forward or a side step away from confrontation? Think first how little would have been achieved in reducing lung and other cancers if the only arm of policy had been a 10 percent price increase on cigarettes, then reflect on how much further there is to go to stop Big Tobacco's murdering for profit, which is no crime.

### Conclusion

This is the moment to reflect on one of Judith Wright's poems, 'At a Public Dinner', from her 1973 collection, aptly called *Alive*:

No, I'm not eating. I'll watch the champing jaws,  
solemnly eating and drinking my country's honour,  
my country's flesh. The gravy's dripping red,  
a nourishing stew for business. She's a goner –  
crucified in fat speeches, toasted in wines  
the colour of blood. And wounded past recall.  
Let this occasion be her memorial.

It was all there in the first step onto land,  
the flag raised, the guns fired.  
No one but Harpur called her the land of equals,  
the new Utopia .... Go away, we're tired;

we're tired of being asked about tomorrow.  
Today the profit. Today the hideous old,  
the rising price of uranium, beef and gold.  
Today, for the dreamers, the totally useless sorrow.<sup>73</sup>

I do not intend to enlist Judith's targeting of 'profit' out of a 'stew for business' to enroll her into the ranks of socialists, and still less of Marxists. Rather, I wish to take issue with an undertow of defeat in phrases such as 'the totally useless sorrow.'

Nearly fifty years on from the poem's composition, there are no fewer grounds for feeling, as a Melbourne friend puts it, 'like refugees in our own country.' One example of our planet's being 'a goner' is the driving of farmers off their lands in Brazil, Malaysia and Vietnam to make way for corporations

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<sup>73</sup> Judith Wright, *Collected Poems*, p. 292.

profiting from cattle, palm oil and tourism. Not all is lost. Small landholders in Mozambique defeated a scheme by a Japanese-Brazilian consortium to impose an export-oriented monoculture.<sup>74</sup> No victory is permanent. Cyclone Idai is a threat to that win. Natural disasters are an opportunity for corporates and their agents in state apparatuses to turn reconstruction into dispossession as happened to Afro-American communities in New Orleans after Katrina,<sup>75</sup> when suburbs were gentrified, that is, the blacks were driven out.

This Festival is one mark that not all of us are 'tired of being asked about tomorrow', and that not all of us think of nothing but 'the rising price of beef.' Were this weekend no more than a memorial for Harpur's hope for a 'land of equals', how many of us would bother to be here? Would Julia Green and her co-workers have put so much effort into making so festive an occasion?

A Canadian Wobbly on his ninetieth birthday was praised by a young comrade: 'You've been in for the long haul'. No, the nonagenarian snapped back: 'I'm in for the *endless* haul.' And so was Judith Wright, 'with love and fury,' as a poet, a polemicist and a protestor. The two fires of her art and activism continue to light pathways towards social equality.

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<sup>74</sup> *Le Monde Diplomatique*, June 2018, pp. 8-9.

<sup>75</sup> *Le Monde Diplomatique*, December 2018, pp. 10-11.