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Dairy Chains: Consumer Foodways and Agricultural Landscapes

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Abstract: Food is significant as an agent of social change as well as being the subject of activism. The focus of this paper is on nature's "perfect food", milk, in the 1950s, a period of social transition that offers fertile space for reconstructing food activism and giving it a history. Australia's dairy industry is the country's largest processed food industry and the fourth largest of the nation's rural industries. Milk is a fruitful site to consider the relationship between people and their food, production and consumption, the intimate way we bring our food into our bodies and the experience of farmers with personal connections to the ecosystems in which they live. Dense networks connect farm producers and consumers. The dairy industry will be considered as a site of production and consumption where considerable political activity was concentrated in the 1950s. These themes are illuminated in the paper by briefly considering two groups of women caught up in very different family labour systems defined by their relationship to milk – housewives active in the state associations campaigning around milk prices and quality and farm women. The transformation of rural life, home and food culture during this period impacted on both groups of women, it was from their work that they expressed a position and identified, and both engaged in complex processes of negotiation that, I argue, have generated and sustained other movements.

Keywords: activism; dairy; consumption; housewives

We understand food as crucial to life for physical and cultural nourishment, but food is also an agent of social change. Although it is a staple of Australians' everyday lives, most people know virtually nothing about milk – where it originated or how it is being produced. As Anne Mendelson has shown of Americans, Australians too have simplified, modified and technologized milk beyond recognition (2008). Industrialization and urbanization have so lengthened the food chain, products bare little knowledge of their origins or how it is produced. There are two main points I want to make: The first is that food is the basis of

enduring social organization through its production, processing and consumption. Food is clearly an agent of social change and not just its product. Secondly, food habits shape identity. Gender roles, for example, derive largely from the division of labour in production, in processing and preparing food and allocating consumption within the family (Pilcher, 2006: 4). Both gender and social organization are thrown into sharp relief when we consider the ways in which the Housewives Associations in Australia have used and constructed food to organize themselves.

The 1950s in Australia are significant for a number of reasons; the 'Long Boom' (for some), it was also a period of rapid change in the dairy industry in terms of regulation, mechanization and quantity. The economic boom that began in the 1950s was not confined to Australia, and ushered in a new consumer society. In the dairy industry, more and more farms moved to liquid production; there was a surplus in production, not just in Australia, but in the US as well, and consequent price reductions for the export market, and domestic price fixing to protect the market.

During the same period there were constant complaints from both housewives and the industry about the high domestic cost and price fixing; there was more milk but higher production costs, which dairy farmers claimed they had little or no control over (Dairy Industry Investigation Committee, 1953: 2). For this reason the Dairy Industry Investigations Committee advocated using subsidies rather than higher prices to meet the increasing costs of dairy production (1953: 7). Economic motives similarly drive the introduction of the free milk scheme in 1951, bolstered by nutritional science. This would distribute the surplus and, according to the British Medical Association, double the normal growth rate of children and improve their behaviour, their athletic prowess, dental health and attendance at school (Department of Education Library Services, 2000).[i] Such ideas provide early examples of the use of scientific knowledge to understand and manage eating habits. In the face of concerns to stabilize the industry, a Dairy Industry Investigation Committee was established in 1953 and their reports provide a rich record of both the industry and the people who worked in it.

The Housewives' Day, a survey prepared for the Australian Sales Research Bureau at the end of the 1950s, provides an equally rich record of how women at home were spending their time. The report was the first major study of the Bureau and recognized the importance of women to marketing. Interviews were conducted with nearly 1400 women employed in "domestic duties" living in Melbourne (Australian Sales Research Bureau, 1959). The women spent an average of 4½ hours every day on meals, on preparation, consumption and washing up. The London study the survey was modelled on showed the same general pattern. Meals presented a series of tasks from which virtually no housewife could escape.

Younger women, however, were already spending less time preparing food than their older contemporaries. Housewives younger than twenty-five spent 1½ hours less a day on meals than women over forty-six years of age. A suggestion was made in the report that younger women were more likely to live on tinned and prepared meals or have appliances that made their life easier. This points to the significant paradox at the heart of the 1950s dream: that the fantasy of domestic goddess, the

kitchen at the centre of her life is simultaneously bound up with the acquisition of appliances and prepared food that promise to free her from it. As Susan Sheridan has shown, while women during this period might be spending less time 'actually preparing meals, she would have more products on her shopping list, more choices to make between brands, more information about nutrition to assimilate – and trips around the supermarket take up her own time, rather than that of the grocer and butcher who used to make up and deliver her orders' (2002: 99-101).

Cars and refrigerators, television and supermarkets and a whole new market of convenience foods heralded a massive transformation in food culture in Australia in the 1950s. The almost universal 9-to-5 working hours meant that women outside paid employment did all the shopping, learned to drive and took the family car. The formation of consumer groups like the Australian Consumers' Association and organisations specifically for housewives provided a forum for activism just when women's place in the home was being venerated. Lobbying for cheaper food, better quality food and a Ministry of Housekeeping showed how central food was to women's politics in the 1950s.

According to the official *Journal of the Housewives Association of New South Wales*, 'The housewife was possibly more interested in milk than in any other single food on her refrigerator shelves' (1953: 3). Food was a major focus of the Association's activities; it took up a considerable amount of women's time and the household budget – around 21 percent of household income in the 1960s (Symons cited in Sheridan, 2002: 101). The Housewives Association of NSW was founded in 1918, modelled on a similar group in New York. Other associations were established in different states and a national organisation was formed (see McLeod, 2008; Johnson, 1999; Smart, 1986; 1994; 1998). They were also part of an international network. In Spain such participation in housewife associations has been described as 'part of an expanded notion of the political' (Radcliff, 2002: 79). This was a conception of the political that would encompass everyday life. The Association aimed to educate women in the principles of proper nutrition and to campaign against rising food prices, although it broadened its interests to become a lobbying force on issues affecting women and children generally. As the official journal pronounced: 'Your problem is Ours'. 'This is your journal' the President wrote,

> and we want every woman to write to us on every problem she meets and can't cope with alone. It doesn't matter how simple your query is, or which aspect of "living" it embraces, ours is a service magazine and we're here to help (1953: 3).

In the postwar period Australian Housewives' Associations engaged in consumer boycotts, factory inspections, letter-writing campaigns, cooperative buying and lobbying for representation in parliament, on boards and committees of inquiry. In all these activities housewives were represented as agents of rational consumption. While the dominant discourse emphasized national unity during wartime, alternative discourses of consumerism arose during the 1950s and gender and class conflicts were channelled into these, making food prominent as an agent of change. Margaret Howe urged readers 'Let's have a bushfire':

> There is a vital need for women in Parliament. Some women are wasting their time in minor activities. They need to move up from Parents' and Citizens' Associations to Local Councils. Attend your local councils; get to know your Mayors and Alderman. Take an interest in council affairs and make your presence felt…If your local member does not do what you require, vote him out at the next election, until you get someone who does… Women of Australia, join and support your Housewives' Association, Country Women's Association and attend your local Council Meetings. This work is vitally important and for Australia. Your country needs you in peacetime even more than in wartime (1953: 9).

The period was marked by changes in the nature of mechanisms articulating and mediating production and consumption where women's role as consumers was both a source of political activism and a constraint. Until recently historians have represented the 1950s as dominated by a conservative promotion of domesticity. Taking an alternative perspective, Justine Lloyd and Leslie Johnson have argued that the figure of the housewife enabled the feminist subject by making it possible for women to think of themselves as having something in common, by encouraging women to insist on their right and need to represent themselves and by traversing the boundaries between public and private concerns (2004). Taken together these factors, they argue, were crucial to the emergence of second wave feminism. In doing this, food played a central but neglected role.

The Housewives Association used the language of a separate sphere of interest and influence to assert their claims for political change. Their slogan 'your problem is ours' and endorsement for the idea that unity is strength encouraged women to identify with and support each other through what they saw as common problems. Self-organization supported their identity as women and simultaneously expanded the possibilities for participation and created networks of solidarity. They also broadened the parameters of public debate.

In a different way dairy farmers in the 1950s also worked at relationships attempting to provide a viable alternative to capitalist agribusiness. Interdependence was a fundamental fact of farm life. While most families divided labour along gender lines, they did not always do it in the same way. Dairy farming was dependent on family labour and practices of cooperation in daily chores, especially milking, could blur gender distinctions and generate common interests and understandings, (simultaneously perhaps drawing on the racial, gender and class biases that such a tradition embraces). And while women's work could be subject to what Jeanne Boydston calls 'pastoralisation', becoming taken for granted as a 'natural' activity without distinct economic value, gender based networks integrated work with sociability that had an economic dimension (1990). Dairy farmers depended on their neighbours and the integration of work with their social life and the mutual aid they provided each other contributed to a resilient network of interdependence among neighbouring farm families. Such interdependence acted as a safety net during illness or absences and provided the basis for subsistence.

Until the 1970s the dominant organization of dairy farmers was a co-operative,

although this was declining, as dairy farming was for some years before that. The North Coast Fresh Food & Cold Storage Co-operative Company Ltd (NORCO), which began operations at Byron Bay, in 1895, was typical of dairy co-operatives. It commenced operations as a farmer-owned business. The lifestyle as well as the economic structure also encouraged interdependence among farmers. Wages were too high to employ staff and the industry relied on family labour, extending to community labour when there was illness or the need for travel from home arose. Dairies were characterised by subsistence farming where reliance on family and neighbours was customary.

The dairy industry experienced a decline during the war years, a reduction in the number of registered dairies and in the number of cows, after the expansion in the industry during the Depression as families on wheat farms turned to cows to acquire cash (Wadham & Wood, 1950: 181). The total output of milk also dropped considerably and the production of butter and cheese almost halved from the 1934 total. Part of the explanation lay in the difficulty in obtaining labour, but dairying also lost its appeal in the face of the high cost of production and wages in relation to price and drought contributed to the problems. In 1953 the Dairy Investigation Committee had warned that the 'inability to secure satisfactory prices, would accelerate the drift of young people to the cities, and dairying would cease to attract new settlers' (1953: 6). The average age of dairy farmers on the North Coast of NSW in 1960 was 55, many were a lot older. The Dairy Industry Act 1957 was introduced to provide a five-year stabilization plan for the Industry, but it was too late for some. Farmers diverted their dairy farms to other forms of agriculture – most notably the production of vegetables, and to beef production. Some sold to neighbouring farmers, others to hobby farmers or speculators. Successful farmers expanded their holdings and mechanization.[ii]

In 1950 the Commonwealth Diary Products Equalisation Board had guaranteed an increased and stabilised return with the advice that 'it is to more modern farming methods, scientific improvement of pastures and more attractive working conditions that the industry must look for further stimulus' (National Bank, 1950: 18). The ideology of efficiency, as Andrea Gaynor calls it, which took hold in the twentieth century, privileged institutional knowledge over personal experience and skills, management strategies from agricultural scientists and the application of new technologies (1995). Industrial inputs and scientific knowledge generated fertility and produce, not the interaction of land and people (Main, 2008). As Chief of the Division of Plant Industry at the CSIRO, Otto Frankel observed in 1962, agricultural science became a 'world force', helping 'to conquer the earth for man's use' (1963: 301). Diverse interest groups in Australia during the period of the Long Boom also believed that science could solve consumer problems, 'be they declining demand or falling product standards' (McLeod, 2008: 79).

Gladys Hain, President of the Victorian Housewives Association advocated up-to-date methods of cooking, higher and more efficient knowledge of housekeeping to reduce work for the housewife (1953: 7). The Association promoted cooking and domestic science courses to all girls in all schools, rather than the knowledge inherited from mothers and grandmothers. On milk it was nutritional experts the journal used to promote milk consumption and elevate its importance. A campaign

in 1953 demanded the removal of sales tax on ice cream, 'a dairy by-product constantly billed as a national food' recommended for children and invalids. While nutritional experts confirmed that 'milk is nature's most complete food…ice cream is even more highly concentrated' and included as a basic food in the US (1953: 10). The journal suggested you should allow one quart of milk a day for each child, one pint a day for each adult (1953: 23).

This amount of milk would be out of the reach of many families and the housewives activism was constantly directed at the Milk Board. As always, Dora Lawson, the Organising Secretary of the Housewives Association of NSW complained, 'Housewives suffer directly from the arbitrary declarations of the men in control' (1953: 7). While they failed in their attempt to bid for cheaper milk and seasonal prices, the Association took credit for the drop in consumption registered in 1953 and for preventing milk price rises the following year. The Dairy Industry Investigations Committee had warned against raising the price of butter during the same year because it would stimulate the demand for substitutes (1953: 7).[iii] The Housewives Association campaigned for bigger margarine quotas that would provide a viable substitute. Letters from readers showed considerable interest in the way primary products were controlled and distributed, and complained that money was going to the factory and not the dairyman.

Dairy farming remained a demanding means of earning a livelihood; the cows have to be milked twice a day, 365 days a year. Improvements in working conditions elsewhere were not passed on and made dairy farming hired labour less attractive. The industry was consequently dependent on family labour. As a 1950 Report recognised:

> The process of milking and cleaning up the sheds and utensils, properly carried out, absorbs so much time that unless the family does this work the farmer has little time for other jobs on the farm. This is particularly so on small farms, where the no of cows kept does not warrant the use of milking machines (Wadham & Wood, 1950: 186-87).

Improvement in the quality of dairy products was explained by the application of knowledge acquired by research workers in dairy bacteriology, advances in the standard hygiene of farms and less contamination of the milk and cream in bails and dairies. Milk was separated on the farm and fed to calves and pigs, that industry developing as a sideline to dairying as a way of using the by-products of the butter and cheese industries. Reductions in the revenue from pig meats in the mid-50s then also impacted on dairy farms (Dairy Industry Investigation Committee, 1955: 19). Other factors in this transformation were said to include better education of factory managers and their assistants, improvements in the design of churns and butter working appliances, the neutralizing of the acidity of the cream when the souring process had gone too far by the time it arrived at the factory, better control of temperature and improvements in pasteurization (Watt, 1955: 163-65). Pasture management and the maintenance of soil fertility were borrowed from Great Britain, France, Holland and Denmark to improve the carrying capacity of dairy farms. Electric fences and strip feeding replaced more inefficient pasture grazing but curtailed the movements of the herd at the same time.

Farmwomen's lives were also being transformed during the same period. There were fewer materials to clean when the farms became more mechanised. Buying butter, rather than churning it at home became more common. The use of milking machines expanded throughout the early 20th, all changing the role women played on the farm and their contact with the herd. Farms got bigger, regulations got tighter. Between 1961 and 2001 the number of Australian farms almost halved and the size of those that remained grew. Alma Graham was one of the farmers that turned to beef production, although she prefers dairy cows:

> I used to love them… and when we were milking the cows got to love me too. They'd stand there in front of my bail and they'd look at Stew and they'd say don't you let him milk me and they'd stand queued up at my bail so as I'd milk them. Oh they were beautiful and I'd rub them and talk to them and Stew'd say, 'come on get in here'. Know every cow. There'd be 80 and I'd know every cow…. You looked after them. Every little calf you loved them. It was special. Because you realised what that mother was going through. Sometimes you go and you'd see that poor old mother just jump straight over the fence to try and get to her. … try to get to her little baby. I supposed I loved them too much. I did love them… I couldn't go back to it. I still love the animals (2008).

Alma Graham's attachment to dairy farming was more than the sustenance it provided financially and the changes that the industry underwent had very real consequences for the way of life of farmers and their communities. This project is part of a much larger study trying to bring together people who live and work on farming land and those who sustain themselves from the same land, hundreds or thousands of miles away. The Housewives' Association identified itself as political (although non-party), and their domain of interest included every sphere of public life, promoting the home, women and children as public policy concerns. The interlocking chains binding milk producers and consumers are much clearer when the historical narrative is reoriented, around the circles placing gender, family and community at the centre of the story. Such an approach provides a valuable lens to re-examine how food was used and constructed to organise politics and people's lives.

Some authors have proclaimed that we are currently in the midst of a food revolution. Many separate movements are converging on a common goal to create a food system that promotes the health of people as well as the environment. Such movements address the production and consumption sides of the food system: fair food, slow food, farm-animal welfare, the organic food industry, locally grown food movements, safe food campaigns, activism against marketing foods to kids, the kitchen-garden school programs, anti-trans-fats and anti-high-fructose-corn-syrup movements, better food labelling and food security (Nestle: 2009, 37). Women on dairy farms were both housewives and workers. They were linked with their contemporaries in urban areas by the consumption of the products of that labour. While the housewives associations were political in the sense of making claims about what the social collective and state ought to do, they were also civic associations directed outward to serve members and the broader community. Farmwomen were part of that community and yet advocating on their behalf around

a common goal was hindered by the artificial boundaries between production and consumption that are now being questioned again.

In the 'Pleasures of Eating' Wendell Berry advocates reclaiming responsibility for one's own part in the food economy:

> Eating ends the annual drama of the food economy that begins with planting and birth. Most eaters, however, are no longer aware that this is true. They think of food as an agricultural product, perhaps, but they do not think of themselves as participants in agriculture. They think of themselves are 'consumers'. If they think beyond that, they recognise that they are passive consumers (1990: 145).

Eaters, Berry argues, should understand that eating takes place inescapably in the world, that is inescapably an agricultural act, and how we eat determines, to a considerable extent, how the world is used. For women in the 1950s, both at home and on the farm, what we eat took up a considerable amount of time. Food helped shape their lives. Moreover, it contributed to the shape of women's lives in the years that passed. The identification of common interests among women laid the groundwork for feminism and the civic and political dimension of housewives associations provided a model as well as experience in organisation. The significance of family and community central to both groups of women elevates the importance of everyday life, which has generated and sustained other movements. Food is clearly an agent of social change and not just its product.

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Bio note

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[i] The free milk scheme was first advocated by Dr Cory Mann in Britain in the mid 1920s, and applied to a number of countries during the Depression years. There was some opposition to the scheme in Australia, on the grounds that distributing milk and collecting bottles and money would take up valuable teaching time. At a State Education convention in 1941, Dr Noel Gutteridge, from the British Medical Association, proposed a scheme to provide a dairy ration of half a pint of milk to children for the health benefits it would provide. Menzies raised the matter of a free milk scheme with State Premiers in 1950. In December that year the Commonwealth's *State Grants (Milk for School Children Act* was passed and by October 1951 all Australian states were participating in the scheme, except Queensland, where it began operating in 1953. See Department of Education and Training Library Services, 'Free Milk Scheme', State of Queensland Department of Education and Training, 2000. The scheme ended in 1973 when the *Review of the Continuing Expenditure Policies of the Previous Government, the Coombs Report* presented to the Commonwealth government recommended discontinuing the scheme due to significant agreement among health authorities that it could not be justified along nutritional grounds.

[ii] Part of the rationale for protecting the dairy industry in the 1950s was the cultural significance of farming to Australians. John Howard used the same argument in 2006 when he announced that farmers would receive an extra 350 million dollars to see them through the drought: 'We would lose something of our identification as Australians', he said, 'if we ever allowed the number of farms in our nation to fall below a critical mass' (*Sydney Morning Herald* 2006). Richard Waterhouse has explained the significance of this in terms of the yeoman ideal and the commitment to improving and cultivating so as to legitimate non-Indigenous claims to the land. This ideal continues to infuse the hopes many Australians have for their land and society.

[iii] Until the 1960s there was a ban in Australia on blending margarine with butter or using colouring to yellow margarine, which is white in appearance. Both measures, in addition to quotas, were intended to protect the industry.