

The Political Uses of Food Protests: Analyzing the 1910 Meat Boycott

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In 1910, a meat boycott spread through the United States. Tens of thousands of people pledged not to eat meat for thirty days to demand lower prices and protest the practices of the Meat Trust. The movement, though its outcomes were limited, was supported by consumer organizations, labor unions, lawmakers, suffragists, and women's clubs. It thus intersected with struggles that were at the heart of the Progressive Era's reform movements. This article will explore how various organizations (labor unions, the Socialist Party, suffragists, the National Consumers League) used, or did not use, this event to further their own goals. It will argue that food protests constitute a site from which to analyze particular transformations of the protest landscape of the time, such as the rise of consumer politics; it will also show that as transversal spaces of mobilization, food protests should be studied through the significance of their object. Food, as a meeting point between the individual body and society, can epitomize the blurring of the lines between private and public that characterized Progressive reform movements.

Between 1897 and 1916, the cost of living in the US rose by almost a third, leading to fierce public debate around the causes of the increase in prices and to protest movements aimed at the companies and trusts held responsible for the situation. Food riots erupted in cities like New York and Providence, often led by immigrant housewives who had no access to unions and political parties to make their voices heard.¹ They were sometimes joined by local

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¹ On the evolution of prices and the cost of living in the Progressive Era see Eric Rauchway, "The High Cost of Living in the Progressives' Economy," *Journal of American History*, 88, 3 (Dec. 2001), 898–924, 900; and Helen Zoe Veit, *Modern Food, Moral Food: Self-Control, Science, and the Rise of Modern American Eating in the Early Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 16. For studies of food movements in the early twentieth century see Paula E. Hyman, "Immigrant Women and Consumer Protest: The New York City Kosher Meat Boycott of 1902," *American Jewish History*, 70, 1 (Sept. 1980), 91–105; Dana Frank, "Housewives, Socialists, and the Politics of Food: The 1917 New York Cost-of-Living Protests," *Feminist Studies*, 11, 2 (Summer 1985) 255–85; Kimberly Nusco, "The South Providence Kosher Meat Boycott of 1910: A Study of Jewish Women's Consumer Activism," Open Access Master's Theses, Paper 1771, at <https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/theses/1771>; and Nusco, "The South Providence Kosher Meat Boycott of 1910," *Notes: Rhodes Island Jewish Historical Association*, 13, 1 (Nov. 2003), 97–126.

activists, radicals, union members, or advocates of women's suffrage. The aim of these riots was to bring prices down and restore the families' purchasing power in a wider context of labor struggles around working conditions and concentration of industrial production. Mobilizations around food thus emerged as meeting points between groups of activists pushing for reform in various fields during the Progressive era, one example of the "issue-fused coalitions" that characterized the period.² They blurred the boundaries between struggles over working conditions, women's suffrage, or consumer rights. While in itself a political object, fraught with symbolism and cultural meaning, food could also be a vector through which to reach marginalized groups and advocate for diverse causes.

The meat boycott of 1910 is a particularly interesting event with which to analyze food as a crossroads of political mobilization. It lasted only for a few weeks (between January and March), and its success in achieving its aims – lowering meat prices and ending the unlawful practices of the Meat Trust – was doubtful; nevertheless, it is worth analyzing as a moment, rather than a movement, when one action (the boycott) gave national prominence, especially through the press, to various groups and organizations. Labor unions, consumers' organizations, women's clubs, legislators, and suffragists all participated in the boycott, sometimes for its own sake, sometimes to advance their own goals. Although the "meat strike," as it was often called, was a collection of local initiatives rather than a coordinated national movement, it was given a national scope by press coverage, and thus differed from other, more local, movements such as the 1902 kosher meat riots in New York,³ or the 1914 "Macaroni riots" in Providence.⁴ Food riots and boycotts in the early twentieth-century United States have largely been analyzed from a gendered perspective, as they enabled women, especially immigrant, working-class women, to act as political agents outside traditional structures such as parties and unions through "domestic politics."⁵

The 1910 boycott is another case study enriching this feminist perspective, but its analysis requires a broader lens, or rather a multiplicity of lenses leading to an understanding of how various movements used it to advance their

² Daniel T. Rodgers, "In Search of Progressivism," *Reviews in American History*, 10, 4 (Dec. 1982), 113–32, 114. On the diversity of progressive causes and coalitions see also Maureen A. Flanagan, *America Reformed: Progressives and Progressivisms, 1890s–1920s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). ³ Hyman.

⁴ Russell J. DeSimone, "Providence's 'Macaroni Riots' of 1914," *Italian Americana*, 12, 2 (Summer 2014), 133–45.

⁵ Emily E. Twarog, *Politics of the Pantry: Housewives, Food and Consumer Protest in Twentieth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 4.

specific goals, and how the boycott itself contributed to the reframing of political issues such as the relationship between producers and consumers or the interaction between domesticity and the public sphere. Movements around food, its price and its quality, were one of the instances where various groups sought to frame everyday issues within the vocabulary of reform. But while these movements have often been analyzed through the perspective of reform ideologies (which movements were involved, for which goals) and “frame brokerage,”⁶ another question that should be asked is whether the *object* of protest (here food, and more specifically meat) has an impact on the movements that use it. In other words, what is the specificity of food as a site of protest, and how does it contribute to the legitimization of marginalized political actors, most notably women?

After a summary of the boycott itself and the main events that characterized it, I will analyze the ways in which different groups used the boycott, either by supporting or by criticizing it, in the pursuance of their own political aims: unions, socialists, suffragists, or organizations like the National Consumers League were active in the boycott in different states and for different reasons, harnessing the anger of the people against the Meat Trust to put forward their own agenda. I will then focus more precisely on how the boycott manifests the complex emerging relationship between producers and consumers, one of the major transformations of the political economy in the Progressive Era.⁷ More specifically, the meat boycott shows how tensions emerged within unions and consumer organizations around the legitimacy of the boycott itself as a tool of protest, as well as the appeal of food as an object of protest. This will lead me to analyze the specificity of food in these patterns of mobilization, to reverse the perspective. Rather than wonder what reform ideologies underpinned movements around food, the analysis can also start from the object of protest, its symbolism and political value, and the way this affects the claims of various groups and their quest for legitimacy.

⁶ Jeffrey Haydu, “Frame Brokerage in the Pure Food Movement, 1879–1906,” *Social Movement Studies*, 1, 11 (2012), 97–112.

⁷ On the issue of consumer politics see in particular Lawrence B. Glickman, *A Living Wage: American Workers and the Making of Consumer Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999); Glickman, *Buying Power: A History of Consumer Activism in America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009); Meg Jacobs, “‘How about Some Meat?’ The Office of Price Administration, Consumption Politics, and State Building from the Bottom Up, 1941–1946,” *Journal of American History*, 84, 3 (Dec. 1997), 910–41; Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics: Economic Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

A "BIG WAR ON MEAT"

The meat boycott took place in a context of rising tensions around the heightened cost of living,⁸ and ongoing concern on the part of public authorities as to the activities of the major food companies in the wake of the passing of the Pure Food and Drug Act and the Meat Inspection Act of 1906. The price of beef was 22.6 percent higher in 1909 than it had been during the 1896–1900 period,⁹ and inquiries were being launched into hog and cattle conditions and the practices of the Meat Trust, which led to measures such as the dissolution of the National Packing Company.¹⁰ More generally, 1910 was a pivotal year in the emergence of food prices as a central concern in US political life that would go on to have important consequences on the political landscape with the elections of 1912.¹¹

The meat boycott crystallized those concerns; it lasted around eight weeks, from mid-January to mid-March 1910. At its zenith, it involved hundreds of thousands of Americans; while it is difficult to find precise and reliable figures, press articles regularly mention the scope of the boycott in several cities,¹² as well as the way in which it gradually spread across the country from its starting points in Washington and Cleveland.¹³ The first collective instance of boycotting meat took place in Cleveland in mid-January, when foremen in factories committed to a thirty-day without-meat pledge, urging workers to do the same

⁸ "A Big War On Meat," *Washington Post*, 22 Jan. 1910, 1. The account given in this paper of the boycott, its scope, and its different stages relies mainly on press articles: 78 articles from the *New York Times*, 42 from the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and 25 from the *Kimberly Nusco* has also retraced the boycott's unfolding in "The South Providence Kasher Meat Boycott of 1910."

⁹ "The Soaring Cost of Living," *New York Times* 2 Jan. 1910.

¹⁰ "Meat Prices Soar," *New York Times*, 8 Jan. 1910; "Asks Beef Trust Inquiry," *New York Times*, 18 Jan. 1910; Meat-Packer Legislation, "Hearings before the Committee on Agriculture, House of Representatives, Sixty-Sixth Congress, Second Session, on Meat-packer Legislation" (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1920), 1880.

¹¹ David I. Macleod, "Food Prices, Politics, and Policy in the Progressive Era," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, 8, 3 (July 2009), 365–406, 368.

¹² Both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* mention 125,000 boycotters in Cleveland on January 24. *New York Times*, "Little Meat For Cleveland: Supply Has Become So Small That Prices Are Kept High"; *Washington Post*, "High Price Record: Cost of Living Now Greatest in American History," 2. The *San Francisco Chronicle*, 22 Jan. 1910, 2, "Boycott Spreads to the Atlantic: Workingmen in the East Join in the War on Meat Prices," reports 50,000 "I don't eat meat" buttons having been manufactured in Baltimore. The *Washington Post*, 23 Jan. 1910, 1, "No-Meat Army Covers Nation. Thousands Join Boycott Against High Prices," goes as far as to claim that 600,000 people are enrolled in the boycott in Pittsburg alone.

¹³ "Boycott Spreads to the Atlantic," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 22 Jan. 1910, 2; "Chicago to Join Boycott," *New York Times*, 23 Jan. 1910; "No Meat Army Covers Nation," *Washington Post*, 23 Jan. 1910, 1.

and receiving support from the state Senator, Daniel W. Williams, and from clubwomen eager to join the anti-meat campaign.¹⁴

In Washington, DC, an organization called the National Anti-Food Trust League had been created in early January, led by wives of members of Congress and their husbands. Its plan was to organize boycotts of various food items to force the trusts to reach more equitable prices. According to the league's manifesto,

The object of this league is to restrict the demand for any particular food product by the simultaneous discontinuance by the members of the league and their friends of the use of such product for a given time, not definitely stated in the interdict, thus creating the only effective means through which lower prices can be secured and unfair prices prevented in the future.¹⁵

The league had no influence over the Cleveland boycott; however, it quickly piggybacked on it, sending out membership cards and hiring home economists as experts to provide recipes with meat substitutes.¹⁶

Between 17 January and the end of the month, the boycott spread rapidly in thirteen states, with tens of thousands signing pledges. It was supported by unions, lawmakers, restaurants, and women's clubs, and led to the opening of a Federal grand jury, with US district attorney Edwin W. Sims calling to dissolve the National Packing Company. By the end of the month, butchers were starting to close down in several cities, the Ways and Means Committee decided on an investigation of high prices, and national newspapers were relaying the advice of experts on how to have a balanced diet without eating meat.¹⁷

Nevertheless, as early as 3 February, prices started climbing again, unions were divided on whether or not to support the action, and the boycott faded by early March, with the *New York Times* wryly titling, "Meat Strike's Formal End. Had Long Ago Practically Ceased with Higher Prices than at Beginning."¹⁸

There were boycotts in New York, Boston, Pittsburgh, Baltimore, Cleveland, Chicago, St. Louis, Omaha, Atlanta, and Los Angeles. The largest part of the boycotters was concentrated in the East and in Ohio; nevertheless the boycott was widely reported on by the press, including on the West

¹⁴ "Thousands to Eat No Meat," *New York Times*, 18 Jan. 1910; "Workmen Declare Boycott on Meat," *The Columbian*, 20 Jan. 1910; "Meat Prices Take Tumble," *Marion Daily Mirror*, 20 Jan. 1910. ¹⁵ "Labor in Food War," *Washington Post*, 21 Jan. 1910, 1.

¹⁶ "To List Food Substitutes," *New York Times*, 22 Jan. 1910.

¹⁷ "Chicago to Join Boycott," *New York Times*, 22 Jan. 1910; "What to Eat—and Why," *New York Times*, 30 Jan. 1910.

¹⁸ "Meat Prices Climb Again," *New York Times*, 3 Feb. 1910; *New York Times*, 17 March 1910.

Coast, as witnessed by the many articles featured in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. In spite of this reach, there was no centralization; the meat strike can be analyzed as a collection of local movements, taking inspiration from each other without formal coordination, except in the case of some unions (such as the Central Labor Union, which instructed its members in several states to join the boycott), and attuned to different local contexts, its message also depending on which organization took up the cause with the most zeal. The *San Francisco Chronicle* thus describes the boycott as a form of organic reaction, from the bottom up, a letting out of pent-up anger and frustration at the ever-rising prices:

There is no central organization to the movement in evidence as yet: no leader making special pleas for its advancement and prolongation or exploiting prejudices. It seems to be swayed by an undercurrent of mutual feeling in communities, often widely separated, that the price of meat is regulated by monopolistic manipulation and that its price has soared just high enough and that the time is at hand to call a halt, even though by doing so the use of that most necessary article of food was cut out entirely for awhile.¹⁹

In the absence of national coordination, of “leaders” or “special pleas,” the boycott can therefore be analyzed as a collection of local initiatives, bound together by anxiety over rising prices within various communities, but whose message was devised by the communities who embarked on it, and the organizations which lent it their support.

While food riots in earlier periods have been characterized as relatively spontaneous events, scholars have shown that struggles around food safety and prices in the early twentieth-century United States were structured and borrowed from diverse vocabularies of protest.²⁰ In the case of the 1910 boycott, it gathered claims related to high prices and the fight against the trusts, to working conditions, to the rights of consumers, and to women’s suffrage, thus encompassing various progressive causes. In Ohio and Pennsylvania, the boycott was mainly led by unions; in Washington, the Anti-Food Trust League attempted to centralize pledges and to carry the message of the boycott to members of Congress and President Taft himself,²¹ while in New York support for the boycott was led by women’s organizations, whether clubs or suffragist groups. While David MacLeod points out that “the protest movement was weak organizationally, and not all potential supporters agreed on tactics,”²² one might also argue that it is

¹⁹ “Meat Boycott Is Discussed,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 24 Jan. 1910.

²⁰ Nusco, “The South Providence Kosher Meat Boycott,” 25.

²¹ “League to Boycott Trusts,” *New York Times*, 16 Jan. 1910.

²² MacLeod, “Food Prices,” 368.

this diversity of tactics and objectives that makes the movement relevant in terms of analysis, forcing us to tackle the complexity of protest movements at the time and raising issues about the framing of such movements by the organizations involved in them. As Jeffrey Haydu has argued, “frame brokerage” is essential to understanding how a movement formulates its goals and adapts them to a specific campaign and a specific audience.²³ I would argue that in the case of the meat boycott, both the object (meat) and the strategy (the boycott) of the protest contributed to ongoing debates within unions and women’s movements on how to fight and to reach their goals.

THE BOYCOTT: A CONTROVERSIAL STRATEGY

Unions were the first to organize and popularize the boycott. In Washington, the president of the Central Labor Union was on the board of the National Anti-Food Trust League;²⁴ in Pittsburgh, the trades council encouraged all local trade unions to declare a boycott.²⁵ The use of boycotting by unions was no innovation; on the contrary, the meat boycott took place in a context when boycotting was a common way of mobilizing to achieve better working conditions. It was also a topic of debate within union ranks and within the political left as to its usefulness.²⁶ In fact, the American Federation of Labor in 1910 was waging an important court battle around the boycott, having been accused by the Buck’s Stove & Range company of restraining trade for putting them on the AFL’s “We Don’t Patronize” list.²⁷ Boycotting a commodity instead of a company could circumvent those legal hurdles; some labor unions therefore saw the meat boycott as a way to legitimize a tool that they had been using to further workers’ rights.

²³ Haydu, “Frame Brokerage in the Pure Food Movement,” 98.

²⁴ “The Meat Strike Started as a Labor Union Movement,” *New York Times*, 21 Jan. 1910; “Labor Leads in Movement,” *Evening Star*, 21 Jan. 1910; “League to Boycott Trusts,” *New York Times*, 16 Jan. 1910. The CLU was particularly involved in the movement and had contributed to developing the tool of the boycott since its foundation in 1882. Philip S. Foner, *History of the labor Movement in the United States*, Volume II, *From the Founding of the American Federation of Labor to the Emergence of American Imperialism* (New York: International Publishers, 1955), 34.

²⁵ “75,000 in Pittsburg Join. Pledges Distributed in the Streets—Unions Lead the Boycott,” *New York Times*, 22 Jan. 1910.

²⁶ The importance of this tool was manifested by early publications on its significance for the labor struggle in the United States, such as Harry W. Laidler’s *Boycott and the Labor Struggle: Economic and Legal Aspects*, published in 1914, or Leo Wolman’s *The Boycott in American Trade Unions*, published in 1916.

²⁷ Philip Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States*, Volume III, *The Policies and Practices of the American Federation of Labor* (New York: International Publishers, 1981), 338–41.

In the words of an AFL general organizer, “The right to boycott has become an interesting question, inasmuch as the public in general, as well as the newspapers, has emphatically declared its belief in it.”²⁸

Boycotting meat could thus appear as a solution to avoid legal procedures and maintain the boycott as a tool of mobilization for workers. Nevertheless, unions were divided on the benefits of such a method, and the AFL itself did not present a united front. Its president, Samuel Gompers, refused to issue a formal call to local unions to join the movement, while the secretary of the organization, Frank Morrison, was reported as saying that the movement could achieve great good in demonstrating the “powers of the purchasers of the country.”²⁹ In saying this, he was pointing out a specificity of boycotting goods rather than companies: while by boycotting a company, workers were acting directly on working conditions, even if they were doing so as consumers, by boycotting a food item like meat, they were acting exclusively as consumers. Giving up meat for thirty days had no direct link with their own trades and industries, but an indirect impact on their standard of living if the boycott was successful and the price of meat went down. In the initial pledge taken by the Cleveland workers who started the action, they defined themselves both as “wage earners” and as “citizens.”³⁰ The meat boycott thus participated in the creation by workers of a consumerist identity during the Progressive Era, as well as in the tensions produced by this shift in consciousness, from the worker as producer to the worker as consumer.

As the boycott progressed, so did divisions among the unions, with the United Trades and Labor Council in Cleveland “boycotting the boycott,”³¹ and the Central Labor Union in Boston arguing that only Congress could curb high prices. For some union representatives, the boycott was at best

²⁸ *Labor Journal*, 4 Feb. 1910, 1. E. L. Scharf, the president of the Anti-Food Trust League, was conscious of the legal risks involved in staging a boycott, and he painstakingly explained to a House Committee of the District of Columbia that what the league was proposing was in fact not a boycott, but a “discontinuance” of “the use of any particular food article.” In answering a question of the chairman on the difference between such proceedings and a boycott, he replied, “I have asked advice of the ablest attorneys in Washington before we went into this thing, because I was told that we might be treading on dangerous ground. This advice is to the effect that we can go on, and they said: ‘You can refuse to eat or you can agree to eat what you please, but you must not recommend to anyone not to buy from any particular concern, and not attack any enterprise that is at present a legal entity.’” Report of Hearings on H.R. 16925, To Regulate the Storage of Food Products in the District of Columbia—United States. Congress. House. Committee on the District of Columbia. Subcommittee on Investigation of Food Storage and Prices, clii.

²⁹ “More Give Up Meat,” *Washington Post*, 24 Jan. 1910, 1.

³⁰ “Workmen Declare Boycott on Meat,” *The Columbian*, 20 Jan. 1910.

³¹ “Little Meat for Cleveland,” *New York Times*, 24 Jan. 1910.

doubtful, at worst harmful, as a weapon in the fight against the high cost of living; its victims would not be the packers, who were targeted, but the small farmers who would sell fewer cattle, the workers in the factories, and the small retailers who were squeezed between producer and consumer, with very little leverage to negotiate with the packers.³²

Further to the left of the political spectrum, the boycott was wholeheartedly condemned precisely because it blurred the class conflict between capital and labor by casting the workers as consumers.³³ Though socialists were conscious that the cost of living was an issue that preoccupied working-class families, to them it could not be solved by a decrease in prices, but by a rise in wages. The meat boycott, rather than being seen as a political opportunity to put forward the plight of the working class, was presented as a counterproductive tool that would end up solidifying the hold of the trusts, an interpretation that was shared by the various exponents of socialism at the time (the Socialist Party of America, the Socialist Labor Party, and the IWW).

In the pages of the *Appeal to Reason*, the boycott is little mentioned, dwarfed by the newspaper's campaign against corruption in federal courts, the fight against the rise in mail rates, and the free-speech fights led by the IWW. Nevertheless, it is addressed in the two issues of 29 January and 12 February. The boycott is called "childish," "a silly remedy" that will leave the packers even more powerful than before.³⁴ The argument is taken up in "Shot in the Stomach" (12 February), where the growing success of the boycott is acknowledged and deplored: "The workers and the farmer are shooting each other in the stomach, while the Meat Trust sails serenely over their heads wholly uninjured." The only way to solve the issue of high prices is socialism, "a destruction of the entire profit system through the collective ownership and management of the means of production and distribution."³⁵ In the *Weekly People*, the organ of the Socialist Labor Party led by Daniel DeLeon, doubts are also raised as to the efficacy of the boycott, since the trusts, rather than being abolished, should be controlled by the workers. However, a letter from a reader suggests that rank-and-file socialists might have seen things differently: he stresses that the boycott is "an event of ... deep significance" and that contrary to traditional workers' actions, which are in part at the mercy of employers (who can buy machines or hire others to replace strikers), in the case of the meat boycott the weapon that is used is the human stomach: "there is no substitute ... to dispose of the beef

³² "Protests at Meat Boycott: It Will Not Hurt the Beef Trust, but the Producers," *New York Times*, 29 Jan. 1910.

³⁴ "A Childish Boycott," *Appeal to Reason*, 29 Jan. 1910, 4.

³⁵ "Shot in the Stomach," *Appeal to Reason*, 12 Feb. 1910, 4.

³³ Glickman, *A Living Wage*, 7.

products, and there is no appeal for the stomach's decision."³⁶ As a whole, however, socialists remained predominantly hostile to the boycott; consumer protests were deemed a possible distraction from the larger struggle of the workers for control of the means of production. The *Industrial Worker*, one of the main newspapers in English of the IWW, does not mention the boycott; in the *International Socialist Review*, also close to the union, a lengthy article is devoted to the rise in prices, concluding on a note similar to that of the other publications: "We shall not boycott the Meat Trust ... We must have higher wages. We must strengthen the Socialist party and join an industrial union wherever it is possible."³⁷

The meat boycott is thus another illustration of the complex patterns of workers' mobilization in the early twentieth century; the emergence of consumer politics blurred boundaries between labor and capital, and created divisions within the unions and in the ranks of the left. Within these debates, the tool of the boycott was in itself controversial. As Lawrence Glickman has shown, the boycott appeared to many workers as a negative option, which could entail judicial risks, as witnessed by the Buck's Stove & Range's case.³⁸ The union label was seen as a more positive tool to harness the power of workers as consumers.

The same argument was made by the National Consumers League (NCL); the league's major campaign in the early twentieth century, the White Label campaign, "avoided the legal challenges that would have defeated the simpler strategy of publishing a black list of firms to boycott."³⁹ The meat boycott therefore presented a dilemma for the NCL: while it was a movement showcasing the power of consumers, and singularly of women as the purveyors of food, it relied on a tool, the boycott, that the organization did not systematically support. In her declaration to the press on 23 January, Maud Nathan, president of the New York branch of the NCL, chose to support the cause underlying the boycott while never endorsing the boycott itself:

Such action, said she, would be entirely outside the province of the League. It is true, however, that I consider the present prices of meat unbearable and entirely without warrant. The beef trust is reaping the benefits. The farmer gets nothing, the small dealers get nothing. The retailer actually loses.⁴⁰

³⁶ C. B. Wells, "The Meat Strike," *Weekly People*, 5 Feb. 1910.

³⁷ Mary E. Marcy, "The Cause of Rising Prices," *International Socialist Review*, 10, 9 (March 1910), 769–74, 774.

³⁸ Glickman, *A Living Wage*, 116.

³⁹ Kathryn Kish Sklar, "The Consumers' White Label Campaign of the National Consumers' League, 1898–1918," in Susan Strasser, Charles McGovern, and Matthias Judt, eds., *Getting and Spending: European and American Consumer Societies in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 22.

⁴⁰ "No Meat Army Covers Nation," *Washington Post*, 23 Jan. 1910, 1.

Instead of focusing on the way consumers were mobilizing, she insisted on how the movement showed the power of the consumer against the trusts: “The consumer, after all, is the real master of the situation, and if he sets earnestly about it he can compel fair treatment, even from the trusts.”⁴¹ While acknowledging that the boycott was not the NCL’s preferred tool of mobilization, she therefore supported the effort to attack the Meat Trust as being consistent with the NCL’s general aim to have the consumer recognized as an important political force, capable of grassroots mobilization as well as legislative pressure, and to show the power of women to act in the public sphere.⁴²

In the ranks of labor as well as within the campaigns of the NCL, the meat boycott created debate and controversies which resonated with the changing landscape of reform movements in the Progressive Era, mapping out new interactions between consumers and producers in their opposition to the trusts. This ambiguity is manifested in the vocabulary used to describe the boycott, often called a “strike,”⁴³ a vocabulary still heavily indebted to the world of labor struggles,⁴⁴ as were the tools of mobilization (picketing, leaflets) used to spread the movement. The overlap between the world of production and that of consumption manifested by the boycott shows that far from leading to a depoliticization of working-class and middle-class Americans, “pocket-book politics” could galvanize forces of protest within various organizations, each framing the boycott according to its own goals.⁴⁵ While the boycott cannot be characterized as a national movement, in spite of the efforts at centralization deployed by the Anti-Food Trust League, it offers an interesting vantage point from which to observe the reconfiguration of labor struggles through consumerism and the part that food played in articulating popular discontent with organized forces of reform.

MOBILIZING WOMEN

This reconfiguration was heavily gendered, and food movements participated in the blurring of the lines between private and public that characterized the Progressive Era. As Kathleen Turner has argued, food is a “private matter with

⁴¹ “Dealers Ridicule Boycott Here,” *New York Times*, 23 Jan. 1910.

⁴² Jeffrey Haydu, “Consumer Citizenship and Cross-class Activism: The Case of the National Consumers’ League, 1899–1918,” *Sociological Forum*, 29, 3 (2014), 628–49, 629. Other organizations, such as the Mothers’ Club in Berkeley, also saw the boycott as a controversial tool, but one that was necessary under the circumstances, to avoid violence: “Women recoil from such drastic movements as boycotts, but in this case it seems to be the only alternative and vastly better than the riots which might follow should the prices go much higher and the feeling become stronger.” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 24 Jan. 1910.

⁴³ *New York Times*, 21 Jan. 1910, 31 Jan. 1910, 17 March 1910; *Evening Star*, 21 Jan. 1910.

⁴⁴ Twarog, *Politics of the Pantry*, 11.

⁴⁵ Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics*.

public implications”;⁴⁶ as such, it was of particular significance to women, and gave legitimacy to movements seeking to assert their competence outside the home in the name of domesticity. The rise of the consumer, as I have shown, contributed to this blurring of the lines, as well as to gender anxieties which led some organizations to dismiss consumer protests as childish and immature. While socialists had ideological grounds on which to oppose the boycott, their criticism can also be read in gendered terms; Dana Frank, analyzing food riots, argues that “underneath the Socialists’ brief temporal commitment to cost-of-living organizing lay a basic analytical indifference to the issue itself,” which can be related to the “deficiencies of party theorists’ commitment to women’s concerns.”⁴⁷ Food itself symbolized the blurring threshold between private and public. With the rise of urbanization and immigration, and the acceleration of the rural exodus, the growing distance between producers and consumers of food led to new interrogations as to how to buy, cook, and consume it. While the working class managed to keep producing some food items in spite of their living in big cities, they were far from self-sufficient and had to rely predominantly on the marketplace for their food consumption;⁴⁸ women hunted for the best prices at the same time as they sought to preserve family and cultural traditions in their preparation of food. In this, food differed from other objects of protest that linked the home and the city at the time. Other emblematic struggles, around public sanitation, education or clothing, while they were key to the “maternalist politics” of the era,⁴⁹ did not embody as fully as food the intrinsic duality of “a material good and an abstract emblem of change”;⁵⁰ the food you buy and cook becomes part of your body as you consume it, thus materializing the bond between self and society.

⁴⁶ Katherine E. Turner, *How the Other Half Ate: A History of Working-Class Meals at the Turn of the Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 60.

⁴⁷ Dana Frank, “Housewives, Socialists, and the Politics of Food: The 1917 New York Cost-of-Living Protests,” *Feminist Studies*, 11, 2 (Summer 1985), 255–85, 281–82. Similarly, Lawrence Glickman has shown how the reconceptualization of working-class struggle through consumption led to complex arguments seeking both to enhance women’s importance in these struggles and to belittle their significance as independent political actors. Glickman, *A Living Wage*, 116–24.

⁴⁸ Jane Ziegelman, *97 Orchard: An Edible History of Five Immigrant Families in One New York Tenement* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010); Donna Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 61.

⁴⁹ Seth Koven and Sonya Michel, “Womanly Duties: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States in France, Germany, Great Britain and the United States, 1880–1920,” *American Historical Review*, 95, 4 (Oct. 1990), 1076–1108.

⁵⁰ Megan Elias, “Making Progress in Food,” *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, 18, 4 (Oct. 2019), 391–96, 392.

Women were the guardians of this transition from acquisition to ingestion, and while the 1910 boycott was not a women's movement like others were, such as the 1902 riots, women nevertheless played a key role in its organization and development. The National Consumers League, the Women's Trade Union League, clubwomen, Congressmen's wives involved in the Anti-Food Trust League, and suffragists saw in it an opportunity to put forward issues that related to the place of women in the public sphere while using food as a legitimizing tool for their larger goals. New York suffragists framed their support for the boycott in the language of patriotism, calling the organization they created the "Gotham Beef Party," in reference to the Boston Tea Party of 1773;⁵¹ the spread of meat consumption in the early twentieth century can in some ways be compared to the way tea went from luxury to necessity before the American Revolution, causing anger and frustration when the British Parliament passed the Tea Act.⁵² The members of the "Gotham Beef Party" therefore presented themselves as the heirs to the mothers and fathers of the Republic, and implicitly warned of violence if their demands were not met.

But beyond the nods to American political history, women involved in the boycott sought to use meat as a way to show the importance of women in the economic life of the country, and the need to give them more power in public affairs. They wanted to "use the homefront as a starting point for protest in the public sphere,"⁵³ the meat boycott serving as yet another struggle in the development of the maternalist politics of the era. This is consistent with the analysis of women's movements by scholars such as Temma Kaplan, who has shown, through her study of collective actions by women in Barcelona in the 1910s, that "women's defense of the rights accorded them by the sexual division of labor, although fundamentally conservative, had revolutionary consequences."⁵⁴ In the case of the meat boycott, women were largely mobilizing within a gendered division of society and labor, as those who provided food for their families. In other words, the boycott enabled them to have a say in public life without overtly questioning predominant gender roles.

One organization was particularly active in promoting the boycott in New York, and in using food as a legitimizing tool for its political goals: Sofia Loebinger's National Progressive Woman's Suffrage Union (NPWSU) took inspiration from British suffragettes in advocating for radical actions to obtain the vote. The NPWSU organized several meetings in New York to support the boycott and had attendees sign pledges, while distributing the *American Suffragette* and advocating for votes for women: "Our meetings and the meat

⁵¹ "Gotham Beef Party," *American Suffragette*, 1, 8 (March 1910), 28.

⁵² T. H. Breen, "'Baubles of Britain': The American and Consumer Revolutions of the Eighteenth Century," *Past & Present*, 119 (May 1988), 73–104, 98.

⁵³ Twarog, 2.
⁵⁴ Temma Kaplan, "Female Consciousness and Collective Action: The Case of Barcelona, 1910–1918," *Signs*, 7, 3 (Spring 1982), 545–66, 551.

boycott are necessary and useful, because they advertise our cause and bring to public attention the fact that something must be done.”⁵⁵ Beyond this relatively classic repertoire of protest, however, the NPWSU resorted to more original tactics, inspired by the domestic-science movement and by other suffragist organizations, using the boycott as a way both to advocate for suffrage and to answer anti-suffrage arguments that women who wanted the vote were unwomanly. Suffragists in the early twentieth century used food as a way to counter those arguments, by publishing cookbooks, organizing bake sales, or opening cooperative kitchens.⁵⁶ Their aim was to show that suffragists could be housewives, mothers, and cooks; but beyond this acknowledgment of gender roles, it was also to show that precisely because of this, they, and all women, deserved the vote. Such an argument fell into the maternalist vision of society as an extension of the home,⁵⁷ but it was articulated distinctly in the realm of food, which appeared as both a basic duty indispensable to survival and, in the context of food reform, as a newly opened avenue for political involvement. During the meat boycott, alongside rallies and leaflets, the NPWSU also used recipes to spread support. The *American Suffragette*, the organization’s publication, featured meatless recipes alongside pictures of the rallies and calls for mobilization. The “Suffragette No-Meat Savories” were featured in a distinct section of the paper until the July issue, even though the boycott had all but failed by March 1910. Sofia Loebinger also announced – although sources do not indicate whether this initiative was put in place – that members of the NPWSU would hold cooking classes in New York to help women master those recipes.⁵⁸ As if materializing the association between being a good cook and advocating for women to have the vote, many of the recipes bear the name of the dish followed by “a la suffragette” (“Noodles a la suffragette,” “Bread pudding a la suffragette”⁵⁹). They also feature meat substitutes which were popular at the time, such as “nut meat.” Cooking, protesting and voting were therefore shown to be intrinsically linked rather than opposed, as Loebinger herself stated to the press when she announced a public meeting in favor of the boycott: “Not only will the speakers prove conclusively that if women had the vote the price of beef would go down, but recipes for dishes to take the place of meats will be distributed.”⁶⁰

⁵⁵ “Boycott of Meat Gaining Recruits,” *New York Times*, 30 Jan. 1910.

⁵⁶ For an analysis of suffragists’ political use of cooking, see Jessica Derleth, “Kneading Politics: Cookery and the American Woman Suffrage Movement,” *Journal of the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era*, 17 (2018), 450–74; and Stacy J. Williams, “Personal Prefigurative Politics: Cooking Up an Ideal Society in the Woman’s Temperance and Woman’s Suffrage Movements, 1870–1920,” *Sociological Quarterly*, 58, 1 (2017), 72–90.

⁵⁷ Koven and Michel, 1084.

⁵⁸ “Gotham Beef Party Is Active in Campaign,” *Birmingham Herald*, 1 Feb. 1910.

⁵⁹ “Suffragette No-Meat Savories,” *American Suffragette*, 1, 9 (March 1910), 21.

⁶⁰ “Milk Trust Inquiry May Reduce Prices,” *New York Times*, 24 Jan. 1910.

THE SYMBOLISM OF MEAT

Women relied on food and food movements to establish political legitimacy; they also relied on their social roles as protectors of their families to claim this legitimacy in mobilizing around food safety and price. These were recurring topics of grassroots activism and lobbying between the second half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth; from the swill milk scandal in New York in the 1850s to the food riots of 1917,⁶¹ popular protests were recurrent and reform organizations seized upon them to advance legislation and pressure politicians into acting, as was the case during the Pure Food Campaign that led to the Pure Food and Drug Act and the Meat Inspection Act of 1906. In the gamut of food protests however, meat had a distinctive symbolism, and was an important focus of popular discontent. The availability of meat was one of the distinctive traits of the US American diet for immigrants coming from countries where meat was a luxury.⁶² It came to embody their new lives, as well as the disillusionment with the image of the United States as a land of plenty. Meat was also seen as a source of virility and strength, which sometimes led to criticism of its boycott as a threat to the health of the workers. Lastly, food in general, and meat in this instance, served as a legitimizing tool of protest for specific groups, most notably women, for whom it was a gateway to political action. The meat boycott can thus be seen as an opportunity to reverse the lens of analysis of food protests, from a perspective centered on the framing of the issue by various movements (unions, consumer organizations, suffragists) to a study of the significance of the object of protest itself.

As Amy Bentley has argued, along with more established interpretations of food protests as expressions of a sense of injustice, female consciousness, or budding nationalism, food protests should be analyzed for what they say about the symbolic nature of the food item at the heart of the protest.⁶³ In this respect, riots and boycotts of meat in the United States in the early twentieth century are singular because they focus on an item that was not readily or regularly available to most working-class people in Europe. Though statistics are piecemeal for the period, there was a democratization of meat consumption among the

⁶¹ Turner, *How the Other Half Ate*, 86; Michael Egan, "Organizing Protest in the Changing City: Swill Milk and Social Activism in New York City, 1842–1864," *New York History*, 86, 3 (Summer 2005) 205–25; Dana Frank, "Housewives, Socialists, and the Politics of Food: The 1917 New York Cost-of-Living Protests," *Feminist Studies*, 11, 2 (Summer 1985) 255–85.

⁶² For a discussion of the vision of American abundance see Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat*; Ziegelman, *97 Orchard*; and Lynne Taylor, "Food Riots Revisited," *Journal of Social History*, 30, 2 (Winter 1996) 483–96.

⁶³ Amy Bentley and Christy Spackman, "Food Riots: Historical Perspectives," in David M. Kaplan, ed., *Encyclopedia of Food and Agricultural Ethics* (Dordrecht: Springer Reference, 2014), 1200–8, 1200.

American population through the industrialization of production that resulted in meat being closely associated with the abundance of life in the United States, especially for immigrant working-class families.⁶⁴ Press articles reporting on the boycott show that even working people ate meat several times a week; the *New York Times*, quoting a retailer, reported that with the rise in meat prices, American working families might have to eat meat “only a very few times a week,” like the English.⁶⁵ In Pittsburgh at the end of January, residents, probably feeling that a total abstinence from meat was too much, reverted to consuming meat only twice a week to support the boycott while not depriving themselves completely.⁶⁶

According to Lynne Taylor, “what were considered basic necessities by the working population in the early twentieth century would have been considered unattainable luxuries in the early nineteenth century – meat, eggs, milk and butter, for example,”⁶⁷ all the more so in the United States where consumption of meat was more abundant. In her study of the eating habits of immigrant families in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in New York tenements, Jane Ziegelman shows the importance of meat as a symbol of the immigrants’ new life, when she analyzes their reaction to the menus of Ellis Island in the early twentieth century: “And the meat! A single day’s ration on Ellis Island was more than many immigrants consumed in a month.”⁶⁸ Even though most working-class immigrant families only had access to the roughest cuts, or had to make do with offal, which native Americans often disdained, they nevertheless came to associate meat with their new life in the United States, and to consider it a staple of their diet, and to a certain extent an expression of national belonging. While this did not mean there were no conflicts about how to consume meat,⁶⁹ the eating of meat by immigrants did bring them closer to a large part of the American population. Immigrant families were active in food protests at the time, and although it is

⁶⁴ Joshua Specht, *Red Meat Republic: A Hoof-to-Table History of How Beef Changed America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 23; Twarog, *Politics of the Pantry*, 14.

⁶⁵ “Meat Prices Soar,” *New York Times*, 23 Jan. 1910.

⁶⁶ “Eat Meat Twice a Week,” *New York Times*, 25 Jan. 1910.

⁶⁷ Taylor, 486.

⁶⁸ Ziegelman, 285; see also Specht, 359.

⁶⁹ In particular within the home economics movement, which sought to “educate” immigrant palates to American tastes through cooking classes and public kitchens. This movement has given rise to a wealth of books and articles, among which we can quote Chapter 5 of Gabaccia’s *We Are What We Eat*; Megan Elias, *Stir It Up: Home Economics in American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Carolyn M. Goldstein, *Creating Consumers: Home Economists in Twentieth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Laura Shapiro, *Perfection Salad: Women and Cooking at the Turn of the Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Helen Zoe Veit, *Modern Food, Moral Food: Self-Control, Science, and the Rise of Modern American Eating in the Early Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

difficult to precisely gauge their involvement in the 1910 boycott, there are indications that some communities did contribute actively.⁷⁰

While meat appeared as a marker of US American identity, it did so also through its associations with strength and virility. In his political history of vegetarianism, Adam D. Shprintzen has shown how the vegetarian diet, while taking root in the United States in the middle of the nineteenth century, was criticized and mocked by those who saw meat as a marker of manhood; medical authorities like the American Medical Association (AMA) thus debunked vegetarianism as quackery in the early twentieth century, stressing its negative consequences for health and fertility.⁷¹ These arguments were regularly taken up in the press during the meat boycott, including by Dr. Harvey Wiley, director of the Bureau of Chemistry and one of the leading figures in the era's fight for better nutrition, who declared, "A race of mollicoddles would probably be produced by an abstinence from the use of meat ... I am not a vegetarian. A vegetable diet is all right, but there should also be a meat diet to go with it."⁷² An unnamed author in the *San Francisco Chronicle* expressed his fears that in spite of the legitimacy of the boycott, it risked undermining itself in depriving its supporters of the strength they needed to fight the trusts. He suggested buying only half the supply of meat rather than abstaining altogether, for "an American community in arms against a beef trust and a meat diet should temporize with both a little, and not exclude the elixir of its fighting spirit, the very sinews of its war-like capacity, at the outset of the struggle."⁷³ In this article, the author claims that the boycotters need to balance their "personal appetite" with their "desire for the public good," summing up the specificity of food movements as inextricably linking the physical body with the body politic.

CONCLUSION

The meat boycott was one of a series of protests against high prices and the practices of the Meat Trust that punctuated the first two decades of the twentieth century. The federal grand jury in Chicago that was spurred by the boycott and led to the dissolution of the National Packing Company did

⁷⁰ A 20 January article ("Boycott on Meats") in the *Democratic Banner*, an Ohio newspaper, recounts that in the city of Steubenville, "three hundred families of Serbians, Croations and other foreigners" have gone on a meat strike, and that "this class of foreigners are the biggest meat eaters in the city."

⁷¹ Adam D. Shprintzen, *The Vegetarian Crusade: The Rise of an American Reform Movement 1817–1921* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 209.

⁷² "Too Many Mouths to Feed," *New York Times*, 23 Jan. 1910.

⁷³ "The Boycott on Table Meat: A Less Drastic Programme Needed to Achieve Victory," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 22 Jan. 1910, 6.

not put an end to the practices of the main players in the field of meat production (Armour, Morris, Cudahy, Wilson, and Swift), and many more investigations would follow until the Packer Consent Decree in 1920 forced the packers to sell their interests in activities not directly related to meat (including stockyards or warehouses), following an investigation by the Federal Trade Commission ordered by Woodrow Wilson.⁷⁴ While the boycott was not successful in leading to a decrease in meat prices, it was followed by other, more local movements (in New York and Providence, for instance) and contributed to establishing food costs as “a major public problem” and a topic for debate during the electoral battles of 1912, when the Democrats regained power.⁷⁵

However, more than because of its immediate outcomes, which were limited, the 1910 meat boycott appears as an insight into the complexities of protest and reform in the Progressive Era. A multifaceted struggle, with a national resonance though without a national organization, it was framed in different ways by the various organizations which were involved in it, and leads to analyses of how these organizations framed the fight and its aims. The boycott itself as a tool was widely debated within union ranks and consumers’ organizations, and is an example of the reconfiguration of the political field, with consumer politics emerging as a major force, displacing the opposition between capital and labor; boycotting an item rather than a company appeared to be a safe choice, avoiding many legal hurdles, but could also be seen as threatening the identity of workers as producers, by recasting them in the gendered role of the consumer, the buyer, with no direct link between the object of the boycott (here meat) and their own trades. While unions were divided on the pertinence such a method, most socialists condemned it, believing it would pit workers against farmers and take attention away from the fundamental claims of the movement in favor of the ownership of the means of production by the workers themselves. These diverse takes on the boycott also had a gendered dimension, the association of the consumer with women adding to the reticence of some unions to support it. Women’s organizations, on the contrary, even when doubtful of the legitimacy of the boycott as a tool for protest, as was the case for the NCL, supported its underlying claims, and the role it gave to women as purveyors of food for the family and therefore entitled to a say in the matter.

For food appears, through the study of the 1910 boycott, as both epitomizing reform tactics in the Progressive Era and having distinctive traits. Because of its intertwining of the physical, the symbolical, and the political, food is an important object in the blurring of boundaries between private and public that

⁷⁴ G. O. Virtue, “The Meat Packing Investigation,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 34, 4 (Aug. 1920), 626–85.

⁷⁵ MacLeod, “Food Prices, 372.

characterizes how Progressives, and especially Progressive women's organizations, transformed the very notion of what was political. Writing about the 1912 New York waiters' strike, the IWW leader Elizabeth Gurley Flynn described how, when she campaigned for the strike, her arguments about the waiters' and hotel staff's working conditions did not resonate with the middle-class audiences she was addressing. However, once she started speaking about the conditions in the kitchens, and how the food was prepared, she obtained a very different reaction: "They were interested when I began to talk about something that affected their own stomach, where I never could have reached them through any appeal for humanitarian purposes."⁷⁶ Suffragists and suffragettes, in particular, saw in food an opportunity to articulate their support for the franchise while answering anti-suffrage arguments that portrayed them as unfeminine, incapable of taking care of home and family. In disseminating leaflets and recipes, they welded together ideas of domesticity and emancipation. The boycott can therefore be understood within the larger framework of maternalist politics, side by side with the struggles of the NCL and the WTUL for better working conditions in the textile industry, the calls for housing and sanitation reforms by Jane Addams and others, or the temperance movement led by the WCTU. However, it also invites us to adopt another angle of analysis, starting from the object of the protest, its symbolism and meaning. Food then appears as distinctive in the relationship it builds between individual bodies, group cultures, and the political arena, a materialization of the assimilation of and resistance to imposed roles and affiliations.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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⁷⁶ Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, "Sabotage: The Conscious Withdrawal of the Workers' Industrial Efficiency (1916)," in Salvatore Salerno, ed., *Direct Action and Sabotage: Three Classic IWW Pamphlets from the 1910s* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2014), 89–104, 102.