Bodies and Needs: Lessons from Palestine

SHERENE SEIKALY
Department of History, University of California, Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, Calif.; e-mail: srseikaly@gmail.com
doi:10.1017/S0020743814001081

We have come to understand developmental indices such as growth, standard of living, and the calorie as "universal." Such indices promise an objective means of erasing developmental differences. They promise sameness. However, what happens when we shift our focus away from inclusion and exclusion in the process of development, and instead look at when and how these categories themselves were constituted?

In 1896, the American scientist Wilbur Atwater invented the calorie-meter. Along with the categories of fats, carbohydrates, and proteins, this invention made food a "politically legible" object.[1] The study of food, which came to be called nutrition, was inextricable from the measurement of basic needs and poverty. In the late 19th century, U.S. nutritionists and economic elites together calculated the basic caloric intake needed to contain the intense labor mobilizations of that period. Nutritionists in the United States and Britain vacillated between identifying hunger as a structural problem and seeing it as an outcome of the moral weakness of the poor. In the colonies, too, nutritionists were divided between identifying the main causes of malnutrition in low wages, poor yields, and colonial mismanagement or in the natives' purported backwardness.

It was not until World War II that identifying the cause of malnutrition, so as to ensure healthy soldiers and workers, took a back seat to treating it. The war inaugurated a set of social experiments inspired by government and military requirements for stronger workers and more productive bodies, bringing to the fore a series of technological innovations that first and foremost attempted to define "basic needs." Managing food supply was crucial to maximizing resources and preventing unrest. The League of Nations set a "universal" standard for caloric intake at the onset of the war. As it did so, it decreased the minimum levels of proteins, fats, and carbohydrates from the higher Western standards to account for the "dietary habits" of people in the Middle and Far East, who were primarily "vegetarian in mind."[2] Armed with this differentiated index of the calorie, and facing the exigencies of war, Britain embarked on national and imperial experiments that promised to provide a fair share for all and yet fell far short of that promise. The most horrific example of colonial mismanagement was in Bengal in 1943, when an estimated three million people died from famine.[3] How did these promises fare in wartime Palestine?

In 1939, when British officials in Palestine implemented rationing programs to ensure wartime resources and contain the possibility of famine, they faced the realities of two decades of rule that had facilitated Zionist settlement and deprived Palestinians of basic rights and services. For example, the European Jewish community had established a Department of Nutrition in the medical organization Hadassah as early as 1933. Palestinians had no corollary organizations, relying instead on charity and small private societies. Confronted with this gaping disparity, the British colonial

government tried to balance its wartime needs with establishing what it called a nutritional economy.

Rationing in Palestine went through three stages. The first was a coupon scheme, in which color-coded coupons for sugar, rice, and flour were labeled Arab, Jew, or others.[4] The second was a "municipal market" scheme in which local authorities oversaw direct contact between producers and consumers. Yet prices continued to rise and unregulated markets to flourish, and colonial officials faced the difficulty of providing a "fair share" to all in Palestine's "fluctuating and diversified population."[5] The solution they found is an example of the tenuous relationship between desires and basic needs. In May 1942, the leading rationing expert, E. M. H. Lloyd, introduced the so-called points scheme in Palestine. In contrast to the more common rationing system (based on coupons and a consumer–retailer link), points were a substitute for money. Lloyd introduced the system in Britain in 1941 and in the United States in 1943.[6] He argued that his scheme provided freedom of consumer choice while realizing nutritional goals.

As I detail in my forthcoming work, *Bare Needs: Palestinian Capitalists and British Colonial Rule* (Stanford University Press), wartime rationing schemes and nutritional surveys reveal a great deal about British rule. For one, colonial officials faced tremendous difficulty in measuring goods. The common units of measurement in Palestine and the Middle East were the *wuqiya,* the *raṭl*, and the *kayl*. These units varied from one locale to another within and across national borders.[7] The government's attempt to institute the metric system was one of its most contentious policies, and revealed Palestine's resistance to standardization. Counting people proved equally difficult. European Jewish organizations had detailed population records. But when it came to Palestinians, the colonial government suddenly realized the "absence of any comprehensive registration."[8] Categorizing people was another challenge. In 1943 the Department of Health commissioned the first comprehensive survey on nutrition in Palestine.[9] W. J. Vickers, a senior medical officer, directed the survey, which examined 1,300 family budgets and four settlements. It was based on three "racial expenditure groups": Arabs, "Oriental Jews," and European Jews. The survey originally subdivided Arabs into Muslims and Christians, until investigators found no "important differences in these diets." Commonalities between Muslims, Christians, and Jews troubled the internal coherence of the two separate "races"—Arab and Jew.[10]

Nutritional surveys and rationing schemes also reveal commonalities that transcend some comfortable binaries. The approach to poverty as an incurable expression of moral weakness, common to depictions of the poor in Britain, had a colonial iteration in the figure of the backward "Oriental." The much-maligned figure of the housewife also transcended divides of colonizer and colonized, Jew and Arab, Oriental and European. Indeed, if we were to take Vickers' survey at its word, most nutritional, health, and budgetary problems in 20th-century Palestine were a result of bad cooking, inadequate mothering, and ignorant housekeeping, whether Arab or Jewish. The housewife in Palestine, as in Britain, was "the last to eat [and] the first to garner responsibility for managing hunger."[11]

In addition, while the ascendance of measurements may have inspired some bureaucrats to "dreams of omniscience,"[12] colonial officers in Palestine do not seem to have indulged such fantasies. War compelled British rule, if momentarily, to calculate goods, people, and economies. In doing so, it exposed the depth of two decades of apathetic

rule, and the extent to which European Jewish infrastructure, at least in the realm of nutrition, far outstripped that of the colonial government in both capital and expertise.

British austerity and its attempts to build a "nutritional economy" in Palestine also offer insights into the set of goals and policies we have come to call development. As we have seen, food in the early 20th century became a politically legible object. Colonial and governing officials approached the lack of food as an incubator for revolution and war; its provision was central to various development regimes.[13] War worked as an experimental terrain to shape "basic needs," in ways that were contingent on violent exclusion.

NOTES

[1]Nick Cullather, "The Foreign Policy of the Calorie," *American Historical Review* 112 (2007): 338, 345.

[2]The Western protein daily allowance of 90–100 grams was adjusted to 69 grams in Palestine due to climate. (In India, the Technical Commission estimated the basic requirement for adult women and men at 35–65 grams.) The League of Nations took a strong line on animal protein requirements for pregnant and nursing women at 40 grams per day. Vickers claimed this was an "impossibility" in Palestine and throughout the Middle and Far East due to availability and the dietary habits of most people, who were "vegetarian in mind." The average Western fat requirement was 85–125 grams per day, an amount that was adjusted to 50 grams per day in "hot climates." Rhodes House, Blue Book Register: Palestine 905/12/6: *A Nutritional Economic Survey of Wartime Palestine, 1942–1943* (Jerusalem: Palestine Government Printer, 1943), 43.

[3]Ibid., 11.

[4]Israel State Archive (hereafter ISA): RG2/CSO/4331/8: Controller of Supplies Memorandum on Food Rationing, 16 November 1941.

[5]National Archive, Colonial Office 859/112/6: Economic Advisory Council: Committee on Nutrition in the Colonial Empire: Summary of Information Regarding Nutrition in the Colonial Empire [First Draft], 1938.

[6]E.M.H. Lloyd, *Food and Inflation in the Middle East, 1940–1945* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1956), 182.

[7]The *wuqiya* in Egypt is 37 grams, in Aleppo 320 grams, in Beirut 213.39 grams, and in Jerusalem 240 grams. The *raṭl* is 449.28 grams in Egypt, 462 grams in Saudi Arabia, 504 grams in Tunisia, 508 grams in Morocco, 1.785 kilograms in Damascus, and 2.566 kilograms in Beirut and Aleppo. *The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* (Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrassowitz, 1979). The southern Palestinian *wuqiya* was closer to the Egyptian measurement, while the northern Palestinian *wuqiya* followed the Beirut measurement.

[8]ISA: RG2/CSO/4331/8: "Controller of Supplies, Memorandum on Food Rationing," 16 November 1941.

[9]An earlier study, which was very limited in scope, was conducted by the leading Zionist malariologist. See the volume on this: Israel Kligler, A. Geiger, S. Bromberg, and D. Gurevitch, "An Inquiry into the Diets of Various Sections of the Urban and Rural Population of Palestine," *Bulletin of the Palestine Economic Society* 5, no. 3 (1931).

[10]Rhodes House, Blue Book Register: Palestine 905/12/6: *A Nutritional Economic Survey of Wartime Palestine, 1942–1943* (Jerusalem: Palestine Government Printer, 1943)

[11]James Vernon, *Hunger: A Modern History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 197.

[12]Adam Tooze, *Statistics and the German State, 1900–1945: The Making of Modern Economic Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 28.

[13]On Herbert Hoover, see Cullather, "The Foreign Policy." Randall Packard and Frederick Cooper explore how Robert McNamara's concern with rural poverty as he took over the World Bank in the 1970s may have been shaped by his experiences in Vietnam and his fear of rural-based revolution. McNamara's approach resonated with earlier French and British policies that used development to face "the threat of colonial rebellion and the spread of communism." Cooper and Packard, "Introduction," in *International Development and the Social Sciences: Essays on the History and Politics of Knowledge*, ed. Cooper and Packard (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1997), 20.