

# School Meals in England and the Contradictions of Capital

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## The Study of Food

Food and drink may not seem to have much to do with real politics, the class struggle, and the battle against climate change. However, there is a growing awareness across the globe that food, how we produce it, transport it, sell it, and finally consume it, is right at the heart of the ecological crisis that is so intimately bound up with capitalism. Although natural scientists and nutritionists have been concerned for a long time about the effects food supplies have on our health, only recently have social scientists begun to study and research food in its own right.

As Lien and Nerlich remark, food makes connections between

...nature and culture, production and consumption, morals and markets, family and society, the individual and the collective, body and mind. ...many relations that are constituted by and through the medium of food are also power relations, and should be analyzed as such.

There are different theoretical approaches to the study of food. The anthropological approaches of the 1960s and 1970s stressed the concept of foods as cultural signifiers. Culture defines what we classify as food. What the cultural approach does not tell us is the nature of power relationships involved in food transactions. Further, "...food is never just food, and its significance can never be purely nutritional." As Freund and Martin argue, attention must be given to "consumption practices" rather than individual consumers to see "how they are socially organized and how moments of consumption are conjoined."

## The Food Crisis

Lang and Heasman's recent study takes a fresh look at food production, supply, and consumption, and in doing so raises very important issues that should be of concern to a red-green perspective on food. They map out three "paradigms" that are useful in analyzing the present situation and guiding red-green thinking, although they do not spell out the full theoretical implications of the distinctions they make. The three paradigms are the "productionist paradigm," the "life sciences paradigm," and the "ecologically integrated paradigm."

Their "productionist paradigm" essentially describes "agribusiness" and can perhaps be seen as Fordism applied to food production, although Lang and Heasman do not use that terminology. Products are as homogenous as possible, quantity is maximized at the expense of quality, and food is produced as cheaply as possible. Food is marketed with an emphasis on appearance, (manufactured) taste, and convenience, while its value as ingredients for cooking a wholesome and delicious meal from scratch is typically ignored. Production in this paradigm depends on high-energy inputs in the shape of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Supply chains are long, so that further energy is expended in transport—the "food miles" in the phrase coined by Tim Lang that has caught on in popular discourse.

Discredited by both health and environmental concerns, the productionist paradigm is reaching its limits. In the U.K., health concerns have included bovine spongiform encephalopathy, or BSE; foot and mouth disease; food irradiation; avian influenza; *E. coli*; and pesticide residues. There is a growing obesity crisis for children in Britain, which is now recognized by both the government and medical researchers alike. Children in particular, faced with a bombardment of TV advertising, are increasingly living in an “obesogenic environment.” The number of children aged four to eleven years old who are overweight or obese rose sharply between 1984 and 1994, after having been more-or-less stable for the previous decade. According to figures from the U.K. government’s National Food and Nutrition Survey, the U.K. now has the highest rate of obesity in Europe, with one in three children overweight or obese. Sustain, a U.K. public interest umbrella group representing approximately 100 national groups advocating safe, environmentally friendly and sustainable agriculture, cites the following figures on its website:

- 92 percent of children consume more saturated fat than is recommended.
- 86 percent consume too much sugar.
- 72 percent consume too much salt.
- 96 percent do not get enough fruit and vegetables.

At the same time, there is greater public awareness of the ecological damage being inflicted by industrialized agriculture. A further concern for Red-Greens, not fully brought out by Lang and Heasman, is the effect of industrial agriculture on the countryside and landscape. Jules Pretty points out that the commodification of food and its associated culture has broken the link between consumers and the place of production. For Pretty:

...agricultural and food systems, with their associated nature and landscapes, are a common heritage and thus, also, a form of common property. They are shaped by us all, and so in some way are part of us all too.

Pretty argues that the loss of biodiversity is both a practical and a philosophical issue. Monocultural farming practices not only devastate the visual landscape but also jeopardize the long-term safety of our food supplies. In a similar vein, Oliver Rackham identifies the period from 1945 in England as one of massive acceleration in the destruction of the countryside by modern agriculture. Like Pretty, Rackham is concerned about the loss of meaning and how the landscape “is a record of our roots and the growth of civilization.”

The problems created by the “productionist paradigm” leaves us at a juncture where food production can go in one of two directions. Lang and Heasman argue that the direction is likely to be in either of the other two paradigms, the life sciences integrated paradigm or the ecologically integrated paradigm.

### **The Life Sciences Integrated Paradigm**

Although it moves away from the productionist paradigm’s emphasis on maximum quantity towards a concern with market niches and differentiation, the life sciences integrated paradigm builds directly upon it and does not in any way challenge the capitalist

character of the agricultural and food industries. If the productionist paradigm was Fordist capitalism, then this paradigm is post-Fordist capitalism. In this paradigm, the food industry relies on new technology, genetic modification (GM), and other biotechnologies. It is a form of eco-modernization, although Lang and Heasman do not use that term. An important feature of this paradigm is its control element. As they put it: "...this paradigm [is] a way of capturing a body of thought that has at its core a mechanistic and fairly medicalized interpretation of human and environmental health."

A typical element of the "life sciences" paradigm is "nutriceuticals," also known as "functional foods." Straddling the line between foodstuffs and medication with the idea that science can determine the optimal nutrition for each person, functional foods give new layers of meaning to the term "processed food." A further step along this line is "nutrigenomics," plant and animal genetics applied to food. It offers the promise that genetic disorders can be treated by nutrition. Yet another approach is "designer diets," which are formulated based on the specific health needs of the individual. Curative rather than preventative, designer diets ignore the socio-political climate, which would include, for example, the conditions that encourage or discourage people to exercise.

The vast majority of food no longer comes directly from the farm via the market to the household but is subject to various stages of processing, starting from the industrial production of inputs, such as seeds and fertilizers. In this system, what is produced on the farm—or often more accurately in the closed shed—is only raw material for later stages of the production process. Also, capital accumulation has shifted away from the farm to the second and subsequent stages—processing, packaging, transport, and retailing—where the valorization of the product begins to be realized. As Peter Dickens has often pointed out, divisions of labor are at the same time divisions of knowledge, and food production illustrates this very clearly. In the U.K., farmers and others in the countryside lobby broadly associated with conservative politics like to complain that "townies" do not understand where basic foodstuffs come from.

It has frequently been noted that many children now are at a loss when asked where particular food products come from or even what they are. A survey carried out for the farm owners' association, the National Farmers Union, found that nearly half the children asked thought that margarine was made from cows' milk, most were unaware that spinach was grown in Britain, and a third incorrectly believed that oranges were grown in Britain. A similar lack of awareness was demonstrated in an episode of the U.K. television documentary on the state of school meals hosted by British celebrity chef, Jamie Oliver. He asked groups of children to name some vegetables that he had brought into the classroom. A large number of the children did not know what the vegetables were called. When he asked the children where a carrot came from, answers ranged from trees to tin cans.

Yet the knowledge of food production processes that is necessary for maintaining a healthy diet can no longer be gained from making occasional visits to the countryside; it entails a much wider scientific literacy and an access to facts that is not easy to come by. The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food had a notorious culture of secrecy that came to a head during the BSE crisis of the late 1990s after the nation's Chief Medical Officer, testified at a government enquiry on the crisis that he had been kept out of the loop. The ministry

was dismantled by the Blair government and succeeded by the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA).

Both the productionist and life sciences paradigms identified by Lang and Heasman have caused multiple contradictions in the relationships people have with food. Beyond the high-energy inputs and food miles, there is the question of seasonality. Customers are thought to demand year-round availability, but increasing numbers of people are questioning the extent to which food is eaten out of season. Animal welfare is also an issue that leapt to public attention in the U.K. when it was discovered that veal calves were being exported en masse to continental Europe to be reared in crates after that practice was banned in the U.K.

Yet in many ways, consumers are locked into industrialized food production. One important reason is the loss of basic cooking skills in the domestic sphere, a consequence of a combination of factors: changing gender roles within households, a quickening pace of life, and a long-hours culture. The last 30 years or so have seen a huge increase in women entering the labor market. Since access to good, affordable childcare is difficult in the U.K., a large proportion of mothers work part-time for reduced pay. While the greater involvement of women in the workforce has brought many benefits, in practice it also means that household members often have little opportunity to eat together.

The response of food production companies to this changed social situation has had an impact not only on the time and the manner of food consumption but also on the types of food that are produced and consumed. Food production, distribution and consumption necessarily change to reflect these demands of capital. New shopping patterns include the family weekly shopping alongside daily shopping for fast food—for example, the worker's sandwich. This has resulted in the use of greater numbers of artificial inputs and increased use of preservatives to extend the shelf life of the food, more synthetic additives and flavorings, and overpackaging. Further, as Sidney Mintz points out, additives like fats and sugars have made huge differences to our relationship to food:

Together, fats and sugars—both in the ways that they are extracted, and in the ways that they are conceived and combined—have modified in some ways our human relationship to nature, while playing a special role in the remaking of the food habits of the entire world.

(Fast) food has become more portable to fit in with a faster pace of life in the workplace, education and elsewhere, as evidenced by an increase in the phenomenon invented by the fast food companies and insultingly termed “grazing.” Many people no longer recognize set meal times and instead snack whenever it is convenient to fit it in with a demanding job or other activity. This kind of convenience is directed towards the reordering of time rather than enhanced comfort, and it is often a solitary activity away from fellow workers, family or friends. As early as 1979, the French anthropologist Fischler outlined the move away from gastronomy to what he called *gastro-anomie*, a trend towards desocialized, aperiodic eating.

Although Lang and Heasman identify it as a separate “life sciences integrated” paradigm, contemporary food production has much continuity with the era of industrial mass production that preceded it. Production within this new paradigm is able to exploit infrastructures that are already in place: the global supply chains and favorable investment

from private backers combined with state subsidies. Within what is essentially a revised capitalist model, an inescapable fact of food production is its relative inelasticity of demand. Firms at the various stages of the supply chain resolve this by adding value to products so that they can be sold at a premium rate.

One of the main contradictions in the life sciences integrated paradigm that Lang and Heasman identify is the fact that those elements of the supply chain closest to consumers—the food retailers—have been subject to a rapid concentration of capital, so that U.K. food retailing is now dominated by four giants. These massive retailers are necessarily more sensitive to consumer demands than are the firms further up the supply chain and have thus far been hesitant in their embrace of new food technologies that their customers have said they do not want. At this nexus, chinks begin to appear in the armor, and spaces are opened up for political resistance in the shape of consumer movements.

### **The Ecologically Integrated Paradigm**

Lang and Heasman point out that the current crossroads may allow us to take a much more benign approach to food production, which they call the “ecologically integrated paradigm.” While the ecologically integrated paradigm is firmly situated within the biological sciences, it has important differences. First, it takes a more holistic and integrated approach to nature as opposed to the more “engineered” approach by the life sciences paradigm. It recognizes and values symbiosis and mutual dependencies and utilizes a more sophisticated and subtle approach to manipulating nature. “Agroecology” falls under this paradigm and is similar in many respects to the approach to food production advocated by farming activists like José Bové and François Dufour in France and more broadly by the “Slow Food” movement—or movements—that originated in Italy and have now spread through the developed world. Both Lang and Heasman and Bové and Dufour emphasize food production that relies on local, tacit knowledge as well as science and research. For the French, producing food is a craft, a skill that is in danger of being lost. Within mainstream public discourse, there is still emphasis on seasonality, locality and regionality. Valuing of transparency as well as traceability is taken for granted.

One of the problems for the ecologically integrated paradigm has been its fringe or marginal image in the past, although this is beginning to change. As a result of food scares, obesity, and greater concern about personal health and the environment, a new awareness about food, health, and the environment is developing among some sections of society. This has led to greater consumer demand for organic food. Though in the U.K., currently more than three-quarters of organic produce is airfreighted in at great cost to the environment. Nevertheless, market opportunities are opening up to greatly expand organic production in the U.K.

Although the logic of capitalist food production provides a powerful push for the life sciences integrated paradigm to supersede the productionist paradigm, resistance to this trend is important. Lang and Heasman’s ecologically integrated paradigm is in fact a vision of the future that a wide coalition of interests can subscribe to, from socially conservative farmers to vegetarian city dwellers. The awareness that not all is right with food production

and consumption runs deep and rekindles memories of more integrated food production in the recent past.

### **War of the Paradigms**

All three paradigms claim strong health orientations, in that the role of the food supply is to improve health. So, the productionist paradigm has increased production of food and food security, which, it is claimed, must be good for general health. This is, of course, based on a rather narrow understanding of nutrition and health. Food output is also important for the other two paradigms, but the life sciences paradigm puts a lot of emphasis on individualized health, whereas the ecologically integrated paradigm sees health as intrinsic to the various stages of growing and distribution processes. So for Lang and Heasman, the battle lines are presently drawn between the two emerging paradigms. Which one prevails will mainly be resolved within the political battleground at a number of levels. It could be that both fight side by side for ascendancy over a period of time.

Although the U.K. government spends money on health promotion, currently the private companies are taking most of the initiative. To encourage people to eat more fruit and vegetables, the government fixed on a target of five portions of fruit and vegetables a day. The target and the advice about what constitutes a portion, which fruit and vegetables count towards the five (for example potatoes do not count, packaged orange juice does) was based on market research into consumer attitudes rather than on scientific health research, although the government cited World Health Organization findings to justify its guidelines.” The campaign has been successful, and the target has entered the public consciousness. Currently the supermarket chain, Sainsbury’s, is promoting the “five a day” idea by giving vouchers to customers with the chance of winning a free piece of fruit or (packaged) vegetable or salad item. However, the fruit and vegetables sold by this supermarket and its competitor chains are often imported, overpackaged, and out of season. In the U.K., expenditure on fast food and pre-prepared meals is about the same for all socio-economic groups, with consumption highest in the 15-19 age group.

Lang and Heasman contrast the systems of control in the productionist and ecologically integrated paradigms. In the latter, they note “an increasing emphasis on skills and or knowledge management in contrast to the single technician managing thousands of hectares on a recipe basis; it would re-link the people with the land, encourage small-scale management units and return alienated farm workers to the land.”

What is instructive for Red-Greens is that recent critics of food policy are apparently unaware that in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Marx was concerned about the dislocation of food production and consumption. He identified a contradiction between town and countryside, particularly in relation to the disposal of human waste in the towns and cities. Before large-scale urbanization, agricultural land was naturally fertilized by both animal and human waste (night soil). This enabled the “quality of the soil,” which Marx makes numerous references to in his writings, to be maintained and yield nourishing and healthy food. But by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, greater demand for food for a growing population prompted a newly emerging chemical industry to find ways of manufacturing artificial fertilizer as a substitute. In the meantime, guano (bird excrement) imported across continents acted as a temporary

substitute. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx notes “...agriculture no longer finds the natural conditions of its own production within itself, naturally, arisen, spontaneously, and ready to hand, but these exist as an independent industry separate from it...”

To use Lang and Heasman’s work in an explicitly political program, it is useful to begin to identify what alternatives might look like. The demise of the productionist paradigm is beginning to open up new political possibilities and directions—some negative such as GM, some positive such as organic. A new consciousness is growing among some sections of consumers wanting to see greater transparency and provenance. Consumers are beginning to make links between the way food is produced and the effects on the environment, food quality, and human health.

The three paradigms identified by Lang and Heasman are a very useful clarification of dream or nightmare future scenarios. One thing missing from their analysis is a discussion of the current and future strategies of the corporate world and the state. The nearest they come to this is saying that the future will be decided “...by the strength of forces and ideologies in and beyond the state and will be framed by the degree of organization and coordination of the particular paradigm.” They also point out that evidence-based nutritional information is often sidelined by governments’ politically driven agenda. The crises of the school meals service in England reveals such an agenda.

## **The School Meals Service in England**

School meals in England offer a case study of how these three paradigms play out in real circumstances. They also have a rich history with red and green concerns.

Socialists in Britain had from the 19<sup>th</sup> century campaigned for free meals for schoolchildren as part of their demand to have free education available for the working classes. After free compulsory elementary education had been established throughout the country in 1880, the main Left party, the Social Democratic Federation (SDF), committed itself to fight for free meals at its inception in 1884. SDF members, Stewart Headlam and Annie Besant, standing for election to the London School Board in 1888 included the demand in their campaign literature, and at the 1896 Trades Union Congress, the pioneering trade unionist, Ben Tillett, stated that 80,000 London children attended school every morning without breakfast. Some SDF branches actually provided free food for children.

The needs of both industry and the British Empire at this time were crucial factors, as was the fact that recruitment of soldiers for the Boer War (1899-1902) was being hampered by the lack of healthy and fit young men due to widespread malnutrition and general bad health. Trade Unionists and leftists stepped up their campaign and succeeded in getting Parliament to adopt the 1906 Education (Provision of Meals) Act, which enabled local authorities, if they wished, to introduce free or reduced-price meals to children whom it was deemed would benefit. Although this was a significant victory for the Left, free meals were considered virtually a form of medical treatment to be given only to children who were diagnosed as suffering from malnutrition.

Provision of meals was patchy until the 1944 Education Act, which obliged local education authorities to provide school meals. Although enacted by the coalition National Government that had led Britain through World War II, many aspects of this Act embodied the spirit of the Welfare State that was to be championed by a new Labour Government in 1945. From a welfare perspective, the Act of 1944 was seen as an important step forward for working-class children's health and well-being. The 1944 Act devolved many aspects of education, including the provision of meals, to the local education authorities (LEAs). Britain continued food rationing for some years after the end of the war, and children's nutrition was a priority. They were supplied with vitamins in the form of free orange juice and cod liver oil, which were distributed through clinics and administered at home. Children also got a third of a pint of free milk at school every day.

In the 1950s and 1960s, schools provided a main meal in the middle of the day, free of charge to families on very low incomes, and at a low cost to others. This meal was usually referred to as "dinner," reflecting the working-class usage, where "dinner" was the midday meal and "tea" or "supper" the evening meal, rather than the middle- and upper-class terminology, where "lunch" was eaten at midday and "dinner" in the evening. The school meal format was similar to meals given adults in Britain at the time: a main course followed by a sweet course ("pudding"). Immediately after the war, LEAs were constrained by the rationing of basic foodstuffs, including meat, milk and dairy products, sugar, and even for a time, bread. However, there were statutory minimum nutritional standards that all local authorities were required to observe, so that schools across the country offered a fairly similar menu.

Typical main courses were minced (ground) beef with mashed potato and cabbage, roast lamb with roast potatoes and carrots, fried fish and chips, or corned (canned) beef with salad and mashed potato. Puddings included traditional English favorites like "spotted dick" (a genuine name for a pudding including raisins), rice pudding, and treacle tart with custard. These meals were not particularly varied or healthy, and convenience ingredients such as gravy powder and custard powder were used. But not all children had this meal. Many went home for lunch in those days, when mothers did not typically work outside the home and children lived near enough to school to go on foot. Some children brought a packed lunch of sandwiches if the school meal was thought to be unsuitable. There was little or no provision for special diets such as kosher or vegetarian food.

A slow cultural shift began in the 1970s, as the British diet started changing and adapting to foods from around the world. After the postwar wave of immigration from the former countries of empire, particularly in the Caribbean and South Asia, many schools in inner-city areas were catering for a multi-ethnic school population. By the 1970s many schools, especially secondary schools, were offering a choice of options. But the ritual of free milk disappeared from secondary schools in a cost-cutting exercise. The responsible minister, Margaret Thatcher, became known as "Thatcher the milk snatcher," although she had in fact spoken against the move in the Cabinet and had to adhere to it under the principle of collective responsibility. Vegetarian options were introduced from the 1980s, and in areas with a multi-ethnic population, options such as halal meat became available. There was a further shift toward using convenience ingredients such as powdered mashed potato. And in some areas, pre-prepared hot meals were brought in from a kitchen that served several schools.



The manner of consuming food in Britain was also changing. Eating away from the home is not a new phenomenon, even for working-class people, since most countries have had “street food” of some kind for centuries. However, there have been important changes in the way in which people eat outside of the home in the developed world, where up to half of consumer expenditure on food and drink is now spent eating out. More important than the volume of meals eaten away from home is the types of meals taken and the ways in which they are provided. The decline of Fordist manufacturing has been accompanied by a fall in the number of work canteens and, therefore, of meals eaten at work. At the same time, new forms of mass catering, such as fast food outlets, have expanded rapidly, while traditional mass catering in hospitals, schools and universities, prisons, the armed forces, and so forth has continued. Eating out as a recreational activity or for pleasure, particularly since the early 1970s, has also greatly expanded. As the school meals example shows, even the traditional forms of mass catering have been transformed.

In 1980 under Margaret Thatcher’s brand of neoliberalism, the government released local authorities from the obligation of minimum nutritional standards and the requirement to spend a minimum amount of money. In retrospect this Act was more significant than was realized at the time. It was seen as one of a series of cuts in public spending, rather than the transfer of power from the public to the private sector that it actually was—a precursor of the major “privatizations” that Thatcher was to introduce after 1983. It was slipped onto the statute book without much protest in a climate of high inflation, and although the main the teachers unions did oppose it, their opposition was blunted by the fact that they had just won a 20-25 percent pay rise in April of that year.

The quality of school food continued to deteriorate after the 1986 Local Government Act, which introduced the quintessentially neoliberal practice of “compulsory competitive tendering” and brought market competition into services that had been provided by local government. This meant that contracts for school meals had to be put out to tender and awarded to the lowest bidder, whether commercial or in-house. In the same year, the 1986 Education Act gave schools “local management” and devolved budgets to individual schools based on a formula that used a certain amount of money per student. This move received mixed responses. On the one hand, it enabled individual schools to have greater control over their own budgets, but it also meant that schools would suffer the consequences when there was not enough money or things went wrong. This was another neoliberal move to create “market” competition (in fact quasi-market) between schools, and it reflected similar developments in other areas.

A new breed of catering contractor emerged to respond to these opportunities and the promise of lucrative profits. The local government workers union, UNISON, has documented the shift to the use of private contractors between 1995, when about 70 percent of school meals services were provided in-house, and 2001 when this had declined to about 55 percent; the proportion may have declined still further since. The contracting density was highest in England and lower in Scotland and Wales, where there had been more resistance to privatization. UNISON found that more than 20 companies were listed as having contracts with either local authorities or individual schools but that most were small- to medium-sized operators. The big players in school meals in England are Compass, the world’s largest catering contractor, trading in the education sector as Scolarest, as well as

Initial and Sodexo. There are also a large number of much smaller catering contractors working for local authorities or individual schools. The Compass group was by far the biggest, involved in 37 local education authorities. Many local authorities still directly employ their school meals staff, including the managers, but they are constrained by tight budgets.

A decline in the food preparation skills of kitchen staff has resulted in the gradual removal of cooking from scratch with fresh ingredients. This de-skilling and neglect of nutritional education can be traced back to the 1980 Act introduced by Thatcher. With increasing reliance on highly processed food that requires little preparation in the kitchen other than opening plastic and cardboard packing and then placing the food in ovens and microwaves, schools began to reduce the size of kitchens and use the space for other educational activities. Many head teachers saw the lunch break as an inconvenience and distraction away from the core function of a school and therefore were keen to speed up the whole operation and get students back into class as quickly as possible. A long-standing cultural shift coincided with the contracting out to create a major change in the pattern of school meals.

Most schools still provide meals, although some do not provide hot meals, only sandwiches. Some schools allow children to go outside at lunchtime when they may buy food from shops or fast food outlets. While the 1944 Act embedded school meals into the daily life of schools, subsequent acts have disembedded them again. Food writer Bee Wilson has summarized this history of school meals as three philosophies:

... a charitable philosophy—the piecemeal feeding of the malnourished of 1906; a consumerist philosophy—the give-children-what-they-want-at-a-low-price-and-never-mind-if-they-become-diabetic-and-obese ethos of 1980, 1986 and 1991; and a universalist philosophy—the inclusive spirit of 1944.

Since the 1980s, there has been a further shift in favor of cafeteria junk food for two reasons. One is the extension of the ideology of choice towards young people themselves—driven by capitalist imperatives rather than any concern to educate young people, far from any reference to the “children’s rights” agenda. Many schools introduced soft drink and snack vending machines, justified by the idea that part or all of the profit would go to school funds. This trend can also be seen as an antidote by Thatcher to the idea of the “nanny state.” Catering contractors have played an important role in this shift. The second reason is that teachers’ unions advised their members that they were not responsible for lunchtime supervision. Thus school meals were decoupled from education. The 1986 policy that introduced compulsory competitive tendering was designed to reduce public costs by shifting the onus from the collective welfare provision of a standardized product and service to an individualist decision-making process of choice. The publicly stated aim by the government was individual choice.

Local authorities and schools are now under pressure to conform to the “Best Value” policy, which was introduced by the New Labour government in 1999 under the Local Government Act (Part 1). “Best Value” essentially continues with the obligation to put public services out to private tender but allows quality criteria to be considered alongside price criteria. The advance of neoliberal ideas and the retreat from social democracy have led to the “rolling back” of the state (including the local state). Services are now “purchased in”

from the capitalist sectors, and new capitalist companies have formed or expanded to fill this “new” market. Some of these are transnational corporations with huge buying power and economies of scale. They are adept at driving down costs to the bare minimum and can appear to be more competitive and cheaper than smaller competitors. As costs have been trimmed to the bone, the quality has declined, and the numbers of students taking a full meal at lunchtime has fallen off sharply in recent years. Under this capitalist scenario, where new large-scale commercial catering organizations are in constant competition with each other for profits, the number of students eating school meals is not likely to rise.

## **The School Meals Crisis and Government Response**

In the present decade, school meals have become a key battleground in the “food wars” that Lang and Heasman describe. In 2001 new nutritional requirements were introduced. However, a joint Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and Food Standards Agency report conceded that the regulations were often either ignored or only partially adhered to in secondary schools. The research also found that students were not making healthy food choices in a canteen environment where so many unhealthy choices are on offer alongside the set meal of the day. In one secondary school investigated by the author, about 400 of the school’s 1200 students purchased food from the catering contractors on site. Typically about 40 students got the “set school meal of the day,” while the rest bought a large array of the unhealthy junk food available with little or no guidance from the school or the catering contractors.

The Jamie Oliver TV series made famous the “turkey twizzler,” an item of junk food regularly consumed in schools and produced by Bernard Matthews, the agribusiness conglomerate that came to public attention again in early 2007 for its involvement in an avian influenza outbreak. Oliver also made much of the fact that in some local authorities, the spending on each school meal was only 37 pence. The government has now made this amount somewhat higher.

After the 2005 Channel Four TV series, the government appointed a former consultant to the largest commercial school meals provider, cookery writer Prue Leith, as “School Meals Tsar.” She has so far made few public statements except to suggest that parents should limit the amount of pocket money they give their children so that they spend money on school food instead. As a parents’ representative pointed out, the “cash canteen” system in use in most schools means that parents have to give their children money every day, or they are not able to eat during the day at all. Parents have little control over whether the children spend their money in the sweet shop on the way to school, or save it in order to buy food (which may be snack food anyway) from the school canteen.

In July 2006, the DfES produced a consultation document on “sustainable schools.” This document contains a wish list that schools should adopt. On food and drink it states:

...all schools to be models of healthy, local and sustainable food and drink produced or prepared on site (where possible), with strong commitments to the environment, social responsibility and animal welfare, and with increased opportunity to involve local suppliers.

From September 2006, the government introduced new nutritional standards and limited the amount of junk and other unhealthy food that could be sold during the lunch break. In many schools, this partial restriction only served to accomplish a decline in the sale of midday food, since students often buy their junk food during the morning break. From September 2007, the more stringent nutritional standards will apply to *all* food sold on school premises.

In recent months there has been speculation in the press and broadcasting media that many of these catering contractors will pull out of the school meals service, because they can only make a profit by selling junk food—especially since there is little profit to be made from mainstream meals that students are reluctant to eat. Young people have rejected “the school dinner” for several reasons. The ingredients used are, in the main, the cheapest available, highly processed, high in sugar, fat and salt, and these meals require little or no skilled preparation by the catering contractors’ staff. Students often have to line up for a long time to be served, and lunch break time in most schools has shrunk to between 35 and 45 minutes. Students therefore opt for the quicker, more portable snack food that is generally far more unhealthy.

It is unlikely that the major contract caterers will be able to respond to the new agenda. The answer to the question, “Are you using local suppliers and/or organic produce?” in the FAQs section of the Compass website illustrates the importance of the power of economy of scale. The answer was:

With the purchasing volumes required by us and our parent company, it is often not feasible for local supplies to be able to meet the specifications we require in terms of quantity and consistency of supply for many of the products that we purchase.

This contradicts the stated aims of the major catering contractors and clearly requires a rethink on their food purchasing practices to shorten their food supply chain. It also highlights the barriers that exist for small- and medium-sized growers and producers in bidding for school contracts.

A recent study found that concern about the diets of British children and adolescents has focused on the nutritional content of school dinners. It included a survey to find out whether markers of nutrition, cardiovascular health, and type 2 diabetes differed between children who ate a meal at school and those whose school day meal was provided from home. Those who had “school dinners” had better indicators of health than those who brought food from home, although they lacked folate. The authors cited U.K. government research to back their claim that “school dinners have changed little.” But this conclusion ignores the major shifts that have taken place towards fast-food-style mass catering. The study also failed to look at the group of pupils who buy snack food rather than the main meal of the day from the school canteen. So only the nutritional content of school meals and lunch boxes brought from home have been questioned. The Jamie Oliver approach has been to work only on the school-provided food, in the hope that if that improves, fewer pupils will want or need to bring food from home (or purchase it outside).

## Conclusion

The nature of the crisis of school meals outlined here raises important issues for the Green Left. Do we need an approach that is more democratic and accountable and favors localism, sustainability and keeping money circulation local? Those of us who have been guided by Marxism have traditionally argued for greater “statification” of welfare services such as education and health, resisting moves towards privatization and commodification. The history of social democracy teaches us that government provision of services at all levels is often bureaucratic, undemocratic and poor quality, with accountability that tends to be distant and convoluted. Red-Greens need to think in a different way by involving and creating alternative systems of food provisioning. There are already many examples where individual schools have entered into buying contracts with local farmers, or engaged with local food cooperatives and social enterprises. This involves entering into different alliances in the short or long term and breaking away from the large contract catering corporations who base their profit on what the productionist paradigm provides.

Since school meals are officially under the control of school governing bodies, the meals and mealtime experience will only improve in a school if there is a movement of parents pressing for change. School governors who have taken an initiative on their own tend to be in primary schools where governors, especially parent governors, are more embedded in the community. The question for parents at individual schools is that if they do not renew contracts with the large school meals contractors, should they revert to the old top-down social democratic model of school meals that was originally conceived of as charity? That option is not likely to work well, because local authorities are not set up to run meals services directly. In any case, there never was a golden age for the school meal service. Instead, schools should work with small- and medium-sized firms and wherever possible with social enterprises and workers' co-operatives.

The old statist welfare/social democratic approach is no longer a viable model. We need to look for more creative, grassroots, organic (in both senses!) alternatives. In the U.K. some schools have taken the plunge and set up their own in-house catering. In order to make the food appealing to students, these in-house services have put quality at the top of the agenda. This often entails buying local, fresh and, frequently, organic ingredients, which also helps the local economy and keeps money circulation local. This, importantly, often creates shorter food chains. Successful examples usually also involve investing in training kitchen staff and paying them well. Good practice examples showcased on the Health Education Trust website show that some schools have been so successful at boosting the consumption of their meals that they have surplus profits to reinvest back into making further improvements into the food service.

The example of school meals nuances Lang and Heasman's idea that the main alternative is the ecologically integrated paradigm. A wider alliance can from time to time bring in people like Jamie Oliver, who makes millions from advertising the Sainsburys supermarket chain, and the former Compass consultant, Prue Leith. The school meals crisis also demands that we look at the pace of life in our schools. As stated earlier, school lunch breaks are getting shorter and are being decoupled from the core aims of the school. We have a lot to learn from the fledgling “Slow Food” movement and its emphasis on bringing

the culture back to food and eating. The school lunch period should be an enjoyable engagement for young people where they can experience appetizing and nutritious food representing an important social and educational period of the day which becomes embedded into school life. This can only be achieved in conjunction with a food production system that approximates the kind of ecologically integrated paradigm outlined by Lang and Heasman. As an academic writer of Labour Party background has noted, even the New Labour government of Tony Blair, which has carried on a modified form of neoliberalism, realizes that delivering public services cannot be done by government alone. A government “Cabinet Office” report recognized the tensions and contradictions between neoliberal, market-led approaches and the need to foster an ecologically reforming approach that puts sustainability at the forefront.

The natural limits to the trend towards ever more processed food are manifesting themselves in at least three ways. First there are high profile cases like BSE, *E. coli*, foot- and-mouth, and in early 2007, the outbreak of avian influenza in a well known “turkey factory” in England. Such outbreaks have immediate impact and are usually dealt with swiftly. A second consequence, which has only gradually crept into affluent societies, is the “obesity epidemic.” While this is not due to food alone—sedentary lifestyles are another major reason—it is likely to create major health problems in the near future, not only at an individual level but also in terms of the economic costs to society of extra health interventions. Third, there are the less obviously tangible cultural (but very political) consequences of how we relate to food. Because of the quickening pace of life—including what goes on in schools—that capitalism has imposed on us, we are less likely to cook from scratch, less likely to eat sitting at a table, more likely to rush our fast food, more likely to indulge in grazing (eating on the hoof) with little idea of the ingredients of what we are eating or where they came from. This, in the classical Marxist sense, indicates that we are alienated from the provenance of our food and how it was “manufactured” and transported to our mouths. We are cut off and set adrift from important aspects of nature, such that our metabolic relationship with nature is fractured.

So, what does this all mean for the Green Left? Readers of *CNS* are well versed in the reasons for ecological degradation and climate change. Most would argue that capitalism is the main driving force behind all these problems. Therefore, we have to find ways of curtailing capitalism and replacing it with something else—a not inconsiderable job. The issue is what kind of institutions, processes, relationships and so on do we want to build? Does encouraging movements like Slow Food help to undermine capital’s constant appetite for accumulation? Does reducing food miles, consuming more organic food, and embedding a different kind of food culture in our children and adults assist in this struggle for a new, sustainable way of life? These issues are likely to be near the top of the political agenda in the next few years.