

### **Hunger, (Mal-)Nutrition, and the Self in the 20th and 21st Century**

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**Bericht von:** Stefanie Büttner, Historisches Seminar, Universität Erfurt

In Hannover the Herrenhausen Symposium on „Hunger, (Mal-)Nutrition, and the Self in the 20th and 21st Century“, funded by the VolkswagenStiftung, assembled interdisciplinary presentations on the multi-faceted themes about the politics of food, mechanisms of consumption, and modes of knowledge production aligned to the categories hunger, (mal-)nutrition, and subjectivation in globalizing modern social orders. In the spirit of a „Problemgeschichte der Gegenwart“ papers and discussions deployed nuanced approaches from current debates about nutritional education, food relief, health and the body, recent consumption or eating patterns. These were problematized and historicized under the complex intersectionality of the categories gender, class, ethnicity/race, age and space – globally and locally alike, as well as for different social and national systems.

Historian TATJANA TÖNSMEYER (Wuppertal) opened the conference with her presentation on experiences of food shortages, administrative regulation of food access and formal rationing within occupied societies, focusing on Eastern and Western European countries under German rule during World War II. Tönsmeier emphasized that economies of scarcity and the necessity of successful coping strategies affected occupied social orders as a whole and permeated them on an every-day basis. She elaborated on women’s shifting agency in a troubled food system that further became interspersed by antisemitism, racism and criminalization. Her talk opened the floor for further discussion on mechanisms of regulating population and its productivity and work force. It affected both hierarchies and stability of social orders with regard to gender, class and ethnicity.

Taking the conference’s agenda for global perspectives on hunger and nutrition seri-

ously, GADADHARA MOHAPATRA (New Delhi) geographically moved the attention towards hunger and gendered dynamics of local food insecurity to recent East India. By focusing on a case study on the district of Kalahandy, Mohapatra illustrated coping strategies for environmentally and economically induced situations of hunger within rural communities based on agricultural self-supply. He critically observed that historically reoccurring disruptions in food supply, economic instability, and poverty have to be approached by fundamental alterations in land use and the structure of local economies, and by the development of sustainable systems of employment for Kalahandy’s population. The plenum discussed critically whether such present-day constellations of inequalities are implemented and reinforced by a (post)colonial legacy and whether changes in food habits and nutritional or agricultural knowledge will help advance sustainable food production and usage.

ALICE WEINREB (Chicago) widened the focus by presenting historical perspectives on the politics of food. She talked about perceptions of hunger as a (bio)politically framed ideological tool in German postwar political debates. Hunger as a civilian experience of suffering during both World Wars became a highly politicized, moral category of guilt and innocence, she argued, strategically used in public discourse from all actors within the national and international political spectrum. Weinreb showed from a rich base of sources how a contrasting media imagery of the hungry and malnourished body spoke to the interrelatedness of postwar political propaganda and the modern food system. A nuanced discussion picked up on the consequences of these powerful media discourses for debates about food access, human rights and the role of nutritional and medical knowledge in reinforcing a visibility of hunger.

The conference deliberately fostered interdisciplinary. JÖRG DÖTSCH (Cologne), director of the department for pediatrics and adolescent medicine at the university hospital of Cologne, added an approach to hunger and malnutrition from a medical point of view. Both the opportunities and ethical challenges of diagnoses of deficient food supply and

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precarious health of unborn children were at the core of his presentation. He introduced medical research for mechanisms explaining prevalence of malnourished babies for diabetes and obesity. The detailed but intuitively accessible overview provoked technical questions in the research methods on obesity and its meaning for social and political debates of a supposed „obesity epidemic“. How could one integrate social and cultural factors influencing „obesity“ and overweight bodies into a medical perspective? It was further critically observed that science predominantly diagnoses obesity as a „medical crisis of global scale“, but largely neglects social sciences' plea for a critical treatment of modes of medical knowledge production itself as framed by social and cultural contexts.

A panel on „Hunger, Nutrition and (International) Politics“ opened the second conference day with CHRISTIAN GERLACH's (Bern) talk on politics, imperialism and hunger in Indonesia. A number of famines between 1945 and the 1980s disrupted the political, social and economic orders and affected several segments of Indonesia's population, as Gerlach showed. He highlighted the effects of changing repressive governmental regimes, conflicts, as well as agricultural, environmental, and infrastructural deficits that deprived the region of adequate food supply. Gerlach interpreted the dealing with hunger as a widespread strategy to enforce colonial and governmental rule and tighten social stratification through food access during the 1940s onwards. A shift towards (non-governmental) food aid did hardly occur until the 1970s. The discussion even stronger underlined the strategically usage of hunger as an instrument of governance. Its significance in local struggles for independence, public memory, and resistance merits further research. Attention to local situations in Indonesia can furthermore exemplify how specialized knowledge was at work in the historical contexts of famine and food aid.

Hunger and global means for nutritional knowledge and education could alternatively be approached through the lens of international institutions such as the World Bank. It has been actively involved in such debates since the early 1970s, as VERENA KRÖSS

(Bremen) elaborated. Engaging critically with the political issues at stake regarding rural development of countries of the Global South and the enhancement of their „productivity“, Kröss diagnosed an awareness of leading actors for the relevance of nutrition as part of larger development strategies. Acknowledging it as a global issue for decades, the World Bank failed to integrate mechanisms of coping within their agenda for developing countries; it seemingly ran contrary to its ideological alignment. Thus, the World Bank was vividly discussed as an internationally and economically highly entangled institution, very much shaped by US-American perspectives on food relief, inequality, poverty and hunger.

DANIEL MAUL (Oslo) took up the thread of international famine relief in his talk about US-American Quaker aid for Germany between 1919 and 1923 concentrating on alleviating food shortage among children („Kinderspeisung“). He elaborated on key themes that made that initiative a distinct variety of transatlantic humanitarianism and politics of food by targeting enemy populations in particular. For the largely privately funded Quaker initiative that meant to specifically re-negotiate its aim to combine pacifism and spiritual message with active politically contested food aid. Further discussion showed how hunger became visible in perceptions of children's bodies that occurred as prime political targets of famine relief. A zooming-in perspective on local processes of knowledge production about how to take up on international aid will further add to that research.

Perceptions of malnutrition and categorization of hunger as a global problem were consciously interrelated with local practices of measuring and the contested field of knowledge production by JOEL GLASMAN's (Berlin) presentation. He discussed the introduction of the MUAC-band as a tool of measuring children's degree of malnutrition and as a crucial moment in the politically highly charged development of medical-based techniques to quantify hunger and re-negotiate strategies in food aid. The performativity of the tool itself as a new form of standardization that shaped public perceptions of malnutrition and how it practically catered to an articulation of crisis in the global food system

were marked as key insights from the discussion.

HEIKE WIETERS (Berlin) and CHRISTIANE BERTH (Bern) highlighted the powerful interrelations of food production, commercialized distribution, governmental interests and the consumers' role added to that triangle. Their presentation took up US-American politics regarding agricultural surplus production by redirecting it into food aid. They tracked down these processes to local agencies through the introduction of Incaparina, a fortified food product as an alternative protein resource, in Guatemala. With an eye for that dynamic network of different transnational and local actors, the paper took into account how marketing strategies and practices of consumption influenced each other. They also tried to move the consuming subjects into an analytical focus. Looking closer at strategies and agencies reveals the problematic task of historic attempts in changing local, often class-based food habits, as the discussion showed.

Staying geographically in the context of Latin America, CORINNE PERNET (Genève) approached mechanisms of global knowledge production in the field of medicalized nutrition expertise, dietary advice, and human rights (to food). She critically engaged with the functions of both individuals and institutions shaping discourses in nutritional sciences. Approaches of the human body through nutritionist intervention were implemented into the work of international organizations. Paper and discussion further touched upon the gendered dimensions within the realm of nutritional science and fieldwork and problematized the unbalanced use of quantitative and qualitative data.

CLAUDIA PRINZ (Berlin) illustrated via her research in medical history how the prevention of malnutrition in the international context of media-based World Health Organization (WHO) campaigns on breast-feeding since the 1970s turned mothers into targets of nutritional advice and health education. Breast-feeding and an implicitly debated concept of motherhood arose as highly politicized issues in the context of social reform and educational campaigns that also resonate with today's discourses about health and responsi-

ble, able-bodied subjects. Historicizing such understanding of medicalized health education thus has to be problematized with regard to women's lives, bodies, and empowerment. The discussion focused on the role of the state to call upon women's responsible behavior.

Adding on neoliberal techniques of subjectivation, LISANNE CLAESSENS (Amsterdam) presented her anthropological study in urban youth identifying themselves predominantly through consumption of food, health, and fitness while acquiring urban spaces as well as creating and circulating individualized nutritional knowledge through social and physical networks. Focusing on Amsterdam and an urban community lifestyle, Claessens claimed that this approach made visible the distinct ways how young people „navigate health“ through their body-energy-relationship and a focus on the metabolic system. Different forms of individualized nutritional expertise become very powerful in a regime of subjectivation and self-optimization that also problematizes extreme, even compulsive manifestations of that lifestyle.

GABRIELLA PETRICK (New Haven) opened the final section and presented somewhat diverse approaches to a theoretical framework for a cultural history of taste, socially triggered food habits and industrialized food processing in the United States between 1900 and 1965. Drawing on two examples, the production and distribution of iceberg lettuce and the introduction of Sodapop, Petrick stated the interrelatedness of the industrialized convenience food system, consumer preferences and both economically and socially induced dietary changes over that decades. An interpretation of statistical data in specific historical context left room for problematizing what people actually ate or how eating patterns changed.

Patterns of food consumption and nutritional knowledge often resonate within media spaces and public debate, as UWE SPIEKERMANN (Göttingen) elaborated in his talk about three exemplary food scandals in Germany between the 1910s and 1980s. He portrayed the media coverage of events, trends and supposed risks in food as catering to fundamental transformations in modern consumer society driven by commercialized de-

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sires and fears. A disambiguation of risky eating without proper dietary advice filtered down to the marketplace and the circulation of medical advice, exemplified through the implementation of iodized salt in Germany or the concerns of hormone contaminated meat in the 1980s. Historiographically, Spiekermann argued for a structural analysis of economic, political, social, and cultural aspects to make continuities and change in consumption history visible, with special focus on the „aesthetics“ of scandalizing.

Taking up the thread on aesthetics and representations of food, MONICA RÜTHERS (Hamburg) moved the focus to nutrition and socialist society. Relying prominently on visual material she presented perceptions of food and eating from the early Soviet Union to the present Russian Republic. Rütters elaborated on how socialist notions of food production, distribution, or cuisine differed from that of capitalist contexts but nevertheless adapted forms of („rational“) consumption and obstinate eating. A pervasive characteristic of socialist food practices symbolized a constant re-negotiation of the socialist and later modern Russian self through food that visually and textually was transported and transformed through socialist realism.

For the final presentation JÜRGEN MARTSCHUKAT (Erfurt) problematized the alleged „global obesity crisis“, critically examining socially constructed assumptions about fatness, body image, and racism. He used Michelle Obama’s 2010 anti-obesity campaign „Let’s Move“, primarily targeted to the African American community, as a gateway to question current debates on fatness, fitness, and empowerment through advice for responsible food choices. Martschukat convincingly elaborated how such medicalized debates could be revised through the lens of cultural critique that unpacks highly normative, biopolitical assumptions about body shape, able-bodiedness, and fitness for citizenship. Discussing these perspectives alludes to the importance of being critical to well-implemented historical narratives and looking closely at when these discourses and related practices gain momentum for structures of social order.

Diverse panels and fruitful discussions

about „Hunger, (Mal-)Nutrition, and the Self in the 20th and 21st century“ were summarized by TATJANA TÖNSMEYER (Wuppertal), HEIKE WIETERS (Berlin) and EVA BARLÖSIUS (Hannover), a sociologist in the field of nutrition, by several concluding remarks. Histories of food within globalized economies and societies had been unfolded throughout the conference as undoubtedly powerful narratives. As analytical lenses hunger and (knowledge about) nutrition were proven to be useful categories on several levels, since past and present fundamental societal debates focus on food. Finally, a plenary discussion acknowledged that as a success but further commented on its challenges. The global food system in its modern or even post-modern stages has highly entangled histories that could reveal powerful explanatory mechanisms in the light of cultural and capitalist critique. Multi-layered, spatial and temporal dynamics connect the global to the local and vice versa. Furthermore, approaching hunger and nutrition as interrelated with production, articulation, and circulation of knowledge has been convincingly presented as a gateway to both collective and individual practices, norms and discourses, spaces of consumption and neglect, and questions of conflict and governance.

#### **Conference Overview:**

*Welcome, Introduction, and Key Approaches*  
Tatjana Tönsmeier (Wuppertal) / Heike Wieters (Berlin)

*Panel 1: Experiencing Hunger/Coping with Hunger*

Chair: Heike Wieters (Berlin)

Tatjana Tönsmeier (Wuppertal): World War II and the Post War Era: The last European Hunger Crisis

Gadadhara Mohapatra (New Delhi): Hunger in East-India: Coping strategies and gender relations

Alice Weinreb (Chicago): Hungry Innocents? Civilian Hunger Experiences in Germany 1914-1949

Jörg Dötsch (Köln): Hunger from a Medical point of View

*Panel 2: Hunger, Nutrition and (International) Politics*

Chair: Tatjana Tönsmeier (Wuppertal)

Christian Gerlach (Bern): Politics, Imperialism and Hunger: The Case of Indonesia, 1945-c. 1980

Verena Kröss (Bremen): The World Bank and Rural Development: A Western Strategy to combat Hunger and Malnutrition or something completely different?

Daniel Maul (Oslo): Feeding enemy children - American Quakers and the „Kinderspeisung“ in post-WWI Germany 1919-1922

*Panel 3: Techniques and Instruments of Hunger Relief*

Chair: Helge Pharo (Oslo)

Joel Glasman (Berlin): MUAC. How acute malnutrition became commensurable on a global scale

Heike Wieters (Berlin) & Christiane Berth (Bern): Incaparina, Protein Cookies and Vitaminized Sugar: IO/NGO/Industry Cooperation in the Field of Hunger Prevention

*Panel 4: Food and Nutrition Knowledge in a Global Perspective*

Chair: Daniel Maul (Oslo)

Corinne Pernet (Genève): Nutrition Expertise (and the Right to Food) in a Global Context

Claudia Prinz (Berlin): „... their potential is grossly underutilized“: mothers and nutrition education at the WHO, 1970s-1990s

Lisanne Claessens (Amsterdam): Navigating Super Health: on youth and health in the city of Amsterdam

*Panel 5: Nutrition, the Body, and the Self*

Chair: Helge Pharo (Oslo)

Gabriella Petrick (New Haven): Industrializing Taste: Food Processing and the Transformation of the American Diet, 1900-1965

Uwe Spiekermann (Göttingen): Risky Eating: Food Scandals in Modern Consumer Societies

Monica Rùthers (Hamburg): Nutrition and the Socialist Self: a Social Contract of Bread

Jürgen Martschukat (Erfurt): Let's Move and

the Racial Politics of Fat in Recent America

*Concluding Discussion: Hunger, Nutrition and the Self in the 21st Century*

Chairs: Tatjana Tönsmeier & Heike Wieters

Eva Barlösius (Hannover): Hunger, Nutrition and the Self in the 21st Century

Resume and Sociological Input to open Discussion and Systematization

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