

INTERVIEW WITH JEFFREY PILCHER

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ADRIANA SALAY LEME[†]
RÔMULO DE PAULA ANDRADE^{†**}

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.1590/S2178-149420240307>

[†]University of São Paulo – São Paulo (SP), Brazil.

^{*}PhD in Social History at the University São Paulo (USP) and researcher at School of Public Health – USP.
(adrianasalay@gmail.com)

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3608-5766>

[†]Oswaldo Cruz Foundation – Rio de Janeiro (RJ), Brazil.

^{**}PhD in the History of the Sciences at the Graduate Program of History of the Sciences and Health (PPGHCS).
Researcher and professor of the Department of Research in the History of the Sciences and Health PPGHCS.
(romulopa@gmail.com)

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4384-5105>

Jeffrey M. Pilcher is a professor of Food History and director of the Culinary Research Centre at the University of Toronto, Canada. He holds an MA in Mexican history from New Mexico State University and a Ph.D. in Mexican cultural history from Texas Christian University. Pilcher's work primarily investigates the global history of food, with a particular focus on Mexican cuisine and its transnational influences. His latest book project explores the global history of beer over the last two centuries, tracing the expansion of European lager through networks of trade, migration, and empire. He is the author of notable works such as *Food in World History* (2006), *Planet Taco: A Global History of Mexican Food* (2012), *Que Vivan los Tamales! Food and the Making of Mexican Identity* (1998), and *The Sausage Rebellion: Public Health, Private Enterprise, and Meat in Mexico City* (2006). Additionally, he is the editor of the *Oxford Handbook of Food History* (2012) and of the *Global Food History* journal. He is an active member of the Association for the Study of Food and Society and the American Historical Association. His contributions have significantly influenced the field of food history, encouraging new research and promoting interdisciplinary dialogue.

WHEN YOU STARTED OUT, THINKING ABOUT FOOD THROUGH THE LENS OF CULTURAL HISTORY WASN'T VERY COMMON. TODAY, WITHIN THE HIERARCHY OF OBJECTS TO BE STUDIED THAT PLACES THEM IN A PRESTIGIOUS POSITION, HOW DO YOU SEE THIS OBJECT AMONG HISTORICAL STUDIES?

The longstanding neglect of food as a subject for cultural history has a number of causes. In part it comes from the feminization of food work, although even gender historians often shunned the topic due to the association of kitchen labor with patriarchal oppression. Paradoxically, food culture was also considered a luxury of the rich, a view articulated most prominently by Pierre Bourdieu in his elitist dismissal of the "taste of necessity" common among the lower classes. The past three decades of research, together with the growing interest in food in the wider culture, clearly demonstrated the importance of food in all aspects of human life. For example, despite the mechanization of agriculture, food production remains by far the largest global employer. And even with the modern fragmentation of food consumption, commensality continues to be a vital focus of sociability. Meanwhile, environmental historians recognized food as one of the most important points of contact between humans and the outside world. Nevertheless, many still consider the study of food to be frivolous, an attitude that I can only attribute to the discipline's inherent conservatism.

HOW DO YOU ANALYZE THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERDISCIPLINARITY IN HISTORICAL STUDIES OF THE FOOD?

Interdisciplinarity is absolutely essential to the historical study of food. With the founding of the Annales School in the 1920s, historians recognized that the methods of anthropologists, sociologists, economists, and psychologists could broaden our understanding of the past and help interpret the documents that have traditionally been our main primary sources. Anthropology, with its longstanding interest in everyday life and culture, has been the leading source of insights on food. Despite his blind spots, Bourdieu's logic of social distinction can be usefully applied to diverse historical contexts. The economist Amartya Sen's theory of entitlements has enriched our understanding of food politics and hunger in history. More recent neuroscience research has informed the boom in sensory studies. The omnipresence of food within all aspects of human life therefore demands that we study it with a similar holistic approach.

Similarly, historians have much to offer scholars of food working in other disciplines. Historians' attention to chronology and change over time can enrich the often presentist views of many social and physical scientists. My own book, *Planet Taco*, sought to historicize our understanding of authenticity by showing how competing versions of authentic Mexican food have evolved over time. The industrial modernity associated with North American fast-food tacos encouraged Mexican elites to overcome their distrust of Indigenous cultures and embrace pre-Hispanic foods as a more authentic national cuisine.

IN 2012, IN THE INTRODUCTION TO THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF FOOD HISTORY, AND IN 2016, IN AN ARTICLE FOR THE AMERICAN HISTORICAL REVIEW, YOU REVIEWED HISTORIOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVES AND TRENDS IN FOOD HISTORY. CAN YOU GIVE A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE FIELD TODAY?

Historians of food have been very productive over the past decade, and I cannot hope to do justice to their findings in a brief interview. Summarizing this work is also difficult because historians of food and food studies scholars more generally have not settled on a single paradigm, which is fortunate, really, because it offers opportunities to push forward in many directions using diverse methodologies.

One area of exciting historical research is the industrialization of food, as we seek to understand the origins of the ultra-processed foods that increasingly constitute our basic subsistence. From a technological angle, much recent work examines the biochemistry of food science and the search for inexpensive chemical substitutes for traditional ingredients.

Although engineered foods have become ubiquitous in present-day supermarkets, nineteenth-century examples include margarine, saccharine, and adjunct beers. Labor histories increasingly focus on the role of the senses in working with food, a trend that recognizes the expertise demanded of even the agricultural field hands and the food processing factory workers. Technologies of marketing were also essential for the industrialization of food, at first to win consumer trust for newfangled products, and more recently to overwhelm us with meaningless choices. Government oversight has shifted from regulating the wholesomeness of foods to simply providing information on the assumption that consumers will be able to navigate this complex media environment and make informed purchases, which is a challenge given the sophistication of food advertising. The historiography of industrialization also reminds us of the ecological and social costs of cheap food (Cohen; Kideckel; Zeide, 2021; Cohen, 2019; Spackman; Lahne, 2019; Zeide, 2018; Hisano, 2019; Frohlich, 2023; Otter, 2020).

As a complement to the industrial transformation of food, historians have examined changing notions of food and health. The human appetite for food, which was viewed with suspicion in classical times as a source of gluttony, continues to be questioned by scientific authorities claiming to offer the perfect diet. Working in diverse fields, from biochemistry to psychology, specialists have sought to displace human desire for food, which is a process that is now culminating in the use of Glucagon-like peptide 1 (GLP-1) class diabetes medications such as Ozempic to suppress the appetite. Since the Enlightenment, diet has also come to be seen as a legitimate subject for government intervention. Leaders feared that undernourished workers would suppress economic development and endanger the nation in times of war. Of course, the result was not to distribute foods more fairly but to devise efficient diets based on cheap starches like potatoes and discourage indulgences such as coffee or sausage. The so-called “wonder foods,” from Borden’s meat biscuit and Kellogg’s corn flakes to present-day Soylent and Impossible Meat, sought to provide technological solutions for political problems (Williams, 2020; Earle, 2020; Haushofer, 2022).

Cultural histories of food continue to explore the ways that people and communities make meaning around the dinner table. Scholars have made great strides in examining the foods of marginalized communities in particular, including African Americans, Muslims in India, and colonial subjects everywhere. At the same time, mobility has become a useful framework for examining the ways that foods and cuisines are constructed beyond national boundaries. These are just some of the topics that historians have recently explored (Klein, 2020; Wallach, 2018; Sharma, 2023; Rappaport; Schmidt, 2024; Bender, Cinotto, 2023; Pite, 2023).

PIONEERING WORKS SUCH AS THOSE BY JAMES VERNON, MIKE DAVIS, AND DAVID ARNOLD HAVE DISCUSSED NOT ONLY THE PRESENCE OF FOOD, BUT ALSO ITS ABSENCE IN STUDIES ON SCARCITY AND HUNGER AS OBJECTS OF HISTORY. IN RECENT YEARS, WE HAVE SEEN AN INCREASE IN HUNGER WORLD-WIDE. ACCORDING TO THE FAO, BETWEEN 2019 AND 2023, AROUND 122 MILLION PEOPLE WERE “PUSHED” INTO HUNGER, ESPECIALLY THOSE LIVING IN LATIN AMERICA AND AFRICA. WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR HISTORIOGRAPHICAL PRODUCTION?

Hunger and the politics of food have been perennial topics for historians, just as hunger keeps getting forgotten and then “rediscovered” as a contemporary problem. Perhaps what is different today is that we can no longer treat hunger as natural, in large part thanks to Brazil’s Zero Hunger program and the development goals of United Nations that it inspired. Of course, the ideas behind Zero Hunger were developed within civil society in the decades before Lula’s election. In a similar fashion, Civil Rights activists in the United States came to recognize food as a human right and worked to build cooperative kitchens, community gardens, and farm support programs (Smith, 2023). The idea behind food sovereignty, meaning that people should have not just access to a bare minimum of subsistence but also have control over the source and nature of their foods, has likewise become a subject for historians looking at food quality and agricultural land (Lee, 2011; Logan, 2020; Cevalco, 2022).

A CURIOSITY ABOUT YOUR CAREER: HOW DID YOUR ACADEMIC (AND PERSONAL, OF COURSE) INTEREST IN MEXICAN CUISINE COME ABOUT?

I’ve always been something of a foodie, although growing up I didn’t have much chance to sample diverse foods in the Midwest. After university, I moved to the Southwest and began to explore Mexican cuisine. At the same time, I became interested in Mexican history. The opportunity to combine the two as a historian of Mexican food was really a product of the expansion of the historical field in the 1980s and 1990s. I was fortunate to be in the right place at the right time.

YOU ESTABLISH A RELATION BETWEEN THE FORMATION OF NATIONAL IDENTITIES AND LOCAL CUISINES, AS WITH MEXICAN CUISINE. WHAT THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL TOOLS DID YOU USE TO CARRY OUT THIS WORK?

My first book, *¡Que vivan los tamales!* (1998) was written at a moment of nationalist revivals of the 1980s and 1990s and the research that it inspired, particularly the

work of Benedict Anderson. Despite the unusual topic, it was part of a longer tradition of history that took the state as its subject and investigated the ways that food were employed to create nationalist ideologies and to include or exclude diverse social groups.

Arjun Appadurai's essay on how to make a national cuisine was also formative for me. Cookbooks were my most important primary source, but I took a rather empirical approach to them, absorbing a large corpus of works and trying to make sense of them. I didn't receive much interdisciplinary training in graduate school, and I would probably have worked more efficiently if I had learned the tools of discourse analysis. On the other hand, a deep textual immersion has paid off long term dividends. I'm still discovering novelties about Mexican food based on that dissertation research (Charbonneau; Pilcher, 2023).

In *Planet Taco* (2012) I essentially rewrote the first book from a mobility studies perspective by asking if Mexican food outside of the national borders, particularly Mexican American, mattered in the historical development of the cuisine. This was true in the early modern era, regarding the ways that maize traveled the world without the cultural knowledge of nixtamalization, which fortified the plant's nutritional value and allowed Indigenous people to avoid pellagra, a deadly disease caused by the lack of vitamin B-2. In the twentieth century, Mexican Americans created new cuisines blending Mexican cooking techniques with the products of United States supermarkets. These dishes became the model for fast food versions of Mexican food, but their creativity was dismissed both by Mexican nationalists and by American gourmets seeking a primitive authenticity.

OVER THE LAST FEW YEARS, YOU'VE BEEN RESEARCHING BEER. WHAT DOES A DRINK LIKE BEER TELL US ABOUT THE PROCESS OF CONSOLIDATING CAPITALISM AND THE GLOBAL CIRCULATION OF COMMODITIES?

H*opped Up*, as the book is titled, begins with a world map that was published on the social media platform PureTravel and depicts each country's iconic or best-selling beer: Budweiser in the US, Skol in Brazil, Molson in Canada, and Tsingtao in China. Despite the diversity of the labels, they are all the same pale lager—light, clear, fizzy, and indistinguishable. The one exception is Ireland's Guinness. The book explores how diverse Indigenous beverages came to be displaced by this global commodity. Although one could consider pale lager as a case study in European cultural imperialism, I suggest that this beer style is itself a product of globalization.

Pale lager was of course a product of industrial capitalism, but so were all the other, seemingly more authentic, beer styles like porter, India Pale Ale (IPA), and Munich lager.

London porter was the first industrial beer, and its dark malt served to hide the imperfections of early brewing technology. With the growth of scale needed to quench the thirst of London's industrial workforce, brewers learned to control the vagaries of fermentation. By the nineteenth century, the pale ales formerly reserved for the gentry could be produced more cheaply than the workman's porter. Brewers marketed a new version of pale ale to the growing ranks of shopkeepers and clerks through a form of imperial nostalgia associated with India, the IPA. Meanwhile, Central Europeans adapted British malting and brewing technology to their unique bottom fermenting yeast, producing a spectrum of lager beers ranging from dark Munich to golden Pilsner, from the Czech town of Pilsen. International competition between these beers eventually favored the light, clear Pilsner because of its seeming purity, an ideal of nineteenth-century industrial food processing. The success of these beers led rivals elsewhere to advertise copies as Munich and Pilsner "style" beers. Unlike the French government, which offered legal protection to winemakers in Champagne and Bordeaux, imperial officials in Berlin and Vienna refused to grant similar intellectual property rights to Bavarian and Czech brewers. Beer styles therefore came to reflect the capitalist imperatives of industrial standardization, imagined geographies, and commercialized consumption.

Pale lager spread around the world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries through migration, trade, and empire. Central European migrants established lager breweries across the Americas, from Milwaukee and St. Louis to Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires. Meanwhile, German shipping brewers such as Beck's displaced IPA from British imperial markets such as Calcutta and Cairo. Pale lager acquired customers not only among imperial agents but also native elites eager for a refreshing taste of European modernity. The Japanese, determined to acquire European skills and avoid the colonial fate of India and China, sent students to Germany to learn to brew lager beer. Eventually they built an empire of beer, sourcing ingredients and selling beers in China, Korea, and Taiwan. As lager beer traveled the world, brewers adapted the recipes. The addition of maize and rice adjuncts in North America produced a lighter, more sparkling beer than could be made with barley alone. Japanese microfiltration and fermentation techniques pushed the clean, dry flavor even further. Thus, the standardized commodity was a product of innovation from many lands.

The craft beer movement, although it proclaims itself to be a reaction against commodified lager beer, illustrates how twenty-first-century capitalism produces commodities. Of course, the supposedly traditional styles favored by craft brewers are themselves products of capitalist industrialization. Strong bitter and sour flavors became a postindustrial distinctiveness in place of the clean pure flavors prized in the industrial era. In place of massive

advertising budgets, craft brewers justified their premium prices by moral claims on local, artisanal, communal, and sustainable products. Nevertheless, prominent craft brands such as California's Lagunitas and Scotland's Brewdog have been selling out to global giants like Heineken and private equity groups, in much the same way that programmers hope to create a "killer app" that will be bought up by Google or Meta. By the same token, there is a curious affinity between craft brewers and Carlos Brito, the Brazilian executive who built AB InBev into the world's largest brewing company and who has been compared to a "tech start-up CEO" (McCoy; Bomey, 2015). In short, the beer mug provides a lens for viewing the history of capitalism and the lives of people caught up in it.

FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF THE NON-ACADEMIC PUBLIC, THE HISTORY OF FOOD HAS A STRONG APPEAL. HOW DO YOU ANALYZE THE PRODUCTION OF BOOKS BY PEOPLE NOT NECESSARILY LINKED TO UNIVERSITIES? IS IT POSSIBLE TO HAVE A DIALOGUE BETWEEN THIS PRODUCTION AND THE SPECIALIZED ONE?

The general public has become deeply interested in food over the past few decades, and audiences have often been more receptive to books about food than research on the history of sexuality, for example. Public intellectuals are successful to the extent that they can take that interest and use it to make compelling arguments about social justice or sustainability. That's where the dialogue needs to happen with non-academic writers on food, who are not always interested in the "why it matters" question about food. It's unfortunate if any author gets so focused on the fun side of food that they lose sight of the very real problems facing food workers or people who lack access to healthy food.

YOU ARE THE COORDINATOR OF FOOD STUDIES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO. HOW DOES IT WORK? WHAT RESEARCH AND STUDENT PROJECTS ARE RELATED TO THIS LINE OF STUDY? WE ASK BECAUSE, IN BRAZIL, SOME LABORATORIES ARE STUDYING THE HISTORY OF FOOD IN VARIOUS REGIONS OF THE COUNTRY, AND WE WOULD LIKE TO LEARN ABOUT OTHER EXPERIENCES.

We at the University of Toronto's Culinary Research Centre houses a number of current publicly engaged and socially conscious research projects. Professor Jayeeta Sharma's Feeding City Lab works with farmers, markets, and public kitchens in Toronto and worldwide to collect stories about innovative methods for growing and exchanging healthy and culturally appropriate foods. The research has focused in particular on Indigenous women's collectives

seeking to maintain heirloom seeds in a time of climate change. These stories are available as podcasts,¹ which functions as a knowledge sharing platform. A second research project, Tasting the Global City,² has created historical maps of Toronto's food system as a research tool for locating the contributions of indigenous peoples and migrants in making Toronto the culinary tourism destination that it is today. A third project that has been particularly successful in the Food History classroom teaches students to mine historical recipes to create meal kits that can be used for home or public kitchens. Thus, the Culinaria Kitchen Laboratory, which was built as a teaching kitchen for food studies classes, demonstrates the power of food history for recovering the past and learning lessons for the future.

NOTAS

- 1 Available at: <https://www.utoronto.ca/projects/feedingcity/>. Access on: Aug. 2, 2024.
- 2 Available at: <https://www.utoronto.ca/projects/torontofood/>. Access on: Aug. 2, 2024.

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