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How TV Dinners Embody Industrial Capitalism in the USA

A stroll through the frozen aisle of any American supermarket will reveal an intricate variation of the classic TV dinner; an entire reheatable meal all conveniently prepacked in an individual portion. Such advances in food design would not have been possible without the feats of industrialism, although not without consequences. This paper goes over the history of TV dinners, discusses its emergence from industrial capitalism alongside its context within consumer culture, evaluates its social effects, and briefly overviews some health repercussions. Ultimately, this paper argues that the TV dinner is the embodiment of a cycle of exploitation that the American capitalistic food industry has given birth to.

The TV dinner is a frozen or chilled entrée meant to be heated in a microwave or conventional oven following a set of instructions on its packaging. Its ease in preparation in addition to its removal of “texture and flavour, combined with the scientific techniques to restore taste to food” (Bentley 526) classifies it as an industrial food. These foods are often associated with “unpronounceable, hidden ingredients” and the act of eating quickly alone. (qtd. in Crowther 233) Its place on the table emerged from the surplus of leftover Thanksgiving Turkey in 1953, when the now-famous brand Swanson’s coined the idea of selling it in aluminium trays that airlines use to serve food, as it doubles as a baking tin and plate. The success of the meal skyrocketed with the consequent inventions of the freezer and microwave in the 1960s, which “shifted the ability to cook onto men and children, effectively de-skilling cooking.” (Winterman; Crowther 124)

The necessity of effortless cooking surfaced from the “reorganisation of time” due to the industrial revolution, when focus shifted onto the needs of production over the maintenance of social relationships as well as the satisfaction of nutritional needs. The shift into industrial

agriculture is marked by the (over)production and consumption of sugar, saturated and trans fats, and refined carbohydrates such as white rice, white bread, and maize. In the critically-acclaimed documentary *Food Inc*, VP of the American Corn Growers Association Troy Roush notes that 30% of land in the United States is dedicated to planting corn. “That’s largely driven by government policy that allows us to produce corn below the cost of production, [...] we’re being paid to overproduce because of these large multinational interests.” The film then demonstrates the multiple uses of corn; in the feed of farm animals that become the very meat inside processed foods, and in the form of so many disguised corn derivatives (Appendix 1), the principal being high-fructose corn syrup (HFCS). (Kenner et al., “Food, Inc”)

The overproduction of these select crops drives an urgency to coerce consumers into purchasing them, or a form of them. Often times, the drive is so strong that producers find subtle ways to exploit consumers as a form of culture. Fischler points out that “the sweet tooth” is an innate trait shared by a great number of species, and that the world consumption of “sugar” has multiplied tenfold since 1900. Perhaps when fruits and honey were the only sweet foods available, it would have been beneficial as a source of quick calories, but it has since become maladaptive as foods are “submerged by cheap and often ‘invisible’ sugar,” which incidentally points at HFCS. (943) With targeted and competitive marketing, foods such as TV dinners “are made available, attractive, and affordable to many urban residents.” (Crowther 230) Bright colours, identifiable symbols, aggressive advertisements, imperative slogans, socialisation and biological instincts are used to encourage Americans into being good consumers, and holding more significance for the brand than the product itself. (Fessenden) In ‘Eating Culture’, Crowther mentions that the sensory appeal of these foods and ability to fit into people’s lives

trump the desire to engage in cultural traditions. (233) While his notions of individualisation over shared culture are literally mirrored in the individual portions of a TV dinner, one can argue that these foods have formed an ideal on its own (Appendix 2). Fitchen reports that “people who are poor enough to receive government-issued food stamps” purchase not only “basic, inexpensive staples but also [...] popular items such as frozen pizza, potato chips, [and] soda pop, [...] perhaps attempting to convert their perceived hunger into a sense of well-being or to affirm that they can live like other Americans.” (309) Essentially, the consumption of brands over products themselves has altered the idea of affluence from meaningful nutritious variety to packaged empty calories. The now growing demand of TV dinners and other industrial foods is further incentive for governments to devise policies that would aid further production, that would in turn prompt more consumption in a never-ending exploitative cycle.

Gastro-anomie is a term used to contain the dissatisfaction from the normlessness of eating foods produced from nowhere by nobody, and is often a result of the lack of identity associated with it. “Meals are an important site for the invention of tradition, such as a cuisine, that offers a connection with the past, [...] where people can eat their identity [and food is] more than just sustenance.” (Crowther 155) An unimaginable amount of social interaction is lost in the hearts of American families when all that’s needed for “sustenance” is to remove a meal from a chiller and reheat it. This consequently leads to a sense of isolation, where “work is the dominant obligation, [and] personal, family, or free time become marginal, tethered to the clock bound nature of work.” (Daly 284) Looking back into our hunter-gatherer days, we see that this way of life is entirely unnatural because, first and foremost, human beings are social creatures. “Identity is more collective than individual,” note Ryan and Jetha, “the sense of being alone - even in a

crowded city - is an oddity in human life, included, like so much else, in the agricultural package.” (87) This is a key point because the deprivation of human beings’ innate tendencies is a destructive impact on their coping abilities, as their mental tenacities are allocated towards denying their nature rather than achieving their goals.

As mentioned above, the food industry is a part of an exploitative cycle, and this surely extends to the direct health consequences caused by the regular consumption of their products. A caveat that is deeply concealed from Americans is that the misfortunes that stem from the food industry drive diet, pharmaceutical, and many other industries. (Fessenden) It is common knowledge that highly-processed food is a major cause of the surge in the levels of obesity, diabetes, cancers, and a myriad of cardiovascular and respiratory diseases. Yet, instead of alleviating the source of these health complications, the industry has found a way to profit from it; eating away at the average American’s wages by further encouragement to ingest diet pills and medication.

Moving on from aspects of physical health symptoms, there is also considerable evidence that TV dinners and similar foods cause substantial repercussions to mental health, in addition to the reduction of coping abilities mentioned above. “Industrially processed foods and ready-made instant meals, in comparison to their corresponding basic food showed losses in vitamins, minerals, trace elements, fibre, and essential fatty acids to the extent of 50-90%.” (Fusch et al., 1) Oftentimes, the role of these essential micronutrients in overall health are overlooked. It is only recently that psychologists have studied the effect of micronutrients in the treatment of multiple mental illnesses such as autism, attention-deficiency hyperactive disorder, bipolar disorder, and obsessive compulsive disorder. (Patel and Curtis; Rucklidge et al. Apr 2009; Rucklidge Aug

2009; Gately et al.) It is noteworthy here that the treatment to many psychiatric illnesses in America is, not surprisingly, pharmaceuticals. Now that these facts are known, it is impossible not to ask - why isn't the system changing? Why isn't the cycle of ongoing capitalism being broken?

In simple terms, there is change, albeit slow. With growing awareness of these pressing issues, there have been a shift in food trends that involve eating "raw," "vegan," "organic," or "fresh." Products that are eligible in these categories proudly exclaim their labels onto the supermarket shelves. This movement involves "the rise of farmer's markets, and the calls to eat fresh ingredients and for sustainable agriculture and aquaculture to become the norm." (Crowther 125-126) The contents of TV dinners themselves have been evolving to include more vegetables and healthier options. Nevertheless, due to the gradual nature for the reversion to a more nutritiously varied diet, the demand for fresher foods is low, therefore they are still classified as a luxury item that, unfortunately, many of the American labourers cannot afford. In fact, there are some notable contemporary examples categorizing proletarian foods as "less than" healthier foods. (Appendix 2)

No matter how prevalent the return to traditional eating culture is in the USA, it still does not currently compare to the catastrophic consequences that capitalistic, industrial agriculture has brought. Much can be learnt from the TV dinner, and how integrated Americans are into the concept of consumer culture. To conclude, the first step towards change is in the awareness of the problem.

Appendix 1



Screenshots taken from Food, Inc that show some of the foods that corn-derivatives are present in, and the ingredients that corn-derivatives are described as or are included in

Appendix 2



Picture 1 - a middle class family, the Wormwoods, eating a TV dinner in its culturally significant way: in front of a TV (DeVito, “Matilda”)

Picture 2 - the “Swenson’s” Thanksgiving family TV dinner, wherein an altercation happens relating to the dull nature of eating a TV dinner on Thanksgiving (Falchuk, “Scream Queens”)

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