

Featured Review

Seeing Like a Supply Chain

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Red Meat Republic: A Hoof-to-Table History of How Beef Changed America. By Joshua Specht. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019. 368 pp., \$27.95, hardback, ISBN 978-0-6911-8231-5.

Joshua Specht's new book aims to offer "the first hoof-to-table history of industrialized beef production" in the United States, which has been, according to Specht, historically the most important beef-eating nation in the world (4). While I dispute that this is the *first* such effort, Specht delivers so much on this promise that I am inclined to concede it is the best.¹ For historians of agriculture and capitalism, Specht provides a model narrative on how to integrate social, economic, and environmental history reciprocally across different production regimes and places. The book makes a few clear interventions in beef industry history, but Specht's work is most notable for its breadth and integration of many stories and themes across a very large subject. In so doing, Specht breathes new life into the commodity supply-chain approach very popular in recent decades.

A commodity supply chain is an organizational model derived from business logistics that is supposed to analyze the many linkages between stages of production of a good for sale. It was valuable to managers because it revealed the importance of transactions happening far down the line (and often far around the globe) to a firm's costs and profits.² The model found academic

1. Comparable holistic efforts include: Jimmy M. Skaggs, *Prime Cut: Livestock Raising and Meatpacking in the United States, 1607–1683* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1986); Maureen Ogle, *In Meat We Trust: An Unexpected History of Carnivore America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013); Charles E. Ball, *Building the Beef Industry: A Century of Commitment* (Denver: National Cattlemen's Foundation, 1998); John W. Longworth, *Beef in Japan: Politics, Production, Marketing and Trade* (St. Lucia, AU: University of Queensland Press, 1983); Ian MacLachlan, *Kill and Chill: Restructuring Canada's Beef Commodity Chain* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001); Richard Perren, *Taste, Trade and Technology: The Development of the International Meat Industry since 1840* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006). The approach is also clear across the works of Roger Horowitz.

2. A similar approach developed simultaneously in the French colonial agriculture department in the 1960s, which was more methodologically sound. See Philip Raikes, Michael Friis Jensen, and Stefano Ponte, "Global Commodity Chain Analysis and the French *filière* Approach: Comparison and Critique," *Economy and Society* 29, no. 3 (2000): 390–417.

value in the works of Immanuel Wallerstein and Gary Gereffi, who used it to study the differing economic and political consequences of people's relationships to the same commodity.³ Sidney Mintz, often credited with popularizing the model for historians, used it to explore the connections between brutal plantation labor in the Caribbean and the depoliticized ways of consuming sugar in Great Britain.⁴ The model has been most widely used in food history, where it is more often a means of organizing chapters rather than an approach that reveals anything new.

Specht pioneers a "conflict-centered approach" to narrating the supply chain and takes no trading or social relationship for granted (3). Specht expertly reveals the driving contexts and particular contingencies in the formation of a modern beef industry that was "revolutionary and exploitative" (3). His method is innovative because the greatest shortcoming of supply chains is their rigidity. They tend to force complex socioeconomic texture into "category hierarchies" of production, processing/manufacture, consumption, and sometimes distribution.⁵ They also tend to assume the stability of rich-poor power relations. Supply chains were useful exactly because they helped explain why capitalism did not always lead to ruinous competition and economic crisis as Marxists otherwise predicted.

The beef industry defied the usual categories. "The fact that no single word captures the totality of meatpacking, ranching, and consumption reflects both the difficulty and the importance of treating this subject holistically," asserts Specht (261, n. 5). We learn that corn farmers acted as cattle feeders, meatpackers acted as wheat speculators, and many different people and industries rose and fell before the chain was complete. The commodity linking them also necessarily changed: "Turning a particular animal or cut into an abstraction—beef—is an ongoing process" (17). In Specht's telling, cattle and their parts occupied such a plurality of meanings and material realities that it strains the very category of commodity: a fungible and exchangeable good. It is a testament to Specht's writing that a reader can follow this all clearly.

For the bulk of Specht's narrative, the cattle are alive and often have agency

3. Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974); Gary Gereffi and Miguel Korzeniewicz, eds., *Commodity Chains and Global Capitalism* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994).

4. Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Viking, 1985). See also Steven Topik, Carlos Marichal, and Zephyr L. Frank, eds., *From Silver to Cocaine: Latin American Commodity Chains and the Building of the World Economy, 1500–2000* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

5. Roberto P. Korzeniewicz and William Martin, "The Global Distribution of Commodity Chains," in *Commodity Chains and Global Capitalism* (1994): 69.

in shaping the beef industry. Even though a great number of cattle occupied Eastern states well after the Civil War, Specht claims that the cattle that moved into the Southern Great Plains were the most important in the formation of the modern beef industry. Specht argues that cattle were an essential motivator and tool in the violent dispossession of indigenous lands by Anglo-Texans.⁶ The most innovative contribution in this early section concerns the colonial construction of indigenous people as lesser beef consumers. Specht then focuses on a familiar and historically exceptional set of massive (and massively capitalized) Texas ranching corporations, such as the XIT and Matador Land and Cattle Company, and he finds in their records much that is new. Especially here, Specht is able to show the chaotic reciprocity of variable ecologies and variable capitalism. The environment rendered much unknowable that nevertheless had to be firmly accounted for on paper. Ultimately, the ranchers transformed grassland environments and specific cattle trails into spatial abstractions that could be reproduced without regard for local conditions.

Specht's treatment of the cattle kings conflicts slightly with his larger supply-chain argument that meatpackers dominated the lesser producers and forced ranchers to "shoulder" economic and ecological risk (74). The problem is that by the end of the narrative, Specht is talking about very different people. In reality, large corporate ranching was temporary, as was the open-range ranching in many of the areas discussed in the book. Specht's America mostly occupies a hockey-stick geography travelling north out of Texas by foot, then turning abruptly east by rail toward Chicago and New York City. Specht is too quick to argue that the expansion of ranching in other regions—such as the Southeast, Midwest, Pacific Coast, and Intermountain West—were either directly linked to Texas or exceptions that proved the rule (126). The "Texas connection," as some Western historians may remember it, has never been resolved, but I am inclined to say local differences mattered a great deal.⁷ Further, a reader could never anticipate the integration of Australian,

6. The argument builds on a trend in environmental history: Virginia DeJohn Anderson, *Creatures of Empire: How Domestic Animals Transformed Early America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Deana Dartt-Newton and Jon Erlandson, "Little Choice for the Chumash: Colonialism, Cattle, and Coercion in Mission Period California," *The American Indian Quarterly* 30, no. 3 (2006): 416–30.

7. See Simon M. Evans, Sarah Carter, and Bill Yeo, eds., *Cowboys, Ranchers and the Cattle Business: Cross-Border Perspectives on Ranching History* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2000); Terry G. Jordan, *American Cattle Ranching Frontiers: Origins, Diffusion, and Differentiation* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993); Jack Stauder, *The Blue and Green: A Cultural Ecological History of an Arizona Ranching Community* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2016).

Canadian, and Mexican beef into the everyday operation of the American beef industry in the twentieth century. The result is that the “modern” beef industry described in the book actually looks very little like our own, and this is particularly true of Specht’s account of meatpacking in Chicago, a place where few livestock live or die today.

The Chicago meatpackers may be among the most well-trod subjects of the book, but Specht again finds something new to say. Contrary to nearly a century of emphasis on technological change, economies of scale, and corporate organization as the innovative drivers of concentration in American meatpacking, Specht says all these things took a back seat to specific on-the-ground and in-the-court battles with ranchers, unions, and butchers around the country.⁸ “The refrigerator car might have made it possible for fresh Chicago beef to reach Minnesota,” he writes, “but a Supreme Court decision was necessary to sell it there” (209). This is one of the strongest examples of how Specht builds historical contingency into the supply-chain model. Readers may be most surprised, though, to learn that consumers did not often feature as the meatpacker’s antagonists.

Consumers, who were certainly politically active, cared about two things: purity and low prices. Purity the meatpackers could handle with some adjustment, and low prices were exactly the weapon they were using in all their other battles. Specht goes so far as to argue that early scandals over contamination in canned beef “may actually have contributed to the naturalization of industrialized beef,” since “meatpackers could take tangible action” (235). It would have been more challenging if consumers cared about the well-being of ranchers or meatpacking workers, but they did not. Specht does well to sample different kinds of beef consumers ranging from infantry soldiers to homemakers, but it is necessarily far from comprehensive. Specht’s conclusion that consumer activism was limited and mostly supported the robber barons is bold and deserves attention by diverse readers.

The greatest oversight made in the book is the complete lack of clarity about the chronological coverage of the narrative in the title, introduction, or anywhere else. Upon close reading, I determined it to be about 1848 to 1921 with the bulk from about 1870 to 1906. Specht lets the period stand in vaguely for American modernity, which holds up in some ways but not in others. He argues convincingly that this period saw the essential transition from older political economies of bison and butcher shops, but he oversells the claim that many of the central structures and conflicts narrated “persist today” (179,

8. See Mary Yeager, *Competition and Regulation: The Development of Oligopoly in the Meat Packing Industry* (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1981).

191, 251). This is where the structural rigidity of supply-chain analysis finally limits Specht's account. In that model, change only moves in one direction; once the modern supply chain takes shape in Specht's narrative it comes off as more durable than history actually allowed. Specht is right that a great deal about the contemporary beef industry, and indeed American capitalism writ large, resembles the conditions of the late-nineteenth century Gilded Age, but that is a shock if you know what happened in between.

After the 1920s, meatpacking corporations became the most heavily regulated manufacturers in America, but have since fought successfully for deregulation. Meatpacking workers became some of the most heavily unionized and best-paid industrial workers, but now they are not. American consumers ate continuously greater quantities of beef until suddenly they started eating less. The real price of beef rose steadily and then turned to steady decline. The numbers are convincing. In 1906 there were 65 million cattle in America. The population rose to 130 million in 1975 then contracted back to 95 million at present. In fact, there are few commodities in modern world history (another being nickel) that show such an irregular pattern of development and pricing.⁹ Further, America is very quickly slipping from its long status as the most important beef eater. China is already second and consumption is expanding at a remarkable rate. The global reach of the contemporary beef industry in production, processing, consumption, and financing is not only unlike the late nineteenth-century American supply chain, it would be impossible to describe as a supply chain.

Nonetheless, Specht demonstrates the ongoing relevance of the commodity supply-chain model, and pushes it into new territory. Contrary to the model's past tendency to discover and uphold the status quo, Specht builds in conflict and contingency throughout. In contrast to stable capitalist power, Specht finds ruinous and violent human conflict in every case. The Red Meat Republic was the "product of thousands of struggles, large and small," which gave all sorts of people and animals, in all sorts of places, roles to play (3). Perhaps the most remarkable thing about the history of the beef industry is that a book this ambitious and excellent still cannot capture it all.

9. David S. Jacks, "From Boom to Bust: A Typology of Real Commodity Prices in the Long Run," *Cliometrica* 13, no. 2 (2019): 201-220.