A foodies guide to the history of humanity

Tom Standage’s book, An Edible History of Humanity, opens with a quote from the philosopher Karl Popper: ‘There is no history of mankind, there are only many histories of all kinds of aspects of human life.’ That is the outlook that has spawned a growth industry in quirky history books that take one, often trivial, element of our existence and look at how it has shaped, and been shaped by, society.

Standage himself has one or two examples of the genre under his belt, including The Victorian Internet, a history of the telegraph, and A History of the World in Six Glasses, which looked at the way six different beverages—beer, wine, liquor, coffee, tea and Coca-Cola—have influenced the world. While these quirky histories are often entertaining and enlightening, they only capture one small element of the dynamics that drive society forward.

But An Edible History of Humanity is a little different, because this is not a book about just any old aspect of life. Food is the very thing that allows us to exist. Obtaining enough food is the most basic impulse that anyone has, and the changing ways in which we obtain food are central to shaping history. Indeed, as another recent quirky history book, Catching Fire, argues, the mere act of cooking food may have been crucial to the very coming into being of Homo sapiens.

Standage argues, very plausibly, that food has been a major driver of historical change. His first example is the shift from hunter-gathering to agriculture. On the surface, this seems like a no-brainer: why constantly go out in search of food when you can create your own? But things are not so simple. Far from making life easier, agriculture requires more work for a poorer reward. While farmers toil day in, day out to scratch a living from the soil, even present-day hunter-gatherers may only spend a couple of days per week finding food, and when they do so, it is often of a far greater variety and quality than that produced by primitive farmers.

Human health declined after the development of agriculture. For example, life expectancies in the Illinois River Valley would appear to have fallen from 26 years for hunter-gatherers to just 19 years for farmers. Farmers suffered deficiency diseases like rickets, scurvy and anemia due to their limited diets. Skeletal evidence from Greece and Turkey suggests that hunter-gatherers at the end of the last Ice Age, about 14,000 years ago, were taller than farmers in the same area 5,000 years ago. Indeed, modern Greeks and Turks are still on average shorter than their post-Ice Age ancestors.

That doesn’t mean, as the American author Jared Diamond has bizarrely argued, that the adoption of farming was ‘the worst mistake in the history of the human race’, though Standage does note that farmers exchanged ‘a varied, leisurely existence … for lives of drudgery and toil. Agriculture would surely not be allowed if it were invented today.’ Yet putting an end to nomadism and settling in particular places was ‘the basis of civilisation as we know it’. Hunter-gatherers may have no problem with food, but their societies were stuck in a rut, always moving but going nowhere. Selective breeding (at first unconsciously) of particular crops and the development of agricultural techniques meant that, eventually, more food could be produced than was immediately needed for the survival of the group. How this surplus has been increased and dealt with down the centuries is the essence of history.

For example, the first agricultural societies would have featured a ‘big man’, the most influential figure in a village or tribe, who became the ‘clearinghouse for surplus food’. But while the role of the ‘big man’ is useful, it was not until later that we saw the emergence first of chiefs (and chiefdoms) and then of monumental architecture as a statement of power enabled by an agricultural surplus, such as the pyramids of Egypt and the Aztec temples of Mexico. ‘These great edifices stand as monuments to the rise of the first civilisations’, writes Standage, ‘but also to the emergence of a new and unprecedented degree of inequality and social stratification that has persisted ever since’.

If this sounds like a rotten deal, it merely reflects that life is tough and always has been. Standage reminds us: ‘The notion that hunter-gatherers lived...
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in a perfect and peaceful world is beguiling but wrong.’ If life expectancy is any measure of progress, then the current figure for the USA—78 years—is clearly far greater than that for either hunter-gatherers or farmers in ancient Illinois. It may have taken a few thousand years, but farming paid off in the end—mainly when the majority of us stopped doing it.

Yet the idea that there is something spiritually essential about the land, that we should have a ‘connection’ with it, persists in a romantic, even decadent sense. The symptoms are there, scattered through history from the Romans onwards. For example, Standage notes, Marie-Antoinette had an idealised farm built for her at Versailles where she and her ladies-in-waiting would dress up as shepherdesses and milkmaids. Californians prize peasant Italian food more than any other kind. In India, a tourist village has been opened near the technology hotbed of Bangalore so that the new middle classes can sample an idealised version of their forebears’ subsistence living. As modern agriculture progressively frees us from the farm, so reactionary, anti-modern ideas come bubbling to the surface to draw us back again, to view the experience through rose-tinted lenses.

One of the most enlightening sections of the book is Standage’s discussion of the spice trade. From the Romans onwards, Europeans have been prepared to pay an enormous premium for these ‘special’ goods. They were not necessarily the spices we know today—like cinnamon, ginger and cardamom—but any luxury goods from the East, including lions, leopards, silk, ivory, even Indian eunuchs. However, spices as we understand them today became extremely important because they were not only highly valuable but their value was also highly concentrated, making them easy to transport over long distances.

Though these products came from India, Indonesia and China, the spice trade had always been controlled by Arabs, who spun ludicrous tales about the origins of their wares to throw gullible Europeans off the scent as to the true source. To some extent, this Arab monopoly was circumvented by a land route to the East, controlled by Mongols. Once the Muslim powers cut off this route, marked by the fall of Constantinople in 1453, Europeans had either to accept the Muslim monopoly or find a new route to the East. The result was an explosion of exploration.

Columbus believed that the world was far smaller than it really was (it was widely understood by this time that the world was round), and that India could be reached more quickly by sailing west, not east. And for a long time, he convinced himself and the Spanish court that what he had struck were the ‘spice lands’, not a new and completely unknown continent. Disappointingly, he never managed to find the rich source of spices hoped for, but he did bring back the chilli pepper—and planted the seed for the Spanish empire that devastated the native Americans with disease and repression and provided what would become one point of the slave-trade triangle.

Meanwhile, Portuguese explorers were finding a route east by rounding Africa. It wasn’t long before all the major seafaring powers were following them, making Asia the setting for a centuries-long power grab which displaced the Arab merchants with the might of European warships.

Standage describes the less-than-subtle approach of the Dutch in Indonesia’s Banda Islands in the early seventeenth century. Having attempted to negotiate with the locals, only to have their admiral and his party wiped out, ‘The Dutch retaliated by seizing the Ban-das for themselves, building two forts and claiming another spice monopoly. Villages were burned down and the inhabitants were killed, chased off, or sold into slavery.’ After the village chiefs were tortured and beheaded by the Dutch East India Company’s samurai mercenaries, the islands were turned into slave colonies where workers would be ‘executed in a variety of gruesome ways for the most minor transgressions’. Such behaviour seems to have been pretty typical of the conquering powers, with plenty of echoes in the imperialist epoch of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

While we might think little of the little jars of spice in the supermarket today, it was the rarity and value of those products that inspired the launch of the first wave of colonialism. In turn, it was the products that those explorers brought back—gold, of course, but just as importantly the potato—that fuelled and sustained the Industrial Revolution. Trivial though it may seem now, the potato was (eventually) a major boon. In The Wealth of Nations, Adam Smith observed that an acre of potatoes would produce three times the nourishment of an acre of wheat, while the English writer and researcher Sir Frederick Eden noted that potatoes had become a mainstay of the Lancashire diet by 1800: ‘Potatoes are perhaps as strong an instance of the extension of human enjoyment as can be mentioned.’

The potato, having offset starvation as a valuable alternative crop to wheat, was also blamed by Malthus for
the looming population trap, whereby exponentially rising numbers of people could not be fed by slowly rising agricultural productivity. As Standage points out, what Malthus failed to predict was the convergence of three great trends: factories staffed by the workers freed from the land; the growing use of fossil fuels; and the ability to import food, enabled by Britain’s new-found manufacturing wealth.

What Malthus did correctly warn against, however, was an over-reliance on the potato. Britain used Ireland to produce enormous quantities of wheat, while the locals lived off potatoes. When potato blight struck their staple crop, they had nothing to live off, a situation compounded by British unwillingness to provide wheat to the starving. Millions of people died or emigrated. It’s still a shock to read that there were once nine million people in Ireland, a population never since matched in the Emerald Isle. (The current total, north and south, is still only two thirds of that number.)

It’s not just the long-standing industrialised countries that have seen a boom built on reliable food supplies. Standage argues that for both China and India, modernisation was only enabled by first solving the problem of producing enough food.

The resurgence of Asia has many causes, but it would not have been possible without the dramatic increase in agricultural productivity triggered by the green revolution. Between 1970 and 1995, cereal production in Asia doubled, the number of available calories per person increased by 30 per cent, and the prices of wheat and rice fell ... the proportion of Asia’s population living in poverty fell from 50 per cent in 1975 to 25 per cent in 1995.

The combination of artificial fertilisers and pesticides, the development of more productive varieties of staple crops in the ‘green revolution’ and the liberation of farmers from overweening state control has cranked up production and freed millions of young people to work in the cities. Other developing nations will need to undergo a similar transition if they want to modernise in the same way.

History shows—from the defeat of Napoleon in Russia to the collapse of the Soviet bloc in the late eighties—that the availability of food plays a central role in defining the course of events. Like Standage’s previous books, An Edible History of Humanity is a highly readable combination of big themes and engaging stories that reminds us that if the problem of food has been solved in the past, it will still need to be solved again and again in the future.

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