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Ill fares the Land?

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Abstract

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After the repeal of the Corn Laws ended the policy of protectionism which had enabled Britain to feed herself from within her own resources, free trade resulted in domestic food production constituting only 30% of the British diet. This study looks at the political discourse from 1880 to 1939 when the 'empty countryside' became a symbol of agricultural decline. Emerging radical and socialist narratives put forward approaches for rural regeneration and increased food production. Other narratives suggested that agricultural decline was one manifestation of national decline whereby a self sufficient and proud nation was being betrayed by Capitalism. Both Left and Right offered up the prospect of different solutions predicated upon shared perceptions of 'Englishness.' The experience of Irish famine failed to inform political action or policy making.

The study notes the importance of War upon the development of food policy. Increasingly, the State joined forces with the NFU in a corporate endeavour which sought to manage, rather than increase, food production and created structures which became increasingly important in the context of rearmament. Increased food production was rejected upon defence grounds in that free trade and a navy were seen as appropriate safeguards.

Those countries which sought to follow self sufficiency – or autarky – are portrayed as warlike in their intentions; by 1939 all mainstream political parties rejected the notion of artificially increased food production.

Those who continued to press for increased food production concentrated either upon earlier pre Capitalist societies or were attracted by Fascism and strong leadership. After such searches became increasingly problematic there was emphasis upon the soil, with the adoption of an approach which was both practical and mystical.

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