

Harini Suresh  
21L.707 Essay #4

### Soyer's Charitable Impulse

*"Two nations between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are ignorant of each other's habits, thoughts and feelings, as if they were dwellers in different zones or inhabitants of different planets; who are formed by different breeding, are fed by different food, are ordered by different manners, and are not governed by the same laws ... THE RICH AND THE POOR."*<sup>4</sup>

Disraeli, Benjamin. *Sybil*. © Oxford University Press, 2009. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <http://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>

This quote from Benjamin Disraeli's novel *Sybil* was published about a year before Alexis Soyer's *Charitable Cookery*<sup>8</sup>, and captures the tense economic dichotomy in the United Kingdom at the time. The Industrial Revolution of the first half of the 19th century proved to be a mixed blessing, improving the lives of some and greatly depressing the lives of others. Soyer's *Charitable Cookery* was a pioneering effort in many ways: it introduced designs and recipes for the first recognizable soup kitchen in addition to reflecting the extreme poverty and hunger in society and the country's changing attitude towards it.

In the early 19th century and previously, poverty was regarded as a necessity or "natural condition" of society. In the 18th century, the economist and philosopher Bernard de Mandeville expressed a normal attitude of the time, stating that it was "manifest, that in a free nation where slaves are not allow'd of, the surest wealth consists in a multitude of laborious poor."<sup>7</sup> An abundance of cheap labor was considered not only inevitable but also useful for economic development. Efforts to help the poor were more focused on easing extreme suffering rather than raising them up.

As a result of the English Poor Laws, “workhouses,” where conditions were even worse than the lowest standard of outside labor, began to appear around Europe as early as the 17th century. They were intended more to keep the poor incarcerated and control bad behavior rather than to extend compassion.

Riots and violence in the early 1830s prompted reform, but the consequent Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 only made more workhouses more prevalent by making their organization centralized rather than parish-based and abolishing other outside relief sources for the poor in order to motivate them to work. The act “provided a system designed to keep the poor just on the right side of starvation without diverting capital from the wage pool.”<sup>3</sup> In 1822, William Cobbett’s *Cottage Economy* described the common attitudes of the time as applauding “happy poverty.”<sup>2</sup>

Soyer wrote his cookbook after experiencing a starved, impoverished Ireland. The Irish population, especially the rural poor, had established the hearty and dense potato as the primary food source of much of the country by the early to mid 18th century. In 1845, a strain of *Pytophthora* from North America arrived in an unusually cool and moist Ireland, and went on to mercilessly kill off much of the country’s potato crops year after year. Between the years of 1844 and 1851, the Irish population fell from around 8.4 million to 6.6 million, with the population of agricultural workers experiencing a drastic portion of this decline.<sup>5</sup> The extreme poverty and struggling Soyer witnessed in Ireland was likely a large motivator of his coming charity.

Soyer bluntly addresses the failure of legislative reform to address the poverty of the times. “When the advantages of new laws seemed likely to spread abundance over

the land, that every sensible man congratulated his neighbor on the victory obtained, all was cheerfulness and hope, but the expected blessing vanished like a shadow," he states in his introduction<sub>8</sub>. The Poor Laws of the time were motivated by a primarily pragmatic impulse that considered poverty inevitable and only combatted extreme hunger because it was considered to be a social and moral issue that led people to lives of crime -- "horrid want is the great parent of crime," as William Cobbett said<sub>2</sub>. Soyer's efforts take on a much more charitable tone. He states that his intent is that "every labouring family may reduce their expense, and live much better than they have hitherto done." More than giving the extremely poor just enough to survive, as was done in the workhouses, Soyer describes how he wishes to feed people "wholesome" and "nutritious" food.

Many of Soyer's contributions were new ideas and new ingredients -- he can be thought of as the first appearance of the modern celebrity-chef, effortlessly combining self-promotion and philanthropy with an entrepreneurial spirit. He published *The Gastronomic Regenerator* in 1846, which detailed an elaborate design for the kitchen centerpiece of the Reform Club in London intended to optimize productivity<sub>1</sub>. In *Charitable Cookery*, he extends his knowledge of innovative kitchen designs to provide a new design for a soup kitchen that could serve a thousand gallons of "excellent and very economical food" to be distributed once or twice a day. He was appointed by the British government and invited by Irish government to go to Ireland to institute this idea for a large and efficient soup kitchen and he left a job cooking sophisticated dinners for London's elite at the prestigious Reform Club to do so<sub>1</sub>. He also introduced new

ingredients such as “Indian corn,” complete with a footnote comparing its nutritional content with that of the potato, clearly trying to tread new ground and encourage the Irish to switch over to using new sources of starch.

Soyer’s focus on nutrition is present throughout the book. He discusses the ways that food is commonly cooked incorrectly, such as boiling or roasting meat for so long that all the “ozmazome” dissipates. He proposes a new technique of reducing the main meat and vegetable substances to a glaze that is thinned out with water and bulked up with cheap grains, and suggests that this stretches out the nutritional properties of the meat to a much larger volume.

In Receipt No. 1, he creates two gallons of soup with just a quarter pound of meat and equally small amounts of onions, turnips, leeks and celery. The recipe calls for triple the amount of flour as meat. Spices such as brown sugar, salt, ‘drops of essences’ and black pepper are used in his recipes, as Soyer claims that used sparingly, proper seasoning “restores and strengthens the digestive organs.”

While the government went on to sponsor Soyer’s soup kitchens and his book sold wildly, the motivations of the government, the people buying his book, and Soyer himself remain debatable. The small quantities of actual meat in the recipes likely made the soups much cheaper than other comparable recipes, which may have played a large role in their eager adoption by the government. *The Lancet* declared that the soups were part of a “spasmodic feeling of benevolence” by the rich “as a salve for their consciences.”<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the surface-level urge to feel charitable or be a philanthropic celebrity-figure was part of Soyer’s motivation. The people that bought his book were

not the poorest but “artisans and families headed by clerks in business,”<sup>3</sup> perhaps falling under the same allusion. Soyer received some backlash about the claims he made regarding nutrition, especially from medical professionals. *The Lancet* performed a chemical analysis of the content of each soup, determining they contained meager amounts of actual solid food per quart of liquid, much of which had negligible nutritional content (ingredients like turnip parings, celery tops, or salt). “No culinary digestion, or stewing, or boiling, can convert four ounces into twelve, unless, indeed, the laws of animal physiology can be unwritten,” it argued.<sup>6</sup>

Whatever his true motivation, Soyer was truly a pioneer. The soup kitchens we are so used to nowadays undoubtedly evolved in part from Soyer’s own designs and thoughts on bulk cooking. The charitable impulse he describes reflects the beginning of general change in attitude towards poverty in the U.K. as its extreme manifestation during the “hungry forties” drew attention to the extent to which the poor were suffering. *Charitable Cookery* is one of the first cookbooks that claimed to help the poor, as well as a reflection of UK’s struggling economy in the 19th century and the showiness of a man who could be called Britain’s first celebrity chef.

Sources:

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