

Introduction

JONATHAN OGDEN ARMOUR could not abide socialist agitators. It was 1906, and Upton Sinclair had just published *The Jungle*, his explosive novel about the American meatpacking industry. Based on two years of research and six weeks of undercover reporting, Sinclair's book was the arresting tale of an immigrant family's toil in Chicago's slaughterhouses.¹ Unfortunately for Armour, *The Jungle* was not his only concern. A year before, muck-raking journalist Charles Edward Russell's *The Greatest Trust in the World* attacked a packing industry that comes to the American dining table "three times a day . . . and extorts its tribute."² In response to these attacks, Armour, head of the enormous meatpacking firm Armour & Company, took to the *Saturday Evening Post* to defend himself and his industry. Where critics saw filth, corruption, and exploitation, Armour saw cleanliness, fairness, and efficiency. If not for "the professional agitators of the country," the nation would be free to enjoy an abundance of delicious and affordable meat.³

Armour and his critics could agree on this much: they lived in a world unimaginable fifty years before. In 1860, most cattle lived, died, and were consumed within a few hundred miles' radius. By 1906, an animal could be born in Texas, slaughtered

in Chicago, and eaten in New York. Americans rich and poor could expect beef for dinner. The key aspects of modern beef production—highly centralized, meatpacker dominated, and low cost—were all pioneered during the period.

America made modern beef at the same time that beef made America modern. What emerged in the late nineteenth century was truly a red meat *republic*; beef production and distribution were tightly linked to the development of the federal state and the expansion of American power west of the Mississippi. During the 1870s, small-scale cattle ranchers supported as well as instigated and justified wars against the Plains Indians. In Wyoming and Montana, wealthy ranchers dominated state and territorial governments, shaping their early histories. Meanwhile, the emergence of the regulatory state was closely connected to beef production. Key federal bureaucracies, such as the Department of Agriculture, the Bureau of Animal Industry, and the Bureau of Corporations were in large part outgrowths of state attempts to regulate beef production and distribution. In Chicago, the “Big Four” meatpacking houses were some of the first large, integrated corporations, pioneering the assembly line, managing global distribution, maintaining complex supply chains, and growing into the largest private employers of their day.

For Jonathan Ogden Armour, cheap beef and a thriving centralized meatpacking industry were the consequence of emerging technologies such as the railroad and refrigeration, coupled with the business acumen of a set of honest and hardworking men like his father, Philip Danforth Armour. According to critics, however, a capitalist cabal was exploiting technological change and government corruption to bankrupt traditional butchers, sell diseased meat, and impoverish the worker. Ultimately, both views were in some sense correct. The national market for fresh beef was the culmination of a technological

revolution, but it was also the result of collusion and predatory pricing. The modern slaughterhouse was a triumph of human ingenuity as well as a site of brutal labor exploitation. Industrial beef production, with all its troubling costs and undeniable benefits, reflected seemingly contradictory realities. This book explains the origins and ongoing resilience of a beef production system that was at once revolutionary and exploitative.

To do so, this story puts people and social conflict at its center. Technological advances and innovative management techniques made cheap beef possible, but they did little to determine who would benefit most from this new regime (meat-packers and investors) or bear its heaviest costs (workers, small ranchers, and American Indians). This new beef production system was the product of thousands of struggles, large and small, in places like the Texas Panhandle, the West's burgeoning stockyards, and butchers' shops nationwide. The story of modern beef, then, is fundamentally political.

By looking closely at conflicts between workers, industrialists, bureaucrats, and consumers, this book highlights the individuals and conflicts that shaped food industrialization. Its conflict-centered approach builds on the work of others who have explored agricultural production and capitalist transformation, most notably William Cronon in *Nature's Metropolis*.⁴ At times, however, these works lose sight of the people and the struggle at the center of economic shifts, making processes like centralization and commodification appear predestined, when they were anything but. This book demonstrates that what might seem like structural features of the beef industry, such as the invisibility and brutality of slaughterhouse labor, were actually the outcome of individual choices and hard-fought policies. This view allows us to see possibilities when they were foreclosed—could today's struggling ranchers have dominated

a system the meatpackers now control? In exploring the contingent reasons why meatpacker-dominated, low-cost beef production won out, this book explains the ongoing resilience of a system that has remained in key ways unchanged since *The Jungle's* publication.

This approach requires a wide lens, one that captures New York meat riots as well as Texas cattle deals. Consequently, this book is the first hoof-to-table history of industrialized beef production. The sheer scope of this analysis demands a broader conception of industrial beef, motivating my use of “cattle-beef complex,” a term denoting the set of institutions and practices keeping beef on the dinner table.⁵ The emergence of this complex was as much a question of land as business, as much a question of taste as labor.

Making Beef Modern

The transformations that remade beef production between the end of the Civil War in 1865 and the passage of the Federal Meat Inspection Act in 1906 stretched from the Great Plains to the kitchen table.⁶ These changes began with cattle ranching. Antebellum ranching had been local and regional. Beyond the few Mexican holdings that survived the Mexican-American War, the people who managed cattle out west were the same people who owned them. In the East, disconnected and relatively small farms produced beef and other agricultural products largely for regional markets. Then, in the 1870s and 1880s, improved transport, bloody victories over the Plains Indians, and the US West's integration into global capital markets meant investors as far away as Scotland funneled money into massive operations like the three-million acre XIT ranch. Ranchers large and small soon participated in an international network of cattle and capital.

Meanwhile, Chicago meatpackers pioneered centralized food processing. Before the Civil War, small slaughterers around the nation's cities worked seasonally. The largest early nineteenth-century packers, centered around Cincinnati—known then as “Porkopolis”—employed only a fraction of the people that the big houses would eventually control. Starting around the time of the Civil War, a group of Chicago companies capitalized on sizable government contracts to dominate the beef and pork industries. Through an innovative system of refrigerator cars and distribution centers, these companies sold fresh beef nationwide. Millions of cattle were soon passing through Chicago's slaughterhouses each year.⁷ These companies did not want to replace local retailers, but aggressively and often coercively sought partnerships that bankrupted retailers' local wholesale supplier. By 1890, the Big Four meatpacking companies—Armour & Company, Swift & Company, Morris & Company, and Hammond & Company—directly or indirectly controlled the majority of the nation's beef and pork.

These changes in production accompanied a far-reaching democratization of beef consumption.⁸ Despite the efforts of reformers, debates over industrial change and the growing concentration of capital were quite distant from consumers, for whom the real story was a bigger steak at a cheaper price. Nineteenth-century dietary information is limited, but evidence suggests meat consumption rose dramatically.⁹ Immigrants celebrated the abundance of beef in the United States. Butchers lamented that “common laborers” demanded fine cuts of meat. When customers faced price spikes, they would even occasionally riot, breaking windows and seizing cuts of meat.¹⁰ Americans would come to see cheap and sanitary beef as a necessity.

Industrial beef emerged at the nexus of opportunity and policy. Abundant land, the potential to link distant places, and

swelling urban cities provided the opportunity, while politicians and bureaucrats gradually accepted the idea that mass production in the interests of low prices and, later, sanitary food was the highest policy priority. This is not to say that industrial food production emerged according to some overarching plan. Ranchers, meatpackers, politicians, and bureaucrats all sought to channel policy decisions to advance their own interests or undermine rivals' efforts.

These actors all framed their interests in a way that made them palatable to a wider audience. Often, the strategy was to portray industrialized food as inevitable. This way of framing changes in food production helped transform centralized, industrial food from strange and artificial to familiar and natural. Starting with the meatpackers' own accounts of the rise of their industry and appearing in the first histories of the business—the first historian of modern meatpacking, Rudolf Clemen, also happened to be an Armour employee—it was argued that the industry's rise was the inevitable consequence of technological change.¹¹ In response to his critics, Jonathan Ogden Armour characterized unfettered private control of meat, vegetable, and fruit shipping as “not only natural but inevitable.”¹² According to this logic, it was better for regulators to accept centralized meatpacking, despite the cries of traditional butchers and populist ranchers, than try to stop the march of economic progress.

Meanwhile, ranchers developed their own arguments. Ideas about progress and improvement justified their expropriation of American Indian land. Later, ranchers in the 1890s defended their industry as family centered, nonindustrial, and authentically American, a perspective that still informs public perception of the business. Where meatpacking had Rudolf Clemen, ranching had Joseph McCoy. A businessman and town booster (promoter) for Abilene, Kansas, McCoy built one of the most

iconic cattle towns of the period and was ranching's great participant-historian. His book, *Historic Sketches of the Cattle Trade of the West and Southwest*, is widely considered one of the most influential books about the industry's history, despite McCoy's clear romanticization of ranching and relentless attacks on his chief enemy, the railroads.¹³ Men like McCoy developed the romantic image of ranchers and cowboys that moved cattlemen to the center of western mythology. These images provided consumers wary of industrial slaughter with an acceptable—even heroic—face for the new food regime. Even today, in a massively centralized, thoroughly capitalized, and highly subsidized industry, producers still advertise with craggy-faced men riding lonesome prairies.

How Beef Transformed America

The cattle-beef complex was national in scale and revolutionary in effect. In the American West, its emergence was a story of ecological changes with profound political implications. In a matter of decades, an ecosystem founded on the relationship between ranchers and cattle displaced a system of nomadic peoples and bison. Cattle ranching not only justified the expropriation of American Indian land, but it was also part of the material process of doing so; ranchers and cowboys supplied the US Army, occasionally accompanied the military on raids or reconnaissance missions, and even at times organized their own expeditions. Further, the profitability of ranching encouraged the rapid settling of the American West. Though pastoralism would eventually give way to farming, US power in the American West had its roots in cattle raising.

However, the changes were not merely ecological. Beef production promoted a continent-spanning standardization of

the built environment. As ranches, stockyards, and butchers' shops participated in expanding networks of commodities and capital, they adapted themselves to appeal to distant customers. Ranchers wooing far-away investors and cattle towns looking for new visitors appealed to each by mimicking what was already familiar to these actors, whether uniform cattle pens or railroad cars.¹⁴ This standardization of spaces meant that people who worked in the industry could move quickly from place to place. At the same time as this built a thriving national market, it exposed specific places to the vagaries of that market. A cattle town might overtake a rival by appealing to ranchers with familiar amenities—livestock exchanges, clean stockyards, etc.—but when every aspiring cattle town took this approach, one town became the same as any other. As business and capital came and went, towns like Abilene, Kansas, or regions like the Texas Panhandle were subject to a nineteenth-century form of deindustrialization.

This remaking of land and space also contributed to a remaking of American institutions. The American regulatory state grew as it struggled to deal with the consequences of a new way of producing beef. Business concentration was at the heart of the landmark Sherman Antitrust Act, and its chief initial focus was on the power of the railroads. However, the shipment of refrigerated beef was deeply connected to this story. Railroad attempts to manage traffic often focused on the relative rates for shipping live cattle and refrigerated beef. The Chicago meatpackers fought for more than a decade against these attempts to fix shipping costs. This fight actually ended in the meatpackers' victory; eventually the mighty railroads would ask regulators for protection from the ruinous demands of Chicago's Big Four.

Early attempts to protect and encourage consumers also placed beef at the heart of the expansion of federal power. An

act of Congress ordered the Bureau of Corporations, the forerunner to the Federal Trade Commission, to make one of its first investigations an inquiry into “the unusually large margins between the price of beef cattle and the selling prices of fresh beef, and whether the said conditions have resulted in whole or in part from any contract, combination, in the form of trust or otherwise, or conspiracy, in restraint of commerce.”¹⁵ The same day in 1906 that Teddy Roosevelt signed the Pure Food and Drug Act, he also signed the Federal Meat Inspection Act, empowering an army of Department of Agriculture bureaucrats to inspect the nation’s meat supply.

On the business end, the Chicago meatpackers drove far-reaching changes in the nature of American agriculture. Fresh fruit distribution began with the rise of the meatpackers’ refrigerator cars, which they rented to fruit and vegetable growers. Production of wheat, perhaps the United States’ greatest food crop, bore the mark of the meatpackers. In order to manage animal feed costs, Armour & Company and Swift & Company invested heavily in wheat futures and controlled some of the country’s largest grain elevators.¹⁶ In the early twentieth century, an Armour & Company promotional map announced, “the greatness of the United States is founded on agriculture,” and depicted the agricultural products of each American state, many of which moved through Armour facilities.¹⁷

Beef was a paradigmatic industry for the rise of modern industrial agriculture, known as “agribusiness.”¹⁸ As much as a story of science or technology, modern agriculture is a compromise between the unpredictability of nature and the rationality of capital. This was a lurching, violent process central to the cattle-beef complex as meatpackers displaced the risks of blizzards, drought, disease, and overproduction onto cattle ranchers. Today’s agricultural system works similarly. In poultry,

processors like Purdue and Tyson use an elaborate system of contracts and required equipment and feed purchases to maximize their own profits while displacing the business's risk onto contract farmers.¹⁹ This is true with crop production as well. As with nineteenth-century meatpacking, relatively small actors conduct the actual growing and production, while companies like Monsanto and Cargill control agricultural inputs and market access.

The cattle-beef complex was enormously resilient. The meatpacker-controlled system of cheap refrigerated beef survived rancher protest, labor unrest, railroad opposition, and regulatory reform. This resilience was rooted in two factors: the first in the realm of production, the second in consumption. In production, policy favored a flexible and stable food system above all else. Standardization was key here. Since disparate places were increasingly well connected and functionally identical, disruptions in, say, Illinois, could be smoothed out with changes in Colorado. This made meat production bigger than any particular geographic place, whether Texas, the Plains, or even Chicago. Further, the agribusiness model, which displaced economic and environmental risks onto ranchers and small producers, meant that packing-industry profits, as well as the system as a whole, thrived even in the most difficult times.

The cattle-beef complex's resilience also depended on beef's supreme importance to consumers. Because industrial production provided ever-cheaper beef, critics of the system in 1890, as today, faced—often rightfully—charges of elitism. When butchers sought regulation curtailing the Chicago meatpackers' power, they had to acknowledge to lawmakers that industry decentralization would increase prices. Lawmakers would ultimately side with industrial production. In contrast, charges that beef was not sanitary—such as during the US Army beef

scandal of 1898—spurred rapid consumer mobilization and state action. But once the Chicago packers resolved these sanitation issues, it merely strengthened their grip. While consumers' concerns about prices and sanitation seem self-evident, we have to understand the logic of consumers who demanded beef more than any other food, and were at times willing to riot for cheap beef rather than eat fish or chicken.

Beyond the United States

Though the rise of industrial beef is an American story, it is one with global influences and consequences. Cattle are global organisms; their DNA reflects the intermingling of subspecies from two distinct periods of domestication in South Asia and the Middle East.²⁰ Further, cattle from the Americas exhibit adaptations made to survive in the aftermath of the Columbian exchange.²¹ As these animals adapted to arid and nutrient-poor climates, they developed a rapid reproductive cycle, which explains both their abundance and their popularity with ranchers. However, these changes were not all desirable. Adaptations that made them hardier also meant the breeds were lean and slow to gain weight, making them, according to one account, as juicy as “a boiled grand piano.”²² The final—and most consumer friendly—adaptation of American cattle only came with the infusion of northern European stock like the Hereford and Angus in the late nineteenth century, constituting yet another stage in the globalization of cattle bodies.

As with cattle themselves, American cattle raising reflected a blend of imported traditions. Spanish ranching, with its emphasis on horses and animal roping, shaped ranching in the West and Southwest, while northern European traditions of cattle fattening and hands-on care would underpin cattle raising in

the corn belt and Midwest.²³ Similarly, recent work has shown that African traditions were important to the development of American ranching.²⁴ To the extent any distinctly American cattle-raising tradition exists, it is the product of a slow blending of a variety of influences.

Meanwhile, ranching as a highly capitalized enterprise had its roots in transnational flows of capital and people that reached the American ranching industry in the 1880s. Abundant American land became a target for British capital, which soon leveraged the Scottish and English cattle-raising tradition. “Land and cattle companies” began buying cattle across the American West to amass herds with as many as a hundred thousand animals. This infusion of foreign capital, paired with the subsequent importation of ranching expertise in the form of itinerant European ranch managers, turned western ranching into big business. These operations began supplying Chicago meatpacking markets as well as corn-belt cattle fatteners, creating an integrated cattle-raising system. Ultimately, the land and cattle business would turn out to be a land and cattle bubble, but in the process European capital helped create the perfect conditions for the emerging Chicago meatpacking houses: abundant supplies of cattle with financially desperate owners.

Meanwhile, the global consequences of American ranching and meatpacking were profound. Some of the same Scottish pioneers of American ranching would travel to South America to start ranches there. French investors sent Murdo Mackenzie, the Scottish-born manager of the American Matador ranch, to South America to help organize the Brazil Land, Cattle and Packing Company. In the early twentieth century, the Chicago meatpackers took over the Latin American beef processing industry, opening facilities in Brazil, Argentina, and elsewhere.

Swift & Company purchased an Argentinian food distribution company in 1907 and developed a rivalry with several other Chicago houses for control of the country's beef trade.²⁵ Local competitors would learn from and even improve on the Chicago model; in 2007, the Brazilian company JBS purchased Swift & Company, making JBS the largest meat processor in the world.

The cattle-beef complex would also shape global foodways. The transatlantic meat trade would contribute to the democratization of meat consumption in Great Britain. The export of live cattle and, later, refrigerated beef from the United States to Great Britain was a thriving—and contentious—trade. Starting in the 1870s this trade expanded rapidly, and in 1901 more than three hundred million pounds of dressed beef crossed the Atlantic. South American beef would come to dominate the British market in the next couple years, but the Chicago meatpackers directly and indirectly controlled much of that trade as well.²⁶

On the lower end of the quality scale, canned beef would become a vital product for militaries in the age of imperialism. Few people willingly ate canned meat during the nineteenth century, but soldiers could be compelled to do so. The German, French, and British militaries all purchased millions of pounds of Chicago canned beef and used it to keep their armies supplied. This was particularly important in tropical places, where other foods spoiled quickly.

One of the key contradictions of global agriculture is the way that farming and animal husbandry remain inescapably local—a plot of land or a herd of cattle—yet are subject to distant networks of capital, commodities, and people. This means that accounts of their origins must be sensitive to the specificity

of these processes as well as their global element. In the case of the cattle-beef complex, this means exploring a distinctly American story with global origins and consequences.

A Steer's-Eye View of the History of American Capitalism

To tell the story of the rise of industrialized beef in America I use novel sources, as well as asking new questions of traditional archives. Scholars of industrial meat production have long faced the particular challenge of the dearth of business records for meatpacking's key period, the late nineteenth century. These records are spotty, missing, or otherwise inaccessible. To get around the missing records, I turned to a variety of sources, and this has allowed me to better understand the cattle-beef complex as a whole.

The records of late nineteenth-century ranching corporations are traditionally used in narrower histories of Texas and western ranching, but when used to examine the rise of industrialized meat they have bigger implications. They can help us rethink the history of food and American capitalism. Ranches like the Matador, Swan, XIT, and others coordinated efforts of investors in Europe, ranch managers across the West, and buyers and agents in Chicago and in the East. Messages between ranch managers and agents in Kansas City, Chicago, and elsewhere provide a window into their participation in the national beef distribution system and their attitudes about the emerging giants of the late nineteenth century: the Chicago meatpackers. These sources portray attempts to remake western environments, and frictions between the needs of investment capital and millennia-old agricultural processes. Meanwhile, I use cowboy songs, trade cards, and recipe books to explore the

cultural meanings of ranching and beef, as well as how these meanings shaped the nineteenth-century economy.

Building outward from these sources, this book draws wider conclusions about the beef industry and advances arguments about the nature of American business development. It shows how the changing relationships between nature and capital were key to the United States' broader economic history. New technologies like the railroad and financial innovations like futures contracts have rightfully been placed center stage in the history of American capitalism. Yet, western railroads were profitable to the extent that they could move agricultural bounty, and futures contracts were, at least initially, about managing ecological risk. Animal husbandry and agriculture inspired institutional and regulatory developments at the heart of the nineteenth-century economy. American industrialization has natural roots.²⁷

Further, this book argues that even if markets are deeply political, the cultural history of consumption is closely tied to how and why markets are regulated. Consumer tastes had profound effects on the beef industry; the pervasive preference for fresh, rather than cured, beef is in part what made beef production a highly capitalized and centralized industry. Keeping meat chilled all the way from Chicago to New York was difficult prior to electrification. It is important to understand why the industry was so aggressively regulated around sanitation as opposed to, say, labor, and such an understanding should come before debates over whether industry effectively captured regulation like the Pure Food and Drug Act.

Finally, this history of the American beef industry shows that mobility was vital to the emergence of national markets.²⁸ It was the desire to move goods over long distances that sparked the standardization mentioned earlier. The fact that stockyards began to look similar across the country or butchers' shops

carried similar cuts of meat was a consequence of businesses moving goods nationally and, later, globally. The expansion of the federal regulatory state was an attempt to manage this process. For instance, the patchwork of state laws regulating the movement of cattle became inadequate once animals were being shipped nationally or even across the Atlantic, promoting calls from both business and consumers for federal regulators to referee the process. Still, this emergence of a national market was a product of conflict and competition; standardization and regulation were processes born of individual attempts to profit from the beef trade.

This analysis will help explain the nature and strength of agribusiness today. Though this was not always the case, spatial flexibility and the close relationship between the centralized regulatory state and big business mean that centralized food production is here to stay. Industry critics must consider this reality before advocating practices like locavorism or decentralization. Similarly, the history of the cattle-beef complex reveals the limits of consumer politics and the long history of the fixation on low prices. Questions about how to reform food production—or whether it even needs reform—must start from questions of political economy, rather than the all-too-popular resort to consumer choice.²⁹

While looking at what the beef industry can tell us about industrialization, regulation, and business practices, we should not forget that at the center of this story is the relationship, usually economic but at times emotional, between cattle and people. The domestication of cattle stretches back ten thousand years, and scientists and archaeologists still debate its origin and time line.³⁰ The centrality of grazing animals to human society goes back even farther. Some of humanity's earliest known works of art—in the Lascaux caves in France—feature

aurochs (cattle's precursor), horses, and other game. From earliest domestication, a variety of cattle breeds, ranging from those almost entirely independent to those requiring near-constant supervision, have accompanied most African and Eurasian societies as creatures of economic, social, and spiritual importance.³¹

Cattle are not sacks of flour. Cattle fought with one another and with their owners. They wandered off. When their young died on the trail they straggled at the back of the herd, trying to turn back. It was their ability to feed themselves on the range that was the origin of much of their value, meaning they were even performing a kind of labor. Though it is impossible to understand what the cattle-beef complex meant to them, it is important to recognize that the very possibility of this system depended on the fact that these animals were capable of moving, working, and, in small ways, resisting.

Book Overview

This book follows beef from hoof to table. Turning a particular animal or cut of meat into an abstraction—beef—is an ongoing process, whether on a ranch, in a slaughterhouse, or on a stove top. Cultural systems and values as diverse as kosher dietary laws and the mythology of the cowboy inform each step of this process. Specific moments can threaten a commodity, such as when food contamination turns a steak from delicacy to poison or when a lightning strike turns a herd of cattle from an asset to a stampeding mess. Commodities are abstractions that must be understood through the particular.

The first chapter, “War,” explores western cattle ranching’s origins in Indian land expropriation. Western ranching was about scattering cattle far and wide on marginal land, and this

required remaking the Great Plains as an ecosystem as well as a political space. Through analysis of conflicts like the 1874–75 Red River War and the stories of ranching pioneers like Susan Newcomb, I argue that the cattle-beef complex depended on land expropriation through both deliberate government policy and independent rancher effort. This expropriation was part of a wrenching process of transforming the Great Plains ecosystem from a grass-bison-nomad system to a grass-cattle-rancher one. The violence of Indian War—romanticized and reimagined as the against-all-odds struggles of early ranchers—created the cattle-beef complex’s foundational myths.

Chapter 2, “Range,” traces the origins of large-scale ranching to a speculative bubble that funneled investment capital to the US West from back east and as far away as Scotland. Investors created a multitude of large, highly capitalized, corporate ranches that made cattle raising big business, but also spurred speculation, overproduction, and poor management. This system eventually collapsed as blizzards and mismanagement collided to bankrupt or cripple the majority of the large ranches. Ranching would thereafter be conducted on a smaller—and less profitable—scale. The rise and fall of corporate ranching is a tale of alternate possibility—food production today could look quite different if not for the collapse of these ranches at the same moment the Chicago meatpackers were gaining power. This chapter argues that far from being inevitable, the way ranching looks today—small-scale and largely privately run—is a result of a mix of chance, policy, mania, and ecological limitation.

Chapter 3, “Market,” takes a bird’s-eye view of cattle raising. At its core, the cattle-beef complex was about mobility—the ability to move commodities farther and faster than ever before. This depended on a kind of flexibility in production that was a consequence of deliberate policy and historical accident. A

study of the cattle disease Texas fever and the story of the cattle town of Ellsworth, Kansas, reveal that this complex began in particular places, but soon outgrew them as a consequence of the emergence of standardized spaces, whether stockyards, railcars, or feedlots. Mobility also depended on trust, and this was a consequence of state regulation of animal diseases and business practices. Ranchers and meatpackers, in concert with local, state, and national politicians, shaped this system as they sought to turn a profit in the cattle business.

Though the cattle-beef complex was a national and global system, the first three chapters of this book focus heavily on the US West. There were more beef cattle east of the Mississippi than west at the time, so this focus might seem odd. But understanding western ranching is essential because it helps us to understand ranching culture, as well as enables us to consider alternate possibilities. The way consumers, businesspeople, ranchers, and lawmakers understood ranching helped justify and defend the system. Large-scale corporate ranching was also tried out west at a time when eastern production was overwhelmingly small-scale and family oriented. Though corporate ranching was a failure, attention to its rise and fall suggests it was not inevitable that the Chicago meatpackers would dominate this system. The classic image of cattle ranching is a western one, and it is there that ranching was woven into the country's DNA.

Chapter 4, "Slaughterhouse," explores how a small number of companies headquartered in Chicago came to dominate the cattle-beef complex. The Chicago packinghouses fought with railroads, laborers, and traditional butchers to secure shipment of centrally slaughtered "dressed beef" and, in the process, became some of the largest and most profitable companies in the United States. In regulating these new, massive companies, bureaucrats and lawmakers embraced a consumerist mentality

that prioritized cheap beef over concerns about price fixing, worker exploitation, and butcher displacement. Because the Chicago companies aligned consumer interests with their own, they came to dominate the beef production system.

The final chapter, “Table,” examines beef’s culinary importance to understand why and how consumers mobilize around political issues, particularly of price and sanitation. A consumer protest over rising beef prices—a “meat riot” according to New York’s papers—will reveal what cheap beef meant to hungry consumers. This chapter also studies a core tension in consumer perspectives on food production: acceptance of mass production’s inevitability, despite abstract concern about its effects. Overall, the chapter develops a theory of food as a commodity to understand how consumers’ relationships with their food influence food production.

The cattle-beef complex was the product of thousands of small debates, struggles, and fights over keeping one’s job, protecting a home, or making a dollar. Ultimately, these were contests over what our food system should look like and how our society should be organized. Low prices and sanitary meat at the expense of all else won out. It was a system predicated on land dispossession, low wages, animal abuse, rancher impoverishment, and environmental degradation. But it also democratized beef; hungry consumers could eat what they wanted, and it tasted good. Railroads, refrigeration, and capital made this system possible, but politics and struggle determined its contours. Food production and consumption are not a transparent reflection of our stage of economic development, but rather an ongoing, and at times violent, contest over how we should and should not produce our food.