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Ha-Joon Chang: *Edible Economics: A Hungry Economist Explains the World*: Allen Lane, 2022: 224 pp., hardback, £20.00.

Ha-Joon Chang arrived in Cambridge in 1986 to study economics and has stayed in the UK ever since. He left Korea, one of the poorest countries in the world in 1960, and now a major world player, and preferred the range of economic approaches taught in Britain to the narrow neo-liberal orthodoxy prevailing in Korean and US universities. Cambridge, a gastronomic desert in the '80s according to Bernard Levin, gave Chang the food experience similar to that of another immigrant academic, Diego Zancani in Reading (*How We Fell in Love with Italian Food*, Bodleian Library, 2019, p. 9). Zancani had the olive-oil-for-ears routine from his landlady in the 1960s, while in Chang twenty years later, this is an urban myth in a footnote. But the terrible impact of bland food is the same.

However, Chang's thesis is this: he came to a food monoculture which has become over recent decades a vibrant multicultural food paradise with every flavour and style of food available in many places. Conversely, coming to the UK for institutional and economic diversity, exemplified by the BBC, he finds the policy-makers in the same 35-year period stuck in a monoculture of neo-liberal narrowness. Monoculture is bad is the Chang mantra, whether in food or economics. He does not favour other well-rehearsed mantras such as 'there is no such thing as society,' and 'you can't buck the market'. This splendid book argues that dogmatic affiliation to neo-liberal or any other single economic theory comes at great cost to a country, as if a mathematical construction can ever meet the needs and aspirations of all the citizens of any country and help their potential to thrive. General Pinochet's junta is described as an early disastrous experiment of Milton and Rose Friedman's Chicago 'neoliberal' theories in practice. The book is organized in short chapters based on foods, rather like Margaret Visser's *Much Depends on Dinner*, or David Roochnik's *Eat, Drink, Think*. Visser is memorable on the iceberg lettuce, Roochnik on his enthusiastic family cooking in Boston which interweaves studies of food in Homer and Plato. The personal touch at the stove is very much Chang's mode as well, his mackerel with tomato salsa on rye crisp bread or his mother in law's chilli kimchi.

The food headings start with one of Korea's key ingredients, garlic (sadly lacking in Cambridge in 1986 apparently), and carry on through acorns (a good basic Korean recipe is supplied), okra, lime and many others. The foods are partly there in their own right, but they also play a major political and economic role: the slave trade is treated in the okra and banana chapters, British imperialism under lime, limited liability companies under spices, the welfare state under rye. Particularly interesting is the noodle chapter, which Chang was amazed to discover in pasta form in the UK – another Korean staple

but also the focus for Hyundai, Samsung and LG, major global corporations which were carefully nurtured by protectionist government policies after the Korean (or 'civil') War – as the US and UK used protectionism when it suited them to build their own industries. Companies need support, argues Chang, since governments (or at least governments not following Hayek and the Friedmans) need to take a long-term view, and limited liability companies cannot since their shareholders normally sell up after 12 months ('spices' again). This is the strength of the book: 'free trade' is a slogan not a reality, Marxism is a theory and not a reality. The failings of the Soviets and of Mao are noted. Chang patiently points out costs and benefits to economic processes in simple terms for the general reader. He is not dogmatically against neo-liberals but wants a mixed economy, as he wants a wide political consensus. The most striking chapters are on chilli, where GDP is shown to be too narrow a model for measuring the economy since it omits most care work and child care, often women's work; and on chocolate, where Switzerland and Singapore are shown, counter-intuitively, to be the world's leading manufacturing economies (rather than service economies as often claimed). The Coca-Cola chapter is sobering, on the 'Washington Consensus' of the US Treasury, World Bank and IMF which have harmed South American economies (until recently) with their neo-liberal rules, Asian countries less (with the exception of the Philippines), since they have borrowed less, and African countries in particular, with continuing effects. 'Beef' also tackles the neo-liberal version of history since the British Corn Laws. Admirers of Margaret Thatcher and Liz Truss (other UK prime ministers are available) may not like the sound of any of this but I urge such readers to open this book as it is full of surprises and always finds pros and cons. Patents are a good example of a mixed blessing (in the carrot chapter). I had never heard of the Gini coefficient but have a big interest in wealth distribution (the US is not the most unequal on this World Bank measurement). This is not a Keynesian tract against the service sector or the private sector, far from it ('entrepreneurship … is a collective endeavour', 'it takes at least two decades to change a country's capabilities in a significant way. This in turn means that such changes cannot happen under free-trade conditions'). The first multinational was LEMCO which owned (1865) Fray Bentos and (1908) Oxo cubes. The demise of neo-liberal economics is predicted, though. What most delights is the Korean eye looking at the world. I have an LG TV but had no idea it was a Korean company. I once had a Samsung phone. I've written about acorns but had not seen their use in Korea. Beatrice Webb does not come out well: her racism against Koreans (the garlic chapter) is extreme, and, as Chang argues, based on stereotypes of Confucianism that suit the West, depending on whether hard work, savings, or laziness is the axe being ground. Britain is said not to have impacted on Korea (Chang means it was not influenced by the empire as China was) – though 1000 British soldiers died in the Korean

War. It turns out that Chang's initial finding in Cambridge, that is a lack of garlic and spice, is not quite what it sounds. Koreans like spicy sauces, but as a north-east Asian country, grew few other spices than chilli. He had no more knowledge of cardamom and Sichuan pepper than the natives when he arrived in the Fens. But as with his economics, he has an open mind and much curiosity, which led him to South Asian food, Italian food, and all the other good things now readily available in the UK, as are Kia cars. After all this, I went out and ordered Korean sprouts at our local restaurant.

John Wilkins