

## Drinka Pinta ...?

Has it ever occurred to you that there is a political agenda surrounding the milk industry? Some of our preconceptions and misconceptions surrounding milk were changed when our Environment and Climate Crisis Group recently visited the Wellcome Collection exhibition “Milk”.

One of the first startling facts we came across was that approximately two thirds of the world’s population have some difficulty digesting milk. That’s because lactase, the enzyme we have which helps process the sugar in milk (lactose) declines after childhood. The ability to process lactose is most common in white European and North American people.



*Figure 1. Milk Bottles from around the World*

When and why, then, do we drink so much of it, and think it’s so good for us?

We found the explanations all very interesting, covering the history of the development of milk production and its marketing but also how colonialism, racism and ideas of genetic supremacy have become inextricably intertwined in the whole industry.

Regularly drinking fresh milk is a modern habit, popularised in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Demand had increased during the previous century, with most milk production in cities being from cows kept behind the shops where it was sold. (See Fig. 2 The Cowkeeper by George Scharf.) The milk was therefore often contaminated with dirt and diseases and was blamed for high infant mortality rates.

The dairy farming industry responded to the situation by reforming around principles of hygiene, and mechanisation enabled the centralisation of the industry and its takeover by larger corporations.



*Figure 2. The Cowkeeper, George Scharf, 1825.*

Increasingly the terms “clean” and “dirty” were used, and these became linked to social status, and an aspirational middle class lifestyle, with adverts exclusively featuring white families.

Cleaner milk brought health benefits, obviously, but the more scientific approach led to ideas that women needed scientific advice in order to feed their babies properly; ideas reinforced by adverts for newly available infant formulas. Feeding became measured and monitored, and adverts

promoted infant formulas as perfect substitutes for breast milk. It was obviously in the interests of the companies who sold formula milk that more mothers used it. Some companies marketed it to third world countries, in particular Africa, which has caused considerable censure as many countries do not have living conditions hygienic enough for feeding babies in any way other than by breast.

The World Wars revealed widespread malnourishment in the population, and milk was hailed as “nature’s perfect food” because of its mix of protein, carbohydrates, vitamins and fat. It became embedded in British diets through welfare schemes such as school milk, and science was used to justify the export of dairy cattle and tinned milk throughout the British Empire.

Associations between dairy products and whiteness are still being used today by far-right political groups to assert racist ideas of white “strength”.

Recently, plant milks have begun to appear on the market and are gaining sales, particularly amongst vegans and people who are concerned at the damage that dairy farming does to the planet. You can find out more about the different plant milks on our Environment Group website, on the “Which Milk” page <https://u3acroydon.weebly.com/which-milk.html> Several of the group have tried pea milk and are now using it regularly.

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