

WN Columns

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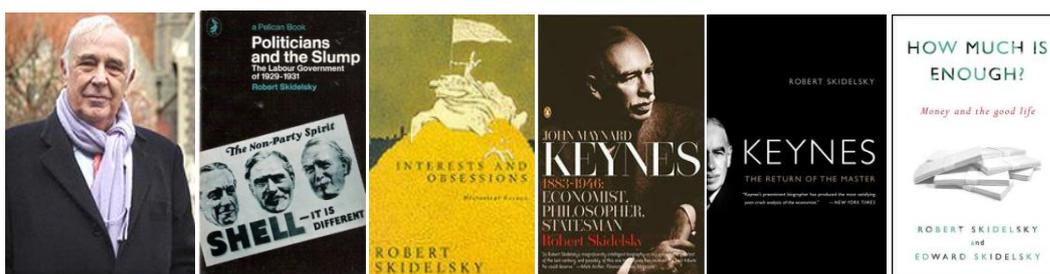
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What do you think?

Geoffrey Cannon

Food and nutrition, health and well-being

What they believe: 2. Robert Skidelsky Ideas come first



The historian of modern politics and economics Robert Skidelsky and five of his books on the value money and the good life well led. These go to the roots of all that should matter most to us now

My hero this issue is the political and economic historian Robert Skidelsky. He is hot now. There was a time when he was out in the cold. His 1975 biography of Oswald Mosley, founder of the British Union of Fascists, portrayed Mosley as a brilliant erratic tragic figure, who in other circumstances might have become prime minister. Written of a man whose second marriage in 1936 was in Berlin with Adolf Hitler as guest of honour, it is not surprising that the book was generally hated, and Skidelsky was blocked from university posts at Oxford and also Johns Hopkins.

Twenty years ago I was given his *Interests and Obsessions* (see above) as a Christmas present, by a man who before retirement had been a very senior UK civil servant. I devoured this series of essays mostly about the history of British public life early in the last century when Britain was still – just – Great, and have read them all again just now. Some point to the way things are now, and to what needs to be done.

Cannon G. What they believe: 2. Robert Skidelsky: Ideas come first.

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At the time I remembered Robert Skidelsky as an exact contemporary of mine at Oxford. Then I got to know him as the biographer of the economist, philosopher and statesman John Maynard Keynes in three volumes published over nearly 20 years between 1983 and 2000, and then in one condensed 1,000+ page volume, which I have been reading and consulting for ten years now. (Also see the pictures above). Then I realised that the author has been, since 1991, a life peer as Baron Skidelsky.

The case for Lords

This reminded me that at school I once defended the concept of a non-elected second chamber – such as a House of Lords – in an exam designed to train boys to win an Oxford scholarship to study politics, philosophy and economics. Part of my argument was that the process of election as a member of any mass party attracts people mostly of a similar nature – plausible, vain, pliable, often lawyers – whereas peers, including hereditary aristocrats, don't have to sweat about what a party machine wants, or act against any principles they may have, and are more varied.

The argument applies well to Robert Skidelsky, with his deep scholarship and wisdom and his immediate relevance to our need to escape from the mad ideology of econometrics, not to mention his likely unwillingness to waste his time in the House of Commons. It is surely more and more obvious now that the preservation of the world depends not so much on elected politicians, as on those who engage in public policy on their merit as scholars, and who are also activists. These are the people to whom we should pay attention, and who should guide us. Robert Skidelsky is also charming: the story he tells of his return to China and to Harbin (once 'the Paris of the East') and to Tianjin, where he was born and then lived for a while as a boy, is delightful (1). People who have lived in different cultures have a sense of proportion.

The meaning of history



Historical principle

We can properly understand the food and nutrition issues that face us now and for the foreseeable future, only by examination of the historical decisions that have shaped the world's food systems



Very well, but what does this have to do with public health nutrition? One quick answer is to cite one of the series of principles that govern nutrition as how it needs to be framed, as a social, economic and environmental as well as a biological and behavioural science. Here above is the salient slide.

Philip James, a regular *WN* contributor, gives as examples the impact of the two World Wars on the agriculture, food and nutrition policy of the UK, which among other things created the factory farming of cattle fed grain (cereals) rather than grass. British food systems and supplies and thus dietary patterns changed dramatically, because of decisions taken well over half a century ago, at a time when the UK was fighting a war of national survival and then struggling to recover in the postwar period. When I was a young boy, the main agreed public health nutrition crises in the UK and Europe – especially the devastated lands of Eastern Europe – were malnutrition, deficiency, and food and nutrition insecurity, much as in sub-Saharan Africa now. The over-riding political and economic drive was to produce more and more cheap filling fatty, sugary, starchy food products, and also meat, milk and dairy products. Those policies have not been dismantled. Readers who live in the UK are invited to look around standard supermarkets.

The same general point applies to other countries. US food and agriculture half a century ago and more, became locked into policies and programmes to go flat out for growth, abundance and surplus. Again, the creation of vast foreign debt in many countries in the global South, has forced farmers in these countries to grow cash crops for foreign exchange. Food systems and supplies and thus dietary patterns become transformed, for deep reasons. It is in my view almost futile to propose nutritional reforms of any significance without being aware of the historic forces that have shaped food systems, and thus what people buy and consume now.

Lack of knowledge of the past and its impact on the present helps to explain why so many good people engaged with nutrition fiddle around with trivial policies that make little or no difference, or even make bad worse. These include education and information programmes advising how to improve ‘individual lifestyles’. They also include tinkering with formulation of energy-dense ready-to-consume fatty sugary or salty ultra-processed products, to achieve marginally improved ‘nutrient profiles’ as a result of which manufacturers advertise the reformulated products with spurious health claims. In any case, such approaches cannot possibly be of use to most people who live in the countryside and also in cities, in most countries in the global South, or indeed to impoverished people in high-income countries.

It is only when we set aside the cascades of data that these days obsess researchers, and study the origins of the political, economic and social public policies and practices that now beset us, that we can begin to see the big picture and where we and our times now fit within it. It is only then that we can gain the insight and the

strength and stamina seriously to address the big issues of public health nutrition. A sense of the significance of history helps us to become effective citizens.

In search of the good life

Later in this column I touch on Robert Skidelsky's championing of John Maynard Keynes, co-architect of the Bretton Woods institutions of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Keynes believed in economics as a social science, and as a vital tool in the promotion of justice and equity for an increasing proportion of people, and a means to the end of a civilised and cultured life. His work, and the institutions built from it, were trashed or distorted by powerful governments as from the 1980s in favour of monetarism, which positions economics as a branch of mathematics, and money – or rather profit – as an end in itself. This has caused an outrageous increase of inequity and misery, and then the almost terminal crisis of the international banking system, and this has proved to be mad as well as bad.

One idea that Robert Skidelsky has developed from Keynes, is that of the good life well led, and what this can mean now. His new book *Money and the Good Life*, written with his son the moral and political philosopher Edward Skidelsky (2) comes to some wise conclusions. Thus: 'First, we must convince ourselves that there is something called the good life, and that money is simply a means to it. To say that my purpose in life is to make more and more money is as insane as saying my purpose in eating is to get fatter and fatter'.

'But second, there are measures we can take collectively to nudge us off the consumption treadmill. One is to improve job security... [Another is to] institute an unconditional basic income for all citizens'. And third – which circles back to food and nutrition – 'Government should reduce the pressure to consume by curbs on advertising. We already have curbs to guard against specific harms: it would not be a big jump to recognise that excessive consumption is itself harmful – to the environment, to contentment, to any mature conception of the good life' (3).

Box 1

Books by Robert Skidelsky

Politicians and the Slump: the Labour Government of 1929-31, 1967; English Progressive Schools, 1969; Oswald Mosley, 1975; John Maynard Keynes: Hopes Betrayed 1883-1920, 1983; John Maynard Keynes: The Economist as Saviour, 1992; Interests and Obsessions. Historical Essays, 1993; The World After Communism: a Polemic for Our Times, 1995; John Maynard Keynes: Fighting for Britain 1937-1946, 2000; John Maynard Keynes: Economist, Philosopher, Statesman 1883-1946 (abridged from the three volumes above), 2003; Keynes: the Return of the Master, 2009; How Much is Enough?; Skidelsky on the European Crisis, 2008-2011, 2012; Money and the Good Life (with Edward Skidelsky), 2012

References

- 1 Skidelsky R. A Chinese homecoming. *Prospect*, January 2006.
- 2 Skidelsky R, Skidelsky E. *How Much is Enough? Money and the Good Life*. London: Allen Lane, 2012.
- 3 Skidelsky R, Skidelsky E. Enough is enough of the age of consumption. *The Financial Times*, 4 July 2012.