

Closing the loop

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Our food culture is riddled with tensions and paradoxes resulting from a collective inability to manage and adapt to the sweeping changes of the last century. Food can be politically explosive and governments are struggling to adopt coherent and credible food policies. Food behaviour is increasingly defined in affluent countries by the growth of individual choice and responsibility. Many of us enjoy menus that would have been unimaginable only a generation ago; yet, despite this individualisation, our approach to sustenance remains central to our social identity. Eating is something we share with those closest to us and thus evokes stirrings of collective coherence, allegiance or paranoia.

We are what we eat. But what, and how we eat is changing radically. Our relationship with food is central to our culture and well-being, and affects our individual lifestyles, health, social routines and body images. Our access to, and control over, food defines our status in society and our interactions with other parts of the world. How we produce, trade and distribute food impacts on the planet. Getting food from farm to plate forms a major part of the global economy, and billions of people are directly involved in the process.

However, millions of people have no control over their eating habits: obesity affects 60 million in the US alone, while 840

million suffer from malnutrition globally. Millions of people die from over-consumption and starvation every day; US consumers spend US\$29 billion on confectionery while the UN struggles to find its \$1.5 billion budget. Media focus on people's misery across the world has not yet produced a successful collective endeavour for eradicating hunger. Western governments, fully committed to international development, preserve trade regimes that over-protect their own food industries while severely limiting the participation of developing countries in the new riches of the food trade.

This collection provides a panoramic view of the shifting patterns of production, consumption and culture that shape our relationships with food, and reveals a surprising range of ways in which eating affects our broader quality of life. Its dominant message is that we are spoiling the riches of contemporary food culture by adopting patterns of behaviour that are collectively dysfunctional. However, the authors also identify many different opportunities to make our treatment of food more sustainable, more just and simply more enjoyable.

First, the good news

As several of our contributors point out, many aspects of food have improved since the end of the Second World War. The level and range of affordable nutrition, and the global cuisine that we now access through television, supermarkets and high street restaurants, reflect significant progress. As Chris Haskins argues, advances in agricultural technology and management have brought more plentiful, cheaper and more hygienic food to the mass of the population.

As British society has grown more affluent, food culture has taken on an increasingly 'postmaterialist' complexion, serving needs well beyond simple survival. It is still less than 50 years since rationing ended in the UK but, within that time, supermarkets have become secular cathedrals, offering to meet all our lifestyle needs, expanding into banking, dating, childcare and learning provision, and developing around them a host of hangers-on, cultish visionaries and oppositional forces. As a result, they have acquired an almost mythical significance in the public imagination.

Hours of daytime and evening TV programming are devoted to food and its preparation, with celebrity chefs high in the public consciousness. We also see successful attempts to take a different path: farmers markets have proliferated over the last five years, and the organic movement, once scorned by supermarkets and the National Farmers Union alike, is now a significant part of the mainstream. The diversity on offer, both within and outside the supermarket, reflects a growing collective confidence in our food culture.

An unpleasant aftertaste

But these advances mask persistent and troubling problems, and also appear to contribute to new risks, costs and hardships. In 2002, as a Demos study showed, food poverty remains a significant, if little noticed, problem in the UK.¹ Many low-income households still struggle, and often fail, to attain a nutritious diet. This is a much more complex problem than simply being able to afford cheap food – other factors such as transport, storage and the pressure exerted by children over their parents all play a part. On average, the relative spend on food in the household budget has fallen significantly. Paradoxically, in a society increasingly characterised by ‘mass affluence’ and cheap, abundant food, poor diet is a persistent problem.

This is not the only difficulty. The growth of modern food psychoses, including chronic obesity, anorexia and bulimia, is widely lamented but has failed to elicit effective, shared responses. Global media and celebrity culture have produced a set of profoundly damaging psychosocial pressures. Body image has become a painfully important source of identity and self-esteem, yet our popular culture still promotes systematically distorted images of what healthy, attractive bodies (both male and female) should look like.

Throughout Western society, food is aggressively marketed as ‘sexy’ while advertisers and the media simultaneously promote the belief that sexy means thin. Thinness as a signifier of affluence and desirability is a recent development, as Felipe Fernández-Armesto shows. Historically, conspicuous consumption was a sign of high status; now, the rich would rather

¹ Hitchman C, Christie I, Harrison M and Lang T, 2002, *Inconvenience Food*, Demos, London.

starve than join the swelling masses of the overweight. If this trend persists in tandem with that of obesity, many more young people will be dissatisfied with their bodies, with increasingly serious results.

Alongside these deep concerns, we are busy manufacturing a whole new set of food fears arising from our ability to engineer abundance: vCJD, foot-and-mouth disease, confusion over GM and escalating concern at the political influence of corporate food interests all define the new food landscape. One new concern caused by our proliferating food waste is a rat population greater than that of humans in the UK, fed to the point of plague.

While most of us are able to enjoy unprecedented choice and diversity, we are also beset by guilt, fear and confusion, bombarded with new information about what and how to eat, unsure what to feed our children and anxious that we might already have made choices that will lead to disaster. Although we indulge, enjoy and agonise in the West, the world is still blighted by hunger.

The contours of food culture

Visible food culture is dominated by principles of choice, convenience, affordability and disposability. The growth of supermarkets, fast food and take away are a response to consumer demand. While shaping our lives, food also has to fit in with the conditions of modern living. Work–life imbalance drives the cash-rich and time-poor towards convenience foods, processed snacks and food on the run. But these pressures often run counter to the essence of improving people’s lives; speed, cheapness and excess are likely to be the enemies of quality, conviviality and well-being.

As Rebecca Spang illustrates, using the menu as an example, the rise of individualism has given us an unrealistic understanding of the meaning of choice. Our decision-making mechanisms obscure the real consequences and connections between our consumption options and the systems of production and distribution that underpin them. We often choose in a vacuum, in ways that ignore the collective and interactive impact of our actions.

Our attitudes to food are influenced by more than just the rational demands of economics, convenience and the instant sating of appetite. We are hardwired by genes and programmed by our culture to behave in particular ways. Only very recently in human history have we achieved an oversupply of food and, as James Erlichman points out, we remain genetically predisposed to storing food and conserving energy – a biological leftover from the hunter gatherer period of evolutionary history.

John Gummer suggests that we have maintained a mystical relationship with food and its purity. This attitude, formed deep in our history, explains not just our contradictory reactions to science and technology, but the curiously symbolic place that food occupies in politics and the instinctive reactions that food crises generate. Even as a modern, industrialised nation we still crave a spiritual connection with the land – part of the reason we continue to subsidise agricultural production so heavily. The idea of losing national self-sufficiency in food production is deeply troubling, even though food is an area which, like most of our other economic activities, has become increasingly interconnected with other parts of the world.

Equally significant, if perhaps more mundane, is the role that habituation plays in forming and sustaining our patterns of food behaviour, and our addiction to unhealthy or unsustainable forms of consumption. The food industry has become a powerful force in defining what we eat, and the food policy arena in developed countries, particularly the US, is dominated by vested interests. Marion Nestle (a nutrition expert) examines the umbilical relationship between food and politics in the US, and describes the connections that undermine the development of a responsible and healthy food culture. Consistency of advice about nutrition and diet has evaded us for centuries, as Steven Shapin points out, and neither the cacophony of expertise nor the incoherence of responses is new.

Webs and chains: reconnecting food systems

How can we begin to make sense of our predicament? One starting point is to recognise that food outcomes are linked through a number of complex systems; finding ways to fill the

vacuum between industrialisation and consumerism may provide some routes to progress. Holism and sustainability are strong themes in several essays: John Brisbin, Carlo Petrini and Daniel Miller emphasise the significance of the growing detachment of the consumer from the production process. The dehumanisation of food chains can be countered by the development of what Brisbin refers to as strong local food networks that promote local produce, create and help to sustain local knowledge, and reinforce good eating habits. Petrini demonstrates how sustainability, conviviality and biotic health can flow from choosing to eat high-quality, locally produced food.

However, localism and shortening supply chains are unlikely to provide complete answers: we also need to address our position within the global food system. Solutions to food poverty and inequality will only be found when food education is embraced and taught within local communities. Miller envisages a world where education, facilitated by emerging technologies, enables a much richer understanding of the human dimension to the food chain, allowing a partial reintegration of production and consumption through collective awareness of the impacts of purchasing decisions.

The systems that govern and contextualise food – global trade agreements, transport and communications infrastructures, weather patterns, cultural preferences and taboos – are individually complex. However, in tackling global hunger, a sustainable strategy has to integrate them, as Clare Short, Alex de Waal and Barbara Stocking all make clear in different ways. Development aid has to engage with the economic, social and epidemiological factors that systematically undermine the ability of African governments, in particular, to ensure that all their people are properly fed. The old paradigm, where both the need for food aid and food aid itself resulted from the surpluses generated by the protectionist policies of developed countries, needs to be overturned. Coherent and unified policies are required to create an equitable trade in food.

Another major concern arises from the effect of modern farming practices, eg monocultures, on the natural environ-

ment. Disease spreads most quickly where uniformity is found, and this is why genetic diversity is so important.

Food and social outcomes

Many contributions in this collection focus on the connections between eating and social outcomes. Food is a classic example of silo-based policy-making, artificially separated into different areas of governance. Government has traditionally thought in terms of production (subsidies, international relations, rural policy), manufacture and retail (food safety, planning, transport) and consumption (advice, but not too much of it, lest the producers, retailers and media object).

Several authors urge a more enlightened and evidence-based approach to the use of nutrition in social and institutional settings. As Jeanette Longfield argues, if sustainable development and consumption are such cornerstones of government policy, why does public sector catering have such a bad record?

Lloyd Grossman makes a convincing case that high-quality medical and primary care are most effective when complemented by good food and a balanced diet. Developing effective public health policies might be easier if the NHS provided hospital patients with a nutritional diet, as the new food programme aims to do. Bernard Gesch cites evidence that changes to the diet of prisoners may have significant, beneficial effects on their behaviour. In the same vein, a number of schools are converting to additive-free school dinners to help promote concentration and learning. A clear extension of this programme would be to replace soft drinks machines with adequate supplies of drinking water in schools; an initiative that should be made mandatory nationwide.

If institutions can do more to support positive social outcomes through their food practices, then the personal mores of eating together, in and out, are even more influential. Terence Conran attributes the phenomenal success of café culture and restaurants to people's desire for conviviality and the growth of disposable income, while Geraldine Bedell argues powerfully that we should rediscover the ways in which food can serve our quality of life and social relationships. David Lammy suggests that the diversity of food cultures and collective cuisines found in his Tottenham

constituency should be understood as a contribution to social capital and community capacity. Eating is not only a factor in public health, but potentially a route to social inclusion.

Risk and imperfect science

Public debate may have matured slightly since the days of Edwina Currie and BSE, but there is still deep unease about the extent to which government should and could protect us from the dangers created by modern food systems. Our infantile collective attitude to food leads us to seek security even as we push our manipulation of nature to new extremes. The result is a public that seeks absolute guarantees of food safety and, when science can't provide them, passes the buck on to ministers, forcing them to assume responsibility for things beyond their control.

Paranoia is amplified by a media that pounces upon food crises with gusto, making it harder for the public to understand the concept of risk, let alone make a rational assessment of it. Hugh Pennington suggests that politicians must take their fair share of responsibility for hiding behind what he calls the imperfect application of science. As Gummer points out, ministers have felt it essential to foster an illusion of certainty while being fully aware that science is a process of empirical accumulation with conclusions that are always liable to change.

We must negotiate a new approach, underpinned by a more honest, searching discourse between experts, ministers, the wider 'body politic' and the public, in which all actors have a responsible role, and with transparent accountability structures. Set up in 2000 as a useful first step in this approach, the Food Standards Agency has been relatively successful in creating a more open culture of information and debate, and has the virtue of putting some food issues at arm's length from government. However, its remit and powers are limited and no matter how well it functions, it cannot keep food away from politics altogether.

Rather than spinning a predetermined position, ministers should be lead a continuing debate and admit that limited scientific knowledge is not always the best starting point for a grown-up discussion. Parliament, government agencies and quangos must attempt to address public concerns through better provision of information and more rigorous regulation,

and the media must take a more responsible role in communicating with the public. A concerted and collective attempt must be made to raise awareness that risk is usually relative and seldom absolute; providing sufficient information will help people to offset one set of risks against another. The disparity between our individual food choices and their cumulative impact on society as a whole could thus be lessened by solving the contradictions in our attitudes to knowledge, safety and risk.

The politics of good food

The first principle of food policy should be that adequate food intake is the most basic right of every citizen. No one should go hungry in a nation as rich as ours, and the provision of basic nutrition must be a cornerstone of any civilised society. The priority of food policy must be similar to that of energy policy: 'security and diversity of supply'. Ultimately responsible for basic food safety, trade relations and the long-term stewardship of the land, governments must create the conditions for one generation to pass healthy and productive resources to the next.

At an international level, food policy should serve the interests of global justice and the eradication of hunger. The most obvious candidates are reform of the EU Common Agricultural Policy and steps towards a more open trade system for developing countries with a shared goal of more sustainable agriculture and food production explicitly built into them.

Basic and sufficient nutrition on a national and global scale are the fundamental foundations. The second building block is a move towards a better diet for all through changes in the production and consumption of food; a move away from the traditional emphasis on producer interests and towards a stronger alliance between consumers, politics and governance. Producer and consumer interests may be in conflict in specific instances but they converge at the highest level. A sustainable agricultural sector and a healthy, well-fed population are inclusive aims: food production, trade, taxation and regulation should reflect the long-term need to maintain the natural systems that underpin nutritional needs.

Enlightened consumer choice can improve standards of production and distribution. At present, the food industry gets

away with labelling and information that shed little light. How can we be informed consumers when we can't tell how far vegetables have travelled, or which pesticides were sprayed on our fruit? We might wish to know, yet are never told, the daily wage of the Colombian campesino who harvested the beans for our morning cup of coffee. Food labels sometimes imitate the logic of Alice in Wonderland: bacon containing 10 per cent water can be labelled as containing none at all.

Knowledge about sourcing, processing, additives and conditions of production – whether provided at point of sale or on request – are all vital tools for consumer empowerment and true diversity of supply. Such knowledge may fuel a robust confrontation with producer interest groups and retailers, but only by changing our food culture can we reduce our already high rates of obesity, cancer and heart disease.

Government procurement should reflect a far greater interest in food issues and lead by example, as Longfield suggests. Catering in hospitals, schools, prisons and civil service canteens should be connected to an agenda of sustainable food production and societal health promotion. Public inspection bodies, such as OFSTED, should take food into account in their reporting regimes in order to bring the worst performing up to the level of the best. Government departments should take more active responsibility for the diet of people in their care rather than simply setting standards for nutritional intake. They should back research into the behavioural effects of food consumption by changing the systems of the institutions they control.

In particular, the government should look again at the way in which budgets and finances discourage high-quality food in schools. Nutritional standards for school meals were reintroduced in 2000, but schools are encouraged to meet those standards at minimal cost – often as low as 40p per meal – with no regard for quality.

The creation of nutrition strategies and the appointment of nutrition tsars in the devolved administrations is an encouraging start on the journey towards a better diet. However, despite rumours that they are imminent, neither is yet in place in England; in any case, the tsar approach is only a way of kick-starting the process.

Equally important is the consumption of fatty, salty and sugared processed foods that are always heavily advertised; these foods have direct societal costs. People's freedom to consume them should not be directly restricted, but a system of taxation should be introduced to redress their effects, in the same way as cigarettes and alcohol. The proceeds of such taxation could then be used to support healthier and more beneficial forms of consumption, particularly at a local community level.

The third priority of food policy should be a positive agenda of well-being, so that we can all enjoy high-quality food. Social change must be founded on the principle of well-informed citizens with genuine choice. From the earliest age, food for health and enjoyment should be a central principle of education and part of the national curriculum, with mealtimes as a component of citizenship and social education.

Government must encourage the trend towards a return to the local. Initiatives such as farmers markets, box schemes, community farms and good old-fashioned allotments, provide better, fresher produce, reduce 'food miles' and help create a more sustainable agriculture. They forge links between producers and consumers and educate people in the realities of food sources, helping to bridge the artificial gap between town and country.

Governments do not and should not control our food habits, but they can help to shape them for our mutual benefit by taking a clear lead in two specific areas of the debate. First, they must create a platform for, and then instigate, a mature discussion about risk, responsibility and accountability that promotes honest dialogue between the expert and the lay person. Second, they must lead by example by ensuring that public sector catering promotes sustainability and well-being.

The policies of government will always be driven as much by our collective food behaviour as by matters of principle. If we can learn to prioritise our well-being rather than just our instant craving, we will be on the way to a politics that can achieve far more for us, both as individuals and as a society. Given its essential nature and its pervasive influence, food is as good a place to start as any.