

Commentary on teaching food: Why I am fed up with Michael Pollan et al.

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Julie Guthman is an Assistant Professor in Community Studies at the University of California at Santa Cruz where she teaches courses in global political economy and the politics of food and agriculture. Her 2004 book, *Agrarian Dreams: The Paradox of Organic Farming in California*, examines how the California organic sector intersected with California's agrarian history to replicate many aspects of industrial agriculture that it set out to oppose and, in particular, how social justice issues were shunted aside in the codification of organic agriculture. Her more recent research looks at other ways in which neo-liberalism – as both a political economic project and a form of governmentality – shapes the politics of the possible in food politics more broadly. Her new research directions involve the articulations of race, alternative food movements, and the politics of obesity.

At my university, I teach several courses related to food and one, in particular, where food politics is the focal point. In this class I attempt to expose my students to various arenas in which activists are trying to address social justice issues in food and agriculture, since most of my students will be doing field studies with various organizations. Invariably, in teaching this class, my students ask me what to eat. I always make a point of not answering that question, at least in the way they ask it. This is in no small part because I want my students to think more broadly about politics than the issue of what they put in their mouths. So, imagine my consternation when I heard the title of Marion Nestle's new book, *What to Eat* (2006), coming on the heels of her more regulation-focused book *Food Politics* (2002).

Nestle's, actually, is only one of a slew of new books that have been published in the last year or so that tell us how and what to eat. Taking cues from chef and food maverick, Alice Waters, who is convinced that "to change who we are as a nation, we need to first change how we eat" (2006), it seems like everyone is getting in on the eating-as-politics act, despite whatever qualifications they have to make their various claims. In one new book, *Grub: Ideas for An Urban Organic Kitchen* (Lappe and Terry, 2006), Anna Lappé, daughter of Food First founder Francis Moore Lappé, is trying to appeal to those who have not been brought into the organic fold, presumably in the interest of de-yuppifying organic's image. In *The Way We Eat: Why Our Food Choices Matter* (Singer and Mason, 2006), famed animal rights activist Peter Singer works through various philosophical arguments regarding a more expanded set of ethical eating practices than vegetarianism. Restaurateur and cookbook author, Molly Katzen, has a new book, *Eat, Drink, and*

Weigh Less: A Flexible and Delicious Way to Shrink Your Waist and Not Go Hungry (Katzen and Willet, 2006). In it, she too veers away from her own expertise and, with the aid of a co-author, ventures into the realm of nutritional science. Her diversion, however, does not come close to that of self-styled "chimp lady," Jane Goodall, whose book, *Harvest for Hope: A Guide to Mindful Eating* (Goodall et al., 2005) is notably lacking in expertise or analysis, despite the team effort.

In various ways, all of these books are responding to the well-documented injustices, health, and environmental risks of the industrial food system. To their credit, these authors are trying to bring what have been abiding concerns of scholars of food and agriculture to a broader audience. Virtually all of these authors extol the virtues of the organic and the local while arguing for a common sense, ecumenical approach to diet choices (no food faddism here). That makes them refreshing in relation to the usual weight loss books and painfully restrictive messages of latter day health foodism. Or does it? Several of them are riffing off of near hysteria around a so-called epidemic of obesity (see Gard and Wright, 2005; Guthman and DuPuis, 2006 for critiques of both the evidentiary basis of the epidemic and the broader discourse of "obesity"). At the very least, these swipes at obesity are insensitive to the pain of dieting. As a genre, "how to eat" books are remarkably unreflective about a long history of Americanization and social scolding in relation to ethnic food ways and bodies. To be sure, these authors seem to have given little thought to the efficacy of conversion attempts or their own subject positions as proselytizers of the gospel. Nor have they given much thought to the implications of the local and/or organic in terms of social justice – concerns that many food scholars

have addressed extensively (Allen, 2004; DuPuis and Goodman, 2005; Hinrichs, 2003, to name a few).

Of all these books, the sine qua non is Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (2006). It is like no other because Pollan not only knows his stuff; he can write his way out of a paper bag, and his book sales show it. At the same time, Pollan comes off as particularly messianic, to the point where the book really is all about him. Nevertheless, because his writing is so compelling and his book substantial in information and ideas, this book is also most likely to be read in undergraduate classrooms. There, students will undoubtedly love him, and *The Omnivore's Dilemma* will join *Fast Food Nation* (Schlosser, 2001) as a favorite among instructors who want to engage students in the contemporary politics of food. Given the surge in popularity of courses that teach food, Pollan's voice will be heard widely. For these reasons, his book deserves special scrutiny.

Before giving Pollan unassailable marks for his writing, I wish to note that occasionally he is too cute, even facile, and he employs tropes I wouldn't touch. Gendered metaphors abound, and, as befitting a science writer, naturalisms trump. In addition, the four meals he traces in this book (the industrial, the big organic, the local organic, and the hunted-gathered) are overly drawn. This is in large part a reflection of his journalistic method which, in finding the good stories, emphasizes the extreme stories. As a result, those farmers who incorporate some sustainable practices – what Michael Bell (2004) and others refer to as “farming in the middle” – are largely ignored. Moreover, Pollan is too willing to couple ethical judgment with biophysical taste (big organic = bad; little organic = good). He is never far, that is, from a Manichean ethics – just the sort of stuff that scholars such as Bell rightfully want to muck up. Sure, this sort of non-fiction sells, particularly to those who seek some intellectualism to support what they already think – thus the popularity of authors like Jared Diamond, Robert Kaplan, and Samuel Huntington whose messages, I would argue, are far more dangerous than Pollan's, in their implicit justification for American empire. Still, the simplistic explanations of obesity, for example – too much food, too cheap – does a disservice to understanding and confronting a society where we are both encouraged to consume and scolded for showing the signs of it.

My main issues with the book, however, are more consequential and would give me reason to pause before I assigned it to my students. Pollan displays a marked weakness at acknowledging intellectual debts. His writing has a fresh, ingenuous quality – as if he thought of it all by himself yesterday. For example, ideas in his earlier *Botany of Desire* (2001) draw quite clearly from the writings of Bruno Latour, about whom no mention is

made. In *Omnivore's Dilemma*, to be fair, he is more careful. The introductory paragraph to the acknowledgements states “that he had a lot of help in the kitchen with this one.” But a simple listing of names does not really do justice to the origins of ideas. Here I must rely on an example with which I am intimately familiar; my hope is that it does not diminish my point. Pollan borrows liberally from data, arguments, and occasionally even phrases I used in *Agrarian Dreams* (2004). He has very similar things to say about organics: its movement origins, its tendencies toward input substitution, the origins of practical effects of organic regulations, the entry of the big guns into the sector, to name a few. Unless a reader was already familiar with my work, this close connection between the two works would not be remotely apparent. For that matter, his work in the corn chapters, where he does a fine job of combining environmental history with political economic analysis is a little too familiar in the latter area. My own work derives from a vast literature in agrarian political economy familiar to readers of this journal – from Karl Kautsky to Willard Cochrane to David Goodman. Pollan actually uses the term “substitutionism” (Goodman et al., 1987) with no credit given at all. I then begin to wonder how many ideas less familiar to me are employed in the book with similar treatment. So, while Pollan must be commended for bringing arguments from agrarian theory to a wider audience, he does so at the expense of codes of scholarly conduct that sets a poor example to our students.

Undoubtedly Pollan's sins of omission will be defended as reflections of different standards for journalistic versus scholarly writing. Besides, not bogging down the text imparts that “gee whiz” quality that is arguably Pollan's signature style. Nevertheless, considering how knowledge is a central theme of the book, this oversight is not insubstantial. The entire premise of the book is that if one traces a meal from its biological origins to its ingestion, one will make better decisions as to how to eat.

Pollan displays obvious fascination with the lay knowledge of farmers, cooks, gardeners, hunters, and gatherers. In fact, many informants and actors are drawn into the narrative of the book. He has his villains (former Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz, food giants such as Frank Purdue and Don Tyson, Gene Kahn of Cascadian Farms, John Mackey of Whole Foods), his heroes (Joel Salatin of Polyface Farms, Alice Waters of Chez Panisse, and his various hunter-gatherer friends, some of whom remain unknown, mysterious figures), and his animals (steer #534, the chicken, the boar). Significantly, scientists of organic agriculture also people the book, from Sir Albert Howard to Miguel Altieri, and, uncharacteristically, a couple of studies are even footnoted within the text. In fact, one of Pollan's minor points is that the scientific

knowledge of agro-ecologists has been made invisible relative to the science of industrial agriculture. Yet, social scientists and social theorists are absent, as if the social study of food (and this journal) never existed! While I cede the problem of dense scholarly writing in reaching a popular audience, there is a politics to citations of which we all should be mindful. Failure to acknowledge the origins of important ideas reflects disregard for collective efforts in producing them; perhaps it also suggests a disregard for collective action writ large. I should add that Nestle isn't much better on this count, given her credentials as a trained academic. She cites nutritional studies at length but shows little sign of engaging with the vast social science and social theory literature with which her work intersects. No wonder those with considerably fewer credentials feel qualified to get in on the food writing act! Politically, the effect is a blunting of what otherwise might be read as a widely held analysis and clarion call.

What about the substance of his argument? Unlike *Fast Food Nation*, which never strays far from political economy, here the territory is much trickier. I, in large part, agree with Pollan's critiques of the food system and the places we must get to. I even share Pollan's foodie predilections: eating at Chez Panisse, buying almost all of my produce at the farmers market, and steering clear of industrially-produced animal products. I recognize that my food tastes derive from disgust at many contemporary food production practices but also a particular sensibility born of privilege and cultural milieu. Thus while I grant that I take my personal eating choices seriously, I see them more as ways to opt out, than a road to change. In other words, I don't harbor the fantasy that individual, yuppified, organic, slow food consumption choices are the vehicles to move toward a more just and ecological way of producing and consuming food. To the contrary, I think that structures of inequality must necessarily be addressed so that others may eat well.

Pollan's overall point, it seems, is to bring together two current day justifications for localism. One is a failure of regulation. People are turning to the local because they have given up on the ability of government to regulate food and agriculture in a way that protects public health and ensures environmental safety. In many respects, this skepticism is understandable, especially in light of today's neoliberal political climate, where remaining regulations and regulators are so obviously captured – the fox indeed guarding the chicken coop. The local is paired against the distant, global, unknowable, and, as the logic goes, untrustable. Pollan shares in a growing sensibility that the only way to trust food is to see it for yourself. Conceding the rules of neoliberalism, transparency is the name of the game; various certification schemes are a second-best choice to looking the farmer in the eye. I witness this sensibility among my students all

the time. Unfortunately, this sort of thinking all too often reproduces a neoliberal climate where broad and substantive public regulation is shunned for the “culture of audit,” corporate social responsibility, and individual consumption choice. For that matter, why is tracing the meal (a trope also used by Singer) the preferred way to think about food at all these days?

Pollan's other justification for localism is more implicit. He makes no secret that his ideal is the unification of the producer and consumer sides of ourselves (or himself?), which is why he extols the gardeners and hunter-gatherers. (When an occasional student of mine invokes Ishi, the hunter-gatherer, as a model, I remind him that we live in a world of 6.3 billion and our politics must start from the present.) Pollan's ideal could be read as a critique of alienation. Instead, he analyzes its evolutionary aspects. He suggests, in short, that we are naturally predisposed to unite these two sides of ourselves, as reflected in our omnivorous digestive systems and teeth. Let us not forget Raymond Williams' (1980) caution of using nature – always seen through and mediated by human history and desire – as a guide to right living. Moreover, by resorting to naturalism, Pollan diminishes an otherwise excellent critique of veganism regarding its failure to address the already existing plethora of domesticated (industrialized) animals. Thankfully, Pollan is not so absurd as to suggest that we could be a “nation” of hunter-gatherers or even Jeffersonian farmers, yet he nevertheless expresses something lost in the absence of such possibility. The farmers' market, a place producers and consumers presumably meet eye-to-eye, is only a proxy for his deeper ideal that makes us closer to how nature intended it.

That Pollan merges a naturalistic argument (nature as a model) with a political one (failure of regulation) so seamlessly is the most troubling aspect of the book. Just as “community” obtains pre-political status (Rose, 1999; Joseph, 2002), the local does so doubly, a place of both biological and social organicism. Pollan's critique of corn subsidies drops out soon enough in the text, and the book never again considers policy, notwithstanding the degree to which degree states and other bodies of governance affect how food is produced, distributed, and consumed. Pollan seems to accept the idea that the food system can be changed one meal at a time. Given his neglect of collective efforts, whether in knowledge production or elsewhere, is it really all that surprising that Pollan's hero is the anti-statist, unabashedly conservative, and rigidly local Joel Salatin (never mind that Salatin's customers drive 150 miles each to pick up a chicken or two)? Pollan may dismiss Salatin's brash write-off of New York City and treat Salatin's deep Christianity as epiphenomenal, but I'm not convinced these ideas can be separated.

What is so painfully evident here and in many other of the new food books, is how food politics has become a progenitor of a neoliberal anti-politics that devolves regulatory responsibility to consumers' via their dietary choices. Remarkably, even Nestle's concern with industry involvement with food labeling gets trumped by her recurring "eat less" message. And Schlosser's biting exposé of how the fast food industry's success is due in large part to the roll-back of health and safety regulations, decline of real wages, and cities search for tax revenue – all policy issues, is dampened by a rather anemic plea at the end to "have it your way." The *Omnivore's Dilemma* is a compelling read and imparts a good deal of scientific knowledge in lay terms, especially about the corn-soy-hog complex. But in regard to this book and contemporary food writing more generally, I am fed up with the apolitical conclusions, self-satisfied biographies of food choices, and general disregard for the more complex arguments that scholars of food bring to these topics. In fact, I wonder why our voices – those of us who are deeply engaged in scholarship of food and agriculture – are so absent from these treatises. Do the food writers fear that we might suggest that things might not be so simple, or is it our own inability to get our voices out there? In any case, there are plenty of highly readable scholarly monographs being published these days that can teach food in all the complexity it deserves and without heavy-handed notes and citations. Susanne Freidberg's *French Beans and Food Scares* (2004) and Melanie DuPuis' *Nature's Perfect Food* (2001) come to mind immediately. I still teach *Fast Food Nation*, too. I'll pass on these other books, though.

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