Food Fight: The Politics of the Food Industry

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FOOD FIGHT
The Politics of the Food Industry

The food movement has garnered much attention in the past decade and has been both lauded and derided for its focus on creating an alternative to industrial food production by emphasizing organic, sustainable, local, and small-scale practices. Recently, food movement heroes like Michael Pollan and Alice Waters have brought debates about our food system to mainstream America. But the food movement—which positions itself as the alternative to a corporate-dominated, unfair, and unhealthy food supply—actually seems to be strengthening the industrial food system. It’s been unable to produce real and radical alternatives, instead catering to the logic of consumerism and the marketplace through its insistence on buying our way to a better food system—or, as the catchphrase goes, “Changing the world, one meal at a time.” This has played perfectly into the logic of industrial food and has resulted in an ever-growing, two-tiered food system.

The industrial food system is based on the use of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, fungicides, and herbicides, as well as genetically modified organisms (GMOs). In order to maximize economies of scale, single variety crops are grown on “monocrop” farms and animals are raised in confined animal feeding operations (CAFOs). CAFOs produce a tremendous amount of waste which is stored in manure “lagoons” that pollute the air, soil, and groundwater. Animal waste and fertilizer runoff from industrial agriculture are now the biggest source of pollution in American waterways. Industrial agriculture also requires inputs like fertilizer and pesticides, which makes it heavily reliant on cheap fossil fuels.

The environmental consequences of industrial agriculture negatively impact our health in multiple ways. Beyond the poisoning of the environment, the foods that are produced in the industrial system are far less healthy than those produced organically or on a smaller scale. Conventionally grown and produced foods raise our exposure to pesticides, GMOs, and a myriad of other chemicals. They also put us at greater risk for foodborne illnesses due to unsanitary factory conditions and lack of proper oversight and regulation. Industrial food products that are highly processed and altered have been linked in hundreds of studies...
to obesity, chronic diseases, and a host of other health concerns.

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The industry also shows little concern for the health impact on farm workers, factory workers, and those living near farms and processing plants. Large processing plants and farms that produce meat, pork, poultry, eggs, and dairy are placed in low-income areas where residents don’t have the power to fight against them, and many are in need of jobs that the plants offer. Farm and factory workers are consistently exposed to pesticides, harmful chemicals, toxins, and bacteria that put them at greater risk for acute illness, cancer, and other chronic diseases. Many workers in the food system live at or below the poverty level and can only afford to eat the industrial foods that harm them.

The bulk of industrial foods and their distribution channels is controlled by just a few large corporations, making it difficult for many Americans to access healthier foods or find alternatives to industrial food. Ongoing consolidation of the food supply grants power to the few over what Americans eat every day. Large corporations make it exceedingly difficult for small-scale family farmers to make a living while providing healthier foods that are better for our environment. These corporations also have broad reach into our government and lobby for policies and regulations that benefit large-scale production that turns the growth and production of food into a business model based strictly on profit without regard for health or environmental concerns. Two prime examples of near monopolies are Monsanto and Cargill. By 2008, more than 90 percent of soybeans in the U.S. were GMOs and contained Monsanto’s patented gene. According to the USDA, in 2008-2009 the farm value of soybean production was $29.6 billion, the second highest among U.S.-produced crops; and since soy is ubiquitous in processed foods, it accounts for a fifth of the calories in the average American diet. Monsanto also produces GMO seeds for corn, canola, and cotton with many more products underway, including seeds for sugar beets and alfalfa.

Another corporation with broad reach and control over the foods we eat is Cargill, the largest privately held corporation in the nation, owning Cargill Pork and Cargill Beef. As the world’s biggest processor, marketer, and distributor of grains, oilseeds, and other agricultural commodities, it also owns dozens of subsidiary businesses, is one of the largest commercial cattle feeders in the U.S., and controls 80 percent of the European market for soybean crushing with a similar share for animal feed manufacturing.

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Despite the enormity of these companies and the lack of concern they show for our environment and our health, the food industry and its players have been successful at framing any attack on industrial practices as elitist and anti-American. Any critique of GMO foods or large-scale factory farming is immediately met with the rebuttal that alternatives cannot feed our population and that critics of industrial food are not concerned for the well-being of
that the barrage of fast food advertising makes kids think industrial foods are “normal and expected.” The researchers also found that this is the first generation of parents whose exposure to industrial food marketing makes them also think it’s “normal” to regularly take their children to fast food restaurants. The food and advertising industries have created a culture of American identity and comfort built around these foods.

On the other hand, the food movement prides itself on promoting hard-to-get ingredients like ramps, rare heirloom tomatoes, or heritage breed pigs—most of which can only be found at certain farmers’ markets located in various progressive enclaves. While this is certainly an alternative to industrial food, not many people can afford to indulge in it and these foods maintain an air of exclusivity. The food movement acknowledges that these foods are more expensive and presents itself as an opponent to the flood of cheap, industrial foods with such concepts as, “Pay More, Eat Less.”

This slogan comes from food movement guru Michael Pollan’s book Food Rules, and the idea has become a rallying cry for the food movement: we should all pay more for our food. Pollan’s point is that the true cost of food does not take into account government subsidies for commodity crops like soy, corn, and wheat; environmental considerations; animal welfare concerns; or the high concentration of exploited workers—all aspects of the industry that flourish because of a lack of fair regulation and proper oversight. Meanwhile, the food movement’s primary solution to these complex problems is framed within the over-simplified instruction to pay more for higher quality food.

The ultimate goal of these industries is to position themselves as the bedrock of America; and attacking the American way of eating attacks our very way of life. They have made the very new phenomenon of eating fast and convenient foods every day seem as if it has always been so. This may, in fact, be their biggest feat. A 2010 study, from Yale’s Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity, found average Americans. But with consumers seeking healthier and organic foods, large corporations have sought to embrace the language and ethos of the food movement.

Walmart is the prime example of this type of co-optation. It is also largely a distribution channel for products grown or raised by companies like Monsanto and Cargill and it’s where many Americans find and purchase “organic” versions of food. While some laud this as progress, it actually further consolidates the food system as large corporations have absorbed the idea of organic food, essentially rendering the term meaningless. These industrial organic products are often no healthier than their non-organic counterparts; in fact, they’ve created another niche market for the large-scale corporations that already dominate the food system. Walmart has been involved in multiple lawsuits over its use of the word “organic” on various product labels. A lawsuit was brought against Walmart, Target, Safeway, Costco, and Wild Oats for milk—produced in large-scale factory farms without adhering to organic standards—these companies labeled as organic. The Horizon “organic” milk sold at Walmart is produced by Dean Foods, the sixth largest food company in North America. Dean has pushed to lower organic standards for years and found success and profitability through Walmart—the number one seller of “organic” milk in the country. The industrial food corporations stay one step ahead of the food movement, absorbing its language into the corporate food model and utilizing huge marketing budgets to obfuscate the truth.

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this cultural divide. Take, for example, what famed Chez Panisse chef and sustainable food advocate Alice Waters had to say on the subject in a 60 Minutes interview from 2009: “We make decisions every day about what we’re going to eat and some people want to buy Nike shoes, two pairs, and other people want to eat Bronx grapes and nourish themselves. I pay a little extra but this is what I want to do.” As Pollan writes in his bestselling In Defense of Food, “Not everyone can afford to eat high-quality food in America, and this is shameful; however, those of us who can, should.”

The high-quality food that Pollan refers to is available, thanks in large part to the popularity of the food movement. It is now possible to buy truly organic, biodynamic, small-scale foods from artisan producers and heritage farmers in certain areas of the country—these producers and farmers embody all that the food movement espouses in its language of alternatives to industrial food. This has been an important step in creating real alternatives, but the vast majority of Americans will never be privy to such foods. In fact, for most Americans living in suburban regions, inner cities, or rural areas the primary (and sometimes only) food options are industrial foods.

While the organic industry grows, it still represents a tiny fraction of overall food production and consumption. Organic food and beverage sales represented approximately 4 percent of overall food and beverage sales in 2010, and that 4 percent is largely the domain of mainstream grocers. Farmers’ markets continue to grow but only 2 percent of Americans currently do the majority of their shopping there. Meanwhile, Walmart controls one-fourth of all groceries sold in the U.S. This gets at the very problem with the food movement’s premise of paying more for food. If Pollan advises “those of us who can” to pay more, then those who can’t are stuck eating unhealthy industrial foods. Rather than changing agricultural practices, like eliminating hazardous pesticides from vegetable production, the added expense for pesticide-free or organic vegetables is passed on to the consumer who is willing to pay a premium. This is regulation through market choice rather than stopping production practices that are dangerous or unfair to both consumers and workers.

The exploitation of workers—from the farmers and farm workers harvesting crops in the fields to the processors in industrial meat production to the food service workers dishing out meals in office cafeterias—is an essential element of the industrial food system and its cheap food. Many of the underlying structural inequities that exist within our current food system are largely based on an exploited working class. How can we ask these same people to pay more for their food when their wages are inadequate? And it’s not only the food sector that matters; many workers across many industries are unable to pay a premium for higher quality foods.

The consumer-based critique that both Pollan and Waters provide fails to adequately address the larger institutions of power and control in this country, which presents a far more complex and overwhelming set of problems that aren’t easily distilled into pithy two-sentence “food rules.” The food industry and the food movement play the same game and it has resulted in a two-tiered food system: those who can afford to eat high-quality food in America, and this is shameful; however, those of us who can, should.

So why is there reluctance to fight for meaningful change on the part of the most vocal and successful representatives of the food movement? Radical change would certainly interfere with comfortable lifestyles. As author and professor Julie Guthman puts it in her book, Weighing In, “[t]he limited solutions to a deeply problematic food system reflect the
cultural values and social power of those who have fared reasonably well under contemporary capitalism…”

We need a workers’ movement—including workers in every segment of the food chain, from farm workers toiling in the fields, to meat plant workers, to McDonald’s employees—that demands a living wage. Uniting people across class and racial divides will be crucial to a radical overhaul of the food system that won’t happen through market-based solutions. Even government regulation may prove limited in its effectiveness since ideas like taxes on junk food or bans on large portion sizes still target the consumer. We need a united front demanding that production practices change and that harmful—to our health, environment, and workers—products are no longer produced.

Until that day comes, we must demand the regulation of the advertising industry. First steps would include prohibiting all marketing to children and putting warning labels on junk food. If political and legislative actions fail, food radicals will have to regulate false and manipulative advertising campaigns themselves and label foods properly. The industry has fought hard and successfully against the truthful labeling of foods, as is the case with GMO foods. Taking a cue from tactics employed by Occupy Wall Street, certain avenues for change will not come through additional lobbying or changing regulatory practices, but from citizens intervening in the system. One such example is “Label It Yourself,” which encourages people to print warning labels for GMOs and sticker foods on grocery store shelves themselves. This could be expanded on multiple fronts, from billboards to websites. Food radicals will need to collectively organize and engage in exposing the truth about these industries and corporations in public and disruptive ways. Without employing a combination of collective actions and political tactics the food industry will remain unchanged and our current two-tiered system will continue to grow. Creating real change will not happen one meal at a time.