

INTRODUCTION



When my book *Food Politics* first appeared in 2002, the immediate reaction to its title was “What does politics have to do with food?” Years later, I am still asked that question. This book aims to answer it. To begin with, the food we consume and enjoy every day is influenced, if not determined, by the power of food companies to sell products, no matter how those products might affect our health or that of our planet. We are obliged to eat in order to obtain the nutrients and energy we need to grow, reproduce, and survive. Here, I describe why and how a substance essential for our very existence has become a touchstone for political disputes about culture, identity, social class, inequity, and power, as well as arguments about what roles are appropriate for government, private enterprise, and civil society in twenty-first-century democratic societies.

Although trained in basic science (my Berkeley doctorate was in molecular biology), I have spent most of my professional career as a public health nutritionist and food studies academic. From this perspective, today's greatest public health nutrition problems—the Big Three—are hunger (affecting roughly a billion people globally), obesity (two billion and rising), and climate change (everybody). These share at least one cause in common: all are due in part to dysfunctional food systems, a term that encompasses everything that happens to a food from production to consumption. Food systems, in turn, depend on political and economic systems. If we want to eliminate hunger, prevent the health consequences of excessive weight gain, and protect the environment, we must understand, confront, and counter the political forces that created these problems and allow them to continue.

For decades, I have been thinking, writing, publishing, and teaching about how politics affects and distorts food systems. If anything has changed over these years, it is the explosion of public interest in the politics of food, and in advocating for food systems that better support health and the environment. The goal of much of my recent work has been to inspire not only “voting

with forks” for healthier and more environmentally sustainable personal diets, but also “voting with votes.” By this I mean engaging in politics to advocate for food systems that make better food available and affordable to everyone, that adequately compensate everyone who works to produce, prepare, or serve food, and that deal with food in ways that conserve and sustain the environment.

Since 2002, I have written, edited, co-authored, or co-edited the books about the politics of food listed at the front of this book. These include hundreds of pages of detailed discussion, exhaustively referenced. Despite my best efforts to make my writing clear and accessible, my books must seem daunting, because I am often asked for a shorter summary of their principal points. I have resisted, not only because I want people to read my books, but also because I do not find short essays easy to write. From 2008 to 2013, I wrote a monthly column for the food section of the *San Francisco Chronicle*. These columns were supposed to respond to readers’ questions, but few readers asked any, which made writing them hard work.

In contrast, I very much enjoyed responding to questions from my friend Kerry Trueman, a dedicated

environmental advocate who frequently blogged about food issues and occasionally asked my opinion about whatever she was writing about. At some point, she began asking more formal questions and posting our exchanges under the heading “Let’s Ask Marion.” I co-posted these exchanges on the blog I have written since 2007 at www.foodpolitics.com.

Kerry’s questions were sometimes about specific events in the news, sometimes about more general topics. What she asked reflected her highly informed concerns about the intersection of dietary choices and agricultural practices, and I appreciated her intuitive food-systems thinking. Her questions ranged from the personal to the political, from food production to consumption, and from the domestic to the international. They often challenged me to think about issues I might not otherwise have considered and were so much fun to deal with that I could quickly respond. In searching for a relatively uncomplicated way to write short accounts of my current thinking about food-system issues, I wondered whether Kerry would consider working with me to produce a book in a question-and-answer format. Happily, she agreed. This book is the result of our joint

efforts and would not have been possible without her collaboration.

My overarching purpose in writing these short essays is to encourage advocacy for food systems that are healthier for people and the planet. Successful advocacy means engaging in politics to counter the actions of a food industry narrowly focused on profit, all too often at the expense of public health. In this book, I use “food industry” to refer to the companies that produce, prepare, serve, and sell food, beverages, and food products. Although this industry includes agricultural producers and restaurant companies, most of my discussion is about the companies that raise or make the foods and food products that we typically buy in supermarkets.

In the current political era, the methods used by the food industry to sell products, regardless of health consequences, are largely unchecked by government regulation. This is because the governments of many countries, including our own, have been strongly influenced—“captured”—by industry. Also, in many countries, civil society is too weak to effectively demand curbs on industry marketing practices. Advocacy

means organizing civil society and pressing government to create healthier and more sustainable food systems. This means politics.

In trying to decide what this book should cover, Kerry and I thought the questions should address how politics affects personal dietary choices, the food environment in communities (in the United States and elsewhere), and the truly global nature of current food systems, and we organized the questions under those three categories. Within each category, we wanted to include the questions we hear most frequently, along with those that illustrate why and how food is political and what needs to be done to make food systems better for everyone, poor as well as rich. Across the categories and questions, several themes come up repeatedly. Watch for these themes in particular.

Food is one of life's greatest pleasures. I list this first because it underlies all of my thinking about food and food issues. Food is delicious as well as nourishing and is one of the supreme joys of human culture.

Food is political. Because everyone eats, everyone has a stake in the food system, but the principal stakeholders—food producers, manufacturers, sellers, farm and restaurant workers, eaters—do not have the same

agenda or power. We eaters want food to be available, affordable, culturally appropriate, healthy, and delicious; workers want to make a decent living; producers and other industry stakeholders want to make a profit. Such interests can and do conflict, especially when profits take precedence over social values of health, equity, and environmental protection.

“Food system” helps explain food issues. As noted earlier, this term refers to the totality of how a food is grown or raised, stored, transported, processed, prepared, sold, and consumed or wasted. Knowing how foods are produced explains much about their availability, cost, and health and environmental consequences. Food systems operate in the context of broader social, cultural, and economic systems; these too have political dimensions.

“Ultraprocessed” is a more precise term for “junk” foods. It refers specifically to products that are industrially produced, bear no resemblance to the foods from which they were extracted, and contain additives never found in home kitchens. Research increasingly links consumption of ultraprocessed foods to poor health.

The principles of healthful diets are well established. We can argue about the details, but diets that promote

human health are largely (but not necessarily exclusively) plant-based, provide adequate but not excessive calories, and minimize or avoid ultraprocessed foods. Such diets are also better for the environment.

The food industry influences food choices. Cultural, social, and economic factors influence food choices, but so do food industry marketing and lobbying actions. The food industry's primary job is to sell products and return profits to stockholders; health and environmental considerations are decidedly secondary, if not irrelevant.

Food systems affect the environment. A sustainable (or, in current terms, agroecological or regenerative) food system replaces the nutrients extracted from soil by food plants, and minimizes the damaging effects of animal and plant production on soil, water, and greenhouse gases.

Food systems generate and perpetuate inequities. An ideal food system makes healthy, sustainable, affordable, and culturally appropriate food available and affordable to everyone and enables everyone to have the power to choose such foods, regardless of income, class, race, gender, or age. It adequately compensates workers employed on farms and in meat-packing plants,

food production facilities, and restaurants. The goals of food system advocacy are to achieve these ideals.

Kerry and I finished writing this book before the coronavirus-induced respiratory disease, Covid-19, devastated lives, livelihoods, and economies. In exposing the contradictions and inequities of profit-driven economic, health care, and food systems, this global pandemic illustrated our book's themes. In the United States, Covid-19 proved most lethal to the poor, racial minorities, the elderly, and those with obesity-associated chronic diseases. Suddenly, low-wage slaughterhouse and grocery store workers—often migrants or immigrants, and many without sick leave or health care benefits—were deemed *essential*. Slaughterhouses, now viral epicenters, were forced to remain open. Farmers destroyed unsold animals and produce while the newly unemployed lined up at food banks. Corporations laid off workers but took millions in government bailouts and paid salaries and bonuses to executives. These events call for advocacy for strong democratic government and institutions, among them food systems that benefit all members of society, regardless of income, class, citizenship, race, ethnicity, gender, or age.

A Word about the Sources and Further Reading

Because my writings deal with controversial topics—alas, not everyone agrees with my views—I usually make sure to back up nearly every statement with extensive references. But for this book, which draws on so much of my own work, I instead include chapter-by-chapter lists of relevant books, reports, and articles, followed by a list of additional books and reports that have informed my work, some historical, some current. All of these references are meant as starting points for deeper investigation of the issues discussed here.

My hope is that this book succeeds in providing a brief overview of my thinking about food system issues, from the personal to the global. Even more, I hope that it inspires readers to take food politics seriously and to engage in advocacy for healthier, more sustainable, and more equitable food systems for current and future generations.