

Food politics

Marion Nestle, former member of the Food and Drug Administration's Science Advisory Board, is the author of five prize-winning books on food politics and nutrition. In 2011, the University of California School of Public Health at Berkeley named her a Public Health Hero; "Time Magazine" included her Twitter page among its top ten in health and science; Michael Pollan ranked her as the second most powerful foodie in America (after Michelle Obama); and Mark Bittman ranked her first in his list of "foodies to be thankful for".

ASPENIA. *Professor Nestle, you have had a long and fascinating career. How have you seen the food debate change over the years and how does it differ in developing and advanced societies?*

NESTLE. Interest in food has changed dramatically. When I started out, I was the only one focusing on food and food politics. When my book *Food Politics* was published – which was only 13 years ago – people were shocked by it, absolutely shocked. Now everybody is talking about food politics. So, attitudes have totally changed.

But this is true mostly in the industrialized world. It's in

Marion Nestle is a professor of Sociology in the department of Nutrition, Food Studies and Public Health at New York University.



the United States; it's in England, Italy and other such countries. The developing world has not yet been overwhelmed by international food companies moving in and changing their local diet. They are beginning to experience it now, however, and their rates of obesity are rising; they too are having to deal with a collection of diseases for which they are ill-prepared due to healthcare systems that can't handle type-2 diabetes, for instance.

What challenges are in store for the developing world in the near future?

It's enough to know that Coca-Cola and PepsiCo have both announced that they will be investing billions of dollars in marketing in Africa, China and India between now and 2020.

102

Let's talk about technology. What development has had the greatest impact on the food debate over your career?

I would have to say biotechnology and genetically modified foods. The Food and Drug Administration approved the production of GMOs in 1994 and over the last twenty years we've seen the percentage of GMO corn, soy beans, cotton, canola and sugar beets grown in the United States reach roughly 90%.

Will we ever find consensus in the debate over GMOs?

No, because the debate is polarized around issues that are completely different. Neither side understands the position of the other, nor do they particularly want to. People who represent the industry or science say: "genetically modified foods are safe; therefore they're fine, so what is the problem?" People on the opposite side of the fence say: "even if they are safe, there are things about GM foods that I do not like." And those viewpoints go right past each other. These people can't hear each other; they can't be in the same room and have a civil conversation. And that hasn't changed in twenty years.

Is there something we could do to get them in the same room?

There could be, if the industry would behave better and recognize that safety is not the only issue. It might make it easier if the industry were more transparent. Indeed, I think the industry brought the problem on itself. As



103

a member of the Food and Drug Administration's Food Advisory Committee in 1994, I witnessed the industry taking positions that went against its own interests. And as a member of that committee I advised the FDA and the industry to label GMO foods clearly right from the beginning. They did not. I think it would have made a tremendous difference.

What side are you on in the GMO debate?

I don't think there is much evidence that genetically modified foods are harmful, but the pesticides that are used with them might be. Frankly, I believe the use of antibiotics is much more dangerous, and should be the focus of greater debate. There is also more and more evidence coming out that Roundup (the herbicide) may not be as benign as everybody hopes. Regardless, I certainly think foods should be labeled clearly.

And the idea of GMOs as a potential key in the fight against world hunger?

Remember: we are talking about corn, soy beans, cotton, canola and sugar beets. None of those is going to solve Third World food problems.

What about the role of women in the fight against world hunger?

We know what we have to do to solve world hunger, and one of the main things is to educate women. But this is not something that you just do. This is very much a political problem. There are countries where the education of women is a cause for death. So to offer any solution that is short of a political one does not make much sense. Progress needs to be made from within and in very small steps. Changing cultures is extremely difficult.

104

Can we consider curbing food losses and waste a solution?

I think production is the problem. You don't have a lot of waste if you do not have overproduction. So, that is really the place where I would tackle the waste issue. There is inevitably going to be waste in food production, but I think you can stop some of it at source, and to do so takes federal regulations.

Again, we are back to political solutions and to getting our leaders – and people in general – to enter into the food debate.

Always. Certainly in the United States awareness is increasing. You hear about it more and more in the media; more and more people are involved in working on these issues. Food issues are very big among young people and that is exciting. Maybe the next generations will be able to do something. I do think it has to be a bottom-up and grassroots effort. The US Congress is stuck in never-ending bipartisan arguing and we can't expect much to come out of there. But you can do a lot at the local level, and I see enormous changes taking place in communities throughout the United States: people

are organizing around common themes and are affecting change, starting from one school, one city, one community, one state.

But we will also have to work to curb economic discrimination as it is closely linked to the food debate.

Fourteen percent of Americans still do not have enough to eat on a daily basis; we also have vast numbers of people who are overweight and subject to type-2 diabetes and other consequences of obesity. These problems have not been solved yet. I think the most serious issue is income inequity, which is behind many health problems. And doing something about that is a very high priority. But, once again, the current US Congress is not only unwilling to tackle this as a problem but is actually doing everything it can to make it worse.

105

Interview conducted by Jessica Carter, managing editor of Aspenia online.

Aspenia

67

Aspenia

2015

Food for thought

Feeding the people,
protecting the planet

Rural Renaissance

The power of women

