

Food and Culture

A Reader

Fourth Edition

Edited by

Carole Counihan, Penny Van Esterik,
and Alice Julier

2019

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW YORK AND LONDON

PREFACE TO THE TENTH ANNIVERSARY EDITION of *Food Politics*

Marion Nestle

IN 2002, WHEN THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS first published *Food Politics*, the idea that food and beverage marketing might influence food choices seemed surprising and, to the food industry and its supporters, alarming. Food choices, the industry said, were entirely a matter of personal responsibility. Obesity was the evident result of poor dietary choices and too little physical activity. The solution to the obesity problem? Get a grip.

As I explained in the 2007 edition of the book, personal choice erupted as the principal argument against *Food Politics* before it had even been published. In February 2002, two weeks before the book first appeared in stores, three anonymous individuals posted critical reviews on Amazon.com. The reviewers accused me of blaming the food industry for what ought to be a matter of individual free will.

“Nestle forgot a not-so-little thing called WILL POWER!” said the first review. “Marion Nestle, one of the foremost food nannies in this country, has produced a book that heaps the blame for obesity, diabetes, and heart disease on food producers, marketing executives, and even school principals. Everyone, it seems, is responsible for those love handles except for the very people who are carrying them around.” From the second reviewer: “Individuals incapable of thinking for themselves will truly appreciate . . . *Food Politics*. [Hasn’t the author] ever heard of personal responsibility, exercise, and appropriate dieting?” And from the third: “Marion Nestle’s book ‘Food Politics’ makes clear that the political system she favors is dictatorship—with her in command. . . . The author’s motto could be ‘if it tastes good don’t eat it.’”

Passionate foodie that I am, this last comment suggested that this reviewer surely had not read my book. But before I could say so, Sheldon Rampton, the coauthor of *Toxic Sludge Is Good for You: Lies, Damned Lies, and the Public Relations Industry*—whom I still have never met—responded on Amazon for me:

For what it’s worth, potential readers of Nestle’s book should note that the first three “reader reviews” of this book are pretty obviously cranked out by some food industry PR campaign. To begin with, they were all submitted on the same date, February 22. . . . For another thing, they all hit on the same food industry “message points”: that critics are “nagging nannies” whipping up “hysteria” on behalf of “greedy trial lawyers,” etc. February 22 is also the date that noted industry flack Steven Milloy of the “Junk Science Home Page” wrote a review trashing Nestle’s book. Milloy is a former tobacco lobbyist

and front man for a group created by Philip Morris, which has been diversifying its tobacco holdings in recent years by buying up companies that make many of the fatty, sugar-laden foods that Nestle is warning about. I haven't even had a chance yet to read Nestle's book myself, but it irritates me to see the food industry's PR machine spew out the usual (...) every time someone writes something they don't like. If they hate her this much, it's probably a pretty good book.

This exchange is worth reproducing because similar attacks on my work and opinions continue to this day. I maintain a blog at www.foodpolitics.com, in which I write almost daily about current events related to matters discussed in this book. I welcome comments from readers on my posts. Most readers send in thoughtful comments well worth reading, whether or not they agree with my opinions. But the blog quickly acquired resident "trolls," anonymous critics using pseudonyms and false, untraceable e-mail addresses who systematically attack what I say in a tone similar to that of the Amazon "reviewers."

The exchange also raises many of the issues still hotly debated today: Is obesity strictly a matter of personal responsibility, or does the food marketing environment have something to do with it? Do food and beverage companies bear some responsibility for the food choices of individuals? Is food marketing—an enterprise that promotes the social acceptability of consuming foods and sugar-sweetened beverages in large amounts anytime and anywhere—a determining factor in obesity? To what lengths may the food industry go to attack critics and engage in actions to protect sales of its products and growth in corporate profits? Should the government set limits on food industry actions in order to make it easier for people to eat more healthfully?

I first began thinking about such questions in the early 1990s, when I attended a conference in Washington, DC, sponsored by the National Cancer Institute and chaired by former U.S. surgeon general C. Everett Koop. The purpose of the conference was to focus attention on behavioral causes of cancer—cigarette smoking and dietary choices. One after another, the antismoking speakers showed slides illustrating worldwide marketing of cigarettes. No region, from high in the Himalayas to the jungles of Africa, was too remote to be free of cigarette advertising. In those days of Joe Camel advertising, one speaker showed slide after slide of cigarette marketing deliberately aimed at young children.

I was well aware of the health consequences of cigarette smoking, and I had seen such advertisements. But, I realized, I had never paid much attention to them. These slide presentations were designed to encourage cancer researchers to notice the ubiquity of cigarette advertising and to understand its effects. I left the meeting convinced that public health nutritionists like me ought to be doing the same thing for soft drink and fast-food marketing. We needed to pay more attention to the effects of food marketing on personal dietary behavior. I did just that and began to write the articles that form the core of *Food Politics*.

My hope was that *Food Politics* would change the conversation about obesity, especially childhood obesity. I was tired of going to obesity conferences at which speakers went on and on about how parents needed to be better educated to make more healthful food choices for their children. I wanted to hear speakers talk about the influence of food marketing on those choices. I hoped that *Food Politics* would encourage people to stop thinking about food companies as social service agencies. They are not. The primary goals of food

companies are to sell products, increase returns to investors, and report quarterly growth to Wall Street. Like my Amazon “reviewers,” food companies can argue that what you eat is your responsibility, but their corporate responsibility is to induce you to buy more food, not less. Eating less—a principal strategy for managing weight—is very bad for business.

We are human. We eat what we buy. *Food Politics* is about how food and beverage companies encourage us to buy more and eat more. The U.S. food supply provides close to 4,000 calories a day per capita, an amount roughly twice the average need. To meet Wall Street’s demands for corporate growth, food companies lobby government agencies, forge alliances with health professionals, market directly to children, sell junk food as health food, and get laws passed that favor corporate health over human health. As part of the normal course of doing business, the food industry changed society in ways that encourage us to eat more food, more often, in more places. Its practices changed society to actively discourage us from making more healthful choices. Against such efforts—and billions of dollars in annual marketing—personal responsibility doesn’t stand a chance.

I wrote *Food Politics* to refocus attention on the environmental—that is, the social, commercial, and institutional—influences on food choice, rather than on the personal. If poor food choices are a matter of personal responsibility alone, then public health efforts should focus on educating people to eat better. But if the food environment makes it difficult to eat healthfully, public health must focus on political strategies to change society so that healthful choices are the easier—the default—choices. I wrote *Food Politics* to help shift the conversation from the personal to the political. In considering what to do about obesity, I hoped to focus attention on the societal factors that make maintaining a healthy weight so difficult, food marketing among them. In March 2002, these ideas were unexpected. *Food Politics* challenged readers to think about food companies in a different way: not just as providers of bountiful food at low cost but also as powerful contributors to an unhealthy food environment.

Today, such ideas seem self-evident. The role of the food environment in dietary choice is recognized by public health and government officials, even at the level of the White House. First Lady Michelle Obama initiated her Let’s Move campaign to address childhood obesity by improving the environment of food choice, specifically in schools and low-income neighborhoods. When I wrote *Food Politics*, I could not have dreamed that a first lady of the United States would be interested in the same issues that I am, or that she would use her position and leadership to improve the health of America’s children.

Mrs. Obama is the most prominent manifestation of today’s rapidly expanding food movement. This movement may be fragmented, uncoordinated, and spontaneous, but its adherents are united in their quest to find morally, ethically, and sustainably healthful alternatives to our current system of food production and consumption. In the years after writing *Food Politics*, I discussed many of these alternatives in my subsequent books: *Safe Food: The Politics of Food Safety*; *What to Eat*; and *Why Calories Count: From Science to Politics* (this last coauthored with Maiden Nesheim):

Today’s food movement aims to transform the environment of food choice to promote health, protect the environment, and support personal responsibility for food choice with

collective social responsibility for making healthful choices easier. The effects of the food movement can be seen in the removal of junk foods from schools and the introduction of fresh fruits and vegetables into inner-city areas. They can also be seen in attempts to tax and restrict the size of sodas, remove toys from fast-food meals for children, and only permit foods that meet defined nutritional standards to be marketed to children.

The success of the movement can be measured by the intensity of pushback by the food and beverage industry. As I discuss in the Afterword, the industry's trade associations are working overtime to deny responsibility for obesity, undermine the credibility of the science linking their products to poor health, attack critics, continue to market to young children, fight soda taxes, and lobby behind the scenes to make sure that no local, state, or federal agency imposes regulations that might impede sales. Food companies unable to increase sales in the United States have moved marketing campaigns for their products to emerging economies in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, with predictable effects on the body weights and health of those regions' populations.

Despite—or perhaps because of—this pushback, now is a thrilling time to be an advocate for better food and nutrition, the health of children, and greater corporate accountability. As more people recognize food companies' influence on government policies about dietary advice, school foods, marketing to children, and health claims on food products—all matters addressed in *Food Politics*—even more want to work to improve the environment of food choice. Plenty of food issues are worth working on, and plenty of groups are working on them. Join them. Eating more healthfully—and encouraging others to do so—can improve lives and is thoroughly consistent with the best practices of democratic societies.

ABOUT THE TENTH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

Because much of *Food Politics* discusses the historical antecedents of current issues, I left the 2007 text intact. To address events of the last few years that substantially changed or added to areas covered in the book—the 2010 Dietary Guidelines and Michelle Obama's Let's Move campaign, for example—I wrote a new Afterword. Enjoy *Food Politics*. Please wish it a happy anniversary. May it encourage you to vote with your fork for healthful and sustainable food choices but also to vote with your vote. Join groups working for social and legislative changes in the food environment that will make healthier choices easier for you and for everyone else.