

Food politics in the USA

Allan Stoekl

Nutrition in food is, today, a function of profitability: junk food and processed foods are more profitable than organics grown locally; meat is not only more energy intensive, but is more profitable (at least for those who package and market it). People's diets are, in other words, determined not simply by what is grown or growable within a region, but also, and above all, by an increasingly global food economics, including what foods can be marketed (hence designed, synthesized), and what foods can be marketed *against* the prevailing foods which are generally on offer ('organics' against 'processed', etc.). One result is that, in the United States as globally, nutritional inputs are not consistent across the economic spectrum; what one eats depends on one's social and racial status. If food provides us with the energy we need to function as living organisms, in many cases the actual food available – particularly what Michael Pollan terms 'food products' (packaged junk food, processed foods of all types)¹ – provides only 'empty calories', leading to a diet that has caused mass obesity in today's United States. There is nothing historically new about hunger or famine, but it is only in advanced capitalism that so much of the average diet is made up of solid fats and added sugars, which simultaneously add calories but few or no nutrients.

Such cheap 'junk food' is possible only because of the current economics of food production, in which the US government actually subsidizes monoculture food production in those 'factory farms' owned by large corporations. Corn, which can be nutritionally (chemically) broken down and reassembled to make a galaxy of food products, and from which high-fructose corn syrup (a major factor in the obesity epidemic) is derived, is *the* major monoculture in the USA, subsidized to the tune of \$90 billion between 1995 and 2010. Because it is so profitable to raise corn – one literally can't lose money, given the subsidies – cropland devoted to corn increased by more

than 13 million acres between 2006 and 2011, at the expense of land devoted to other monocultures, such as wheat and soy. At the same time, ethanol derived from corn is also subsidized to serve as a petroleum additive.² As opposed to such government subsidies to agribusiness, money allocated to encouraging sustainable agriculture, training organic farmers, and so on, remains a relative pittance.

As a result of the economics of food profitability and distribution, linked to the fuels that make the transport of cheap but non-nutritious foods possible, there is thus an ever-expanding proliferation of 'food deserts' (areas where highly nutritious food is not available), particularly within American cities. At the same time, the economics of junk food serves as the model for food waste in general, in so far as cheap food is cheaper to waste than conserve, and it is no coincidence that waste characterizes food production, distribution and consumption on every level today. In short, in a contemporary world of apparent food abundance, such as is found in the USA, there is also, only seemingly paradoxically, great food insecurity and great hunger: actual lack of food, children skipping meals, people standing in food lines; employed people who are not paid enough to eat well on their salaries, supplementing their diets with food stamps; people who are hungry because food stamps have been cut back; and hunger due to food deserts, to a gutted urban space now demarcated by the lack of nutritious food.

Hunger and waste

In the United States a supplemental food allowance, popularly termed 'food stamps'³ and since 2008 called the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), has, historically, been instrumental in reducing hunger. Between 2007 and 2010 the number of people enrolled in SNAP has risen from 28 million to 40 million. Many more people certainly would be eating really badly, if at all, were it not for the

SNAP programme. 'Food stamps' date from 1939, a New Deal programme designed both to distribute agricultural surpluses (and thus prop up prices) and to alleviate hunger. The earliest food stamp programmes were limited to the distribution of foods identified as nutritious – meat, dairy, vegetables – and the stamps could be used to be purchase only foods that were, at the moment, in a surplus. In recent years, however, under the pressure of agribusiness, the SNAP programme has also been expanded to include non-nutritious foods, such as soda pop, snack foods and so on, despite some efforts in Congress to change this.

If, then, despite their limitations, 'food stamps' definitely do alleviate hunger, the SNAP programme is in no way independent of the demands put on it by particular interests – interests which, in fact, often diverge, and are indeed frequently contradictory. The Republican-controlled Congress has recently worked to curtail availability of 'food stamps', and a budget-cutting imperative will in the future further limit the amount of money available for food purchases. Families in need will inevitably be forced to further stretch their food dollars, and so will be further exposed to hunger. Conservative voices note that much SNAP money is wasted on soda, candy and so on, so that it should not be that hard for families to tighten their budgets accordingly. Others point out, quite correctly, that in many cases that is all that is available in the food deserts in which the poor live, and it's all they can afford.⁴ Needless to say, the politics of this are complicated, and neocons and progressives can often find themselves in uneasy alliance. As Alan Bjerga notes:

Anti-hunger advocates fear that changing nutrition standards will be used to justify budget cuts, and nutritionists find themselves allied with food-stamp programme opponents whose motives they may not trust ... Meanwhile, conservatives outraged by people eating junk food at government expense find themselves opposed by libertarians alarmed at federal intrusion into food.⁵

It is worth noting the hypocrisy of conservatives who use an anti-junk food rhetoric as an excuse to cut food stamps – given, of course, that it is the very same conservatives who more often argue for the freedom precisely to *choose* junk food (in schools, food deserts, etc.).

Along with this restricting of food availability comes the recent revelation of a striking dependence on the SNAP programme by what is, according to the Fortune Global 500, the world's largest public

corporation and private employer. As Michael Hiltzik reported in the *Los Angeles Times*, the retail chain Walmart has actually been paying its employees so little that some have been forced to supplement their wages with food stamps.⁶ To the insult of the world's wealthiest family (the Waltons) underpaying their workers is added the injury of the necessity of government – and taxpayer – aid for those very employees. One need not dwell on the irony of this situation, given Walmart's general position on the role of government; one need only note that in this case hunger for employees goes hand in hand with a larger destruction of the economic infrastructure of urban and suburban communities. As small retailers are forced out (by the likes of Walmart), large enterprises move in; then, if profits cannot be maintained at a certain level, those enterprises (including, on occasion, Walmart itself) move out. People who cannot afford transportation to other areas or neighbourhoods are forced to shop at the few retail outlets that remain – generally 'convenience stores' with only token representations of usually wilted and overpriced fresh fruits and vegetables. As a result, a significant proportion of the population simply cannot afford to eat well, resulting in a very particular kind of hunger: obesity and malnutrition together. Hunger, at least in the American context, cannot be separated here from a systemic racism; neighbourhoods are 'redlined' not only by mortgage lenders but by grocery chains. In fact, the two are closely tied: redlining concentrates the poor (and, particularly in cities, African Americans) in certain neighbourhoods; impoverished neighbourhoods are abandoned by groceries. Food insecurity, then, is certainly not universal in the USA, but it most certainly is a function of a 'perfect storm' of racism, corporate greed, corporatized food production, neocon budget cutting, and the relentless decline in the availability of jobs that pay decent wages, with the corresponding decline in trade-union membership.

It might at first seem paradoxical that enormous amounts of waste accompany widespread hunger in the USA. But hunger in America is precisely not due in most cases to a simple lack of food: greasy and sugary high-calorie stuff is generally available except in the most destitute areas, and it is cheaper than 'decent' food. The problem, to put it crudely, is that large corporations have to make a profit from the packaging and sale of 'food products'. Store shelves have to be laden with food at all times, lest there seems to be a shortage of some sort. This is the cornucopia that, in better-off areas, serves as an

alternative to the food desert. The result is, however, an immense amount of waste. Unsold and imperfect food is discarded either before it even reaches the food distribution network or at the point of sale, after it has passed its sell-by date. A lot spoils in transport, over thousands of miles. And since much of this food is grown with immense fossil-fuel input – in terms of fertilizer, pesticide and diesel transport fuel – there is also immense waste of fuel-derived energy in the production of the food that is consumed, as well as, ironically, in the mountains of food that is discarded. Finally, food waste is in the main discarded in ‘sanitary’ landfills, where, decomposing, it produces more waste – noxious methane gases which escape into the atmosphere and contribute to global climate change.

Food justice

Among the more promising ways that have been proposed to address the ‘perfect storm’ of hunger and waste are the various urban farming projects currently under way throughout the USA. Will Allen’s Growing Power in Milwaukee, to take one widely discussed example, seeks to address the ‘food desert’ problem by growing organically produced food for local consumption; it also provides unemployed people in the area with jobs and training.⁷ Urban farming represents, in this sense, one cogent response not just to noxious food but to the hollowing out and impoverishment of the city. The city of urban agriculture is a dense one, where previously abandoned plots are brought to cultivation, and urban space moves from pure abstraction – the void we see from a car window – to the urban retrofit bricolage in which we work and walk. If organic growing in urban space is politically framed by the attempt to knit local neighbourhoods together, it thus also points one way towards city spaces freed from the imperative of fossil fuel: both that of long-distance transport, but also that of social segregation made possible by the division and isolation of neighbourhoods (the space of urban farms is *occupied* space, not the empty space traced by freeways and parking lots).

However, urban farms are not without their problems or limits. Growing food is labour-intensive, and, unlike, say, marijuana, broccoli or beans do not guarantee generous profits to their growers.⁸ Local and federal grants are a help – but urban farms in the USA often operate on the knife edge of solvency. And some urban residents resent a seeming imperative to become, once again, what might seem like sharecroppers. (The Rev. Jesse Jackson has referred

to urban farm or garden projects as ‘bean patches’ – which in one sense is perfectly correct.⁹) The equation farming = impoverishment is a reality that needs to be confronted, but it certainly is true that only agribusiness executives (and some drug lords) nowadays get rich farming. Indeed, as the farmer Bren Smith has recently stressed, despite all the talk by the likes of Michael Pollan and Bill McKibben, sustainable organic farming – sustainable in the sense that the farmer can keep doing it over the long run – remains, for the most part, far more of a dream than a reality:

After the tools are put away, we head out to second and third jobs to keep our farms afloat. Ninety-one percent of all farm households rely on multiple sources of income. Health care, paying for our kids’ college, preparing for retirement? Not happening. With the overwhelming majority of American farmers operating at a loss – the median farm income was negative \$1453 in 2012 – farmers can barely keep the chickens fed and the lights on.¹⁰

In fact, as Smith points out, urban farms like Growing Power, despite doing good work in providing fresh food and education in their communities, are nonprofit operations not subject to the same constraints as a typical ‘independent’ small farmer. Growing Power itself, Smith notes, has received \$6.8 million in grants over the last five years.

Another social model of food justice is urban gleaning. Food banks and charity kitchens (for want of a better term) that collect unsold or ‘spoiled’ (but still edible) food, mainly from grocery chains but also from farms, present an alternative to the grow, dump and starve model current in the USA. Free meals currently provide nutrition for an ever-growing portion of the population. The weakness of the free distribution of surplus food lies, however, in its piecemeal nature: hungry people are not aided in a systematic way, but by local groups often dependent on voluntary labour whose availability may be limited. Selfless volunteers are not enough to ensure a regular supply of free meals to those who need them; to my knowledge the ‘food stamp’ system, back when its purpose was to distribute surplus food, never directly subsidized kitchens. Indeed, this would present too much of a challenge to both the restaurant industry and grocery chains. As Bjerga notes, if agribusiness is the eleventh-ranked sector in Washington lobbying, ‘food processors and retailers are the biggest contributor to the segment’.¹¹

Somewhat less reputable than food distribution chains linked to churches and local charities

is the practice of dumpster diving, portrayed so well in Agnès Varda's 2000 film *The Gleaners and I*. Not without a certain romanticization, Varda's film depicts both the profoundly convivial nature of people gleaning together, but also the resistance of supermarket supervisors who (because of fear of lawsuits? fear of making possible the distribution of food outside the profit chain?) attempt to destroy food before it can be collected.¹² The appeal of 'gleaning' in Varda's sense is not only the distribution of free food to those who need it, but the seemingly subversive gesture of taking perfectly good food, consigned to the landfill for profit-oriented reasons, and its sharing among people who have been excluded from the capitalist system of prosperity. At least one 'gleaner' in Varda's film sees his life of scavenging as a critique of global capitalism and the associated pollution (he cites a major oil spill off the French coast). Nevertheless, gleaning as a critique of capitalism, if it is such, is fully dependent on it; unlike urban farmers, gleaners are necessarily dependent on the very system they critique. Without waste, harvested in tiny amounts both legally (food kitchens) and quasi-legally or illegally (dumpsters, waste piles), gleaning and scavenging as an alternative to buying would not work. Further, one can make the obvious observation – both for kitchens and for divers – that the food offered or consumed is entirely a function of the surplus or waste stream at the moment. If in a dumpster there are huge numbers of Doritos bags, and little else, then the divers-gleaners will be eating Doritos for quite a while.

Food futures

In positing the necessity of completely restructuring and rebuilding the world food system, Olivier de Schutter, for one, has argued strenuously against any continuation of the 'Green Revolution', which was, he suggests, an essentially top-down imperative to produce more food through technical innovation: more fossil-fuel-based fertilizer, hybridized crops, and, following this logic, genetically modified crops as well. Instead, he argues for the need for a fundamental renewal and rethinking of *local* agriculture, one not based on an increased mechanization of production that serves only to undercut local production and displace farmers from their land (forcing them into mega-cities), but one which would produce regional food *systems* linking scientific advances with 'agroecology'.¹³ This thus proceeds almost as if the distinction rural/urban has itself been effaced, in a

world that is saturated with the urban, and in which the urban, as a space of agriculture, as an open space of dereliction, abandonment and renewal (Detroit), has itself become rural in places.

Yet, as de Schutter himself has had to emphasize, since his model of agriculture cannot be top-down, it can only start with (local) individual as well as collective choices, taste and acts of production and consumption (growing your own, supporting CSAs, etc.).¹⁴ Such food politics are oral. One thinks of the successful craft beer renaissance of recent years: while the mega-breweries are consistently losing market share across the USA, a multitude of small breweries, experimenting in many cases with local ingredients, nibble away at their market share. While some would perceive this revolution in and of taste as a purely yuppie or hipster phenomenon, de Schutter would no doubt argue that a revolution of taste is also a prospective revolution of food, tied to a revolution in the relations of farmers to the land, and in the health of many people throughout the world – including those very farmers. In the end, from such a perspective, 'good food' will have to be inseparable from progressive political change, not simply a mark of gentrification.

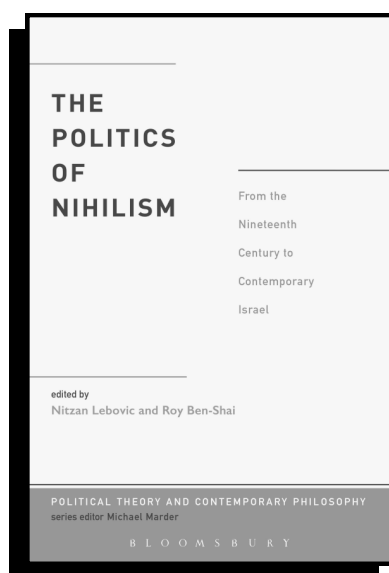
Yet, just as important as changes in eating habits and patterns is the need for political organization. If changes in patterns of eating and drinking can often be seen as little more than changes in consumers' preferences (even if the demand for good food in 'food deserts' is a challenge to American urban policy in general, based as it was for so many years on racist 'redlining'), the needed transformation of farming remains, above all, a profoundly political task. Bren Smith notes that the effective farmers' organizations of the 1880s, 1930s and 1970s – the American Agricultural Movement, the National Farmers' Union and the Colored Farmers' National Alliance – have faded. As Smith concludes, alongside 'guaranteed affordable health care' and the redistribution of subsidies away from 'factory farms', farmers 'need to take the lead in shaping a new food economy by building our own production hubs and distribution systems. And we need to support workers up and down the supply chain who are fighting for better wages so that their families can afford to buy the food we grow.'¹⁵ Motorcades of tractors shut down Washington DC in the late 1970s. Today, however, there is, it seems, only the kind of paralysis of organization that characterizes so much of contemporary American political life.

Notes

1. See, for example, Michael Pollan, 'Six Rules for Eating Wisely', *Time*, 4 June 2006, <http://michaelpollan.com/articles-archive/six-rules-for-eating-wisely>. For Pollan a 'food product' is not really food at all, but a packaged mix of calorie-intense edible elements (usually derived from corn or soy) processed (to guarantee intense salty or sweet flavor and long shelf life) with a myriad of chemicals.
2. On the myriad links between subsidized agribusiness and the US Department of Agriculture, see Philip Mattera, *USDA Inc.: How Agribusiness Has Hijacked Regulatory Policy at the US Dept. of Agriculture*, Agribusiness Accountability Initiative, Washington DC, 2004.
3. Since 2008, there are no longer booklets of coupons ('stamps') that are to be spent as money, but cards that are swiped at the checkout.
4. It should also be conceded that junk food often 'tastes better', since it is engineered to appeal to one's cravings for salt or sugar. While nutritionally challenged, junk food is calorie-intense, thus giving one a sense of 'being full' for not a lot of money.
5. See Alan Bjerga, 'Food Stamp Restrictions Being Debated: Unlikely Alliances Oppose Ban on Junk Food Purchases', *Bloomberg News*, 9 December 2013, www.vnews.com/news/nation/world/9715479-95/food-stamp-restrictions-being-debated.
6. See Michael Hiltzik, 'Wal-Mart's Dependence on Food Stamps, Revealed', *Los Angeles Times*, 24 March 2014.
7. See Alfonso Morales, 'Growing Food and Justice: Dismantling Racism through Sustainable Food Systems', in Alison Hope Alkon and Julian Agyeman, eds, *Cultivating Food Justice: Race, Class and Sustainability*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 2011, pp. 150–76; and on Growing Power, in particular, pp. 156–8.
8. Which leads to the obvious question: what will happen to urban farming when recreational marijuana is legalized throughout the USA (as it is today in Colorado and Washington state)? Will farmers automatically follow the cash?
9. See Jonathan Oosting, 'Jesse Jackson on Urban Farming: Detroit Needs Investment and Industry – "not bean patches"', *Mlive*, 8 September 2010, www.mlive.com/news/detroit/index.ssf/2010/09/jesse_jackson_on_urban_farming.html.
10. Bren Smith, 'Don't Let Your Children Grow Up to Be Farmers', *New York Times*, 9 August 2014, www.nytimes.com/2014/08/10/opinion/sunday/dont-let-your-children-grow-up-to-be-farmers.html?_r=0.
11. See Bjerga, 'Food Stamp Restrictions Being Debated'.
12. In at least one instance, in the UK, there have been (ultimately abandoned) moves to prosecute gleaners for 'theft' – in this case, three men caught taking discarded food from bins outside the supermarket chain Iceland. See the report in the *Guardian*, www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/jan/29/prosecutors-drop-case-men-food-iceland-bins.
13. See Olivier De Schutter and Kaitlin Y. Cordes, *Accounting for Hunger: The Right to Food in the Era of Globalisation*, Hart Publishing, Oxford, 2011. Vandana Shiva has made similar arguments, and has been engaged politically in comparable ways, in India. See Vandana Shiva, *Soil Not Oil: Environmental Justice in an Age of Climate Crisis*, South End Press, Cambridge MA, 2008.
14. A CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) is a food plan in which consumers pay a certain sum, typically by the month, to receive a specified amount of locally grown produce from a local farm. See 'Community Supported Agriculture', *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Community_supported_agriculture.
15. Smith, 'Don't Let Your Children Grow Up to Be Farmers'.

"A major contribution to critical studies."

- Simon Critchley, New School for Social Research, USA



THE POLITICS OF NIHILISM

From the Nineteenth Century to Contemporary Israel

Edited by Nitzan Lebovic and Roy Ben-Shai

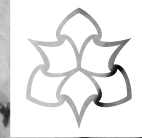
"Combining precision, erudition and intellectual commitment, *The Politics of Nihilism* makes a convincing case... A lucidly argued and greatly enriching book." - Vivian Liska, *University of Antwerp, Belgium*

"The result of seminal work done by a group of Israeli intellectuals and philosophers who are sensible to the problem of equality of citizens." - Gianni Vattimo, *University of Turin, Italy*

Use the discount **NIHILISM20** at the checkout of bloomsbury.com. Valid until 30 April 2015

20%
OFF

The University for
World-Class Professionals



Manchester
Metropolitan
University

MA European Philosophy **MA European Philosophy (Aesthetics)**

Thinking the possible, challenging the actual.

Online distance learning available. Applications open for scholarships

Visit our Postgraduate Fair on Wednesday 3 June

Find out more: mmu.ac.uk/hlss/postgrad/rp
Or e-mail: postgradphilosophy@mmu.ac.uk

Faculty of Humanities, Languages & Social Science