

The Neoliberal Diet: Fattening Profits and People

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The United States rose to world-power status partly thanks to modern industrial agriculture, and it boasts the most profitable and successful agribusiness multinationals involved in the production and processing of agricultural and food products. But this system also exacerbates what we term the “neoliberal diet,” which is largely composed of “energy-dense” foods with high contents of fat and empty calories with low nutritional value (Drewnowski and Specter 2004, Drewnowski and Darmon. 2005) – commonly called: “junk food.” This diet is strongly correlated with negative health impacts derived from overweight and obesity, such as diabetes, heart disease, and several types of cancer. According to the Institute of Medicine, the United States spends between \$150 billion and \$190 billion a year on obesity-related illnesses (Howard, 2012:13), which is clearly unsustainable. Indeed, the neoliberal diet could be chiefly responsible for the current trend that the present generation of children will be the first to have a lower life expectancy than their parents. Moreover, the neoliberal diet is not affecting U.S. citizens equally. Rather, while upper-income groups are seeing increasing access to higher-quality foods, including imported fruits, vegetables, wines and other alcoholic beverages (Otero, Pechlaner & Gürcan, forthcoming), the poor’s diets are being increasingly narrowed to the nutritionally bereft “junk foods.” The poor are thus also afflicted with a disproportionate amount of obesity and diet-related disease (Dixon 2009, Drewnowski 2009, Thirlaway and Upton 2009).

This chapter outlines how diets have become increasingly differentiated by class and other socioeconomic strata in the United States. In the first section, we address the theoretical ‘structure’ versus ‘agency’ debate about obesity, contrasting the personal-responsibility perspective touted in Michael Pollan’s highly celebrated *The Omnivor’s Dilemma* (2006) against the more structural interpretations, such as that brought forth by Julie Guthman (2003, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c, 2011). The second section provides a statistical analysis of macro data from the United Nations’ Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) on how the US diet has evolved since the 1960s to a much greater emphasis on fats and high-caloric foods. Last, we connect inequality and diet as a means of linking the negative health impacts of the current food system to public policy.

Characterizing and resolving the problems of agri-industrialization

Michael Pollan’s (2006) *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* reached critical acclaim over his account of the negative implications of U.S. agri-industrialization and supermarketization of food. In response to the dysfunctions of this system, Pollan argues that eating is not simply about sustenance or pleasure, but an agricultural, ecological and political act (Pollan, 2006: 11). Hence he calls for us to “eat in full consciousness of everything involved in feeding” (2006: 9) and conduct ourselves accordingly. Pollan doesn’t completely reject the industrial food system – which, despite its flaws, has provided us with abundant food – but he suggests that individuals must apply their greater consciousness of food production to finding a middle ground between the industrial, the organic and the hunter-gatherer food systems. Without this consciousness, people have

been vulnerable to the powerful manipulations of the agrifood industry, to their significant detriment.

To make his point, Pollan unravels the negative implications of various features of contemporary food systems, such as the prominence of corn. Corn's importance to the food industry is well documented, from its importance in feed for meat, dairy and egg production, to its infinite flexibility as an ingredient as a starch, flour, oil, and sweetener. Given that humans have limits on our capacities for consumption – no matter how we stretch it – agribusiness had to turn to processing as the means to maintain profit making. Processed food is highly profitable – as evidenced by the proliferation of fast food chains, and sales of packaged food and soft drinks world-wide (Howard 2012) – and corn in all its manifestations is an integral part of processed food:

Corn is in the coffee whitener and Cheez Whiz, the frozen yogurt and TV dinner, the canned fruit and ketchup and candies, the soups and snacks and cake mixes, the frosting and gravy and frozen waffles, the syrups and hot sauces, the mayonnaise and mustard, the hot dogs and the bologna, the margarine and shortening, the salad dressings and the relishes and even the vitamins. (Pollan 2006:19)

Corn consequently constitutes one of the major sources of the obesity problem (Pollan, 2006: 101-103). Furthermore, this corn monoculture has not only been popularized by such agrifood monopolies as Cargill and ADM, but it has been enabled by a wide array of government subsidies and policy supports. It is through government intervention that corn sweeteners became less expensive than sugar, through mechanisms such as “investments in public research that raised yields for corn, sugar production

allotments and trade restrictions, and subsidies for corn production” (Morrison, Buzby and Wells, USD ERS, 2010:17), with a dramatic increase in availability of sweeteners (from 113.2 to 136.3 pounds per person between 1924 and 1974, excluding the war years). Not surprisingly, this has facilitated the production of cheap, sugar-based processed foods and beverages. In just since the late 1970s, for example, the per capita availability of soft drinks has increased from 22 to 52 gallons (American Beverage Association, 2008: 3, 4, as cited in Ha et al 2009: 50). Soft drinks are only the most blatant of a long range of sugar-based and sugar-enhanced processed foods.

Corn is one specific issue under the broader umbrella of what has been labelled the “nutritional transition” (Drewnowski et al. 1997) which is marked by the greater availability of cheap vegetable oils and fats, not only in the United States but globally. At all points, this transition is not only driven by agrifood interests but finds significant government support. Even the “production and export of vegetable oils are promoted through direct subsidies, credit guarantees, food aid, and market development programs” (Drewnowski and Popkin 1997:34). Freeman (2007) argues that government supports play heavily in shoring up the profitability of the fast food industry, through mechanisms such as “subsidies for animal feed, sugar and fats,” without which, “the price of a typical fast food meal would triple” (Freeman 2007: 2242, citing Sams, 2004: 43).

While Pollan provides a convincing critique of agri-food industrialization and supermarketization, his individualistic stance on resolving the food system’s problems overemphasizes individual responsibility and underemphasizes structural fixes, such as the crucial role of state regulation. Pollan also neglects socioeconomic differences in the negative impacts of the modern food system which highlight the limitations of an

individual-based resolution (Dixon 2009; Guthman and DuPuis 2006). This leads him to the naïve and anti-statist idea that the current agrifood regime can be altered individually “one meal at a time,” which understates any collective efforts for genuine structural change (Guthman, 2007b: 263-264; Guthman, 2007a: 78).

Guthman’s (2011) *Weighing in: obesity, food justice, and the limits of capitalism* critiques Pollan’s individualistic and consumer-centred account, emphasizing his failure to adequately address inequality in the food system (Guthman, 2011: 5, 9). Guthman makes a strong case that current problems in our food systems have to do with the nature of capitalism (Guthman, 2011: 16). While Pollan effectively identifies numerous problems with the modern agriculture and food system, this is only half the equation. His weakness is the second half – resolution. Guthman’s analysis is more promising in this regard. For Guthman, neither buying organic produce to influence the market nor educating people to eat more fresh fruits, vegetables and organic produce will be sufficient to challenge powerful economic interests (Guthman, 2011: 5, 17).

According to Guthman, powerful economic interests of capitalists in conjunction with government policy choices have transformed the food system into its current, socially problematic, form.

...fast and convenient food has been a triply good fix for American capitalism. It entails the super-exploitation of the labor force in its production, it provides cheap food to support the low wages of the food and other industries by feeding their low-wage workers, and it absorbs the surpluses of the agricultural economy, soaking up . . . the excesses of

overproduction to keep the farm sector marginally viable (Guthman, 2011: 177).

Consequently, buying cheap, fat- and oil-rich food cannot be reduced to a ‘lifestyle’ choice, as this neglects that the “current policy environment is a result of political choices, not consumption choices (Guthnam, 2011: 194). In fact, Guthman argues that the mainstream of the alternative food movement – of which Pollan is a major proponent – exhibits a colonial attitude with a “civilizing” mission to educate people on how to eat, without addressing the major negative effects of agrarian restructuring under neoliberalism. In contrast, Guthman demands active state intervention that targets not only inequalities in quality food access, but also broadly confronts capitalism, given that:

The systematic production of inequality has taken place not only through farm and food policy but also through trade, labor, immigration, health care, economic development, taxation, and financial policy—in other words, just about all policies that have kept American capitalism (barely) afloat. (Guthman, 2011: 196)

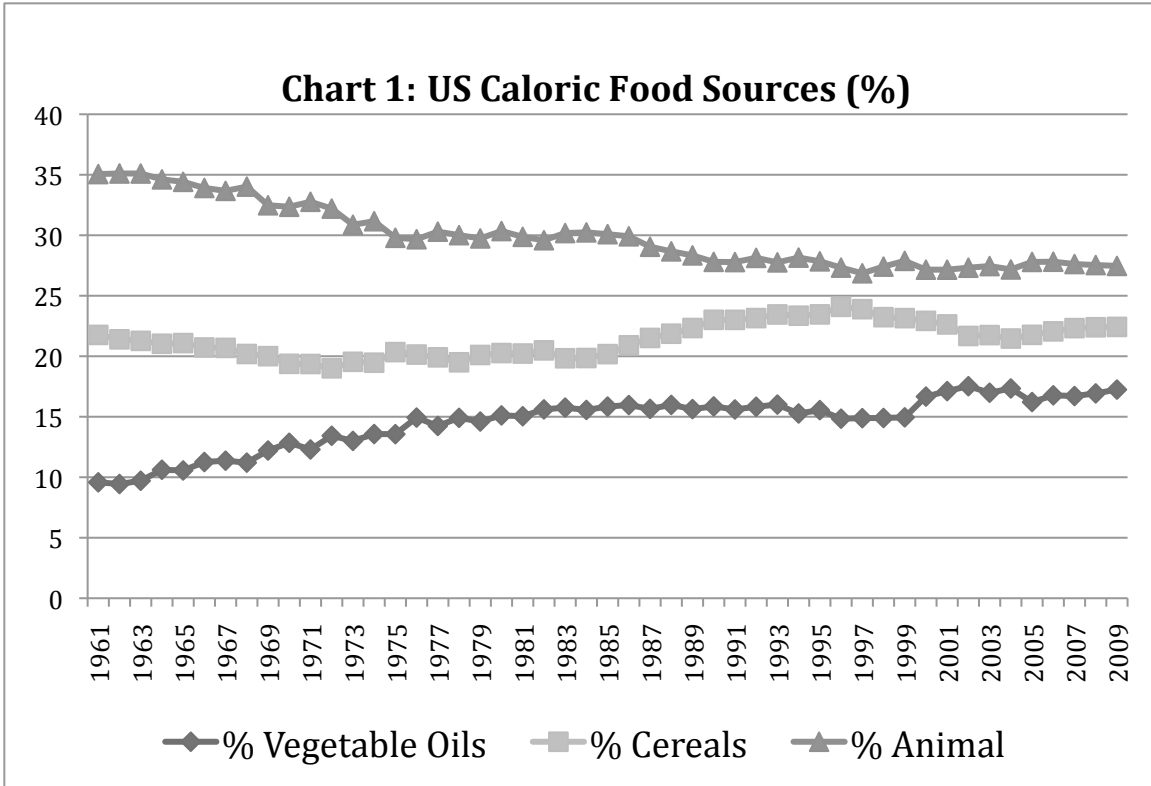
This could occur, for example, through transparent public-private partnerships and radical governance mechanisms that would induce “more collectivist subjects,” rather than mere atomized and disempowered consumers (Guthman, 2007c: 473-474; Guthman and DuPuis, 2006: 442).

Before we assess the disproportionate impacts of poverty on nutrition further, we will first turn to the historical transition of the American diet.

Evolution of Caloric Content in the US Diet, 1961-2009

Between 1961 and 2009, there has been a 28 percent increase in per capita food intake in the United States. A slight dip occurred starting in 2007, coinciding with the global food-inflation crisis. This crisis has made even the US working classes vulnerable to the food insecurity that comes from food price fluctuations, although nothing comparable to that which occurs in developing countries.

Chart 1 depicts the relative rise/decline in the percentage contribution of the three main food sources to total daily per capita caloric intake in the United States. The absolute amounts of each component varied at different rates, with animal products remaining fairly stable throughout the period. Caloric contribution from cereals, however, increased from 627 kilocalories per capita per day in 1961 to 827 by 2009. While the percentage of cereals intake has remained roughly stable, absolute amounts of food intake have increased by 24%. Therefore, cereals, particularly the refined kind, have played a key role in the neoliberal diet (see Chart 2). Calories from refined flour are digested promptly, thus contributing to fat build-up in the body; while others coming from complex carbohydrates take longer to digest and are then eliminated via the small intestine (Howard, 2012:7).



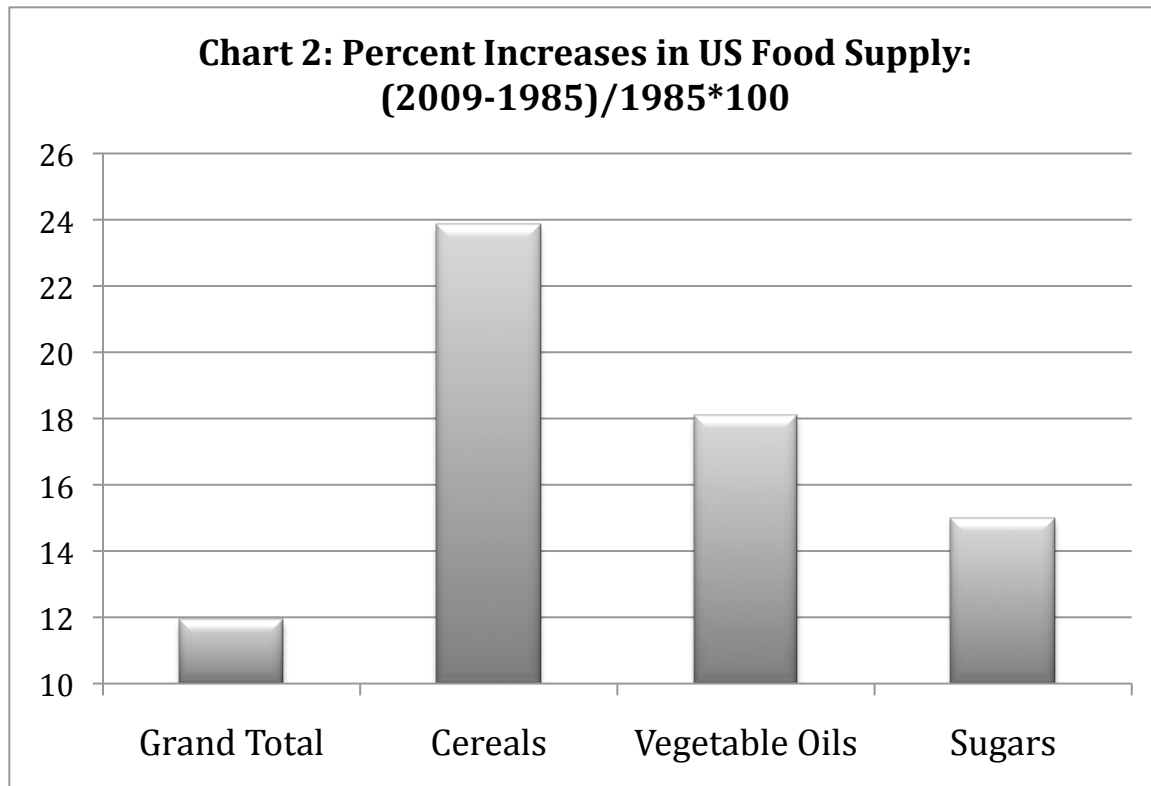
Source for the three charts: Constructed with data from FAOSTAT, available at:

<http://faostat.fao.org/site/609/DesktopDefault.aspx?PageID=609#ancor> (last accessed: 23

January 2013) and

<http://faostat.fao.org/site/610/DesktopDefault.aspx?PageID=610#ancor> (last accessed: 27

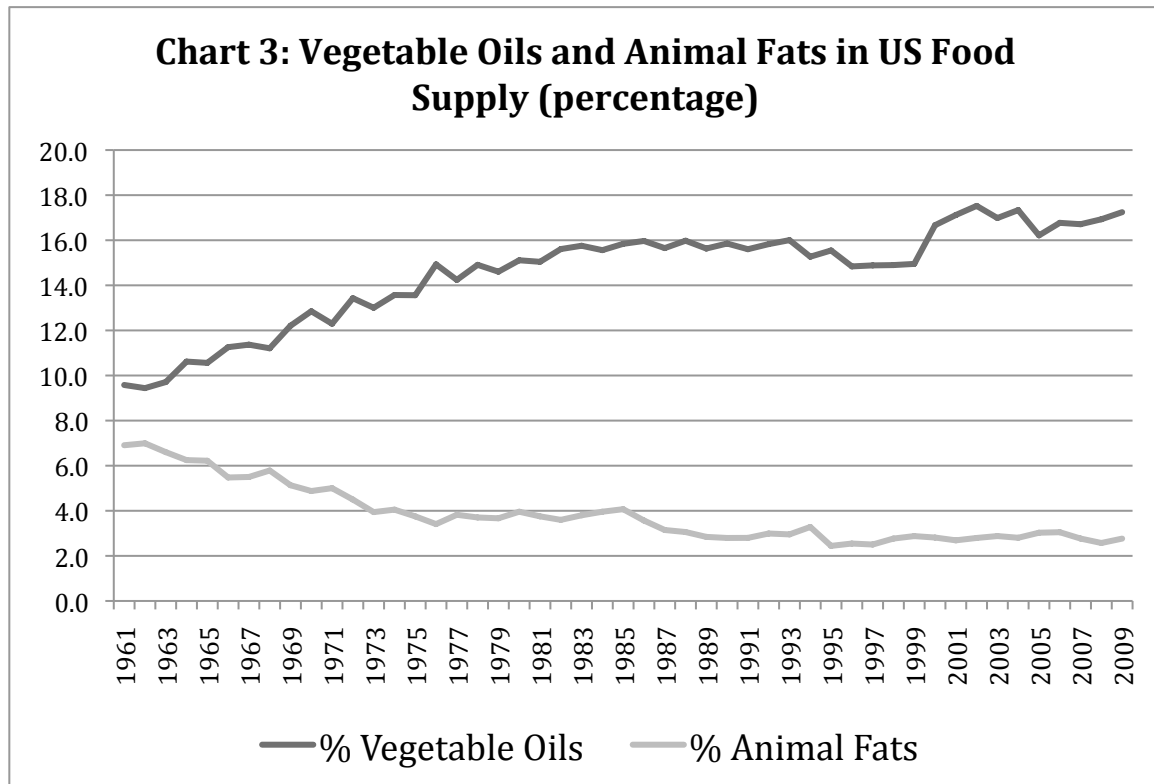
January 2013).



Source: Constructed with data from FAOSTAT, available at:

<http://faostat.fao.org/site/609/DesktopDefault.aspx?PageID=609#ancor> (last accessed: 23 January 2013).

Chart 3 breaks down the percent contribution to the food supply by each of the two main sources of fat – animal fat and vegetable oils – and show a dramatic dietary change between 1961 and 2009. While animal fats used to make up about seven percent of the US total daily caloric intake per capita, this proportion had declined to three percent by 2009. Conversely, the contribution of vegetable oils spiked to almost twice, from 9.6 to 17.2 percent in the same period. Absolute amounts of food intake from these categories of fat followed similar trajectories. Animal fats declined from contributing 199 kilocalories per capita per day in 1961 to only 102 kilocalories by 2009. Conversely, the contribution by vegetable oils more than doubled from 276 kilocalories per capita per day in 1961 to 636 by 2009.



Source: Constructed with data from FAOSTAT, available at: (last accessed: 24 January 2013) <http://faostat.fao.org/site/610/DesktopDefault.aspx?PageID=610#ancor>.

From the above we see that in relative or percentage terms, only the increase of vegetable oils is dramatic in relation to total food intake. This is clear evidence of the “nutrition transition,” i.e., a diet heavy on fats and calories, with added salt for enhanced taste.

Given these changes in the US diet, we need to consider how this national dietary transition could disproportionately affect the poor in the United States. In part of a larger study that compares North American countries with emerging economies, the authors have initiated development of a “junk-food-risk index” (JFI), which affects particularly the poor. The details of the JFI are beyond the scope of this chapter, but it is constructed

as the average of five percentage measures: food-import dependency, the Gini coefficient, the food-uniformity index (Otero, Pechlaner and Gürcan, forthcoming a), the rate of urbanization, and economic-globalization rates of change (Otero, Pechlaner and Gürcan, forthcoming b). Preliminary results indicate that the JFI for the United States increased from 36 in 1985 to 40 in 2007 (Otero, Pechlaner and Gürcan, n.d.). This indicates that the risk of junk food comes from well before 1985 and there is much evidence to support the disproportionate negative impact of the dietary transition by socioeconomic class.

Socio-Economic Determinants of Diet

In accordance with Guthman, we find that while heralding important issues with the modern food system, Pollan's individualistic approach neglects the fact that the current food regime is strongly marked by class differences. For example, while the wealthy access a rising organic sector that concentrates on providing them with luxury and anti-oxidant-rich "functional food" (Dixon, 2009), the poor are relegated to cheap, energy-dense "junk foods" associated with the proliferation of obesity. In short, access to specific foods tends to be closely related to people's class, race and gender background (Guthman, 2011: 174, 177).

The social and economic stratification of diets argued by Guthman finds much resonance in the current literature on the topic, with significant scholarly support for the correlation between various socioeconomic-related variables and diet (Darmon and Drewnowski, 2008; Dixon 2009; Drewnowski 2009; Harirington, Fitzgerald, et al. 2011; Lee 2011; Pickett et al, 2005, cited in Dean and Sharkey 2011: 3; Thirlaway and Upton,

2009). Drawing on an extensive review of existing literature, Lee (2011), for example, concludes that social inequality is closely linked to the question of obesity in the United States at the individual-, family-, school-, and neighborhood-levels. While the reasons behind this socioeconomic class difference are less straightforward, a number of key variables have been identified, such as cost, education, and access.

Most notably, “junk food” is usually cheaper than fresh fruits and vegetables. Thus, “a person with a limited income will find it more cost effective to buy five packets of macaroni and cheese for five dollars versus one bag of organic mixed green salad at the same price” (Lee, 2011: 220). Simply stated, higher-calorie food provides a greater satiation ‘bang’ for the buck. This simple economics stands even without the added issue of “stress induced eating” by people in chronic poverty reacting to end-of-the-month type food shortages: “when money runs low-income individuals may restrict their food consumption and then binge on energy-dense food when money is available” (Lee, 2011: 220).

Good food not only costs more, but it also may be more difficult to access by the poor. A number of studies have shown poor neighborhoods are disproportionately less likely to have food outlets – such as supermarkets and chain stores – which stock affordable, healthy, food. Morland et al. (2002), for example, found that wealthier neighborhoods had 3 times as many supermarkets, and fewer neighborhood grocery and convenience stores (which are more likely to stock processed items) than lower income neighborhoods (2002:27). Rose and Richards (2004) concluded that neighborhood food availability, such as ease of access to supermarkets, was a significant factor in determining household fruit consumption in low-income populations in the United States.

There is also evidence that even the poor quality food that is available in low-income neighborhoods actually costs more than it does in other neighborhoods. In part, this is a consequence of the lack of access to chain stores, indicated above. Chung and Myers (1999), for example, found the lack of large chain stores to be a significant factor in the higher grocery costs for those in poor neighborhoods. But it is not solely an access issue. There are also indications of racial disparities in access to good food (Morland et al., 2002; Block et al, 2004). Block et al. (2004), for example, found that “neighborhoods with 80% black residents had 2.4 fast food restaurants per square mile compared to 1.5 restaurants per square mile in neighborhoods with 20% black residents” (2004: 214). The percentage of black residents was an even more powerful predictor of fast food restaurants than median household income.

Another key factor is the concerted effort by processed-food companies to privilege taste over nutrition. In a seminal exposé, *New York Times* investigative reporter Michael Moss describes how the industry has used a “scientific” approach to optimize foods geared to reach a combination of the “bliss point” and “mouth feel” that creates addiction. “Don’t talk to me about nutrition,” said the CEO of General Mills: “Talk to me about taste, and if this stuff tastes better, don’t run around trying to sell stuff that doesn’t taste good” (Moss, 2013:37). In the potato chip, for instance: “The coating of salt, the fat content that rewards the brain with instant feelings of pleasure, the sugar that exists not as an additive but in the starch of the potato itself – all of this combine to make it the perfect addictive food” (47). Moss consulted industry studies, some of them secret, that identified one particularly promising market: the “rapidly growing Hispanic and African-

American communities” (2013:38). It’s never been about nutrition, but always about how to make people like the junk food to sell more.

These studies suggest significant evidence of diet as a social justice issue. In fact, there is so much evidence of the structural dietary difference that Andrea Freeman (2007) coined the term “food oppression” arguing that it indicates a “form of structural subordination” given that “government support of the fast food industry severely limits dietary choices for low-income, urban African Americans and Latinos” (Freeman, 2007: 2245). In the context of the structured nature of nutrition relations, it is hard to maintain support for Pollan’s individualistic approach to dietary reform.

Conclusion: Poverty and the Future of Nutrition

We have seen here a confirmation of the historical transition to a high fat, salt, and sugar diet in the United States, with strong support that this transition is subject to significant socioeconomic stratification, with substantial health repercussions enacted on the poor and minority populations of the nation. Without significant state intervention, all indications are that this trajectory is clearly on the increase. Any approach to reform the agrifood system that neglects this structural element is not only woefully inadequate, but also dangerously neglectful of significant social-justice issues.

Given the apparent synchronicity between government and industry economic goals, “food oppression” is very difficult to address (Freeman, 2007: 2245). Simply “encouraging low-income families to consume healthier but more costly foods” indeed seems like “an elitist approach to public health” (Drewnowski & Darmon, 2005: 265S). Even taxing unhealthy foods, as a disincentive to their purchase, in this context is equally

regressive, although subsidizing healthy foods for the poor could be a more progressive means of achieving the same result. Whatever the tack, improvement clearly requires significant input from the same policy forces that helped to form the U.S. food system to its current, socially problematic state.

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