Battling Big Food:

"The Failure of Fast Food Reform in the U.S."

Name: Geeskelien van der Veen
Stud. No: 1801643
Course: MA Thesis American Studies
Code: LAX999M20
Credits: 20 ECTS
Supervisor: Prof. W.M. Verhoeven
2nd reader: Dr. M. Messmer
Date: July 28, 2014
Words: 16,127
## Contents

Introduction .................................................. 3

I: Local Efforts:  
First Steps in Food Reform? .............................. 10

II: Potential Changes in the Social Economy of Food:  
The Role of the Organic Movement and Slow Food in the U.S. ........................................... 21

III: The Influence of Public Figures in a Neoliberal Food Climate:  
Michael Pollan, Michelle Obama, and Jamie Oliver .................................................. 33

Conclusions ................................................... 46

Bibliography .................................................... 50
Introduction

***

At the moment, more than one third of adult Americans are overweight.\(^1\) Bodyweight in the U.S. has been rising since the 1970s, and continues to increase today.\(^2\) Recently, scientists discovered that a "fat gene" can be the cause of weight issues, and medical solutions are sought to tackle the genetic source behind obesity.\(^3\) If this is the case, how come it is mainly people in the U.S. that suffer from obesity and possible gene related weight issues, and percentages of obesity are lower in, for instance, Japan and Mediterranean countries? Nevertheless, for now, research shows that the majority of obesity cases in the U.S. cannot be explained by this newly discovered "fat gene," and therefore no wonder pill can cure America's obesity problem (yet). For some ethnic groups, however, the switch from their traditional diet to the all-American diet is often disastrous. For example, the indigenous Pima from Arizona are genetically more at risk for health issues if they exchange their traditional eating habits for an American diet.\(^4\) But this example only shows that while genes play a part in the health issues of some, I argue that the American diet and lifestyle are the main reasons why a great number of people in the U.S. are obese. As many scholars also have pointed to, the human body has not evolved that much over the past century, while the lifestyle of Americans has changed drastically.\(^5\) During the past thirty years, calorie intake has increased due to a change in agricultural policy and in food preparation. Food policies in the 1970s made calories cheap and homemade meals were replaced by less nutritious (fast food) meals that are eaten outside the home.\(^6\) Ever since the 1970s, the sales of ready-made microwave meals or take-out dinners

---


\(^5\) Ibid.

increased drastically. At the same time, the use of the kitchen declined significantly with the introduction of the microwave. To illustrate the American fondness of convenience foods: more than 80 percent of American families use a microwave to heat up food, while only 12 percent of Italians own a microwave. Due to a problematic food system, created by failing food policies of the 1970s, and this drastic change in eating habits, the American diet became increasingly unhealthy.

Problems in the American food culture are well acknowledged by the government, scholars and the public and, this past decade, many requests for change have arisen because of this awareness. At this juncture, Michael Pollan argues that a change in the nation's food culture is near. In early 2008, he predicted that a "food culture revolution" will occur in the U.S. In his writings, Pollan hints at a revolt against the nation's dominant food culture: that is, fast food and industrial food. In his view, the popularity and expansion of oppositional and alternative food movements such as local, organic, and sustainable food play a large role in a possible upcoming food culture change. Around the same time, President Obama already announced that he was willing to make changes in the nation's food policies. As to be expected, Pollan and other food reform advocates were optimistic about change with the prospect of a progressive president, in combination with the grassroots initiatives that were springing up. However, for reform movements to flourish, apart from presidential support, the entire hegemonic process in American society needs to transform before a significant change in the food system can be visible. In other words, change on a political, economic, and a cultural level is needed before America's food culture can change.

Because hegemonic structures in U.S. society have given rise to fast food culture in the first place, these conditions need to change before there will be a food revolution. The term hegemony,
important in Marxist political theory, is often used to describe dominant forces in society. Dominant political, economic and social thoughts are all part of the hegemonic process. In order to alter the dominant system that is in place, changes in all three of these areas need to be made. The theory of Raymond Williams suggests that changes in society take place gradually. Central to Williams' cultural analyses is that "in any society, in any particular period, there is a central system of practices, meanings and values, which we can properly call dominant and effective." Moreover, Williams asserts that cultural changes occur through the process of selective traditions, "[where] certain meanings and practices are selected for emphasis and certain other meanings and practices are neglected or excluded." Williams' process of selection and exclusion explains how ideas and innovations eventually are adopted into society. To understand the process of incorporation of cultures in society, Williams differentiates between the notions of "traditions, institutions, and formations." Williams argues that traditions are shaped by the dominant forces in society. Tradition as the "evident expression of the dominant and hegemonic pressures" is established through the practice of selection and exclusion of certain values and beliefs. Traditions in society "depend on identifiable institutions," such as governments and the industry for instance, as well as on "effective movements and tendencies" that Williams calls formations. In this cultural process, alternative movements are either part of a residual or emergent form of culture. The theoretical model thus shows that traditions in society can only be changed if the whole cultural process will transform. The entire food industry revolves around fast food, and agricultural policies only reinforce this structure. This food environment has subsequently shaped the way Americans buy food and how they eat.

In the U.S., neo-liberalism is dominant in socio-political and economic thought. Although many other countries have embraced neoliberal thought as well, neoliberal principles of freedom

---

14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid., 117.
17 Ibid., 122.
and individuality are especially important in American society. As David Harvey argues, for any socio-political thought to become hegemonic and accepted, it has to resonate with the cultural values of society. Yet, while many U.S. citizens might praise liberty and individual power, a neoliberal climate also entails corporate power and little governmental interference—which is not per se beneficial for the common man and the less well-off. Especially in the midst of the American food crisis, the neo-liberal environment can be a burden for the public. Many critics even contend that this model has created many of today's food issues. Garrett Broad notes that "[t]he hegemonic theory of neo-liberalism proposes that human well-being is best achieved in a global capitalist system that eliminates state intervention in social and institutional life in favor of a commitment to entrepreneurial freedoms, market-based solutions, and the power of consumer choice." This thought suggests that consumers influence the supply of food. However, it is the industry that floods the market with cheap fast food. Consumers in the U.S. are only able to eat differently if they have the means to do so. Also, the work ethic and the long hours Americans put into paid jobs, have created a market for quick and easy food. Thus although consumers have the freedom to buy anything they want, they are pushed toward a particular (unhealthy) choice by the industry.

The American food system, as it exists today, has been largely formed by agricultural policies of the 1970s. Ever since this era, calories became cheap and large quantities of food became the standard. Due to the free market policies that are in place, the industry is not being addressed to stop motivate over eating. During the past years, local governments and groups try to reform federal food polices that challenge the problematic food system that influences the nation's health. Reform advocates in New York and California have tried to toughen food regulations for the

---

22 Pollan, "Food Movement Rising."
food industry by proposing several new health bills. Mayor Michael Bloomberg has turned to food regulation as a measure to curb the calorie, sugar, and fat intake for New Yorkers. Also, in California reform groups attempt to demand the labeling of genetically modified foods. Although innovations in policy such as these have the ability to alter the food environment, they encounter a lot of resistance from both the public and the industry because both parties see these proposed regulations as a restriction of freedom.

In addition to reform policies, alternative food movements and counter responses to the current food system have also become more visible in the past years. Alternative movements such as the Organic Movement and Slow Food act in response to the expansion of the fast food industry. As major player in the field of industrial food, McDonald’s symbolizes the American food culture at large. Although many critics claim that America has no food identity, fast food has been a stable and dominant factor in American food culture. Launched in the 1950s, fast food was hailed as the new way of eating: an easy, cheap, and quick way of dining that replaced many authentic immigrant dishes and "traditional" restaurants. Apart from the homogenization of the American meal, the Californian food trend is also responsible for creating an entirely new food system. During the 1980s, sociologist George Ritzer explained this process as the "McDonaldization” of the (global) industrial food system. For the Organic Movement and Slow Food, food production in harmony with nature as well as human health is important. In addition, Slow Food also argues for attentive eating, instead of snacking-on-the-go. Although counter responses to fast food are popular, the original organic philosophy and Slow Food's principles are very different from the consumer lifestyle of Americans and the current food system. Therefore, they remain marginal cultures while

24 The term McDonaldization, coined by George Ritzer in 1993, is “the process by which the principles of fast-food restaurants are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world.” In other words, the restaurant functions as a factory plant; an assembly line produces a product of, often, poor quality and cheap ingredients. The term is important for understanding the enormous impact the business model of McDonald's has on the U.S. food system from the 1950s onwards. The process not only entails fast food businesses, but has also formed the basis for today's conventional food industry, in George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society*, Revised New Century Edition (Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press, 2004),4.
fast food continues to be part of the dominant American culture. While political reform initiatives and alternative food movements have difficulties to expand and become accepted, Michael Pollan, Michelle Obama, and Jamie Oliver support both these political and cultural movements with their food reform agendas. While part of their program is to address the industry and the government, the majority of their work focuses on helping the individual make better and healthier choices. Although their attention to food issues is welcomed by many food reformers, some scholars argue that it is a false pretence to assert that consumers have the ability to create a food revolution. That being said, a focus solely on the inadequacy of the industry and the government, instead of wrong consumer choices, is also difficult. The economic interests in food are prioritized by the government, instead of public health or the general well-being of the nation. Thus an approach that is focused on changing political and economic structures is likely to encounter resistance by the hegemonic culture. The food reform plans of these public figures offer an understanding of food transformation efforts in a neoliberal climate where food choices are passed off as the responsibility of the individual.

Throughout this dissertation, I argue that Pollan's food culture revolution is not yet underway. To demonstrate my argument, I take into account the many food reform attempts and actions that have come to the fore this past decade. The three pillars (political, economic, and cultural) that ultimately shape the nation's system of food production and consumption need to significantly shift in order to initiate food reform. However, as this dissertation will show, currently, there is too little movement within these pillars. For instance, the all-American culture of free-market ideologies, and freedom of choice both promote fast food culture and keep the existing food structures in place. The nation's labor divisions as well as the availability of convenience food, meals on the go, and large portions are all obstacles in changing the nation's food culture from fast food to new food cultures that focus on taking the time to eat well and healthy. Difficulties to

enforce healthier food policies show that the hegemonic food system as well as dominant values, and eating habits in American society, are too powerful to counter. Even public figures such as Mrs. Obama are unable to use their popularity and influence to put pressure on corporate America and food policies. These examples show that the three pillars are deeply intertwined, and that the cultural ideologies have a strong impact on the political and economic landscape. The neoliberal environment prevents innovations to contribute to a sustainable transformation in the food system, because the notions of free market policies and freedom of choice are strongly connected with the nation's eating habits. Although many of these efforts are important steps toward a larger food culture transformation, for now, there are no signs of significant change in the nearby future.
I
Local Efforts:
First Steps in Food Reform?

***

In an effort to change the local food system of the city, Mayor Michael Bloomberg of New York City initiated a food reform plan to bring the overconsumption of sugar and fat to a halt in 2012. The program includes a controversial bill to ban large sodas from restaurants throughout the city. Bloomberg's initiative to improve the local food culture does not stand on its own. Over the past years, more local food reform initiatives have sprung up across the U.S. In California, the notorious process of genetically modifying foods was recently challenged by citizens groups. Opponents of genetically modified objects (GMO's) have proposed food reform initiative "Proposition 37" in an effort to change the current (local) food system by demanding labeling of the GM process on food products. These two examples of food reform initiatives are part of a larger discontentment with national food policy. The issues of the food system in the U.S. can largely be blamed on federal food policies as well as the food industry. For decades, the federal government has motivated agricultural surpluses. Due to a lack of restrictions for food companies, the U.S. food market is flooded with unhealthy foods. This chapter will show that the surplus of corn in particular has led to unhealthy eating habits because corn is the cornerstone of the nation's fast food industry. In addition to making America's food unhealthier, free market policies have allowed companies to promote these unhealthy foods in large sizes. To make matters worse, in 2013, President Obama even signed a protection bill to further defend the liberty of the grain company Monsanto for the upcoming years.

The local food reform initiatives in New York City and California are important because they try to chip away at the powerful position that fast food has in American society. Although these food reform initiatives create a momentum for change, they cannot bring about a substantial transformation in the American food system for now. The opposition from the industry as well as legal backset and public resistance toward Bloomberg's health program and Proposition 37 clearly reflect that it is difficult to modify the fast food business, the nation's liberal market principles, as well as thoughts on freedom of choice. Especially President Obama's new piece of legislation, that protects large food companies, shows that the problematic food policies, that empowered "Big Food" in the first place, are reinforced and this makes the prospect of food policy reform in the nearby future even more uncertain.\(^\text{30}\)

Both problematic agricultural policies and the lack of restrictions for the food industry have contributed to America's food issues. A key contributor to the nation's diet problems are agricultural subsidies: bad calories are promoted by the U.S. government. The tradition of cheap calories arises from a long history of supporting the production of grains, especially corn and soy. During the New Deal era, surpluses of these crops were kept off the market, to maintain an artificially steady high price for farmers.\(^\text{31}\) But after food prices skyrocketed in the 1970s, Richard Nixon radically changed the existing New Deal strategy in an attempt to drive down high food prices.\(^\text{32}\) By letting all the overproduced crops, such as corn, enter the market, and by paying farmers for their production surplus, prices were stabilized again.\(^\text{33}\) The subsidization of soy and corn, in order to keep food prizes low, thus has supplied the nation

\(^{30}\) C.A. Monteiro explains that "the term 'Big Food' refers to the transnational and other large corporations that increasingly control the production and distribution of ultra-processed products throughout the world. These products are created from substances extracted from whole foods such as the cheap parts or remnants of animals, inexpensive ingredients such as "refined" starches, sugars, fats and oils, preservatives, and other additives," in C.A. Monteiro, and G. Cannon, "The Impact of Transnational "Big Food" Companies on the South: A View from Brazil," \textit{PLoS Med} 9.7 (2012): 2.


\(^{32}\) Ibid.

\(^{33}\) Ibid.
with too much of these grains.\textsuperscript{34} The industry has taken full advantage of these agricultural policies. For instance, corn is a highly profitable raw material, because it is cheap and can be used as a main ingredient in many foods. Today, the starch and sugar from this inexpensive crop is processed in many industrially produced foods, from sodas to hamburgers. Cheap corn and its sugar, high-fructose corn syrup, are changed into "value-added commodities," as Pollan notes.\textsuperscript{35} As an added bonus, researchers in the 1950s discovered that corn "made everything sweeter, and extended shelf life from days to years."\textsuperscript{36} For these reasons, profitable corn has made it possible for Big Food to dominate the food system for years. The significant role that corn plays in the American food system shows that Nixon's former food policies have a strong influence on the nation's food culture. Moreover, studies reveal that obesity in the U.S., as a direct result of an increased calorie intake, has grown ever since Nixon radically changed the U.S. food policy in the 1970s.\textsuperscript{37} Thus the federal government as well as the food industry have set up the contemporary American food pattern, and therefore, both institutions have created a tradition where large portions at a low price became the norm. The food plan of the 1970s has contributed to the nation’s current unhealthy food tradition of overindulging in cheap calories, which ultimately has created rising numbers in obesity and other diet-related health issues.

While fast food meals have continued to grow in size, Mayor Michael Bloomberg aimed to change the pattern of overconsumption in his city by changing portion sizes, and informing the public about the negative effects of fast food meals. Since the introduction of fast food in the 1950s, portion sizes have only become larger. For instance, the largest hamburger at McDonald’s today is five times larger than a regular hamburger in 1955.\textsuperscript{38}

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{35} Pollan, “The Way We Live Now.” \\
\textsuperscript{36} Jacques Peretti, “Why is Our Food Making Us Fat?” \textit{The Guardian}, June 11, 2012. \\
\textsuperscript{37} Swinburn, “Global Obesity Pandemic,” 805-7. \\
\textsuperscript{38} Lisa R. Young and Marion Nestlé, “Portion Sizes and Obesity: Responses of Fast-Food Companies,” \textit{Journal}
\end{quote}
Clearly, these large portions of fries, burgers, and sodas are taking its toll on the human body. Higher than the national average, more than half of the New York population is obese, and suffers from diet-related illnesses such as diabetes and heart disease. The problem is that the food industry encourages consumers to buy the large "supersized" meals by making them relatively cheaper than small or regular meals. Thus the larger the menu item, the cheaper the calories get. Therefore, many would argue that Bloomberg is right to adjust patterns of New York's current food environment in order to minimize diet related diseases. By initiating innovative legislation, Bloomberg tries to adjust the food tradition of large portions and unhealthy calories that contribute to the city's diet related health issues.

Containing over a hundred grams of sugar per cup, the 32 ounce sodas that are sold in fast food restaurants are filled with empty calories and are the main contributors to obesity. Although many people deem themselves capable of making their own food choices, research shows that this is not the case: people are just buying what portion size is available at the counter, whether it is large or small. Thus if extremely large portions are not prohibited by the government, restaurants will continue to serve them and consumers will continue purchase excessively large drinks. To make consumers more aware of their calorie intake, Bloomberg demanded the labeling of calories on menus and food items in chain restaurants. Although it is generally known that fast food menus usually exceed the calorie intake of a "normal" meal (normal is around 500 calories, while an average fast food meal contains 1200 calories), research shows that many consumers still think too lightly about the amount of calories that

---


Ibid., 4.


are hidden in a fast food meal. Studies also reveal that calorie labeling can change the way people eat, because large groups of consumers are inclined to choose menus with less calories when they are provided with nutritional information.

Besides portion control, New York also bans trans-fats from food outlets, and restaurant menus in New York go one step further than just informing the public. The trans-fat ban makes New York City the first large city in the U.S. to limit saturated fat in restaurant meals to less than 0.5 percent. Bloomberg’s fat ban comes at a time when health experts stress that it important to avoid trans-fat because of their negative influence on arteries. In use since the early 1900s, hydrogenated vegetable oils are a popular substitute to animals fats (saturated fats) because they are relatively inexpensive and do not expire quickly. However, almost a decade later, research shows that both saturated fats as well as the (unsaturated) hydrogenated vegetable oils increase the risk of heart disease. Today, many processed food items and fast food meals in particular are rich in trans-fats. To add to that, Michelle Mello notes that more than thirty percent of meals in America are eaten at (chain) restaurants. This means that more than a large part of this food intake contains substantial amounts of trans-fats. By limiting the percentage of trans-fats per serving, the ban makes fast food in New York slightly healthier, and, therefore, the number of diet related illnesses can be significantly reduced by this measure.

The above mentioned health reform plans of Mayor Bloomberg are innovative, but his program is facing opposition. The soda ban in particular has encountered resistance from the food industry, many of his fellow New Yorkers, and also the court did not agree with

---

Bloomberg’s plans. The opposition shows that there is a shared belief that the local government should not regulate the diet of New Yorkers. Unsurprisingly, both bills were also opposed by New York restaurant owners who feared a loss of revenue and argued the plans are a violation of their autonomy. A *New York Times* opinion poll confirmed that sixty percent of all New Yorkers is against a soda-ban. Only thirty-six percent backed Bloomberg’s food reform plans. A large part of the opponents argued that their freedom of choice would be taken away by the measure. "An infringement of civil liberties," is how a resident, living in Queens, expressed herself, while others called it the beginnings of a "nanny state." Unfortunately for Bloomberg, in March of 2013, the State Supreme Court struck down the soda ban. Justice Milton A. Tingling argued that the soda ban was "arbitrary and capricious."

The court, corporate America, as well as a large part of New Yorkers is against modifying and controlling the industry even if the program helps to create a healthier food environment. These opinions reflect a larger ideology behind the anti-reform groups. The rule to limit drinks strikes at the core of the nation’s beliefs about liberty. The freedom to produce and consume is strongly defended and placed above health reasons.

In addition to the freedom argument, the resistance against the soda-ban can also be explained by the commercial value of corn. As Pollan argues, corn is the foundation of the food industry. Many food items contain high-fructose-corn syrup, the sugar extracted from corn, and especially soft drinks mainly consist of this substance. Soda is the ultimate "value-added" product: cheap high fructose corn is turned into a desirable commodity and is then

---

49 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
52 Pollan, "The Way We Live Now."
sold with a large profit. Restrictions on soft drinks can lead to a decline in profit for the large soda companies. Therefore, the food industry is likely to continue to tackle market challenges and health innovations that threaten their revenue. Yet, the trans-fat ban and the calorie labeling bill form less of a threat to the food industry. There is less value in fats because they cannot be turned into as many commodity products as corn can. Also, calorie labeling is not likely to cause huge losses of sales and revenue. Yet, if sodas sizes are limited, large profits will be lost. After all, corn—and the sugar that is extracted from it—is the foundation of the food industry. The fact that the trans-fat ban and the calorie bill were adopted in 2008—and not blocked by the industry—only adds to the fact that there is a vested interest in corn in particular.

Although New York City is known for its many health innovations, the obstacles that Bloomberg's reform plans encounter illustrate that a fundamental change in food policy, and subsequently the food industry, is unrealistic at the moment. While New York often stands out in its progressive reform plans, and functions as a role model of political change, as Freudenberg argues, the soda ban battle only shows that corn and sugar are too valuable to the industry to be further regulated. Of course, the industry fears that if Bloomberg's initiatives were to be implemented, regulation on a larger scale could follow. Suzanne Okie agrees and adds that because New York is "an economic and cultural trendsetter," its food reform efforts can indeed generate comparable changes in cities and states on a national scale. The calorie labeling bill is an example of this: calorie information on restaurant menus is implemented on a national scale. Yet, the calorie bill is an exception, and it is only tolerated by the industry

53 Ibid.
54 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
because it is no drastic measure. As the theoretical model of Williams shows, innovations can be adopted in society as long as they do not threaten the dominant groups and cultures in society too much. The calorie bill does not threaten the continuation of fast food culture. However, as Bloomberg's health agenda has shown, a regulation that restricts the industry and the consumer in their freedom to produce and consume fast food is more difficult to implement.

Apart from subsidizing the production of corn, the government also encouraged the process of genetically modified foods during the late 1970s. This controversial method is widely used in U.S. agriculture, but the government does not require labeling of GM foods. Similar to the promotion of corn, the endorsement of genetically modified organisms (GMO's) might also have negative consequences for the nation's future health. While genetically modified food is a polarizing topic today, the technique of genetically modifying organisms was hailed as a modern agricultural improvement several decades ago. Driven by the fear of possible future food supply shortage, the technique was praised as an effective and financially attractive way to enhance the agricultural business. However, worries about the negative effects of GMO's dominate today’s public debate on this food augmentation practice. In the U.S., genetic manipulation of foods is allowed and labeling of this process is not obligatory. Although the U.S. is no exception in allowing GM foods to enter the marketplace, America is one of the few nations that require no labeling of it on food items. In Europe, public concerns about GM foods and health risks have already lead to mandatory labeling during the late 1990s. In the U.S., however, a correlation between GMO's and health risks and request

60 Herrick, “Cultures of GM,” 290.
62 Ibid.
63 Herrick, "Cultures of GM," 288.
64 Ibid., 290.
65 Ibid.
to regulate GM foods are still disregard by the federal government.\textsuperscript{66}

As a reaction to the laissez fairs attitude of the federal government, "Proposition 37" was put forward by food reform groups in California. The proposition requests a bill that mandates the industry to label genetically modified foods. Even though the GMO bill is principally about food transparency, rather than a ban or limitation, "Prop 37" was attacked by large food companies nevertheless. The industry’s leading food companies such as Kellogg and Monsanto named the costs of labeling GM foods as their primary concern.\textsuperscript{67} Paradoxically, the same companies spent almost forty six million dollars in total to defeat the initiative.\textsuperscript{68} Clearly, the fear of increased expenses for the industry, or consumers, is simply not a valid argument if such a large amount of money is spent to defeat the bill. David Byrne argues that the labeling of GMOs in Europe did not have an influence on any costs thus far.\textsuperscript{69} Thus to prevent the general public from endorsing the idea of labeling, the food industry tries to take advantage of today's confused consumers, by claiming that "Prop 37" spreads unnecessary commotion because the negative effects of GMO's are not conclusive.\textsuperscript{70}

Ultimately, despite vigorous pro-label campaigns, the bill was defeated in the ballot on November 6, 2012.

Undoubtedly, President Obama's "Monsanto Protection Bill" is the main reason why change in the American food system is not likely to occur in the upcoming years. Before his election and during his first term, Obama was hailed as a liberal and moderate president. Unfortunately for the food movement, Obama signed a piece of legislation that means a considerable obstacle in food reform. In March of 2013, President Obama signed a funding

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{69} Strom, "Uneasy Allies."
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid.
The law functions as legal protection for the American grain company. This means that if research in the future shows that GMO's are harmful for humans or the environment, Monsanto (and other GM companies) can continue their practices and cannot be prosecuted. As John Vidal argues, Monsanto can now profit from a "deregulation scheme for [this] particular set of [industry]." As if the legacy of past food policies is not problematic enough, e.g. Nixon's agriculture policies, President Obama continues the tradition of challenging food reform in the U.S. by signing this corn protection bill. The requests of smaller groups to label and modify GM foods are even less likely to be heard when the bill is in effect. Also, food reform advocates had hoped Obama would address the current problematic food system. Instead, Obama gave the food industry additional power. As a result, improvement in America's food environment is now even less achievable than it seemed before 2013.

Over the past decades, the U.S. government has played an ambivalent role by on the one hand keeping food prices steady, and by subsidizing unhealthy foods on the other. In order to block "dysfunctional" federal policies, food reform groups rise up against corporate America and try to alter traditions "that place profit above public health." However, initiatives that had the purpose to change the industry failed. More moderate proposals such as the trans-fat ban and the calorie bill were accepted by the public and the food industry, because they do not have a vast impact on the industry's profit and on consumer freedom. Although Pollan argued that the local food innovations are important indicators that there is a momentum for change in the American food culture, the outcome of these initiatives is

71 Bittman, "GMO's."
73 Ibid.
disappointing.\textsuperscript{75} Pollan, and many with him, considered President Obama a perfect candidate to help the food movement and to achieve long awaited change in the food policy. Unfortunately, the failed health plans of Bloomberg, Proposition 37 and the additional power that Monsanto gained in 2013 indicates that the food industry will remain in control of the food system in the U.S. and it is likely that proposed initiatives only have a minor influence in the upcoming years. "The food industry has tremendous lobbying power and, [...] rural politics tend to be slanted towards economic rather than human-interest issues, Clare Herrick argues."\textsuperscript{76} Thus "to modify corporate behavior," has proven to be difficult, because a change would also mean a break from the neo-liberalist ideology that is in place in U.S. society.\textsuperscript{77}


\textsuperscript{76} Herrick, "GMOs,” 292.

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid.
II

Potential Changes in the Social Economy of Food:
The Role of the Organic Movement and Slow Food in the U.S.

***

While reform initiatives are important in creating momentum for American food culture improvements, alternative food cultures fulfill an equally important role. Apart from the proposal to ban sugar, fat or GMO's from food items, as attempts to influence the food system, Michael Pollan also sees counter movements as part of the path to social change: movements that focus on local and organic food supply are important beginnings of transforming the food system and kitchen regimens, as he argues. Since the late 1960s, the values of convenience, accessibility and affordability dominate the American food culture: mass produced food that can easily be picked up in supermarkets and fast food restaurants has become the standard. Pollan likes to see these old values disappear, and wishes to see new ways of growing produce, buying food, and eating. The most notable counter food movements in the U.S. are Organic and Slow Food. Both movements have emerged out of residual and new ideals on the global and national food systems. Other than the hegemonic food industry, these alternative food cultures are concerned with safety and health issues, the environment, and animal wellbeing. Both organic farming and Slow Food embody values that fit Pollan’s vision of a more sustainable and diverse food system.

In the U.S., organic food and Slow Food are very popular. Sales numbers demonstrate that organic food is favored by consumers; the organic market in the U.S. expanded to a 31.5 billion dollar business, compared to a billion dollar market in 1990. Slow Food also has a

79 Ibid.
large following of 150,000 members in 150 countries including the U.S.\textsuperscript{81} Both movements offer solutions to today's consumers: slow and organic food fit new consumer demands and modern notions on how to eat and produce food in a more healthy and sustainable way. If Slow Food and Organic Food have the ability to further motivate people to think differently about food, they can be substantial counterweights to the existing hegemonic food system and can possibly push the American food system into a different direction.

Nevertheless, these counter movements also face criticism. The main critique of organic food is that it might not be a solution for all consumers: organic and "slow" farming cannot provide food for the entire population, it is often argued. Especially the production process of "slow farming" is designed for small scale farming and therefore can be compared to a pre-industrial economy, and thus cannot provide for the masses.\textsuperscript{82} Organic food is also relatively expensive, and this means that organic food might only be an option for people who are better off. But at the same time, when organic food becomes more mainstream there is a looming danger that organic food can develop into a large scale agro-industrial food business.

However, the main obstacle of the two alternative movements is that the fast food tradition is fixed in the daily eating regime of many Americans. The McDonald's doctrine has shaped the American way of eating as well as the entire food system. It has led to large-scale production techniques in the agro-industry; resulting in high-quantity and low-quality foods. This way of eating has the benefits of being able to provide food for many people at low costs, but causes harm to the public health as well as the environment. Because this food tradition has been in place for many decades, switching to new ways to buy, grow, and prepare food is possibly complicated and unrealistic to achieve in a short time span. Thus although organic and slow food gradually grows in popularity, the principles of their "rival"

\textsuperscript{81} "About Us," on Slow Food USA Website, http://www.slowfoodusa.org/about-us (assessed January 20, 2014).
\textsuperscript{82} Luca Simonetti, "The Ideology of Slow Food," \textit{Journal of European Studies} 42.2 (2012): 176.
movement, fast food, still speak to many people: McDonald's principles of fast service, convenience, and abundance are valued by a large majority. As a result, alternative food movements that according to Pollan are pillars in the nation's food transformation process, have trouble to further expand because they do not coincide well with the American way of consuming and eating.

As reactions to fast food, both Slow Food and the Organic Movement were founded to counteract the spread of fast food culture and its infamous business model. Often passed off as unethical and damaging for diverse food systems around the world, the introduced principles of easy, quick, and inexpensive meals have been popular from the beginning. Since the 1950s, the McDonald's Empire has grown into a multi-billion dollar company that today owns almost thirty two thousand restaurants in 119 countries worldwide. As longtime leader in the fast food industry, McDonald’s sold its first burger in San Bernardino, Southern California. During the late 1940s, the McDonald's brothers, Richard and Maurice, also known as Dick and Mac, tried something new; a revolutionary way to automate the cooking process of their hamburgers and fries. Burgers and fries had been popular items on the menu in the blossoming cities of America’s Golden State ever since the 1930s, but the two brothers revolutionized America’s most famous meal by implementing the method of an assembly line in the kitchen. After that, McDonald's has shaped the way Americans eat for decades, and "fast" has been a constant factor in the national diet ever since the 1950s. In addition to the factory-like business model, Eric Schlosser explains that the triumph of the burger is also linked to America’s car boom. Without the spasiously set up distances of Los Angeles’s

85 Ibid.
86 Ibid., 20.
87 Ibid., 15
area, and the necessity to own a car in this environment, the drive-through fast food business would not have been the success it is today. As Schlosser notes, while "car culture" flourished, a signature American street scene was formed—restaurant buildings along the roads and in outer city spaces, golden arched as part of the skyline, and the lengthy lines of cars at the window of these burger restaurants. With this restaurant set up, a new way of eating was born. Schlosser argues that fast food has not only impacted how Americans eat, but has changed America’s economy at large. The industry quickly adapted to the new way of eating. The fast food industry requires beef, corn and potatoes in large volumes, and therefore intensive farming and mono-agriculture became the standard. The McDonald's philosophy of "efficiency, calculability, predictability and control," as George Ritzer sums it up, has transpired in modern food production at large. This way of mass producing food offers the powerful triple bind of little effort, poor quality, and low costs.

The McDonald’s philosophy is fully absorbed in many facets of America’s food experience. During the 1960s, most people still prepared their own meals from scratch and used whole, non-processed products in the kitchen, but these cooking habits quickly changed in the years after. During the decades after the introduction of fast food and processed foods, people spent less time in the kitchen at home and ate more rapidly prepared meals, whether this was a quick burger or a micro-waved meal. Ever since, Americans have grown accustomed to the convenience that fast food and ready-made meals offer. The downside to this is that although fast food and pre-manufactured food might have brought simplicity in the kitchens of Americans, this food regimen is the main reason behind high obesity rates as well as a loss of knowledge about cooking. At this juncture, Pollan hopes that the influence of

---

88 Ibid.
89 Ibid.
90 Ibid., 3.
92 Cutler, "Why Have Americans Become More Obese?" 93-94.
93 Ibid., 94.
Van der Veen 25

organic food and Slow Food will help to "[preserve] biodiversity" and replace some of these deep-rooted food connotations such as "quick" and "convenience" with "quality" and "pleasure."94

As a way to challenge the expansion of fast food culture and the mounting acceptance of consumers to mostly eat ready-made-meals, a group of Californian farmers founded a culinary movement that exclusively produces and cooks with organic, fresh crops and meat.95 Ever since, the popularity of organic food in the U.S. has continued to grow, and the Organic Movement has carved out a significant space in the American food market. Although organic food is often connected to a healthy lifestyle, organic farming is not merely about healthy food. Essentially, it is a (moral) way of life, a philosophy that stands in opposition to the conventional food industry.96 Most importantly, organic farmers avoid pesticides, synthetic additives such as growth hormones and antibiotics for cattle, and do not use genetic modification techniques.97 Also, small scale and local farming is favored over large scale and intensive farming.98 This method is more environmentally friendly; less fossil fuel is used in the process and no other harmful chemicals are used on the land. Thus overall, organic farming has great benefits for the public health, nature, as well as livestock. This technique is alternative to today's conventional food industry, and especially differs from intensive agricultural practices that supply the fast food industry. Timothy Vos argues that "organic farming both proffers a critique of the (globalizing) hegemony of productionist agribusiness, and proposes a new vision of society-nature as a whole."99 According to Vos, with the rise of industrially produced foods and fast food, the "human relation to nature" has become lost.100

94 Ciesinkski, "Conversation with Michael Pollan."
98 Vos, "Visions of the Middle Landscape," 253.
99 Ibid., 251.
100 Ibid., 246.
Food has become something that is manufactured, rather than something that is natural. The organic movement aims to restore this lost connection with real, unprocessed, natural food.

In addition to the environmental benefits that organic and local farming offers, Pollan also supports organic farming because the products "[have] been grown with more care and less intensively." The common theme in Pollan's thoughts on food is his critique of the standardization of products and taste, and that this development is detrimental to the nation's food culture. Organic farming means a break from this: it celebrates seasonality, quality, and taste. While "industrial food is nutritionless, abundant, and less expensive than food has ever been," organic farming offers consumers better food options, he argues. That is, real carrots and real meat rather than canned carrots with added corn syrup, or chickens that have grown with growth-enhancers and that are afterwards mechanically turned into fried nuggets. Creating a small patch in the garden to grow organic produce and to purchase local potatoes and meats at farmers markets is the best way to go "organic," Pollan claims.

While the organic food movement started out as a small alternative culture, organic produce is now part of a larger market. Because of this expansion trend, organic food gradually loses its connection with the movements' original philosophies. Today, the organic grocer Whole Foods is the market leader of organic and naturally produced foods, with more than two hundred stores in the U.S., Canada, and the U.K. Founded in 1980 by four local Texan businessmen, the success of Whole Foods in the U.S. perfectly reflects the shift in recent consumer demands as people are becoming increasingly concerned with health and

102 Ciesinski, "Conversation with Michael Pollan."
103 Ibid.
104 Ibid.
food safety issues. Although the organic grocer embodies some of the values of the early organic movement, small-scale farming takes a back seat as the company expands. Organic supermarkets today cater to new consumer wishes: the combination of healthy food and safer agricultural methods is what makes organic food so attractive to shoppers.

Although Pollan sees organic food as a solution to break away from the industrial food system, the popularity of organic food might give way to industrialize it. As the demand in organic food increases, the food industry and mainstream supermarkets try to benefit from the organic food trend. According to the New York Times, "organic food has become a wildly lucrative business for Big Food." Although a report of the United States Department of Agriculture shows that farmers markets have increased substantially these past twenty years, organic produce sales via farmers markets only account for two percent of organic trade. This means that most organic sales are made in the supermarket. Although food critics have claimed for years that the organic movement perfectly fulfills the role of fast food adversary, organic consumption today no longer seems to be a counter act against the food industry. The small ideological movement of the 1970s has expanded into a multi-billion dollar industry. In 2010, sales numbers indicate that organic retail had reached the point of twenty-five billion dollars. To cater to buyer's wishes, the number of organic farmers needs to grow to meet the demand of consumers today. However, the problem that arises then is that organic farming becomes increasingly larger in scale. Michael J. Potter, founder of Eden Foods, argues that the integrity of organic food will be lost if the industry takes over the

---

107 Ibid.
110 Belasco, Appetite for Change, 10.
112 Ibid.
organic business.\textsuperscript{113} The fact that even McDonald's and Wal-Mart now offer organic products, such as coffee and milk on their menus prove Potter’s point.\textsuperscript{114} As a result, when organic produce is offered in fast food restaurants and can be bought in mainstream supermarkets—and is even available in one of the most unsustainable stores of the U.S.: Wal-Mart—, the original purpose of the movement can fade away. Clearly, this is not how Pollan would like to see the organic movements grow.

Not only the industry is to blame for hijacking organic food, the consumer is also accountable for the growth in industrial organic food. The main reason why consumers buy organic is "to avoid pesticides, hormones and other chemicals used in conventional farming,"\textsuperscript{115} Thus the ideological nature of the movement is secondary to many consumers; health and safety seems more important than the notion of animal wellbeing or the environment. With the purchase of industrial organic food, ecological implications clearly take a back seat. Therefore, it is likely that the further expansion of the organic market will be largely oriented on healthy food, rather than sustainable and local production. Although Jane Dixon notes that consumption can function "as a potential arena of personal empowerment, cultural subversion, and even political resistance," the political message of organic food seems to become less important as the market grows.\textsuperscript{116} Dixon argues that with the concept of "vote with your dollar," consumers can become an important driving force in further developing a different "balance of power" in the US food system.\textsuperscript{117} So far, the way in which the organic market expands does not have a positive effect on the food system.

Two decades after Californian farmers decided to take action against the expansion of the McDonald's empire, left-wing activists in Italy were also set to take on industrially

\textsuperscript{113} Michael J. Potter quoted in Strom, "Has 'Organic' Been Oversized?"
\textsuperscript{115} Chang, "Organic vs. Conventional."
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid.
processed foods and to protect traditional and local foods in their country.\textsuperscript{118} Similar to the Organic Movement in the U.S., Italy's Slow Food movement has grown to be an oppositional and reactionary food movement that battles the encroaching fast food culture. For the movement, officially founded in 1989, quality of food is essential: real and fresh food is important here. Ever since its introduction, American fast food has created friction in Italy, and has resulted in the formation of an eco-gastronomic organization that tries to bring back the pleasure of eating. Carlo Petrini, president of the movement, stated that Slow Food has the purpose of countering "the symptoms of incipient globalization."\textsuperscript{119} McDonald's fast food culture endangers the Italian cuisine by imposing its values on the local culture.\textsuperscript{120} Slow Food advocates argue for a detachment from fast food culture, and try to "isolate" themselves from the "McDonaldized" world.\textsuperscript{121} The Slow Food movement tries to spread its ideals by promoting the pleasure of (whole) food and the concept of the "shared table," e.g. eating attentively at home with others.\textsuperscript{122} Similar to the organic movement in the U.S., Slow Food tries to fight the influence of fast food and at the same time protect local food culture.\textsuperscript{123}

Producing food and eating more consciously is thus one of the largest benefits of Slow Food. The authentic Italian cuisine is anything but quick, predictable, and extremely controlled fast food. Therefore, there is more room for variation in products, which is beneficial for both the soil and human health.

Together with the organic movement, Pollan argues that Slow Food is also an important alternative food movement, because it embodies a food system and way of eating that is superior in taste and quality compared to the current food system. He argues that the influence of Slow Food can be beneficial to the American way of eating as it provides a

\textsuperscript{118} Parkins, \textit{Slow Living}, 30.
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 19.
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 30.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., 20
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid., 19.
"provocative challenge" to the current ideas about food politics.\textsuperscript{124} Similar to organic food, Slow Food also argues for seasonality and natural, unprocessed food but it adds the components of pleasure and taste. Because gastronomy is an important aspect of Slow Food, the movement tries to preserve classic dishes, recipes, and regional species. Whereas Slow Food Italy tries to save traditional Italian cheeses, for instance, Slow Food U.S. attempts to save native pork and turkey. For instance, the Narraganset turkeys as well as the Southern Guinea Hog are both species that were at the brink of extinction, because different "easier" breeds are favored by the industrial meat industry.\textsuperscript{125}

Although Slow Food is a multifaceted movement that can appeal to people who crave a different food system, it might be too complex for the average American consumer. The idea behind the movement is noble, but in practice, living up to the standards of Slow Food can be quite difficult. First of all, Slow Food is usually not available in the supermarket, and can only be purchased at local farms. Second, as Pollan notes, to grow a Narraganset heritage bird requires more time and effort than to breed regular supermarket turkey. The heritage bird needs several months more to grow into a large turkey than the conventional supermarket turkeys.\textsuperscript{126} But even then, they are still smaller than their counterparts. The uniformity that the industrialization of food has brought has shaped the expectations of consumers about food. For instance, they would like to see a perfect turkey with lots of tender meat. But Slow Food birds are "not factory-made products."\textsuperscript{127} Pollan writes that people who bought a heritage Turkey from a Slow Food farmer were disappointed with the quantity of the bird.\textsuperscript{128} However, Slow Food integrates and celebrates variation in eating and products: quality is chosen over

\textsuperscript{125} "One Heavenly Hog," on Slow Food USA Website, http://www.slowfoodusa.org/blog-post/one-heavenly-hog (assessed December 14, 2013) & Pollan, "Pollan Talks Turkey."
\textsuperscript{126} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{127} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid.
quantity. Lastly, not only does the heritage turkey look less perfect than the supermarket version, it also needs to be cooked differently and longer than a regular turkey. It is "chewier" than what people are used to, because the slow food turkeys have developed more than the fast-growing industrial birds, and have walked around the farm.\(^{129}\) Thus despite the fact that Slow Food provides healthier and more sustainable food, eating according to Slow Food's principles is almost oppositional to the way the majority of Americans experience food.

Without a doubt, the American way of eating has, for a large part, been shaped by the nation's labor division. Long hours at the job and less time at home have created a need for quick meals. Ever since the 1960s, more women in the U.S. started to join the workforce.\(^{130}\) This constitutes a double income, and more money to spend on food, but it also means that there is less time to prepare meals from scratch. From this point onwards, meals such as take-out dinners and microwave dinners were integrated more frequently into busy week schedules, while home cooked meals diminished. Apart from women putting in fewer hours in the kitchen, Americans in general have little time available to prepare meals and eat: the average American works at least 50 hours a week.\(^{131}\) Jerry Jacobs and Kathleen Gerson argue that compared to other countries, "when it comes to the number of workers putting in very long hours [...] the United States does stand out."\(^{132}\) The more Americans work, the more they are likely to make use of fast and easy meals: as Regina Lewis notes, "we need handheld, bite-size, and dripless food because we are eating on the run—all day long."\(^{133}\) This shows that even if people in the U.S. want to eat and live more slowly like the Italians, it is simply not compatible with the American way of life.

\(^{129}\) Ibid.
\(^{130}\) Guthrie, "Role of Food Prepared Away from Home," 140.
\(^{132}\) Jacobs, "Who Are the Overworked Americans," 449.
Both the Organic Movement and Slow Food offer new and alternative ways of eating and consumption. Organic food is very accessible in the mainstream supermarket today. Increasingly so, organic meats, vegetables, and even processed foods such as potato chips and candy bars can be found on the supermarket shelf along with other conventional products. Especially the organic grocer Whole Foods has expanded both the assortment and availability of organic foods. This confirms that the most notable trend in American consumer demands is "healthy," while sustainability and honest food seems to come in second. Unlike organic, Slow Food is less accessible, as it requires a fundamental change in consumer behavior. It incorporates many aspects of America's food culture problems: taste, fair-trade, animal wellbeing, the environment, and tradition. This is clearly demonstrated by the growth of (industrial) organic and the fact that the all-embracing Slow Food movement remains smaller in size and following. Ideally, the majority of (organic) consumers would visit the local farms, and in this way combine their appetite for healthy food with sustainability and ethical values. However, a large part of American consumers is used to uncomplicated and effortless meals. The American consumer lifestyle and its convenience based character—for a large part shaped by labor divisions—thus form the most important limitation to the growth of these alternative food cultures in the U.S.
Many food critics argue that the influence of celebrities and public figures can play an important role in reshaping notions about food.\textsuperscript{134} For instance, for many years, Jamie Oliver has endorsed healthy products for the grocery chain Sainsbury's.\textsuperscript{135} The sales of spices and healthy foods that Oliver promoted more than doubled during the advertising campaign.\textsuperscript{136} An unhealthier form of product endorsement is the partnership of pop star Beyoncé in her Pepsi ads: her celebrity status will help Pepsi sell more sugary drinks and increase the brand's exposure even more, Marion Nestlé argues.\textsuperscript{137} If celebrities have the power to increase the sales of particular food items, it is likely that they can also use their influence to inspire people to change their diet, or that they can push for better food regulation. At least, public figures certainly have the ability to create awareness as well as provide the food movement with a "new level of visibility," many experts claim.\textsuperscript{138}

As discussed in the first and second chapter, efforts in food reform such as political initiatives and alternative food movements are important factors in the process of changing America’s food culture. Yet, although efforts to create new policies and a new market are useful to initiate change in the food environment, the neoliberal ideology is a dominant factor in the American market. As discussed in the introduction, neoliberal theory holds that the well-being of the individual is best achieved in an environment that offers and ensures

\textsuperscript{134} Broad, "Revolution on Primetime TV," 201.
\textsuperscript{136} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{138} Broad, "Revolution on Primetime TV," 202.
"private property rights, individual liberty, unencumbered markets and free trade." In this way, the responsibility of food choices continues to be the burden of Americans instead of the government. For instance, the soda ban failed because consumer freedom was favored over regulation by the public and the industry. While accepting that neo-liberalism indeed controls the nutritional outcomes of the nation's diet, many food advocates embrace this ideology and use it to motivate the consumer to buy healthier products. However, other scholars have been calling for an approach that asks for structural system transformations instead of relying on consumer choices.

Scholars such as Marion Nestlé and Julie Guthman have been arguing for years that there is a need to move past the neoliberal ideology if the U.S. wants to solve food issues. Their argument thus also suggests that the efforts of celebrities and public figures in food transformations are likely to have a higher chance of succeeding if they "absolve the individual eater of responsibility." No changes in the system will be made if diet reform plans only focus on healthy advice for consumers, Guthman claims. Yet, the struggle to influence governmental institutions such as the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA)—which are subjected to the lobbies and power of large food companies—might be more difficult than to inspire people on an individual level to make diet changes. So while the neoliberal mantra is considered an obstacle in food reform, as Guthman argues, instead of inspiring consumers to change their eating habits, the power to influence regulation is needed in order to create a food transformation. In addition to the extensive research on the food system by scholars and

139 Harvey, "Neo-liberalism," 22.
140 Guthman, "Teaching Food," 264.
141 Ibid.
142 Nestlé, Food Politics & Guthman, "Embodying Neoliberalism."
143 Ibid., 435.
144 Guthman, "Teaching Food," 264.
145 Ibid.
journalists, the efforts of celebrities are so important because they can reach a large audience through media outlets such as talk shows, television series and other public platforms. Nestlé argues that Jamie Oliver's focus on changing America's school lunches in his ABC series *American Food Revolution* is very helpful, because it exposes the flaws of the American food system on primetime television.146 Michael Pollan also drew a lot of attention to the problematic food system in his open letter to president Obama in 2008, and for her part, Michelle Obama used her platform to address the food industry in early 2010. Yet, will the work of these public figures only affect consumer behavior or can they also push for change in governmental institutions and corporate America? Although the efforts of Oliver, Mrs. Obama, and Pollan stand out amongst the rest of food reform actions today, their food agendas clearly reveal the boundaries that exist in pushing for policy changes and trying to transform how Big Food operates.

In the wake of the nation's food culture crisis, First Lady Michelle Obama has started a campaign that addresses obesity and poor nutrition. With the help of Chef Alice Waters, and Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack, Mrs. Obama planted an organic vegetable garden on the White House Lawn in April of 2009. The kitchen garden is a public project that is set up to promote home grown food and healthy eating.147 Puja Batra-Wells claims that the garden predominantly functions as a teaching tool, because it shows how Americans can make healthier food choices.148 In addition to the organic kitchen garden, Mrs. Obama also initiated the *Let's Move* campaign in 2009, which focuses on physical exercise for children. In a further attempt to ban unhealthy desserts from the White House kitchen, she requested her French pastry chef to replace butter, sugar, and cream with substitutes such as fruits, and agave

syrup. Chef Bill Yosses supposedly even quit because he thought the First Lady went too far with her health demands. All this shows that Mrs. Obama has chosen to switch to a healthier lifestyle and share this healthy way of eating with the public, because food issues threaten "[t]he physical and emotional health of an entire generation." 

Initially, Mrs. Obama's health plans delighted many food reform advocates, because the garden project was seen as a form of resistance against the food industry. The presidential family switched from an all-American diet to more alternative food choices after Mrs. Obama noticed that one of her daughters gained weight. Right away, Mrs. Obama "[ditched] juice boxes and processed foods" and she soon integrated the produce from her garden into their daily food regimen. Keeping industrially processed food out of their diet is now central to their new lifestyle, Mrs. Obama revealed in 2009. As was to be expected, Pollan and other food critics were pleased with the First Lady's subtle attack on the industry: having the First Lady to promote a diet that revolves around fresh vegetables and un-processed food is a great advertisement for the popularity of alternative food. Also, the garden project illustrates that food is not merely "a product of industry," but a product of nature. The idea to "reduce reliance on huge industrial farms" and "personal food production" encourages the growth of alternative food systems, such as community gardens and local food networks. As Lindsey Naylor explains, small gardens such as these can be seen as "an alternative to the conventional marketplace and [as] an act of transgression."

150 Ibid.  
152 Ibid.  
153 Ibid.  
156 Ibid., 484.  
Although the start of her health campaign seemed promising, Mrs. Obama quickly began to focus exclusively on individual choices and consumer responsibilities. The focus on consumer choice suggests that living healthy is the task of Americans themselves, rather than the government. The garden can be seen as both an anti-advertisement for industrial food, but more so a promotion of personal food production which suggests that a healthy diet is within everyone's reach. Vegetables can be home grown, and thus fresh organic produce—if people cannot afford to purchase organic in the supermarket—is easily obtainable for many people, Mrs. Obama appears to be saying.\(^\text{158}\) The problem here is that not all families have a garden to grow organic produce. However, if a garden is not an option, the First Lady claims that even small steps in changing a diet can help: "You can begin in your own cupboard," she says, "by eliminating processed food, trying to cook a meal a little more often, trying to incorporate more fruits and vegetables."\(^\text{159}\) Her overall message thus proposes that solutions for healthier eating start at one’s own home, whether it is people's kitchens cabinets or the garden. Julie Guthman argues that consumers are not being helped with the message to "make better choices" if they are continuously being motivated to buy cheap processed foods.\(^\text{160}\) This is typical for the neoliberal climate which on the one hand "encourages (over)eating" but on the other hand the same "neoliberal notions of self-discipline vilify it," she notes.\(^\text{161}\)

With a strong focus on the individual, and an obvious detachment from actual political effort and system changes, it is clear that even the First Lady cannot escape the nation's neoliberal food climate. During a meeting with the Grocery Manufacturers Association in 2010, Mrs. Obama argued that improving the nation's health "needs to be a serious industry-wide commitment to providing the healthier foods parents are looking for at prices they can

\[\text{158} \] Marion Burros, "Obama's to Plant Vegetable Garden."
\[\text{159} \] Ibid.
\[\text{160} \] Guthman, "Embodying Neoliberalism,"427.
\[\text{161} \] Ibid.
afford.""162 After the speech, Marion Nestlé called Mrs. Obama's message "an absolute knockout" for the industry.163 Yet, one year after she addressed the industry, a set of voluntary guidelines was the only remainder of initially requested mandatory rules. This only resulted in small changes, such as lowering the amount of salt and sugar in processed foods.164 As Pollan notes, "in the end [the guidelines are] legitimizing a processed-food diet."165 Also, Nestlé contends that the First Lady's dialogue with the industry is so ineffective that it is "enough to make you weep."166 Also, her collaboration with companies such as Wal-Mart, Nestlé, and Coca-Cola, to aim at making healthy food more accessible and reducing calories, is also questionable. Critics argue that by increasing the number of Wal-Mart businesses, local farmers and farmers markets will be the victim of this expansion.167 As for the calorie cutback in soda and food, it is likely that cutting a few calories is not making products healthier: "they can cut a little fat or take some fat out and add some sugar in," Barry Popkin asserts.168 It is clear that Mrs. Obama is at a dead lock with the industry as her political efforts appear to have only created small improvements for consumers.169

Similar to Mrs. Obama's approach, a large part of Jamie Oliver's food improvement agenda has always been very much focused on individual responsibility. As one of the most visible food reform advocates in the U.K. and the U.S., Oliver often talks about the importance of consumer's decisions in the food market. Also, sharing knowledge about food and cooking—preferably from scratch with fresh ingredients—is something he promotes in

163 Marion Nestlé quoted in Bridget Huber, "Michelle Obama: Has the First Lady's Obesity Campaign Been Too Accommodating to the Food Industry?" The Nation, October 10, 2012.
165 Ibid.
166 Nestlé quoted in Huber, "Michelle Obama."
167 Ibid.
168 Barry Popkin quoted in Huber, "Michelle Obama."
169 Margo Wootan, quoted in Huber, "Michelle Obama."
his books, on his website, as well as throughout his television shows and in public appearances. Oliver wants to "give everyone the tools, skills and knowledge "to prepare food, cook healthy meals, as well as inform consumers what to put in their shopping cart and what to stay clear from." For instance, in the series *Jamie's Fowl Dinners* (U.K.), Oliver shows his audience where industrial products, and especially meat comes from, and how these practices take their toll on the environment and animal wellbeing. Following his ethical standpoint on farming and food production, he recommends his viewers to buy free-range eggs instead of battery cage eggs. This approach suggests that Oliver assumes that consumers have the power to change the problematic food system as well as their eating habits. As Garrett Broad explains, this neoliberal notion "has placed the consumer in direct control of her own well-being as well as of the well-being of her physical and social environment." As was discussed in the second chapter, the effect of consumer power on the food industry cannot be overlooked, but Oliver also recognizes that "healthy eating, local, seasonal, and sustainable," is simply not obtainable for the masses. For that reason, Oliver also addresses governmental institutions and the meat industry for failing policies aiming at more structural changes.

Apart from his call for political support in the U.K., in *Jamie Oliver's American Food Revolution* (U.S.)in Huntington W.V., Oliver also tries to tackle the problematic school food in the U.S., because the same issues as in the U.K. are present here: inexpensively processed foods are delivered to the school cafeterias. "The USDA have given us so much of this cheap, cheap junk food, we can’t resist it. You’d be mad not to... We’re in an impossible situation,"

---

171 Ibid.
172 Ibid.
173 Ibid.
174 Broad, "Revolution on Primetime TV," 190.
Oliver comments. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has set nutritional guidelines that are making it hard to integrate freshly prepared foods into the school lunch routine. Broad argues that it is difficult to transform these nutritional regulations, because "[the dietary guidelines] are so heavily influenced by the lobbying of corporate agri-business and their colleagues." As a result, the schools have to serve junk food and let French fries pass as vegetables, whether this makes sense or not. Aware of the obstacles he faces during his Food Revolution in the U.S., Oliver calls for political intervention as the only solution in school food reform: "The USDA has got to evolve and change, and support communities that want to change...Maybe I can use my influence to ask the USDA to make special allowances. But maybe the USDA needs to make special allowances for everyone." Like many food reform advocates, with his lunch reform series, and especially Food Revolution in the U.S., Oliver places the responsibility for better diet options with the government and the industry, not the individual. "If you've got everyone in the world that wants to cook the food from fresh, but they can't buy the food from fresh, that's a problem," he articulates. Yet, the fresh vegetables and the cooked meals-from-scratch in Huntington were made possible by commercial businesses and the local hospital. While the British government administered 280 million pounds "to tackle the school meals 'crisis'" in 2005 after Oliver's outcry of lunch food in the U.K, there was little governmental support for the program in Huntington, let alone assistance and acknowledgement for his program from the Obama administration.

While Food Revolution did not receive any attention from the White House, Oliver's

176 Broad, "Revolution on Primetime TV," 200.
177 Ibid., 192.
178 Ibid., 197
179 Ibid., 190.
180 Ibid.
broadcasts reach many viewers as well as the industry. While food critics and scholars have been raising issues about the food environment for years now, Oliver's critique on the food system is viewed by millions of viewers in the U.S. In this way, Oliver expands the discourse on food issues from a discussion that previously took place in the academic realm to a broad popular audience.\(^{183}\) As Broad explains, in the U.S., "food television," has always been focused on consumers, not on the food system and the problems that come with it.\(^{184}\) Thus far, Oliver is one of the first celebrities on television to attack the industry, and to hold the governmental institutions accountable for the nation's poor diet. Because of his celebrity status and popularity, he has been able—more so than other public food reformers—to influence the industry. While Eric Schlosser and Pollan have exposed the malpractices of the food industry in the documentary \textit{Food Inc.}, no improvements were made by the industry after the documentary was released. Yet, when Oliver brought to light the hidden and ambivalent food practices and attacked the U.S. meat industry for using controversial ingredients—called "pink slime"—in their burger patties, many fast food chains, grocers, and several schools stopped buying the product.\(^{185}\)

Many critics claim that Oliver's persona can certainly motivate Americans to alter their diet. For instance, Amanda Murphy claims that Oliver is that "super character who can transform whatever you want to transform and affect people’s lives enormously."\(^{186}\) She goes on to argue that "transformational television" is inherently American, and for that reason Oliver's shows can help people make better personal choices.\(^{187}\) While his critique on hamburgers caused the meat industry to improve their product, and his series taught many people how to eat better healthier, it seems that Oliver cannot accomplish a further system

\(^{183}\) Nestlé, \textit{Food Politics} & Guthman, "Embodying Neoliberalism."
\(^{184}\) Broad, "Revolution on Primetime TV," 201, 202.
\(^{185}\) "Pink slime" is a cheap by-product of meat containing added ammonia, but is now no longer used by the fast food chain, in Brian Wheeler, "Could 'pink-lime' be rebranded?" \textit{BBC News Online}, April 6, 2012.
\(^{186}\) Quote from Amanda Murphy in Smith, "Barthes on Jamie," 7.
\(^{187}\) Ibid.
change in the U.S. The transformational aspect of his shows is, again, part of the neoliberal notion that consumers are in control of their own diet and food choices. While thoughts "of broader food system thinking and action" are displayed in *Food Revolution*, only the aspects that do not undermine the hegemonic food system on food have endured.\(^{188}\) Only Oliver's demands for better quality meat from the industry and his call for consumers to choose food items more wisely are tolerated by the industry. Although these accomplishments are not insignificant, they do not reflect a structural change of the system and ultimately do not generate large transformations in school kitchens.

Like Mrs. Obama and Oliver, Pollan is an important contributor to improving the American diet. Although Pollan often critiques the food system and agriculture policies, most of his writings reflect a neoliberal environment as he often touches upon the importance of "responsible consumerism" in his books.\(^{189}\) With his appearances and writings, Pollan contributes to food transparency and helps familiarize a large audience with alternative food choices. Thus, Pollan's book *In Defense of Food: an Eaters Manifesto* is a clear guide in how to make healthier choices in the American diet. His advice is to "eat food, not too much, [and] mostly plants."\(^{190}\) Also, one of his famous mantras is "cook, and if you can, plant a garden."\(^{191}\) In line with Mrs. Obama's food agenda, Pollan suggests that planting a vegetable garden is a great solution to eat healthy and it is likely to be less expensive than supermarket fruits and greens.\(^{192}\) Although Guthman agrees with Pollan that "localism" is a better choice than to buy industrial produce, the problem is that guidelines such as these—planting a garden, and eat locally and organic—are beyond the means and possibilities of low income families.\(^{193}\)

---

\(^{188}\) Broad, "Revolution on Primetime TV," 199.


\(^{190}\) Pollan, *In Defense of Food*, 197.

\(^{191}\) Ibid., preface.

\(^{192}\) Ibid., 198.

\(^{193}\) Guthman, "Teaching Food," 263.
Pollan points out the wrongs of the food system, his strategy to change this seems to be mainly focused on promoting alternative food movements and ways of eating. But the strategy of "voting with your fork," suggests that the ball is in the court of consumers.\textsuperscript{194} Again, as the second chapter demonstrates, food culture issues in the U.S. will not be entirely solved if the organic business further expands, or, if people raise their own chickens and plant a vegetable garden. For that reason, the solutions he suggests in his books are in conflict with his critique on the system. In the end, Guthman argues that in \textit{The Omnivore's Dilemma} as well as in \textit{Defense of Food}, Pollan's solutions boil down to consumer responsibilities instead of suggesting solutions to fix the system that Pollan so often critiques.\textsuperscript{195} Even though Pollan wants to see people change their diet, the "one meal at a time" strategy he promotes in his books only reproduces the same neoliberal ideas that have created the piles of cheap corn in the first place.\textsuperscript{196}

Although Pollan's previous writings did not call for much political actions, in 2008, he directed his focus on the resolutions for future agricultural improvements. Similar to many food reform advocates, Pollan was confident that President Obama would support the food movement and reform plans. Therefore, in 2008 Pollan wrote an open letter with his "sun food agenda" to the president.\textsuperscript{197} In the letter, entitled \textit{Farmer in Chief}, Pollan suggests a concrete reform strategy: he argues that the U.S. food system should be decentralized and needs to aim at protecting "the economic viability of small producers and processors."\textsuperscript{198} Pollan argues that the government needs to "promote the development of ecologically diverse, solar-powered regional food economies."\textsuperscript{199} Essentially, Pollan recommends the government to modify the

\textsuperscript{195} Guthman, "Teaching Food," 263.
\textsuperscript{196} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{198} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{199} Ibid., 413.
powerful food industry on the one hand, and to let local food systems have an important place in the national food system—on the other. However, while President Obama has quoted sections of the letter, Pollan’s plans were never integrated into farm policy. On the contrary: as mentioned in the first chapter, President Obama signed the Monsanto Act that protects the power of the largest corn company in the U.S. The bill was signed after Michael Taylor, a former attorney and lobbyist of Monsanto, was appointed head of the Federal Department of Agriculture. Thus President Obama clearly ignores Pollan’s advice: the new legislation only empowers the corn industry, and will further complicate the building of a new de-centralized food system as Pollan recommends in Farmer in Chief. In addition to the Monsanto Act, President Obama also weakened the certification of organic food. With this new law, a number of synthetic substances—which are generally not allowed in organic produce—, are now permitted by the USDA. In effect, the new law means that organic food does not need to be a hundred percent organic in order to receive an organic label. By lowering the standards of organic food, the position of small conscientious organic farmers—who are not using artificial additives for their crops—can be threatened, because competition from larger companies is likely to increase. Also, the new law is not beneficial for the environment if non-natural techniques are allowed in organic farming. Both examples reflect that the president’s recent food policies have not been accommodating to the food movement. During his term, and especially this last year, President Obama did not only fail to improve existing policies, he even created a setback for reform.

As "teachers of food" and public role models, Oliver, Mrs. Obama, and Pollan endorse a diet that includes fresh, healthy, and real food, while at the same time they disapprove of

---

processed, salty and sugary industrial food. Although they can motivate individuals to make better diet choices, the less well-off are not likely to follow their example to plant gardens and buy local, sustainable foods. Unfortunately, changing the way the nation eats depends largely on altering the food policies that are in place. Therefore, Guthman finds it objectionable that the food reform initiatives of journalists, critics, and celebrities are centered on individualism.\textsuperscript{203} Messages such as "plant a garden," and "clean out the junk food in your refrigerator," or "buy organic eggs," suggest that diet related diseases, and poor nutrition can be resolved by consumer choices. However, when they expect both industrial and political responsibility and offer solutions beyond this individualism and consumer power, their voices go unheard. Pollan's letter to the president is a clear example of this. His unambiguous and pragmatic outline of how the system needs to change was not incorporated into policy plans because it creates a conflict in the society's dominant philosophy. Because Pollan's advice is not in line with the interests of the industry, it is understandable that his suggestions are ignored and not integrated by the industry. As a result, public figures can only influence consumer behavior, because demanding action from the government and the industry means a deviation from the dominant tradition in society.

\textsuperscript{203} Guthman, "Teaching Food," 264.
Conclusion

***

As of this moment, it has been five years since Michael Pollan predicted an American food culture revolution. Admittedly, many attempts to transform the nation's food system have been made and a growing number of Americans has become aware of the problematic eating habits and food production methods. Less than a decade ago, many Americans might not even have been concerned with the difference between Monsanto's genetically modified corn and slow-grown "Iroquois white corn." But in the past years, the interest in better farming methods, as well as ideas about a healthier and a "slower" way of eating, have increased in popularity. Not only at the consumer level, but also health experts and politicians have gradually become more involved in discussions about food culture innovations. Hence Pollan has argued that in a relatively short period food issues have even been propelled to the national agenda and are being discussed more than ever before.

Research shows that nations with stricter agricultural policies and more regulated food industries have lower percentages of obesity. The numerous problems that have arisen in U.S. food culture are mainly caused by the power and freedom that the industry has in the market place. Without a doubt, the expansion of the fast food industry in the U.S. was boosted by successive laissez faire policies. Pollan argues that it is time to change this system, because the "food they're cooking is making people sick." In his book In Defense of Food, Pollan explains that mothers, who used to be in control over what families eat, "lost much authority of the dinner menu" to "nutritionists and food marketers." At this moment, either the

204 Pollan, "Pollan Talks Turkey."
205 Pollan, "The Food Movement Rising."
206 Cutler, "Why Have Americans Become More Obese?" 94.
208 Pollan, In Defense of Food, 3.
government needs to step in to further regulate food companies or the industry must find new ways to produce healthier foods to curb the high rates of ill-nutrition and obesity.

Now that America's food culture is defined by fast food and large agriculture business, many reform advocates hope that this system can be changed into a more locally-based, diverse, and decentralized food system—a system that is in the best interest of human health, is animal friendly, and is sustainable. For years, this local and organic way has been a utopian concept of how the nation's food environment can look like. Thirty years after this idea was endorsed by Californian farmers, it is still hailed by many food reform advocates. Pollan even integrated the notion of a decentralized food power in his sun food program as the ideal way to improve the food system. But the obstacle in this approach is that small-scale farming and local food sovereignty is not profitable for the food industry, and therefore it is not picked up. Small holder farmers argue that the margins on their organic produce are too small if they sell to the large groceries. Yet, they also have too few local customers that buy their products. Thus these small scale agricultural models that food reformers would like to see expand, are in jeopardy—and have been from the start.

Indeed, the models of large scale agriculture, and centralized industry power are likely to remain dominant factors in the contemporary food system. Pollan has stated that "along with the industrialization of our food system has come an industrialization of eating, and the former won't be effectively countered until people have rejected the latter, Pollan argued." This change in consumer desires has already taken place to some extent as the large demand for organic food has demonstrated. Although experts forecast a continuation of different consumer demands, the way Americans eat might not change much. "Consumers are willing to pay more for convenience as their work habits and lifestyles change," Diane Troops

209 Pogash, "The Elders of Organic Farming."
210 Ibid.
211 Pollan, "Michael Pollan Talks Turkey."
Thus the dominant lifestyle of working long hours that results in an eating culture of snacking and eating on the go will remain present for the upcoming years. This also means that there continues to be a demand for convenience food, e.g. fast food drive-throughs, take-out dinners, and microwave meals. On top of this, prognosticators argue that consumers will aim to stay within a small budget to prepare their meals. Although the sales of healthy foods such as whole-grain products, and vegetables as well as the visits to alternative food markets will continue to grow slowly, these trends indicate that people still favor convenience and are not willing to spend a lot of money on food, even though consumers are expected to cook healthier meals. Most likely, if convenience will remain an important factor, vegetables and organic eggs, for instance, are most likely picked up in mainstream grocers, or Whole Foods, rather than that they are purchased at local and Slow Food farms. At least, the prognoses do not show a significantly increased demand in sustainable, local, or slow food. For these alternative cultures do not offer the inexpensive products that are widely available in the grocery aisle.

Raymond Williams' theoretical model shows that dominant ideas are rooted in many aspects of society. These dominant elements are not only part of the economic and political model, but are also part of the "social process." The convenient quick meals that Big Food has brought along are now part of the "eating-on-the-go" tradition that makes up part of this social process. Also, as Williams suggests, the dominant culture incorporates aspects of the alternative culture that benefit hegemonic powers in society. Healthy food is now popular, and the industry is taking full advantage of this by producing profitable healthy foods. Yet, other aspects such as sustainability and diversified agriculture that are a part of the alternative

---

213 Prognoses from Phil Lemert and Con AgroFoods in Toops, "2012 Food Industry Outlook."
214 Ibid.
216 Ibid., 115.
culture are likely to be discarded by the dominant culture, because it is less profitable for the industry, and too expensive and inconvenient for consumers. The food trends suggest that it is not likely that local and slow food will become more than marginal cultures.

As pointed out in the introduction, Pollan predicted a food culture transformation throughout the U.S. However, only time can tell whether or not the already initiated reform proposals and efforts will expand and will continue to gain force. In this dissertation, I have evaluated the current situation by illustrating the changes and obstacles that take place in contemporary American food culture. It can be concluded that Pollan needs to reset his goals and to a large extent has to let go of his hope that America's food culture will transform. The hegemonic forces that have contributed to the current food environment are too strong to be dethroned at this moment. Nevertheless, it does seem that Pollan will remain optimistic as he stated in 2010 that "the real challenge, in the end, is finding ways to make money selling simple foods. But if this movement does what most movements do—shifts the centre just a few degrees—then that will already be progress. I won't be discouraged."217 In other words, Pollan also recognizes that the food movement and reformers can only expect gradual change. Indeed, some small alterations are accepted by the key players in American food culture, but there is not enough evidence to speak of a revolution thus far.

Bibliography

***


Herrick, Clare B. "'Cultures of GM': discourses of risk and labeling of GMOs in the UK and EU." *Area* 37.3 (2005) 286–294.


"Michael Pollan: From GMOs to NYC’s Soda Ban, Local Efforts Challenge Agri-Giants’ National Control," on *Democracy Now Website*, October 24, 2012 (accessed December 12, 2012)


Okie, Susan. "New York to Trans Fats; You're Out!" *New England Journal of Medicine*


Van der Veen 56


Troops, Diane. "2012 Food Industry Outlook." *Food Processing Website*.  


