

# Food in Popular Literature

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Since Eric Schlosser's 1998 *Fast Food Nation*, food books appear regularly on the *New York Times* best seller's lists and have been adapted into stand-alone documentary movies and at least one TV mini-series. Mixing industry study, micro-history, and social commentary, food writers describe food systems and present strong opinions about the modern food system's impact on health and the environment, often advising consumers and policy makers what they should be doing about it. While the greater number of food books may simply reflect there being more books of all kinds, the topic seems increasingly popular. Eberstadt (2009) wonders whether a new moral consciousness has emerged around food and food writers, as I will refer to them, to support this trend by fostering an ideologically motivated activism in lieu of the primarily technocratic approach historically marking food policy.

This article briefly summarizes the economic arguments of two prominent food books—Michael Pollan's *Cooked* and Michael Moss's *Sugar, Salt, and Fat*—along with Jayson Lusk's book *Food Police* which critiques the food writing genre as a whole. In addition to his four previous best-sellers, Pollan reached #4 on the *New York Times* best seller's list in 2013 with this work. Moss, who won the Pulitzer Prize in 2009 for his investigative work on the ground beef processing industry, reached #1. Together, they hit the processed food industry with a one-two punch over the obesity problem. Pollan extols the pleasures and benefits of foregoing processed food by cooking at home, and Moss excoriates the unhealthiness and manipulation of those making and marketing processed food. The *Food Police*, in contrast, directly challenges the work of these and other food writers by defending both the current market-based

food production system and sharply rebutting critics of processed food, agricultural policy, and conventional farming (i.e., produced using most available technologies, such as genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and synthetic pesticides, and marketed without labels, such as "organic" or "local").

Although non-fiction, these books are clearly written to a popular audience. My brief summary cannot hope to arbitrate the factual disputes across these three books or within food writing generally. While each book contains footnotes supporting many factual statements, space constraints prevent the author's from exhaustively describing and addressing the advantages and disadvantages of particular policy proposals or market arrangements. The authors typically generalize the opposing viewpoint while addressing it, and each book's motivation colors its discourse. Often these book's non-sequiturs, *ad hominem* attacks, and straw man arguments are off-putting to some readers.

Surprisingly, though, the three authors seem to agree on a basic story behind food processing and over-consumption: (1) As women began working more; (2) households spent less time cooking at home; and (3) eating more prepared foods which: (4) are designed to taste good, be convenient, and cost little; (5) may contain large amounts of sugar, salt, and fat; and (6) are frequently over-consumed. But, where Pollan wants to reform (2) and (3), Moss takes issue with (4) and (5). Meanwhile Lusk views over-consumption (6), where it exists, as either a personal choice of consumers or a matter of local concern and views (4) as a positive, not negative, outcome of the market process. Indeed, Lusk may even go a bit further by offering that convenience foods (4) may have helped cause (1).

While *Cooked* and *Sugar, Salt, and Fat* provide few specific policy recommendations, both Moss and Pollan criticize the expansion of processed food and suggest a need for consumer action or public policies to reverse this trend. Pollan laments concentration in agricultural industries, food sourcing within the National School Lunch Program, and the inaccurate labeling of items such as whole wheat flour. Moss decries the Federal Trade Commission's backing off regulatory initiatives to constrain advertising to children; advocates making calorie labeling more prominent; favors limits on sugar, salt, and fat as additives; and supports the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) efforts to promote nutrition education. While Moss and Pollan briefly touch other topics, such as the 2009 "pink slime" controversy (for which Moss had an important personal role) and the industrial processing of grains, neither author strays far from a nutrition and obesity focus.

*The Food Police*, however, is broader, as it responds to the wide spectrum of food writer criticism of conventional agricultural and food processing from many different authors. Lusk's approach is threefold. First, he tries to correct "mischaracterizations" of modern food systems that might bias public policy against conventional agricultural practices and undermine consumer perceptions of safe, good, and nutritious products. Lusk views current conventional agricultural practices and dietary habits as the logical outcome of technological advances, cost constraints, changing consumer preferences, and market incentives, not a result of a broken regulatory process, industrial cabal, or cynical attempts to turn consumers into addicts. Second, he examines the motives of the food authors behind these mischaracterizations. Here he argues against both the snobbish and interventionist food writers who tout misinformation that fuel distrust of conventional food systems and the

behavioral economists who haphazardly supply intellectual armament in the food writers' war on markets. Third, it makes a spirited defense of the efficiency of free, decentralized markets as providing better outcomes for consumer and producer welfare than a food marketing system controlled by "elites" through onerous regulation or paternalistic prodding. The following sections very briefly summarize each of the three books' and their main economic arguments.

### *Cooked*

Pollan's *Cooked* methodically explores how four different traditional methods of cooking foods have evolved and cleverly relates them to four classical elements—fire (open flame cooking), water (stewing or boiling), air (baking), and earth (fermenting). Pollan explores how he personally has used very traditional and time-consuming methods to prepare pork barbecue with open flame, stews in boiled water, bread by baking, and vegetables and cheeses through fermentation and pickling. All the while, he recounts how technology has transformed the modern food system in subtle and significant ways.

The majority of the book describes why traditional cooking results in great tasting food. Pollan believes people should better appreciate cooking and not view it as work. He is a "foodie" with strong preferences for authentic foods and a willingness to devote money, time, and energy to their pursuit. His disdain for modern food methods seems, at times, antiquarian as he travels extreme lengths to avoid simplification of the cooking process. This feels quaint rather than alarming, as most people experience the joy of cooking at some point in their lives, even while knowing it is less complicated to simply grab carryout. More striking, however, are the sections where Pollan basically argues against market economies. He characterizes the economic theory of

the consumer as focused only on the tradeoff between consumption and work. Economists, therefore, conclude that food is more efficiently cooked by a specialist and should always be purchased in the market. "One of the things I reflected on is the whole question of taking on what [cooking] in our time has become, strictly speaking, optional, even unnecessary work.... Why bother? By any purely rational calculation, even everyday home cooking is probably not a wise use of my time." (p. 19)

No. If you like to cook (or simply dislike it sufficiently less than work), it is perfectly rational to do it. In the modern economy, most work is optional in the subsistence sense. Many people will perform work that is less lucrative than what might maximize their consumption of material goods. Pollan laments: "We're producers of one thing at work, consumers of a great many other things all the rest of the time, and then, once a year or so, we take on the temporary role of citizen to cast a vote." (p. 19) Perhaps this troubling caricature of economic theory arises because economists have so much trouble explaining *n*-dimensional optimization on two-dimensional blackboards. People, however, perform a lot of home production without quitting their day jobs and can even gather some utility from it. Hobbies do not threaten the economic theory of time allocation.

But should we all be cooking more? Pollan seems to think so. He disdains specialization because it "breeds helplessness, dependence, and ignorance and, eventually, it undermines any sense of responsibility." Stultifying and emasculating, the market makes us antlike in our behavior, dependent on others and ignorant of what keeps us alive. "Virtually all our needs and desires we delegate to specialists of one kind or another.... before long it becomes hard to imagine doing much of anything for ourselves—anything, that is, except the work we do 'to make a living.'"

Also, Pollan worries that: “*Specialization neatly hides our implication in all that is done on our behalf by unknown other specialists half a world away.*” (p. 19-20) Much of agriculture generates externalities, both positive and negative. Pollan and other food writers often encourage individuals to learn the details of food production and, furthermore, to refrain from purchasing food that generates negative externalities. This obligation for consumers to be “mindful” of the production process when making a consumption choice (Jamieson, 2013) contrasts with the technocratic view of externality management espoused by many economists. Certain purported virtues of the market—that arm’s length transactions minimize the cognitive demands of market participants, protect agents from institutional bigotries, and make production processes more adaptive—do not resonate if the problem is that people don’t understand nutrition or know how to cook, that communities don’t support local producers appropriately, and that consumers embrace new processed foods willy-nilly. Moreover, the food writers’ concerns—animal welfare, worker pay, local community development, cultural preservation through food traditions—are often intangible, expansive, and difficult to quantify. Solving the externality problem by internalizing them with corrective taxes (in the manner of Pigou) or multi-party bargaining (in the manner of Coase) seems to miss the point so that the “mindfulness” obligation might make the consumer anxious about engaging in the market at all. Pollan does, however, indicate that better consumer information (i.e., labels showing origin or organic status) can reduce the intellectual burden of monitoring what all those specialists are doing on the consumer’s behalf.

For Pollan, food is different from other goods. It can directly affect health and mood, create social bonds, form social rituals, and define cultural

identity. He expresses a deep skepticism of modern, labor-saving production processes and convenience foods. He also argues that scientific reductionism has caused food processors, mediated perhaps by scientifically minded nutritionists and health authorities, to focus narrowly only on the nutritional components of food to the detriment of public health. Pollan’s argument here, and in his earlier *Defense of Food*, seems very conservative in that it defers heavily to the accumulated wisdom of (slowly) evolving food practices embedded in a culture. *Cooked* provides several examples of how traditional food preparations, such as with cheese making and wheat milling, evolved to address modern health and safety concerns, even without necessarily understanding the underlying nutritional or microbiological processes. Pollan’s examples, though, are not necessarily provided to change the framework of food processing or regulation. Rather, he hopes to shift consumer preferences and convince people to take an interest in and enjoy cooking.

### *Sugar, Salt, and Fat*

While *Cooked* highlights the cooking practices of the small, non-conventional cooks and food producers, Michael Moss’s *Sugar, Salt, and Fat* considers the food formulation practices of large food processors (i.e., Nestle, Kraft, Kellogg’s, General Mills). He paints an unflattering picture. Food scientists know very precisely the flavor and nutrition tradeoffs associated with alternative formulations of processed foods. Facing fickle consumers with wanton, subconscious taste buds, these companies have strong incentives to increase sugar, salt, and fat to unhealthy levels because doing so makes food irresistible. Consumers become unhealthy because they cannot resist. The book’s three sections consider each ingredient in turn.

On sugar, Moss describes how food processors use market research,

including paneled taste testers subjected to conjoint analysis, to learn the “bliss point”—the level of sugar that consumers respond most positively to in food flavor formulations. Children particularly enjoy sugar and Moss details the evolution of sugar in breakfast cereals, fruit juices, and beverages and how restrictions on marketing to children, often self-imposed by companies or by government fiat, are slyly circumvented.

On salt, Moss describes how it acts as a flavor enhancer to mask off-flavors in preserved foods (such as soups and meats) and gives snacks essential texture and mouth feel characteristics like crispness and crunch. He specifically describes operations at Cargill, the world’s largest supplier of salt; Campbell’s Soup; and Frito-Lay.

On fat, Moss tells of its critical role in creating mouth feel and enhancing the taste of sugar in processed foods. Moss holds up Oscar Mayer’s Lunchables™ as a prime example of the confluence of these unhealthy ingredients being added to convenience foods in grocery outlets where food processors adapt the marketing strategy of fast-food outlets. By tailoring these products to be desirable without concern for nutrition, he argues that food companies are responsible, ethically, if not legally, for the adverse health consequences associated with their over-consumption.

Moss suggests that these processed foods are addictive by design. For example, when discussing “heavy users,” he notes that, “*Coca-Cola executives never used the word addiction to describe this behavior, of course. The food industry prefers not to speak of addiction. Instead, when describing their most valued customers, they chose a term that evokes an image of junkies pursuing their fix.*” (p. 109) Because addiction is such a loaded term, it would have been helpful if Moss had provided a definition. Economists sometimes emphasize the “reinforcement” (past consumption increases

current preference) and “tolerance” (past consumption diminishes utility associated with current consumption) aspects of addiction (Becker, et al., 1991) but this view may not necessarily be embraced across disciplines. For its part, Moss’s description of addiction takes different forms as the reader moves through the book, sometimes arising because food producers are so good at formulating goods to consumer preferences (i.e., hitting the “bliss point” with sugar); sometimes arising to from habituation (wanting high sugar levels is a “learned behavior”); and sometimes arising from physiological desensitization that caused them to ramp up consumption, as with added salt. At other times, Moss’s issue may be less consumer addiction than self-control problems and these may arise, in part, from information problems. Consumers would not purchase the good or stop eating it if they knew the correct portion size, nutritional information, or health consequences. While semantic arguments are tedious, the addiction term strongly frames one’s viewpoint and proposed remedies. Both smoking cigarettes and driving a fast motorcycle provide a rush and are dangerous, but likely differ in terms of addictiveness. While most people abhor addiction, few want food producers to stop making products that taste good, consumers to have their choices constrained, or buyers to be denied clear information.

### *The Food Police*

Lusk, especially, does not want producers to stop making good-tasting food or for consumers to have choices constrained. Regarding food labels, Lusk thinks the food writers, like Moss and Pollan, often mischaracterize conventional agriculture to create a social stigma against it; and Lusk spends several chapters refuting food writers’ factual claims regarding the relative safety, nutritional, environmental, and economic benefits of

local and organic food versus conventional food and the net effect of federal farm policy and subsidies on the environment, obesity, and farm income.

Lusk dislikes regulation, feeling it is inflexible and often captured by special interests. Lusk argues against the often-posed dichotomy between family farms (presumably small and perhaps organic) that receive few subsidies and corporate farms (presumably large and rarely organic) that receive the lion’s share. He questions food writers advocating for subsidies to small, organic, local fruit and vegetable farms in lieu of eliminating subsidies generally. For instance, he notes that fruit and vegetable farmers are likely to favor the current restriction that historical acres for program crops (corn, soy, wheat, cotton) receiving direct payments not be planted to fruits and vegetables because these restrictions raise fruit and vegetable prices. Separately, Lusk notes that established GMO producer Monsanto is likely to favor proposed food regulations to increase testing requirements for new GMOs because it is best able to cover higher fixed costs of gaining regulatory approval. This “bootleggers and baptists” argument (Yandle, 1983) posits that progressive food writers, while no friend to GMO seed companies, provide political support by advocating for expensive regulations that keep rivals out (Salop and Scheffman, 1987, Salop and Scheffman, 1983). While this may be true, it does not necessarily undercut the food writer’s rationale for the regulation.

In fact, there is no singular entity of food writers. In lumping numerous disparate writers together and ascribing them a collective motivation in their writing, Lusk often seems to be arguing with the most extreme and poorly argued views of each of them. This makes it simpler to pigeon hole them as having a particular political orientation (i.e., liberal, progressive,

market-interventionists), possibly in order to undermine the idea of their objectivity. While progressives may or may not support commodity destruction under the Agricultural Adjustment Acts of the 1930s, recent dairy herd reduction initiatives, for instance, don’t seem to be an exclusively progressive or liberal cause.

The lumping together of food writers is especially troublesome when Lusk discusses caloric taxes and the more novel nutritional interventions advocated by behavioral economists (i.e., rearranging cafeterias and the design of food labels), a group he includes with the “food police.” Much of behavioral economics posits empirically testable theories for consumer behavior without necessarily embracing specific proposals and, when they do, many prominent behavioral economists explicitly seek to preserve consumer choice (Sunstein, 2008, Thaler, 2006).

Regarding taxes, Lusk’s objections (beyond regulatory capture) are threefold. First, he wonders if obesity and its public health costs are overstated, a medical as much as economic dispute. Second, taxes on unhealthy foods are regressive, expensive (for consumers), and often ineffective (if consumers substitute to other, untaxed unhealthy foods). Finally, he worries that an overly expansive conception of externalities is being used to justify food (or sugar or calorie) taxes. He writes: “*While compassion might be a good reason to do something for a friend or family member, it isn’t sufficient justification for government action. When did my weight become someone else’s problem?*” (p. 143) He asserts that obesity-related costs, in the form of higher medical bills and insurance rates and diminished wages, largely accrue to the individual and that any increased public costs to Medicare or Medicaid should be offset by the reduction in future expenses to those programs and Social Security through hastened mortality.

This view of externalities has been put forth at various times regarding tobacco taxation (Viscusi, 1994) to have been met with skepticism in various quarters (Warner, et al., 1995).

Lusk worries that the interventions of the behavioral economists conflict with the notion of respecting autonomous preferences. Indeed, behavioral economists believe that preferences are variable in specific ways that cause consumers to poorly self-regulate and are skeptical of the notion that consumers can foresee and avoid consumption choices that lead to undesired habituation or addiction (i.e. to manage the endogeneity of preferences) (Kahneman, 2003, Kahneman, 2011). These, and other behavioral economic reasons, collectively introduce an expansive role for policy makers (Sunstein, 1991) which Lusk worries are co-opted by the food writers (i.e., the elite). He writes: “*The elite’s motive for denying personal responsibility is self-evident as Thomas Sowell put it, ‘To believe in personal responsibility would be to destroy the whole special role of the anointed, whose vision casts them in the role of rescuers of people treated unfairly by society.’*” (p. 145)

Both Lusk and Moss note that food companies make a mix of healthy and unhealthy foods in response to consumer wants. When consumers choose unhealthy options, can we conclude that they prefer unhealthy food? Which is to ask, do we trust revealed preference as an arbitrator of consumer welfare and a guide for public choice? Behavioral economists have found some evidence that seemingly innocuous alterations to the context of a choice decision (the choice architecture) changes the choice that is made. Classical economic theory asserts that market choices reveal preferences and are unaffected by context. If other small factors affect market choices or if early choices form preferences to drive later choices in a substantial way, should

we remain, as Lusk puts it, “*generally agnostic about preferences?*” (p.15) If not, what fills the void? While Lusk notes that Thaler and Sunstein call for paternalistic policies to “*influence choices in a way that makes choosers better off, as judged by themselves*” he worries that “*behavioral economics has provided the philosophical basis and the real-world traction for supplanting our own preferences and beliefs, as revealed in our individual choices, with those of the food elite.*” (p.60)

Finally, Lusk’s concern about the motivation of food elite seems tied to larger philosophical debates surrounding free will versus determinism, the idea that free will is an illusion because consumer’s choices emerge from cause and effect relations outside the individual’s control. Lusk worries that food writers invoke an “*abdication of personal responsibility*” and “*promoted the idea that we therefore cannot be judged for making poor choices*” (p. 76), and that deferring responsibility of choice from the consumer belittles the consumer’s ability to cultivate and exercise the virtues associated with self-control while restricting the consumer’s freedom of action which is of value by itself. He writes: “*the paternalistic food police would deprive us of the noble act of making a wise choice when we had the freedom to otherwise.*”

### **Does Pop Literature Have an Effect and Should We Care?**

While many studies have examined the consumer demand effects of advertising, recalls, warnings, dietary advice, legislation, and media hits, I know of no work that quantifies the effect of popular literature on either consumer demand or regulatory initiatives. This knowledge gap is understandable but still noteworthy. Books take time to read and their ideas take time to percolate. Casual historians may point to Upton Sinclair’s 1905 *The Jungle*, Ralph Nader’s 1967 *Unsafe at Any Speed*, and Rachel Carson’s 1962 *Silent*

*Spring* as being particularly influential, but attributing a law or consumption pattern to any specific book may just be a convenient, but misleading, way of dating a long, shifting, cumulative thought process. Which specific books, movies, or events, if any, led to, for instance, the Food Safety and Modernization Act in 2011, whose passage was moved by scientific deliberation, periodic food safety events and, yes, feedback from both consumer and producer interest groups?

Academics have always, with variable success, written for a popular audience and responded to popular literature. Solow’s 1967 critique of John Kenneth Galbraith’s best-seller *The New Industrial Society* even bears some resemblance to this current discussion. Concerns over nutrition, obesity, and its public health remedies will likely ensure a ready market for such books on food. How to gauge their impact is an unanswered question.

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