

Big Fat

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If it hasn't yet occurred to you that there are striking and ominous parallels between the tobacco and food industries – Big Tobacco, meet Big Fat – it might be time to pick up a copy of *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health* (University of California Press), by Marion Nestle. It's a depressing and alarming chronicle of corporate agglomeration, campaign contributions, slanted congressional testimony, punitive lawsuits, witty TV spots, and fiendish marketing schemes – not to mention potato chips, barbecued chicken wings, bogus dietary supplements, untold gallons of soda, and other such manufactured glories.

Nestle teaches nutrition at New York University, and the book, as befits its academic authorship and its issuance by a university press, is pregnant with footnotes and appendices. These are not without interest, but the key phrase, of course – the aegis under which Nestle marshals her case – is the oxymoronic "food industry."

Rarely has even the Super Bowl seen a mismatch on the scale of that unhappy conjunction. For when, in America, "industry" enters the ring, the game is up, and everything – including human health and well-being – is subordinated to sales, growth, profits. As Thomas Lewis notes in *A General Theory of Love*, the business ethos is "reptilian" and therefore unconcerned with humane values, except to the extent that pretending to be concerned about them (the artful euphemism of our times is "public relations") will help "grow" markets, increase sales, pad profits, et cetera.

All this is bad enough when we are talking about lawn mowers or PDAs. But when we are talking about food, we are talking about life's most basic preoccupation. We are talking about, among other things, our very connection as mammals to the earth we are in danger of choking to death; Edward Wilson, in the February *Scientific American*, describes human population growth in the 20th century – a century in which more people were born than ever lived in all previous centuries *combined* – as "bacterial." We are, aided and abetted by the food and other industries, increasingly isolated from the world we inhabit and are ruining. Instead of growing our own vegetables and foraging for herbs, too many of us eat too much manufactured food, whose production damages the environment and whose consumption, while easy and pleasurable, damages *us* – rots our teeth, causes obesity and its many attendant ills, from diabetes to bowel cancer.

Is there an answer? Yes. It begins with taking the matter of food seriously, with recognizing that food, while a pleasure, is, like all pleasures, indelibly linked to responsibility. Your choices – all our choices – count. If, as Gore Vidal once said, "sex is politics," then surely food is politics too.

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