

MARION NESTLE



HOW THE FOOD INDUSTRY
INFLUENCES NUTRITION AND HEALTH

Revised and Expanded Tenth Anniversary Edition

Foreword by Michael Pollan



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FOREWORD

ON EVEN THE SHORTEST SHELF of books dedicated to explaining the American food system, Marion Nestle's *Food Politics* deserves a place of prominence. Whenever I teach a course on writing about food, I include the book on the syllabus. On my own shelf, its white and fire-engine-red spine stands next to Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation*, Wendell Berry's *Unsettling of America*, Harvey Levenstein's *Paradox of Plenty*, and Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. Pretty good company for a book that, on its publication in 2002, wasn't even reviewed by the *New York Times*—an error in judgment the paper has been trying to rectify ever since, chiefly by turning to Marion Nestle for a salty quote anytime the food industry finds itself ensnared in controversy. That seems to be happening on more or less a daily basis, and Marion Nestle is herself one of the primary reasons why: The book you hold is one of the founding documents of the movement to reform the American food system.

I first read *Food Politics* while researching *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. The book helped me connect the dots between what I was observing in the farm fields (vast monocultures of corn and soy, spreading like a great lawn across the American Middle West) and what I was finding in the supermarket (endless aisles of processed foods, most of them sporting improbable health claims). In sentences that were almost breathtaking in their bluntness, Nestle methodically laid out the business model of the entire U.S. food industry. How? By proceeding like any good investigative journalist: following the money, rather than listening to the industry's self-justifying rhetoric.

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Here, in a nutshell, is Nestle's account of how the whole game works: Since the 1970s, American farmers have been producing an overabundance of calories—"one of the great unspoken secrets . . . [and] a major problem for the food industry" (p. 13). The industry's dilemma is that the average American can eat only so much of that food—about 1,500 pounds per year—and the total number of eaters in this country is growing by only one or two percentage points per year. Yet Wall Street demands that food corporations grow at a considerably faster rate. What to do? Add "value" to cheap raw ingredients by processing them (i.e., transform a few pennies' worth of grain and sugar into five dollars' worth of breakfast cereal); spend billions to market these products as aggressively as possible (to children, by using sugar and cartoon characters, and to their parents, by making dubious health claims); use every trick of food science and packaging to induce us to eat more of these products than we should; and then, just to make sure no one tries to interfere with this profitable racket, heavily lobby Congress and nutrition scientists to keep anyone in power from so much as thinking about regulation or officially whispering that maybe we should eat a little less of this stuff.

It's pretty much that simple. As Nestle, mincing no words, puts it, "Many of the nutritional problems of Americans—not least of them obesity—can be traced to the food industry's imperative to encourage people to *eat more* in order to generate sales and increase income" (p. 4). This strikes me as Marion Nestle's signal accomplishment in *Food Politics*: peeling back the layers of official and corporate obfuscation to expose the fundamental political-economic reality of the American food system, and then spelling it all out for everyone in straightforward declarative sentences. Need I mention that academics have seldom done any such thing?

What allowed Marion Nestle to write this book is a deep authority founded on a rare combination of scientific training and life experience. An academic nutritionist with a degree in molecular biology, Nestle brings the analytical tools of the scientist and the skepticism of the seasoned political observer to the task. The latter perspective traces to her time spent working deep in the belly of the beast, serving as a nutrition policy advisor to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

As Nestle explains in the introduction to *Food Politics*, this proved to be a disillusioning experience, but in the best way: Illusions—such as the one that government nutrition policy is based strictly on science and

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is innocent of corporate meddling—crumbled, and the darker truth of the matter came clear. Charged with editing the first *Surgeon General's Report on Nutrition and Health*, which was published in 1988, Nestle writes, “My first day on the job, I was given the rules: No matter what the research indicated, the report could not recommend ‘eat less meat’ as a way to reduce intake of saturated fat, nor could it suggest restrictions on intake of any other category of food” (p. 3).

So Nestle brings an unusual authority to her analysis of the food industry. She also brings ample documentation. The result is a book that is utterly convincing and that has proven impossible for the industry to refute. Which probably explains why its response to the book has relied so heavily on epithets (“the food police”) and threats of litigation (from the Sugar Association). What other academic nutritionist has struck such fear in the hearts of Fortune 500 corporations?!

Ten years after the publication of *Food Politics*, much has changed in the cultural and political landscape surrounding food, in no small measure due to the influence of this book. Today, the food industry finds itself operating in the uncomfortably harsh glare of public scrutiny. Its marketing methods have been questioned, even by the first lady. Its culpability in the nation’s public health crisis is no longer a subject of debate. The industry has responded to its predicament in two seemingly contradictory ways: by attacking its critics, sometimes ferociously, and by acknowledging their critiques by promising to reformulate its products to make them “healthier,” often under the rubric of “public-private partnerships.” No one who has read *Food Politics* can be anything but skeptical about these initiatives, having seen in these pages how “food companies will make and market any product that sells, regardless of its nutritional value or its effect on health” (p. xviii). The food industry is surely not done trying to confuse the public about its role in shaping the way we eat, but the bright light cast on its tactics by *Food Politics* has surely made that task much harder.

When *Food Politics* was first published, a decade ago, I remember thinking that the marriage of those two words—*food* and *politics*—seemed surprising, even radical. What was political about food? Everything, it turns out. But we didn’t really know that then. Now, thanks to this book and all the work it has inspired, the words *food* and *politics* have become inseparable.

Michael Pollan