WN *Feedback*

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The Anthropocene
Planet Titanic

Access April 2014 Editorial on climate change here
Access May 2014 Editorial on climate change here



The Titanic hotel, in Antalia, southern Turkish riviera. If climate change has the projected impact on sea levels, later this century it will join the ship it is named for and designed after, under the waves

Colin Butler writes:

I wish I could disagree with your editorials on climate change and its implications, *The beginning of a new world*, and *'We need Virgils'*. Fundamentally, I can't. I particularly appreciate the point that humans prey on each other – though it's not just the top 1per cent on the 99 per cent, it's also us (in the top 10 per cent, I suppose) preying (essentially) on invisible people way below us, now and in the future.

Still, we are trying to change that, and I'm not suggesting immense guilt will help, nor that inequality can be fully abolished. But I am suggesting inequality can and must be reduced, lest nature or revolution or both do it instead, ushering in a new Dark Age.

Four decks

The Human Titanic is the name of the book I have been dreaming of since at least 2000. It builds on *my doctoral thesis* but is aimed at a much larger audience. It is an analogy for the vessel, our planet that we live on, in one of four decks, each occupied by a different global 'claste', who rarely interact except within their own level, other than by rule-giving (or taking) or by ritualised hand-touching or foot kissing.

High up are the Mary Antoinette suites, though they could be also be named after deceased members of this fabulously wealthy and powerful class: Mobuto, Marcos, Mengistu, or for that matter still-living icons like our very own Australian *Gina Rinehart.* These are cabins, decks and on-board casinos inhabited by people who are fabulously wealthy and act as though the fate of civilisation that the ship hosts (and on which you and I also live) does not matter to them.

I live on the second claste deck, and so does virtually everyone I have ever met, and anyone who will ever read this, though some of us live on more or less privileged parts of this level. But some of us from this deck work on the upper floors, trained to be discreet and servile, such as by *Institutes of Butling and Household Management,* producing butlers, as they used to be called – and as one of my own ancestors may have been. Robert Frank has a long description of the production process for these butlers to the elite in his book *Richistan.*

Below us live the *Precariat* and below them, in steerage, are people who are unimaginably poor, at least to most of us on the higher decks. They may number as many as a billion. I have encountered a few of them, for example in a village in Meghalaya, India, near the Bangladeshi border. Few birds live in the remnants of forest on the steep hillside, near the *wet desert of Cherrapunjee.* Most of the people I met there are less than 1.5 metres (5 feet) tall, due to lifelong under-nutrition. Many are chronically infected with parasites. They could become become radicalised, as *Arundhati Roy describes*, but are more likely to live a short life in poverty.

I also once met a precariat member – he was from somewhere in South Asia and was flying back from Nigeria, maybe to Singapore. He'd been in Nigeria for about 24 hours, some mistake had occurred, over which he had very little control. Life in economy class beyond about 60 hours a week surely classifies as a hell realm, but at least he was well-fed, literate, and skilled.

You could argue my temporary companion on that flight really belonged on the second deck, but, like a lot of things in life, the boundaries of these claste decks are not absolutely precise. And some people can definitely move between decks, in either direction. President Mobutu Sesu Seko of Zaire, wasn't born to wealth or power, but for a while he achieved sufficient of both to be a genuine first-claste member. In fact, it was Mobuto's rule that first popularised the term 'kleptocacy' – rule by thieves

The roots of this book

The title *The Human Titanic* was suggested to me by *Robert Chambers,* who I worked with in 2002, and who had been involved with writing *Voices of the Poor,* for the World Bank. We met for three days in San Francisco, finalising the title chapter of the conceptual framework on human well-being and ecosystem services for the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment. Robert was a famous academic, but unlike the rest of us he travelled with a back pack, and didn't seem at home in five-star hotels. But Robert also wasn't perfectly at home when interviewing the extremely poor, one of whom had asked him his salary. Robert couldn't bring himself to tell him.

In 1997 I had hoped to undertake a PhD on tropical medicine, preferably on malaria. But I changed my mind during the conference to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Ronald Ross's discovery that malaria was transmitted by mosquitoes, in Secunderabad, India. One of the keynote speakers, before several hundred delegates, mainly Indian, spoke frankly of the futility of lobbying for further research funds, and suggested instead that malaria researchers would need to learn to better use their limited funds.

My immediate reaction was that though brutally honest, this was only true because those who suffer from malaria are overwhelmingly poor. It then occurred to me, with an intensity previously sensed comparatively faintly, that the way the population of the First World views and treats that of the Third World parallels the way some upper caste Hindus treat the 'untouchable' *dalits*.

The claste system

These thoughts led to coining of the word 'claste' and a substantially econometric analysis of the global claste system that my thesis comprised. But it soon also occurred to me that global economic discrimination also provided a previously under-recognised causal explanation for the process that I called 'environmental brinkmanship', akin to nuclear brinkmanship.

During my thesis I wrote two papers. One, published in 2000, is called *'Inequality, global change and the sustainability of civilisation'.* In it I wrote: 'The powerful exhibit contempt, for the poor, for nature, and for the future, of breathtaking scale. In this paper, humanity is compared to the travellers on the Titanic. Most live in steerage, unable to sense the iceberg's proximity or to escape. Above deck, the privileged enjoy entrancing conversation and entertainment. If, as in 1912, the unthinkable should happen, they know they have disproportionate access to the lifeboats – women and children, and men too.

'Those who escaped the Titanic reached the safety of New York. But if human demands on natural capital exceed the "environmental Plimsoll Line" then we risk not only the failure of civilisation, but its collapse. Even New York may be an inadequate

haven for those sufficiently privileged to access the lifeboats; the hegemony of the currently wealthy may not guarantee future security.'

I see that to read that paper, which was once open access, now costs $US 45. Good thing I have a copy.

I have been trying to write *The Human Titanic*, as I mentioned, for over a decade. I keep getting obstructed – there is always something more urgent, usually that is doing something that I'll get paid for, or meeting an obligation that I rashly promised I'd do. But, now I feel, getting these ideas to a wider audience is perhaps the most important thing I can do. At least I can write some introductions and instalments. More to come….

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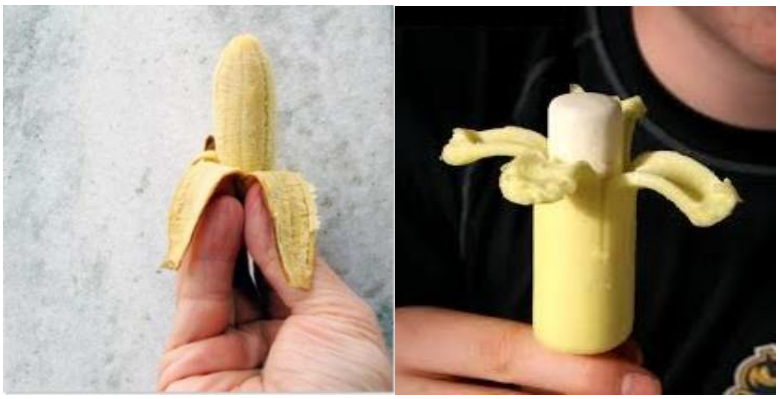
Butler CD. The Anthropocene. Planet Titanic [Feedback]. World Nutrition June 2014, ***5,*** *6, 586-589*

Big Food. Nestlé. PegaPop
Ultra-processed mimicry

Access August 2010 AJPH Carlos Monteiro et al on The Snack Attack here
Access May Big Food Watch on Nestlé's BenNaNa in China here



Golden banana *Peelable ice-cream*
Mimicking the real thing. Will some children somehow get the feeling they are eating a real banana?

Thiago Herick de Sa writes:

The *WN Big Food Watch* commentary in the May issue presents a very interesting analysis of Nestlé's new product: PegaPop™ in Brazil. Here it is, 'unpeeled' (above, right): an ice-cream on a stick designed to look like, and peel like, a banana.

The commentary claims: 'The true significance of peelable ice-cream is that it can be seen as part of the most ambitious corporate strategy that can be imagined – to teach the world to snack'. I partially agree. People have always snacked. Snacking is part of any dietary pattern, from the cookies that grandma made, to guess what, fruits! Fruits are ready-to-consume, eaten with repetitive hand-to-mouth actions in many cases (imagine a delicious handful of fresh berries!) and also very convenient, which allows us to eat them anywhere, even when out walking.

Even though Big Food has been making a gigantic investment in teaching us all to snack at times we are not supposed to, such as mealtimes, in this case their main intent is to mimic a food that is already being snacked everywhere! Also, small sized bananas, such as the little golden banana (above, left), sold in bunches in Brazil and Asia, are common in tropical countries – and you hardly stop after the first one.

Mimicking nature

Mimicry is a successful strategy for the replacement of species in nature. On the other hand, to mimic fruits is not an easy task for Big Food. We already know their success in displacing home-made cookies, cakes and pies with their own branded products. Here, perhaps for the very first time, one Big Food corporation, Nestlé, is marketing worldwide an ultra-processed product designed to look like a fresh fruit.

When we were young we were taught to consume home-made cookies only occasionally (I still hate those high shelves on which my mum put her cookies!). This is why constant promotion of branded cookies and all the other ultra-processed snack products is so bad. Now in Brazil, and I believe all over the world, supermarkets have whole aisles of biscuits.

But our mums always encouraged us to eat more and more fruits. So Nestlé is being even cleverer than your commentary says. They are teaching the world to snack a product by passing it off as a natural snack. That is a very good bottom line for the plan, to teach the world's children to snack Nestlé products every day, and to stay with the corporate brand all their lives.

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Big Food. Global transitions

Are snacks attacking?

Access August 2010 AJPH Carlos Monteiro et al on The Snack Attack here
Access April Update Claudio Schuftan on McDonald's in Vietnam here
Access April Update on obesity in China here
Access May Big Food Watch on Nestlé's BenNaNa in China here
Access May Feedback Barry Popkin on fast food in South-East Asia here



Nestle is marketing its 'peelable banana' ice-cream such as the BenNaNa in China here, round the world. Are snacks displacing meals, or are they extras – as to an extent they always have been?

Barry Popkin writes:

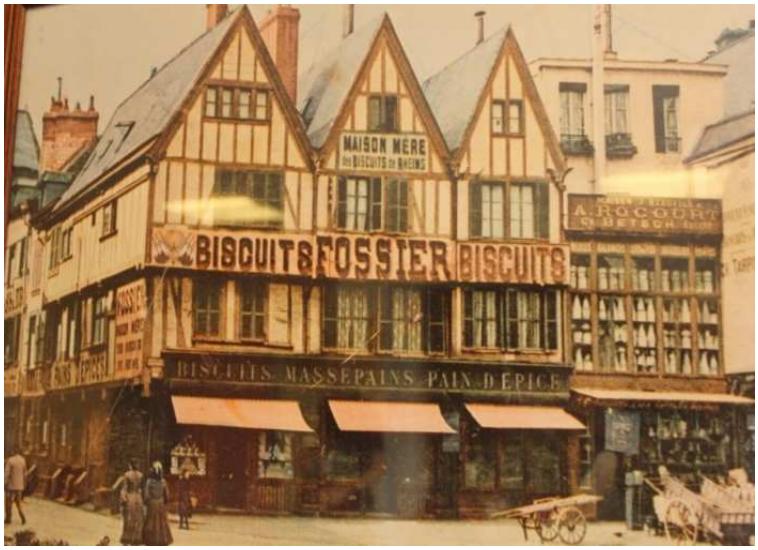
I read the *World Nutrition Big Food Watch* commentary in the May issue, on *Nestle's 'peelable banana' ice-cream* (1), with interest.

With many other colleagues, I have had for decades a special interest in snacking. In many ways this is an invented behaviour. It truly is not yet understood what snacking does to dietary patterns or to health outcomes. Is snacking now replacing the three meals a day? Or is it typical to snack as well as to eat regular meals? Or is the story different over time, or in different parts of the world?

We do know that in the US, availability of snacks has led to many people eating constantly, with the result that at least in this environment, physiological control over appetite is lost, which in turn reinforces constant snacking (2).

Snacking in history

Looking back to ancient history, not a great deal is known about snacking, except for festival occasions such as moon cakes consumed in the Chinese New Year, which originated in the Yin dynasty around the 16th century BCE. Later, the diets of royalty and the nobility were recorded. Samosa in Iran and samsa in central Asia have a long history but probably were consumed only occasionally.



Snack foods have been a feature of diets throughout history, and processed snacks have been manufactured for centuries. But in the past, snacks usually were not a large proportion of diets

Some food cultures are strict about snacking. Traditionally the French have strict times for meals, and children aged above 7 have not been allowed to snack. The biscuit originated in France (the word means 'twice cooked' in French), and biscuits were manufactured in Rheims over 300 years ago (see picture above). But biscuits were consumed usually only as a delicacy at the end of a meal, or else by travellers.

Some modern snack products were invented in the 19th and early 20th century by 'health food' advocates. George Crum created the potato chip (crisp) in Sarotoga, in 1853 (below). Sylvester Graham formulated bread with non-sifted whole wheat flour, and thus also the 'Graham cracker'. Vegetarian John Harvey Kellogg invented peanut butter as a source of protein for his patients who he advised to avoid meat.



The Saratoga Chip was the first of its kind, invented in the mid 19th century. In those days products were commonly advertised with scenes of rustic bliss. Many still are promoted in this way



Mexican women making tortillas pictured in the 19th century. Tortillas are an example of a food that may be eaten as a snack, and may now also be made from mass manufactured ingredients

As from the 1880s Coca-Cola and other cola-type drinks were originally marketed in syrup form as a restorative (3). Most modern snack products came later on, and the creation of snacking as regular behaviour really only began after the Second World War, as part of modern food product marketing.

Globalisation of snacking

There is though, a good deal now known about the globalisation of snacking. Various studies show that 10-25 per cent of dietary energy consumed by people who snack, comes from snack products (4-10). But does snacking reduce meal time? Is it replacing healthy foods with unhealthy processed ones? Does it remove appetite controls? These are challenges that scholars now need to address very carefully.

The Mexican government has placed an 8 per cent tax on junk food and a 10 per cent tax on sugar sweetened beverages. Among Mexican snackers in 2012, snacks provided on average 343 kilocalories per day (17 per cent of total energy). Will this tax reduce snacking, or will it merely replace the taxed foods with other foods; or will it reduce their caloric intake? A careful evaluation of the Mexican tax now ongoing in which Juan Rivera and I are co-investigators, may answer some of these questions.

But other research needs to address just what snacking means for overall diets. What we do know so far, is that in the US, increased eating events have been the major cause of increased daily energy intake over the past 30 years (11,12). Eating frequency was far more important than supersizing of portions or changes in energy density. The task now is to know whether snacking is linked with poor diets, or with increased dietary energy intake, or with replacement of healthier foods.

Meanwhile, are transnational food and drink manufacturers teaching the world to snack? I will leave that to others to assess but I certainly think the facts speak for

themselves in China. When I first started studying eating behaviour in China, virtually no one snacked. Now as noted in my research, snacking in China continues to increase rapidly and it is shifting away from fruit and other healthy options to many salty snacks and other less healthful options (8, 13).

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Rights. Justice
Equ(al)ity



Claudio Schuftan writes:

I refer to a paragraph in Geoffrey Cannon's *What do you think*? May *WN* column (1):

> 'Inequalities in health' strikes me as an odd concept. It is common sense that there always have been, are, and always will be, inequalities in health – and in all other aspects of life also. Surely what is meant is 'inequity', which is an ethical concept – inequalities that are unfair or unjust. By itself 'equality' is sort-of mathematical. So why do most people concerned with public health and public goods persist in using the term 'inequality'? Could 'inequalities in health' be a term originated in bad faith?

Here is what I think. I disagree, and I can respond to the two questions the column poses. Here is how. I will do so simply by quoting a key reference from a paper by scholars from the University of Antioquia, Medellin, Colombia: (2)

> *Equality.* The principle of equality is a part of human rights. It is a principle that recognizes that the same rights apply to all citizens. Equality is the right of every individual to receive the same treatment. It is the principle behind all economic, social and cultural rights, with its opposite being discrimination. Wikipedia offers a definition of inequality: 'the unequal or discriminatory treatment of an individual by another due to their social or economic status, religion, sex, race, among others.' Inequalities are much greater than just 'difference'. People are essentially equal; differences arise secondarily. Equality results from equity just as inequality results from inequity. A reduction of social and health inequalities is limited by capitalism and the structures specific to capitalism. Inequality is a lack of sameness in access, an exclusion from enjoyment, a disparity in the quality of life, while inequity is the lack of equity, that is to say, the inherent characteristic of a society which hinders the common good, hinders fairness. Inequity is injustice producing inequalities. Inequalities are measured, inequities are judged. Equality is not a substitute for equity. Doing more for disadvantaged people is not the same as addressing inequalities!

> *Equity.* Equity is a justice concept, meaning 'fairness', i.e., natural justice, as opposed to the letter of the law. It denotes the willingness to give to each that which they deserve. Equity is a core legal concept and intimately linked to the notion of justice. Equity in health is a measure of the degree of social justice prevailing in a society. (health as merely the absence of disease limits our conception of health care services). The objective of health equality is to be seen in the context of a wider search for social justice. Inequity implies unfair and avoidable differences. A human rights analysis can determine if a given distribution is equitable or otherwise. Achieving health equality requires social policies of empowerment and a redistribution of social wealth. Inequity refers not only to injustice in distribution and access, but to processes which generate this injustice; inequity is about how the social structure determines social inequalities. Inequity arises from the appropriation of power and wealth, which leads to discrimination. Inequity and inequality change historically.
>
> The expression 'social justice' has come into play more recently. It refers to the search for equilibrium between unequal parties that respects their differing needs. Equity and equality are not equivalent, nor can they be reduced to simple risk factors, as currently understood by many.

This should set the record straight.

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Geoffrey Cannon replies: Claudio Schuftan is responding to a paragraph in my previous column, which looked forward to a section in my column in this issue of WN, so I should be brief. The Social Medicine authors are making statements and claims that are reasoned, learned and valuable. But by their nature these are not true or proved in the sense of being beyond argument, so I don't go along with Claudio's 'so that's that' approach. Besides, part of the case I make is a different type of point. The worry is about the use of a strong word in technical discourse in a way that is different from its normal meaning. To me 'social inequalities' is a self-defeating phrase, because people will never be socially equal except in some imagined hippie or Digger commune, and most people, including policy-makers, reading assertions suggesting that everybody should be socially equal will think 'don't be ridiculous'. Whereas social inequities clearly refers to unfair or unjust inequalities, and is clear.

Please cite as: Schuftan C, Cannon G. Rights, justice. Equ[al]ity. [*Feedback*] *World Nutrition June 2014, **5,** 6, 595-596.*

Scientific conferences

Yes, physical activity does not need Coke

August 2012 news story on Coca-Cola and London Olympics here
Access December 2013 Fabio Gomes on the IUNS Granada congress here
Access May 2014 Thiago Herick de Sá on Coca-Cola and conferences here
Access this issue Big Food Watch on McDonald's and conferences here



The fantasy world shown in advertisements for Coca-Cola and other ultra-processed products is very different from the real world. The man in the picture may be holding a beer, but the point is made!

Diana C Parra writes:

I agree with the *letter by Thiago Herick de Sá* (*WN Update,* May) speaking out against the penetration of Coca-Cola and other Big Food corporations into scientific conferences. The evidence is conclusive that sugar-sweetened soft drinks cause dental caries, increased body weight, and diabetes (1).The sponsorship of scientific conferences and events by corporations such as Coca-Cola, whose goals directly conflict with those of public health, should therefore be avoided at all cost.

In the US, the latest position from the Obesity Society states that people should 'decrease consumption of, or avoid, sugar-sweetened beverages', citing children in particular (2). This echoes statements from authoritative organisations such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (3), and the Institute of Medicine (4).

Diversionary tactics

Soda and other soft drinks, energy drinks, sports drinks, and fruit drinks contain virtually half of the added sugar consumed in the US diet (5). Big Soda companies such as Coca-Cola altogether spend billions of dollars lobbying against measures such as added sugar taxes, and fighting effective regulations that would ban or limit

their marketing and advertising, particularly as aimed at children. Moreover, Coca-Cola and other Big Soda industries use enticing public relations strategies to equate the experience of drinking their sugary calories with happiness (6). Recently, Coca-Cola's advertising has gone even further to deflect from their enticement to drink excessive calories (and, so they say, experience 'happiness') through advertisements targeted at first drinking their products and then simply attempting to burn off the extraneous calories through physical activity (7).

The danger and the solution

As was successfully done for the *Rio2012* public health nutrition conference, and the most recent seminar on the Interdisciplinary Management of Obesity in Bogota, Colombia, funding and practical support for conferences and other meetings should come primarily from public sources. Conference programmes should be devised solely by committees whose members have no commercial conflicts of interest. If funding and support from public funds is not sufficient, they should come from non-conflicted private sources, crowd-funding, volunteers, and support from speakers' institutions.

We all, as professionals, as citizens, and as people intending to lead healthy lives, must create a united front against conflicted industry 'support' of conferences and other meetings. This includes the next International Congress of Physical Activity and Public Health due to take place in Thailand in 2016 (*access details of 2014 conference here)* Today, big businesses, such as the food and drink product manufacturers, have a far greater (often negative) impact on public health than many health policies and interventions (8).

We all also must acknowledge as co-responsible professionals that by accepting money and other resources from companies like Coca-Cola, and by allowing sponsors to choose themes and speakers, we are letting private interests shape the public health agenda, and we are sacrificing our objectivity. Worse, we are sending the message to our colleagues and to the next generation that these big businesses and their interests should be able to decide what is best for our health.

With many colleagues I fully support physical activity – it is something to live and swear by – and active ways of life can keep us all healthy and increase our quality of life and well-being. But we must not support – even by silence – partnerships that concede to the influence of conflicted industries and jeopardise our work.

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*World Nutrition June 2014, **5**, 6, 597-599*

Big Food Watch team footnote. The involvement of Coca-Cola in conferences on physical activity is part of a general policy of Big Food transnational and other huge corporations to engage in, influence and even set the agenda of scientific conferences on topics that affect their policies and practices. Access a recent WN commentary on this topic here. Also see the Big Food Watch piece in this issue of WN on McDonald's and conferences in the US, here

How to respond

Feedback is edited by Isabela Sattamini. Please address letters for publication to wn.letters@gmail.com. Letters usually respond to or comment on contributions to *World Nutrition*. More general letters will also be considered. Letters are edited for length and style, may be shortened or developed, and once edited are sent to the author for approval.