WN *Feedback*

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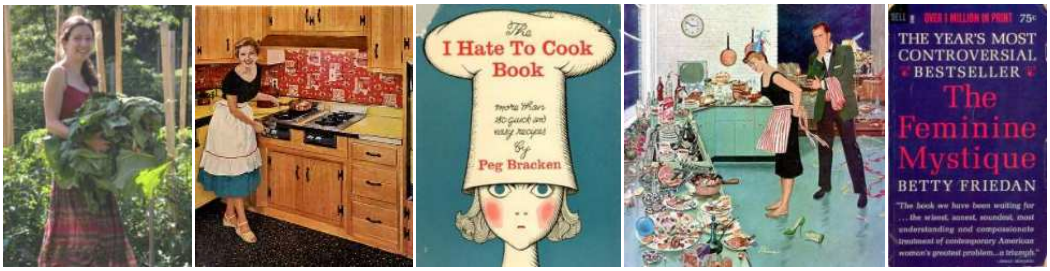
Michael Pollan
Don't blame feminism

Access April 2013 WN appraisals of Michael Pollan here
Access May 2013 WN appraisals of Michael Pollan here
Access August 2012 WN Enrique Jacoby, Patricia Murillo on Peru food culture here
Access July 2009 New York Times Michael Pollan on Julia Child here



From left: 21st century woman harvesting from her backyard, 1960s woman cooking, the I Hate to Cook Book, 1960s couple, The Feminine Mystique

From Emily Matchar, North Carolina, USA

So Michael Pollan is all for cooking, as you show in your April and May issues (1,2). Good, so am I. I've learned to can jam, bake bread from scratch in my Dutch oven and make my own tomato sauce from a bushel of ugly tomatoes I bought at the farmer's market.

But let's not blame feminism for the decline in cooking. I say this because in the *New York Times Magazine* (3), Michael Pollan dismisses Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* as 'the book that taught millions of American women to regard housework, cooking included, as drudgery, indeed as a form of oppression', scolds that 'American women now allow corporations to cook for them' and rues that women have lost the 'moral obligation to cook' they felt during his 1960s childhood.

Comments like this make me – owner of not one but two copies of *The Omnivore's Dilemma* – want to smack Pollan and all the rest of those that share his views on the

head with a spatula. Claiming that feminism killed home cooking is not just shaming, it's wildly inaccurate.

The rise of convenience food originally was because of market forces, not feminism. In the US, after World War II, food companies began unloading packaged food products developed for wartime use, on the domestic market: frozen fish fillets, powdered coffee, tinned spinach. These foods were aggressively marketed as wholesome and modern.

In response, it turned out that lots of women were simply not so fond of cooking, and without any prompting, wanted to do other things. The twentieth century's two most popular pro-convenience-foods cookbooks, Peg Bracken's 1960 *The I Hate to Cook Book* with its recipes like Skid Road Stroganoff ('Add the flour, salt, paprika, and mushrooms, stir, and let it cook five minutes while you light a cigarette and stare sullenly at the sink'), and Poppy Cannon's 1951 *The Can-Opener Cookbook* were hits long before second-wave feminism was so much as a gleam.

Cooking is not fun when it's mandatory. Before she was a professor, Arlene Avakian, food studies scholar and professor emeritus at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, in the 1960s was a stay-at-home mom raising two young children. In those days, cooking was not fun or fulfilling, as it can be now. As a young wife, she was expected to cook nutritious meals day in and day out. She felt trapped, bored, and, as she says, she 'began to go nuts'. Further, contrary to the myth of the happy, apple-cheeked great-great-grandmother evoked by Michael Pollan from time to time in his books, cooking was rarely seen as a source of fulfilment, historically speaking. In Colonial America, kitchen work was viewed as a lowly chore, often farmed out to servants.

The difference now, is that we can choose to cook. At least, we can if we are middle-class, liberal, and white. People are beginning to cook more, for health, economic, and environmental reasons. Best-selling books like Barbara Kingsolver's homesteading memoir *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* (2007) and Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation* (2002) have raised awareness of how food impacts on our health and the environment, as have films like *Food, Inc.* (2008). 'Locavorism' – eating only or mostly local foods – in the US has led to massive supermarket chains proudly labelling produce with mini state flags.

And while Michael Pollan describes his prowess in the kitchen, and although restaurant kitchens are still heavily male (93 percent of executive chefs are men), it's mostly women in the new worlds of artisan food businesses, urban homesteading, food activism, and food blogging. Women also continue to cook the vast majority of

home meals: in the US now, to the best of anybody's knowledge, women cook over three-quarters of dinners, make almost all food purchases, and spend three times as many hours in the kitchen as men.

My grandmother, were she not dead (due to cigarettes), would no doubt look at me like I'm crazy. 'Don't you know that you can buy that stuff?' she would ask. My response would be that I choose to cook. The inaccurate blaming of feminism for today's food failings implies that women were, are, and should be responsible for cooking and family health. Unsurprisingly, women are the ones who feel responsible.

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Emily Matchar's book, Homeward Bound: Why Women Are Embracing the New Domesticity, is published in the US on 7 May by Simon & Schuster.

Please cite as: Matchar E. Michael Pollan. Don't blame feminism. [Feedback]. World Nutrition June 2013, ***4****, 6, 435-437*

Michael Pollan
Do blame Big Food

Access July 2009 New York Times Michael Pollan on Julia Child here
Access April 2013 WN extract from Cooked here

From Michelle Konstantinovsky, Berkeley, California, USA

Emily Matchar's claims are groundless. In his original *New York Times* piece (1), and in *Cooked* (2), Michael Pollan asserts that while Betty Friedan did depict housework as a form of oppression (which is not sexist defamation, it's just true), many women didn't necessarily see cooking that way. Simone de Beauvoir wrote in *The Second Sex* that time in the kitchen could be oppressive but it could also be a form of 'revelation and creation; and a woman can find special satisfaction in a successful cake or a flaky pastry, for not everyone can do it: one must have the gift'.

The real anti-hero in the anti-woman dialogue certainly isn't Michael Pollan. The food industry has fought long and hard to convince women that we needn't waste

time preparing meals for our families because the industry can do it for us. These attempts to lure females out of the kitchen didn't start with the feminist movement. The post-World War II wonders of freeze-dried food were intended to persuade families that cooking was obsolete. Any guess as to why?

'Processing food is extremely profitable -- much more so than growing it or selling it whole', Michael Pollan writes in *Cooked*. 'So it became the strategy of food corporations to move into our kitchen long before many women had begun to move out' He is not blaming feminists. He's rightfully condemning an industry that has not only misleadingly appropriated feminist rhetoric, but used it to conceal decidedly anti-feminist ideals.

By advertising packaged foods almost exclusively to women, the food industry did a great job reinforcing the notion that moms alone should be responsible for feeding the family while letting dads and sons off the hook. Emily Matchar is blaming Michael Pollan for an attack he never made.

'Whenever anyone – but especially a man – expresses dismay at the decline of home cooking, a couple of unspoken assumptions begin to condense over the conversation like offending clouds' Michael Pollan writes, 'The first assumption is that you must be blaming women for the decline in cooking, since (and here is assumption number two) the meals no longer being cooked are women's responsibility...But by now it should be possible to make a case for the importance of cooking without defending the traditional division of domestic labor. Indeed, that argument will probably get nowhere unless it *challenges* the traditional arrangement of domesticity – and assumes a prominent role for men in the kitchen, as well as children'.

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Statement of interest: I was Michael Pollan's teaching assistant for his course on food writing this year at the University of California (Berkeley)

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Fortification. Folic acid and spina bifida
Is it safe? Is it wise? Is it right?

Access March 2013 WN editorial on fortification here
Access March 2013 WN Mark Lawrence on fortification here
Access May 2013 WN Mark Lawrence on fortification here
Access May 2013 WN editorial writer on fortification here

From Mark Lawrence, Melbourne, Australia

The recent *WN* editorial and letter on folic acid fortification (1,2) succinctly capture the complexity and controversy of this food policy intervention, as outlined in my *WN* commentary (3). However, I challenge the contention that that the main causal factors associated with neural tube defects are not genetic but environmental and therefore the best policy response is to pursue greater investment in conventional primary health care activities.

Yes, neural tube defect prevalence varies geographically, but this has been linked to ethnic differences in the frequency of the C677T polymorphism, ranging from 0 per cent in African American women to 3.8, 7.2 and 18.1 per cent in Asian, white and Mexican women respectively (4,5). This finding suggests genetically based variations in folate requirements are more predictive of risk of a neural tube defect-affected pregnancy than the environment as such.

I agree that primary health care activities are consistently shown to be essential in addressing micronutrient malnutrition. But in the special case of neural tune defects it is not a conventional nutrient deficiency that is the cause of this policy problem. The evidence indicates that the majority (not all) of cases are the consequence of a genetic predisposition in a very small number of women. These women have a peculiar requirement for a relatively high dose of folic acid to reduce their risk of experiencing an affected pregnancy. In this unusual circumstance primary health care activities are unlikely to be as effective in addressing the predominant cause of the policy problem as a targeted high dose folic acid supplementation programme.

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Andean food and nutrition systems
Quinoa a win-win? Maybe

Access July 2012 WN Enrique Jacoby on Peru food culture here
Access August 2012 WN Enrique Jacoby, Patricia Murillo on Peru food culture here
Access January 2013 The Guardian on quinoa here
Access April 2013 WN Enrique Jacoby on quinoa here



Quinoa, the ancestral staple crop of the Andean region, is now becoming a global superfood commodity. Is this good news for all? Maybe. Maybe not

From Tom Philpott, North Carolina, USA

Yes, the news as Enrique Jacoby reported in April in your pages (1) that the ancestral Andean crop quinoa, uniquely a source of all essential amino acids, is now officially recognised by the UN, should be good. The fact that its interests are officially represented at the UN at Peruvian and Bolivian presidential level is encouraging. Plus Bolivian president Evo Morales was himself a quinoa farmer, so he knows the ecology as well as the politics.

There is though a problem, as Enrique Jacoby has indicated. Escalating prices, while boosting farmers' incomes, are driving down quinoa consumption in the Andes – including among the very farmers who grow it. Quinoa growers have 'westernised their diets because they now have more profits and more income' says a Bolivian

agronomist. 'Ten years ago they had only an Andean diet in front of them. They had no choice. But now they do and they want rice, noodles, candies, Coke, they want everything!' The economics are simple: 'As the price has risen quinoa is consumed less and less in Bolivia. It's worth more to the producers to sell it or trade it for pasta and rice. As a result, they're not eating it any more'. In other words, farmers are starting to see quinoa as a product that's too valuable to eat – they can use the proceeds from selling to buy cheaper staples like white rice.

Then there are land and environmental issues. As demand for quinoa surges, farmers are scrambling for new land to cultivate to take advantage of higher prices. The push is squeezing out older forms of sustainable agriculture, and putting serious pressure on soil fertility. Traditionally, quinoa fields covered 10 per cent of this fragile Andean ecosystem. Llamas grazed on the rest. Now, llamas are being sold to make room for crops, provoking a soil crisis since the cameloid's guano is the undisputed best fertiliser for maintaining and restoring quinoa fields.

In a short period of time, quinoa has gone from a local staple to a global commodity. 'When you transform a food into a commodity, there's inevitable breakdown in social relations and high environmental cost', as Tanya Kerssen of Food First has told *Time* magazine. A global expansion of quinoa production could also cause its price to crash – as happened to coffee in the late 1990s after Vietnam charged into coffee farming, causing a global glut. If a quinoa glut drove prices low enough, Andean farmers' investments in land and processing infrastructure would be wiped out.

Good news is that the Andean region is now governed by progressive, equality-minded politicians like Bolivian president Evo Morales. In Bolivia, the government is buying quinoa and incorporating it into a packet of foods supplied to thousands of pregnant and nursing women each month. In Peru, the government is placing it in public-school breakfasts. Such programmes can help ensure that non-wealthy Andeans aren't priced out of the market for this nutrient-dense regional foodstuff

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Agitation
Divided we will fall

Access May 2013 WN Geoffrey Cannon column on the need for agitation here





Agitation. There's been plenty of demonstrations in the streets of the USA and Europe, but nothing has changed. A much greater unity of purpose is needed

From Claudio Schuftan, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

This responds to Geoffrey Cannon's plea (1) for some more agitation in the field of public health and nutrition. As a long-standing member of the People's Health Movement I agree (and was sorry to find no mention of PHM); but action, however direct, in any one field has strict limitations.

I am reading Susan George's *Lugano Report II: This Time We Will Liquidate Democracy*, her second savage satire on the current style of globalised capitalism. So far, this is only out in French and Spanish; the first *Lugano Report* is referenced here (2). She points out that recent agitation episodes, such as Occupy Wall Street and the *Indignados* (pictures above), have been self-limited, did not coalesce, and have despaired and given up.

Many of the movements agitating against the corrupted and collapsed banking 'system' and the futile responses of governments, have called for radical reform and have gained public support. But they have not come together and united their appeals. Those in power are careful to keep these movements separated and fragmented by feeding into what Sigmund Freud called 'the narcissism of small differences'. Susan George argues that if these groups integrated themselves into the struggle of well established organisations with greater experience, such as trades unions, 'the red alert would have spread and coalesced'.

She deplores the fact that ecologists fight for the environment, trades unions for jobs, feminists for women. These movements stay specialised and seem not to realise that basically there is just one struggle, which is for justice and equity, and against what is still the prevailing ideology of reckless and irresponsible minimally regulated

capitalism – greed, in a word, not only legal but endorsed by governments and apparently accepted as a fact of modern life by most of the rest of us.

I salute the agitators Geoffrey Cannon celebrates, but agitation has to 'catch on' and mobilise those who are relatively privileged, as are perhaps all the readers of this letter, as well as the masses of people in the world now who have no jobs or hope.

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Please cite as: Schuftan C. Agitation. Divided we will fall. [Feedback]. World Nutrition June 2013, ***4,*** *6,442-443*

Agitation
United we can stand

Access February 2013 WN editorial on the history of direct action here
Access May 2013 WN Geoffrey Cannon column on the need for agitation here



Early 20th century direct action: Force-feeding of a suffragette in 1913 (left), and (right) Mahatma Gandhi's 1930 Salt March. Both involved law-breaking

From Geoffrey Cannon, São Paulo, Brazil

Yes, I should have mentioned the People's Health Movement, along with the World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action and the International Baby Milk Action Network.

These civil society organisations are effective because they include militancy. Moreover, the People's Health Movement, along with La Via Campesina, makes Susan George's point, as indicated by Claudio Schuftan. Both have an effect on food systems and thus on nutrition, not despite having a broad range of concerns, but because of this.

If my column seemed to suggest that everybody engaged in public health nutrition should be militant – to agitate, in the proper sense of the word – or even to be an 'activist', this is not what I meant. Thus, take the movements for votes for women and for Indian independence. The pictures above are emblematic of civil disobedience. Masses of people in the UK and India joined leaders like Emmeline Pankhurst and Mohandas Gandhi in public demonstrations, and many of them were prepared to break unjust laws in doing so. But most who supported these movements did so quietly. The militancy raised their consciousnesses and made them think, and also made political waves and in due course shook governments, encouraged reformers, and led to improved enfranchisement. Eventually the tide turned. Social and political change depended on the many good citizens, whose minds were changed. It also depended on the few agitators, who were prepared to put their careers, reputation and liberty on the line.

Have the Occupy! and *Indignados* uprisings turned out to be futile? In my opinion, no. They are steps on a path. They are reasons why conventional politics in various European countries are now shaken up. Official surveillance of any apparent dissidence is now extremely efficient. But without demonstrations and direct action as one part of an overall movement, and a new acceptance that people have a right to combine and stand up for what is right, the bad can only get worse.

It's good that Claudio Schuftan cites Susan George, well-known for her statement 'Hunger is not a scourge, it is a scandal'. In a poll of public health nutrition and allied professionals conducted in 2005, she was voted the most influential author (2). Susan George has always warned that activism is essential. Almost 40 years ago, after the 1974 Rome World Food Conference, she wrote of world hunger: 'If past experience is any guide, the centre-to-centre connection will only aggravate and perpetuate hunger. Hope lies in the number and the strength of links that can be forged between "ordinary people"… and the pressures that these same "ordinary people" can bring to bear on their governments and on the "international community". An end to hunger depends on how many of us refuse to tolerate the intolerable' (3).

Agitation is not the only answer, and it can make bad worse. Militants do not always act in good faith. There is no panacea. But surely there are some nutritional issues that are so clear-cut, and where the current state of affairs is so entrenched and outrageous, that direct action is justified and necessary. Protection of breastfeeding is the case proving that militancy can be essential. Other clear-cut issues – from the specific to the more general – include promotion of ultra-processed products to

children, partnerships with Big Food in programmes designed to prevent and control undernutrition or obesity, commodity speculation that causes food price fluctuation, and trade laws that displace and even destroy traditional food systems.

Yes, public health nutritionists alone will not be able successfully to challenge these injustices. Yes, alliances are certainly essential. But at the very least, when we see impoverished farmers and parents in the streets of cities in the global South, rising up in consciousness of political and economic systems that make their lives practically impossible, we should see why, and think of what we can do.

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How to respond

Feedback is edited by Isabela Sattamini. Please address letters for publication to wn.letters@gmail.com. Letters should usually respond to or comment on contributions to *World Nutrition*. More general letters will also be considered. Usual length for main text of letters is between 100 and 850 words. Any references should usually be limited to up to 12. Letters are edited for length and style, may also be developed, and once edited are sent to the author for approval.