WN *Appraisals*

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Michael Pollan
The American genius



Joan Dye Gussow, Fred Kirschenmann, Ricardo Uauy, Orville Schell
Marion Nestle, Barry Popkin, Geoffrey Cannon, Carlos Monteiro
Email: wn.theeditor@gmail.com

Access pdf of 2007 MP NYTM piece on Unhappy Meals here
Access pdf of 2008 MP NYTM piece addressed to the US Farmer in Chief here
Access pdf of 2009 MP NYT piece on Big Food vs Big Insurance here
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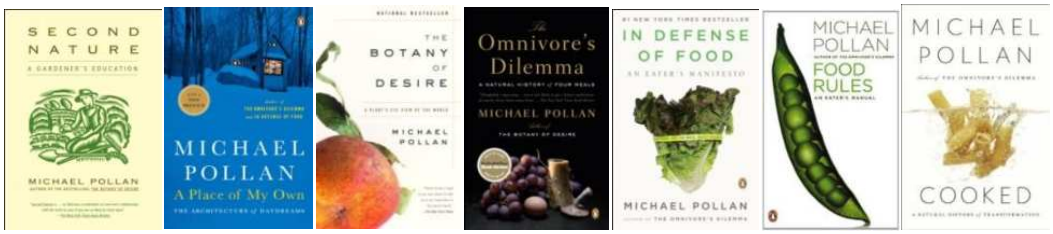
Introduction



Michael Pollan's seven books: Second Nature (1991), A Place of my Own (1997), The Botany of Desire (2001); then The Omnivore's Dilemma (2006), In Defense of Food (2008), Food Rules (2010), and now Cooked (April 2013)

Editor's note. Welcome to Appraisals. This is not a new department of *World Nutrition*. From time to time we have published series of short communications in praise of famous people, which have included evaluation – hence 'appraisal'. Two that come to mind are those commemorating the lives and work of environmentalist Wangari Matthai and physician Michael Latham, both fighters for human rights in Africa. But these were after their deaths. We also as here, mark the work of people who are alive and active.

Please address letters in response 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.

This month Michael Pollan, now succeeding Francis Moore Lappé as the most prolific and influential public intellectual teacher, writer and speaker in the USA on the web of topics that include the environment, agriculture, food, industry, society and nutrition, publishes his new book *Cooked: A Natural History of Transformation.*

Above you see him (left) in action at a TED presentation after publication of his big book *The Omnivore's Dilemma.* Then (right) he is pictured in his office at the University of California (Berkeley) where he is professor of journalism, specialising in his own field of the public understanding of science.

To public health and nutrition professionals Michael Pollan is best known as an advocate of radical and provocative views on food, nutrition and health, succinctly expressed throughout *In Defense of Food (2008)* and in *Food Rules (2010).* He disagrees with and indeed denounces the basic tenets of modern nutrition science, and also rejects conventional dietary guidelines in favour of a whole food approach. He has

done this energetically and forcefully while retaining and even gaining support and sympathy from many – not all! – public health nutrition professionals. Four are currently active nutrition professors: Ricardo Uauy from Santiago, Chile, Marion Nestle from New York City, USA, Barry Popkin from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, USA, and Carlos Monteiro from the University of São Paulo, Brazil. They praise him in their contributions here – Barry Popkin with reservations. So does Joan Dye Gussow from New York, USA, also a professor for many years, and the matriarch of thought and action on nutrition in its full meaning of personal, social and environmental physical, mental, emotional and spiritual nourishment.

However, any specialist view of Michael Pollan diminishes who he is. First, he always identifies himself as a journalist, which indeed now, approaching the age of 60, he has been for close on forty years. More specifically, he has maintained a special interest in the translation of science, mostly but not only biological, into forms that can be understood by anybody with a fair general knowledge and a keen interest – which most people have where their health and that of their families is concerned. As a writer he does not come indoctrinated with any ideology. This makes his writing exciting and dangerous.

Third, as he often remarks, he was drawn into food, nutrition and health almost by chance, because of sensing that the whole field is very important, is a part of a greater whole, and also is – at least from where he stands, with the journalist's gleam in the eye – a great steaming mess. You can get a sense of where he has been coming from ever since his first major writing in the 1980s, from the tributes below from Joan Dye Gussow, Frederick Kirschenmann from Iowa, USA, Ricardo Uauy, and Orville Schell in-flight from Beijing. Michael Pollan's core work concerns the living and physical environment, and is inevitably political – how could this be otherwise, now? He therefore is concerned with the place of humans in the living and physical world, and his conclusions and judgements on nutrition are shaped from this mould. Withal this, he is also determined, in the tradition of Mark Twain, to learn omnivorously, to entertain, and to have a hell of a good time in his life right now, as several contributors here including Geoffrey Cannon from Minas Gerais, Brazil, note.

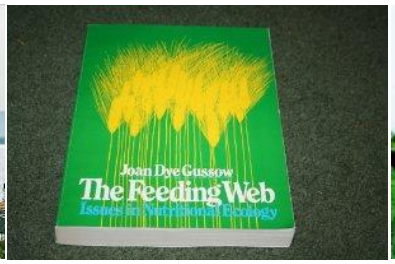
Because of his fame, success and exposure in books, lectures, the *New York Times* and his own comprehensive website, in the last decade he has been able to follow his inclinations in long deep research and reporting on whatever he perceives as most interesting and important. This gives him a rare scope. This appraisal of Michael Pollan has the title 'The American genius' for three related reasons. First, because the term 'genius' has a dual sense, of spirit of place and of powerful influence. Second, because the two continents of America, south as well as north, still despite so much woe, retain a feeling of limitless possibility, at least for those able to survive and live well – and here is the note of reservation. Third, because in the usual sense of the term – 'outstanding intellectual, creative and imaginative capacity and energy' – Michael Pollan surely is set fair.

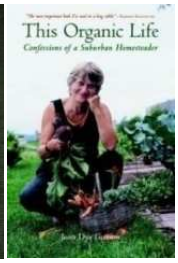
The appraisals below are in the chronological order of when the contributor first encountered Michael Pollan, with Joan Dye Gussow, who has known him longest, coming first. Some respond to ten suggested enquiries (or some of them), which are:

1 When did I come across Michael Pollan?
2 What impressed me at that time?
3 Rate his work and impact
4 Quote one of his sayings that stays with me
5 Has his work changed my work and if so, how?
6 Give an example of where he has made a difference
7 Does his work have relevance outside the USA?
8 In what ways if any do I think he is mistaken?
9 Which of his publications do I most recommend?
10 Any other thoughts or comments

Joan Dye Gussow







Joan Dye Gussow wrote to us from her home in New York State. Here she is in her garden by the river Hudson. 'Once in a while, when I have an original thought, I look around and realise Joan said it first', says Michael Pollan. He and Marion Nestle both state that they have been inspired by her teaching and testimony. Now in her mid 80s, she was professor at Columbia University in New York City for over 40 years. She has always been a severe critic of industrialised food systems, including when she served on the US federal government's official Food and Nutrition Board. She invented the discipline of nutritional ecology. She continues to speak and teach. She responded quickly to our requests in firm fashion, explaining that she was packing for a trip the next day.

When did I come across Michael Pollan?

I first encountered Michael in print when I came across (in my late husband's bookcase I believe) his 1991 book *Second Nature.* I was very taken with the thoughtfulness, humor, honesty, and all around excellence of his writing.

I believe I first met Michael in person at one of the restaurants at the Culinary Institute of America (the *other* CIA) where we were both invited to dinner by a third person whose identity escapes me. I was ready to be impressed– since I was such a fan of his book – and remember only that he was remarkably engaging and friendly.

What impressed me at that time?

What I cannot remember is whether he was already interested in the field of food at that time or whether – as I hope – I may have provoked his interest. Surely his attention to the lives of plants and their roles in human society was already evident in his first book. Each gardening year I recall his unforgettably apt descriptions of the spring garden as Apollonian and the fall garden as Dionysian. And I used his memorable rage at a woodchuck that invaded his garden, then in Connecticut, as an epigraph for a chapter of my own first memoir.

After that meeting Michael called me from time to time to ask me for information, and the next time I remember seeing him in person was at the NY publication party for *The Botany of Desire*. I suspect it may have been at that impressive event that I asked him whether he had made money from his first book and he assured me with a smile that 'you don't write books to make money, Joan, because they never do.' I confess to having teased him about that comment many times since.

Rate his work and impact

I am repeatedly impressed by Michael's ability to figure out which questions are the right ones, and then setting out to answer them with his well-trained reporter's intensity. Michael has often publicly credited me with having put forth some of his ideas before he did and, since ideas are almost always recycled every generation, that is partially true, but I never had his trumpet and his ability to deal with the controversies his often controversial observations provoke.

Quote one of his sayings that stays with me

I'm not taking the time to get this exactly right, but one of his statements that stays with me goes something like: 'To say something is unsustainable means that it will end.' Obvious, but this is seldom said with such directness when 'sustainable' is thrown around everywhere.

Give an example of where he has made a difference

Michael has been a true change agent in the food professions. *The Omnivore's Dilemma* is assigned in classrooms where nothing so 'radical' and so critical of the US food supply would ever before have been read. I give him much of the credit for the fact that it is now possible for someone in the food field to be critical of much of what is in the marketplace without being drummed out of the profession.

For the public, Michael has been a profoundly educational force, introducing to average eaters complicated facts about the ways in which food is grown, processed

and promoted without condemning them for their eating habits. If we in the US get a decent farm bill within the next ten years, he will deserve some of the credit.

Which of his publications do I most recommend?

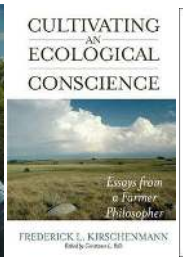
Second Nature (1991), *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (2006), *In Defense of Food* (2008)

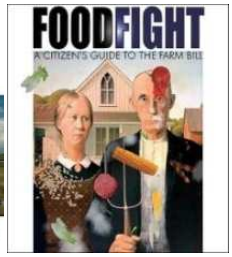
Any other thoughts or comments?

'These are ridiculous times, and if it all makes sense to you, there's probably something wrong'. (Psychiatry professor, April 2012). And: 'As long as one has a garden, one has a future. As long as one has a future, one is alive'. (Frances Hodgson Burnett, *In the Garden,* 1922)

Frederick Kirschenmann







Frederick Kirschenmann wrote to us from Iowa. He is a farmer and a natural philosopher, and a professor at Iowa State University. In 2010 he published a book of essays, *Cultivating an Ecological Conscience.* This traces the evolution of his ecological and farming philosophy over the past 30 years. He converted his family's farm in North Dakota to a certified organic operation in 1976, developing a crop rotation that has enabled him to farm productively without chemical inputs while simultaneously improving the health of the soil. His farm has been featured in *National Geographic*, *Business Week*, *Audubon*, *The Los Angeles Times* and *Gourmet* magazine. He is President of Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture in New York State. He continues to manage his family's 2,600-acre farm in North Dakota.

When did I come across Michael Pollan?

I first encountered Michael through his early book *Second Nature* (1991). At the time I was still wrestling with the same problem that engaged him – how to live in nature, and use nature to produce food and create shelter, without diminishing nature. In *Second Nature* he revealed that he was a 'child of Thoreau', and therefore committed to the notion that nature should, as much as possible, be left alone. But he was also a gardener, so how could he resolve the dilemma of respecting nature's own and still imposing his own garden on her? I have been a farmer most of my life, so I was wrestling with the same dilemma. How could I, along with Michael, 'learn how to use nature without damaging it'?

What impressed me at that time?

His willingness to be honest. His early effort to resolve a dilemma was his passion to create a garden that was incorporated into nature – so that one could not tell where nature left off and where the garden began – hence no fences, no clear boundaries. The garden was to fit into nature. Then came the animal (I think it was a woodchuck) which did incredible damage to his garden. But he felt he was smarter than the animal and so he started to devise ways to outsmart it – but the animal kept overcoming all of the slick ways Michael designed to outsmart it. Finally when he found the animal's hideout he (out of sheer frustration) poured gasoline down the hole and lit it with a match, whereupon it blew up in his face. That, he acknowledged, was the end of the 'Vietnam' approach to the problem.

Ultimately his *Second Nature* approach was similar to the one that was later articulated in Richard Lewontin's *The Triple Helix*. Lewontin reminds us that all organisms destroy part of the environment in the process of feeding themselves and creating shelter for themselves, and we humans are no different. The important lesson to be learned from nature is that in the ecology of nature such destructions become self-renewing capacities in the complex ecological interdependences of nature, and that if it were not for such destructions there would 'be no environment'

Rate his work and impact

The insights in *Second Nature*, naturally invited me into his other writings. His *Botany of Desire* (2001) is an equally forthright investigation, as are his later books. Michael's work is relevant to all members of the human community. We have now reached a tipping point, especially with regard to the impact we are now having on the climate, so it is essential for all members of the human community to appropriate the lessons that Michael has featured in his writings

Quote one of his sayings that stays with me

A statement he made in one of his essays in the *New York Times Magazine* some years ago. He wrote: 'Suppose that we started thinking of food not so much as a thing and more of a relationship'. In other words, for Michael food is not so much stuff that we eat, as it is a complex set of relationships to nature, to economies, and to social cultures that we all participate in.

Has his work changed my work and if so, how?

He has become a source of great inspiration to my own struggles to learn how to be one of those organisms in nature that contributes to nature's self-renewing capacity. This is a capacity which Aldo Leopold the wildlife conservationist describes as 'Land Health'. Learning how to enhance that capacity is what conservation is all about.

Cultivating the 'ecological conscience' which Aldo Leopold determined was essential to achieving a culture that would achieve such land health became my personal passion. I am now devoted to that task, both as a farmer and a philosopher. That is a lesson that we would all do well to learn if we want to remain citizens of planet earth.

Ricardo Uauy



Ricardo Uauy wrote to us from Santiago, Chile. He is former director of the Chilean national institute of nutrition and food technology (INTA) and professor at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. An authority on essential fats, a brilliant speaker and devoted mentor, he was chair of the WHO/FAO panel responsible for the 2003 '916' report on food, nutrition and prevention of chronic diseases, and 2005-2009 president of the International Union of Nutritional Sciences. Above (right, standing left) shows him in 2012 honoured as the outstanding applied scientist in Chile by current president Sebastián Piñera (centre, clapping). An astute political operator, globally networked with access to legislators, he may do more good for public health nutrition than almost anybody else now active in the profession.

When did I come across Michael Pollan?

This was in the early 90s before he was famous, when he was a leading US science journalist. I knew him as participating in relatively out-of-mainstream scientific meetings on essential omega-3 fatty acids and marine foods for human health. He was avid for new information on how animal feed would affect nutritional quality of foods. He was fascinated by work I was doing on how essential omega-3 fatty acids (present in human milk, absent in artificial formula) affect visual and brain development.

What impressed me at that time?

He was interested in the science and also in what drove the science. The hidden scientific agenda being pushed by scientists, funders and governments were most interesting to him. His questions were sharp and insightful, no need for details, he was interested in the big picture and what would be a potential topic of interest to the public. He would have been a perfect plenary speaker for the World Nutrition *Rio2012* conference. *[Ed: he was invited but his teaching commitments at the University of California/ Berkeley prevented this].*

Rate his work and impact

His views are not limited to nutrition, food and health, but he has an interesting position on the ethics of food production and consumption, what drives our appetite and what are the limits we should place on these appetites. He places special emphasis on our responsibility as omnivores at the top of the food chain, to maintain a balance between our appetite and the needs of the ecosystem. He shows us that we need to be more than just predators, we need to be aware of the past, present and future of our food supply and the implications this has for humankind.

This brings him to recommendations for real sustainability of the entire food chain from agriculture to public health. Industrial agricultural producers must now use fewer inputs, produce less pollution of air and water, and replenish and revitalise soil. Small farms need support to produce food as well as feed. Agricultural systems should be reorganised to promote public health as a major goal as an ethical issue above all. He says all this, eloquently and forcefully, to what is now a huge following. He preaches the ethics of food consumption in contrast to those predator omnivores with disregard for all except pleasing the senses and filling the stomach at any cost.

Has his work changed my work and if so, how?

Here are some thoughts that probably concern us all in one way another, which Michael Pollan's work rightly provokes. The first thing to understand if you are doing public health is to examine 'the causes of the causes'. This may not always be obvious at first. However you should always ask questions like: 'who funds the work being presented?', 'who butters your and the presenter's bread?', 'who profits from the actions you take?' Be aware that some will respond in a defensive mode, others will give a polite answer that is unrevealing.

When we propose that people eat healthfully, we come up against those promoting industrialised foods. Their job is to sell more of their products no matter what. The goals of food companies and of public health are not the same. Thus, 'look before you cross'. Stay out of partnerships and alliances that might compromise your ability to support people's efforts to eat well and stay healthy. I say this, having been burned more than once for not paying sufficient attention to this principle.

Rate his work and impact

He is succeeding beyond his role as a communicator. He has posed the right questions and has provided preliminary answers. However, we need to do our job in response to the challenges he poses. How do we shape our science to go beyond the day-to-day minutiae, go beyond frames, and see the big picture?

If you are trying to help people eat healthfully, you will come up against powerful food industries, especially marketers whose main job it is to sell more of their products. The goals of food companies and the goals of public health are frequently in conflict. We need to promote changes in the regulatory frameworks that will change the present model of doing business in the food sector.

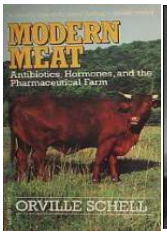
Food and water should not just be commodities that are produced, sold and consumed based on market forces. Food and nutrition supports basic human needs thus should be produced and distributed in a framework of human needs and basic rights. Until this basic principle becomes accepted by societies at large and the international political/policy system, we will make only small progress.

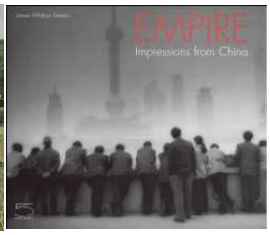
Give an example of where he has made a difference

He has exposed the ethics of modern food production systems. He has also shown using powerful evidence collected by him, that the goals of food companies and the goals of public health are not the same. His message should lead us to carefully examine our actions, while retaining our integrity and strengthening our ability to promote good nutrition and support health in all its dimensions.

Orville Schell







Orville Schell sent his appraisal to us from Beijing, then in-flight, then after landing in New York. He is director of the Center for US-China Relations at the Asia Society in New York City. He is been visiting China since 1975 and has written sixteen books, nine of which have been on China. Formerly he was dean of the school of journalism at the University of California, Berkeley, and was responsible for hiring Michael Pollan. His writing has ranged across a wide variety of topics and appeared publications ranging from the *Atlantic* magazine, *Wired* and the *New Yorker* to *Time*, *Foreign Affairs* and the *New York Review of Books*. He was also a cattle rancher in Bolinas, California, and the author of the pioneering investigation of the livestock industry, *Modern Meat: Antibiotics, Hormones, and the Pharmaceutical Farm* (1984).

I call this the Pollanization of California. Michael appeared in California – thanks to the introduction of writer and fellow faculty member Mark Danner – more than a decade ago when I was Dean at UC Berkeley's graduate school of journalism. We were searching for a likely suspect to fill a newly endowed chair dedicated to the study of science and the environment.

At that point, Michael had already started writing about food and agriculture in the *New York Times Magazine*, but this was well before *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, and he had not yet become the 'monster talent' (to borrow a Hollywood manner of speech) that he was subsequently to become. But already his writing was so lucid, and people were so ready to know more about the food we all eat, the world almost begged for someone like Michael to plumb it exactly as he has done.

And, he is a big picture guy who knows how to both write elegantly and tell a good narrative. And, he arrived at this tipping-point moment filled with a growing host of unanswered questions about the connections between how food was grown, processed, advertised, sold, cooked and eaten, just what more and more people were beginning to be worried about. I remember sitting and listening to the lecture he gave as part of his in initial visit to Berkeley and thinking, 'Ah! Here at last is the Christopher Columbus of the food movement, someone really bent on exploring this new universe of food whose development is creating such a massive wake of technology, sociology and healthcare issues behind it.'

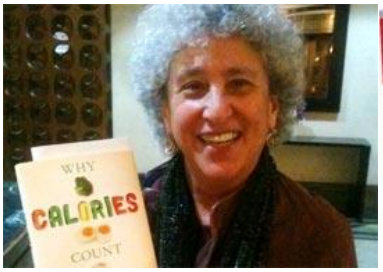
In the end, we at Berkeley were lucky enough to inveigle Michael to move from Connecticut and take this faculty position at Berkeley, where he quickly connected up with the likes of Alice Waters and Eric Schlosser to form something of a West Coast Food Swat Team. (There should be a TV serial!) And, as they say, the rest is history.

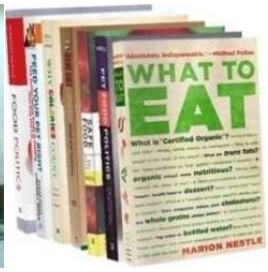
His writing is so easy to appreciate because, even as the universe of 'foodie' literature gathers more and more momentum and ever more chroniclers of food appear, Michael's writing remains distinctly apart. And. although he enjoys a good meal, he has never became fixated on the food's presentation alone.

Nor does he worship chefs or restaurants. He is more interested in tracing the roots of meals, back to their beginnings. In doing so he embraces the social, scientific and even political side of the everyday things we eat. By exploring food from fields to our mouths, he leads us away from the table back to agri-business, farming, processing, marketing and consuming. It is a world in which anyone can take an interest, because his explorations relate to perhaps the most basic thing in everyone's lives: eating and nourishing ourselves, but also, alas, sometimes sickening, even killing ourselves.

Years later, after he had become a household name, Michael came one night to our home in Berkeley for dinner, one that I had personally cooked. As we talked, another old friend, Stewart Brand, jokingly asked me 'How do you dare cook for such a food super-star as Michael Pollan?' Without missing a beat, Michael piped right up to reply: 'Orville has been cooking for me since long before I became Michael Pollan!' Now that he is Michael Pollan, we should sing hosannahs, because even before he 'became' Michael Pollan, the world was in dire need of a Michael Pollan, someone who had just his voice.

Marion Nestle







Marion Nestle wrote to us from New York City. She is on the cover of *WN* next month. Trained as a hard scientist, for many years professor and head of department at New York University's department of nutrition and food studies, advisor to the federal government, her career up to close to retirement age was glittering. Then she blew the lid off the US industrial food system with *Food Politics* (2002). A coruscating yet urbane writer, a superb speaker, a researcher with decades of experience of writing original papers, a news-hound and activist respected while feared by Big Food, Marion's website includes 100,000 twitter followers, trenchant blogs, and sage advice. Above (left) she is with her new book, and (right) with her partner Malden Nesheim in Rio last April on the occasion of the *World Nutrition Rio2012* conference. Next month she publishes the 10th anniversary edition of *Food Politics*, to be featured in *WN*.

When did I come across Michael Pollan?

I had been reading Michael Pollan's articles in the *New York Times Magazine* with admiration, to say the least, so when he invited me to participate in a food conference he was running at Berkeley in the fall of 2002, soon after he arrived to teach there, I was looking forward to meeting him. The conference was splendid. It brought together a huge number of journalists, academics, filmmakers, and government and industry officials. The speakers were glittery. Alice Waters did the catering. The side trips were to a farm in Bolinas and an olive orchard in Sonoma run by the owners of the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Sometime after that, I spoke in one of his classes. But the first meeting I remember in detail must have been in about 2004. I asked for his advice about the book I was working on at the time, which later became *What to Eat*.

What impressed me at that time?

We met for lunch at Chez Panisse, where he was clearly a regular (I was still having trouble getting a reservation). I wanted his advice about how to write for a general audience. He said he wasn't the right person to ask, because he didn't write as an expert. His starting point in developing books was from lack of expertise. As he learned, he brought readers along with him. This turned out to be hugely helpful. I got to know him better in the spring of 2006 when I taught at Berkeley in a complicated arrangement between three schools. I was paid by public policy, had an office in public health, but journalism – meaning Michael – ran the life support. The

following spring I went back to Berkeley to teach a course in science journalism in his program. We did some speaking gigs together.

Rate his work and impact

Obviously, I think he is terrific but I have to do full disclosure. He just wrote the splendid foreword to the tenth anniversary edition of *Food Politics*. I'll just say this: lots of people in the US have been working on the food movement for decades, but his work reaches so large and so passionate an audience that he has to be given much of the credit for its expansion.

Quote one of his sayings that stays with me

In *What to Eat,* I said dietary principles were simple: eat less, move more, eat plenty of fruits and vegetables, don't eat too much junk food. Pollan says: *Eat food. Mostly plants. Not too much*. Oh to be able to write like that.

Give an example of where he has made a difference

Students read his work and want to act. Our NYU programs in food studies are filled with people who read Pollan and want to do something to make the food system healthier and better for the planet.

Has his work changed my thinking and if so, how?

I don't think I ever understood the importance of meat animals in balanced ecological systems to the extent that I now do. The idea of the omnivore's dilemma is mind-changing on its own. I like it because it is so inclusive of different ways of eating and enjoying food. And I can't wait to read *Cooked.*

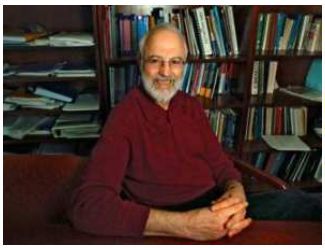
Does his work have relevance outside the USA?

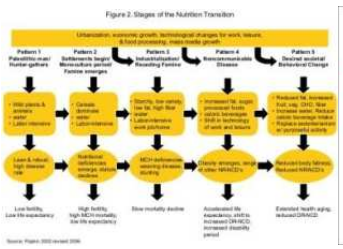
People outside the US are going to have to answer this one but of course it does. Food systems are global. How we in America eat affects the food systems of countries everywhere else and, to some extent, vice versa.

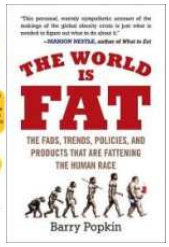
In what ways if any do I think he is mistaken?

I'm of the belief that although health very much depends on *what* you eat, body weight depends on *how much* you eat no matter where the calories come from (one of the theses of my new book *Why Calories Count*). We argue about this all the time. Eventually, the science will get to the point where this gets resolved one way or the other. In the meantime, it's fun to debate.

Barry Popkin







Barry Popkin wrote to us from Chapel Hill in North Carolina, at whose university he has been a professor for many years. Above all others, based on his formidable work in India, China, Mexico and other countries, he has put the linked so-called demographic – nutritional – epidemiological shift (diagram above centre) on the world map. As populations move into cities and consume industrialised products, they get fat. His book on the topic, which is also a personal testimony, so far published in nine languages, is shown above (right). Formally trained as an economist, he continues to track the very disruptive overturning of traditional food systems and their displacement by fast food nations. A methodological chronicler of his travels, Barry is also a wine expert and gourmet.

When did I come across Michael Pollan?

Years ago I read several long articles of his in the *New York Times Magazine* followed by a reading of *The Omnivore's Dilemma* in 2006 and several other books. He is a brilliant writer and his writings have introduced me to this journalist with a strong interest in how we eat. I do not personally know him.

What impressed me at that time?

His idea of what to eat and the role of cooking and local fresh markets fit exactly how I lived. It also fit the way so many of my close friends lived and ate.

Rate his work and impact

Michael Pollan came onto the US scene at the same time as major pushes for local farmers markets, the slow food movement, and many other pushes for educated higher income individuals to change how they ate. He is a very popular author and his message resonates with an educated higher income group of readers and individuals who want to lead a similar lifestyle. He did not create this movement but his work fit in very well with a major push in the US for healthy eating, slow eating, and local farmers markets.

Quote one of his sayings that stays with me

Eat local.

Give an example of where he has made a difference

I think his voice added weight and muscle to those pushing local farmers' markets but really has impacted only higher educated and upper income individuals.

Has his work changed my thinking and if so, how?

No impact at all. Indeed, I think his impact has been negative at times when it comes to my concern for the poor. It has often led many who push his ideas to thinking they are benefiting lower income and minority populations when in reality much of the benefit is to those least in need of his advice and help. When I chaired an Institute of Medicine committee on the public health effects of food deserts and approaches used to address the diet needs of the poor, we found he was used as a rationale often for programs which did not benefit the poor at all.

Does his work have relevance outside the US?

It would be wonderful if the world could follow a diet comprised of produce, legumes, and basic animal and other foods that were cooked and prepared by the consumer. However, I do not think this is realistic in our globe of more than 7 billion. I can afford to follow his model and have and will continue to do so. Also many of my friends throughout the low and middle income world will but the poor and much of the third world is driven by economic necessity and a food system that rewards with cheap prices the wrong foods, media dominated by junk food promotion, and food distribution which is pushing against the Pollan approach. I am not sure that we even have the space on the planet to feed a globe which lived and ate as Pollan promotes.

In what ways if any do I think he is mistaken?

In thinking that his approach can and will help the American poor –unless, that is, we make major changes in our price structure, food system, and ways we allocate our resources.

Which of his publications do I most recommend?

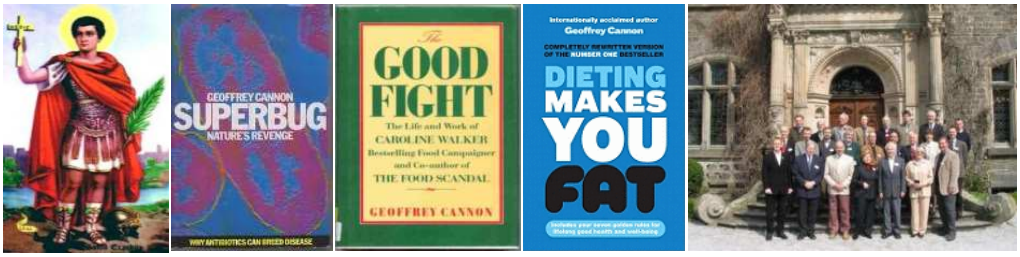
The Omnivore's Dilemma gives much more insight into his thinking in a most readable, enjoyable manner.

Any other thoughts or comments

My biggest concern is to try to find ways to change prices and incentives so more of the world can shift back to eat real produce, legumes, and basic food instead of a diet driven by fatty, sugary processed foods and beverages. He ignores the segment of the

population that cannot afford to follow his lead and has had no role in trying to change any structure of system where he lives or elsewhere.

Geoffrey Cannon



Geoffrey Cannon writes from Minas Gerais in Brazil. With Claus Leitzmann, he (in the light coloured jacket above, right)) convened the 2005 workshop responsible for the Giessen Declaration, which defines nutrition as a social, economic and environmental as well as a biological and behavioural discipline. As you see, he enjoys grand settings. With Carlos Monteiro and colleagues at the University of São Paulo, he shares responsibility for *The Food System* initiative. He writes books from time to time (three above), is a visiting scholar at the University of São Paulo, and is editor of *World Nutrition*. He moved from his native UK to live and work in Brazil at the turn of the millennium, and has never looked back. He has adopted Santo Expedito (above left), much favoured in Brazil as the patron saint of impossible causes.

When did I come across Michael Pollan?

On 28 January 2007. Or maybe the next day. This was after US publication of *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, of which I was then ignorant, and at a time when Michael was unknown to me. Martin Wiseman, my colleague at the World Cancer Research Fund in London, had sent me a note saying 'you may be interested', with a link. I got a sniff of 'yeah yeah, we know this is the sort of thing you like', so I downloaded and printed 'Unhappy Meals' and read this *New York Times Magazine piece* by Michael immediately. Martin was right on both counts.

What impressed me at that time?

'Nutritionism'. The term Michael picked up from and credited to Gyorgy Scrinis and made into the theme of his 2008 book *In Defense of Food*. This is the erroneous ideology that identifies (or confuses) food with its chemical constituents. It's what in my own small book *The Fate of Nations* published in 2003, I call 'the chemical principle'. My own favourite example is 'carbohydrates', a term and category best abolished. So I confess to a passing frisson of envy. For Michael was the big gun, with command over the boulevards of the *New York Times Magazine*. Emails exchanged, and within *In Defense of Food,* he generously bracketed me with Joan

Gussow and Marion Nestle as a critic of reductionism, going on rightly to say of 'nutritionism': 'Proper names have a way of making visible things we don't easily see or simply take for granted'. So I have been a Michael Pollan supporter ever since. Not just because he is an ethical colleague. It is mainly because he writes so well, which is because he thinks so hard.

Rate his work and impact

When I started to work on this issue of *World Nutrition*, Michael had 265,000 Twitter followers. A month later the number was up to 280,000, steadily rising at a rate of 500 a day. When you read this he may have passed 300,000. That's another two things about Michael. He is well organised, and he shares information and ideas. On a number of occasions he has advertised the 'ultra-processing' commentaries that Carlos Monteiro, I and colleagues have published in *WN,* and each time our page traffic has spiked. He is powerful, but not in any sense that can be sensibly faulted.

Quote one of his sayings that stays with me

'Eat animals that have themselves eaten well'. Or, 'It's not food if it's called by the same name in every language'. Clever, exact, wise. Plus Michael explains that many of these 'Food Rules' derive from requests he made in *The New York Times* which resulted in 2,500 suggestions. Some of the Rules are clunky. He has 'Eat only foods that will eventually rot'. No, no! Try: 'Good food goes bad'. And like Michael, I give due credit: this is as I recall paraphrased from Elmer McCollum, who added something like 'But make sure you eat it before it goes bad'. Indeed.

Michael's doings stay with me. Buying feedlot steer 534 so as to have a right to track it, early in *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, and shooting a wild pig for dinner, as he recounts later in that book. Constructing his writing houses, in Connecticut, and now California as you can see on his website. In such ways, he is experiencing a version of the primal lives of the settlers who made their own lives with their own hands and wits, as they went West across the expanding USA.

Give an example of where he has made a difference

It's the entirety of his work, its vision and ambition, and its amplification by delighted publishers and other media gatekeepers, that is making the difference.

Has his work changed my thinking and if so, how?

Informed, encouraged and reinforced, rather than changed. The shock of 'Unhappy meals' was of recognition. Reading Michael is like reading – of living writers – Mike Davis or Charles C Mann or Susan George, and – of those who have died recently –

Lynn Margulis or Robert Hughes or Alan Davidson. Their brilliant writing is not a mere gift. It arises from thorough scholarship, focused thought, and pioneering spirit. Also, they are clearly right. Like them, Michael is present in his writing, and he is constantly examining and exploring and extending his experience, to live and work and think and be more. Being grounded in nature, he is reliable, in common with his heroes Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau.

Does his work have relevance outside the USA, and if so, how?

Yes, and vitally so – but. The 'but' is because like practically all US nationals who have always lived in the USA, Michael needs filtration and translation. For people from Australia or England say, or from Western Europe, this is perhaps not much more than a matter of accent. But for those especially from the global South, people from the USA are characteristically alien in their core beliefs, however attractive and progressive these may be,

To me Michael feels like an example of 'the American dream' come true, as I felt was really possible so long, long ago when I visited California at the time of the pomp of West Coast rock music, and Esalen and the human potential movement. Yes, it is possible to be visionary, hopeful, energetic and fulfilled, even despite President Obama ordering mass manufacture and use of predator drones. But 'the American dream' does not export. It comes true only for extraordinary US citizens.

It would be unfair to construe this as a criticism of Michael. All his writing that I have read, addresses the people he knows – his fellow Americans generally with good educations, incomes and prospects, such as read *The New York Times*. My guess is that Michael never expected to be a best seller in Africa or Asia, or Latin America. This said though, my Brazilian colleagues are devoted to Michael's work, and I sense that one reason is his positive energy and lyric spirit, like that of – who shall I choose? Bruce Springsteen. Robert Rauschenberg. Leonard Bernstein. These analogies indicate that what is missing are dark notes, as in Bob Dylan, Jackson Pollock, Igor Stravinsky. However, you can't fake despair or vertigo.

In what ways if any do I think he is mistaken?

He cannot speak for everybody. Who can? But he does not suggest that he does, so this would not be his mistake.

Which of his publications do I most recommend?

Always the new one! Now this is *Cooked*. It is grounded in doing, and it reminds me to be hands-on food; and because of his celebration of the ancient eternal elements.

Any other thoughts or comments

For all those in public health and nutrition I say: Michael Pollan is making your work more significant. Rejoice and be glad, and again I say, rejoice!

Carlos Monteiro





Carlos Monteiro reflected on Michael Pollan in his office at the University of São Paulo; in a WHO meeting held in Hangzhou, China; and in another WHO meeting in Geneva preparing for the UN summit on world agriculture, food and nutrition policy to be held in Rome in 2014, from which he returned as these appraisals were compiled. He is co-convenor of *The Food System* initiative ('brand images' above), with its focus on the impact and significance of ultra-processed food and drink products, in contrast with freshly prepared meals. *Food System* commentaries are published regularly in *WN*. Trained as a physician and an epidemiologist, he is an authority on obesity and its various causes, and recently was honoured by the Pan-American Health Organization for outstanding public health achievement

When did I come across Michael Pollan?

Reading *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, in 2007, and when he was interviewed in April 2008 for the Brazilian weekly news magazine *Veja* by Thomaz Favoro in its long 'interview of the week'. This prompted me to access his website and follow his work.

What impressed me at that time?

The same as now. He is serious. He respects and develops the complexity of nutrition in many of its aspects. In parallel with our work on *The Food System*, he sees the social, cultural, economic, commercial, political and environmental aspects of nutrition, as well as its effects on human health, and he thinks in terms of mental, emotional and spiritual health. Plus he loves good meals in good company. He has the fortune of being trained as the type of journalist who has scope to search out whole new areas and stay with them, and become a genuine scholar of many topics, which with him are inter-related. It's also partly because his work is grounded in the natural philosophy of nature. With all this he is able to come up with ideas, stories and sayings you always remember.

Rate his work and impact

I like practically everything he writes. I think he's great. Some colleagues who I respect take a different view. For example, his famous summary statement *Eat Food. Mostly plants. Not too much* has been criticised for claiming to be new while actually being a warmed-up version of what nutrition scientists have been saying for ages.

My opinion is different. Firstly, it is unfortunately not the case that most nutrition scientists agree on this – or on many other things. Second, I don't read Michael Pollan as claiming to have made a whole new discovery. His statement is a summary of what he has set out to find out for himself and his readers. Third, we scientists should I think be a little bit more humble and accept that Michael Pollan, perhaps more than anybody now, is reaching audiences beyond our grasp. Fourth, while some of the things he says are audacious, this isn't one of them, and we should be glad that his position can generally be seen as progressive and imaginative and actually consistent with the best independent science. Fifth, the implication of the criticism is that he lacks integrity, and I think that's just plain wrong, I read him as conscientious. Sixth, his impact is partly because of how he writes, which is brilliant.

Quote one of his sayings that stays with me

His *Food Rules*. I have my own favourites, but I like all of them. I have made a couple of dozen spiral-bound copies of this little book of tips – 'dicas' as we say here – and continue to give these out to my best students, and to colleagues and friends. This is not something I have done before!

Has his work changed my work and if so, how?

He has reinforced and encouraged my work. This may seem a strange thing for a scientist to say of a journalist. But seven years ago there were not a whole lot of people thinking as he does, or as I was beginning to think. Also when you are trained as a physician and epidemiologist in conventional ways, as I am, it takes a while to break the mould. I continue to find that he has reasoned through ideas and perceptions that occur to me, and which my work here in Brazil suggests.

Give an example of where he has made a difference

See above. I can't wait for him to come to São Paulo and commune with us here. We have plenty to show him, too.

Does his work have relevance outside the USA?

Yes, Here I am in Brazil!

In what ways if any do I think he is mistaken?

I can think of some but this isn't my mood.

Which of his publications do I most recommend?

Cooked (2013) even before reading it, because from advance reviews I know it is focused dead centre on the work we are doing here now, on integrating nutrients into foods, and more important, integrating foods into meals enjoyed mindfully in company. The traditional Brazilian food culture – our whole family and social culture – centres on shared meals. This is being eroded by what we call 'the snack attack' mounted by giant corporations with colossal budgets for promotion of ready-to-consume ultra-processed products. Here is an example of why food is so very much more than nutrients seen with the purpose of preventing or controlling disease.

We here in Brazil now have the task of preserving what is best and most different, various, rich and special about our country and region. Recently in China I was so sad to see how its cities, like Beijing and Hangzhou that are part of China's heritage and identity, are being ripped up and replaced by districts that language aside could be anywhere. It's not Michael Pollan's books I recommend, it's what he says in his books, and in his *New York Times* articles, and in his lectures.

Status

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