WN *Columns*

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WN *Here I stand*

The Keynes of all times, *and other stories*



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Rio de Janeiro, Juiz de Fora. Onwards and upwards? Or down and outwards? The spiral above is designed to inspire aspiration. But right now the global economy is in vortex mode – a downward spiral. In the previous *WN* I identified the Greek economist and politician Yanis Varoufakis as 'The Keynes of our times' and readers have been asking 'Who is Keynes?'. So my hero in this issue is John Maynard Keynes, the man himself, who a century ago gave clues to just how ominous world prospects are now. 'Sustainable development' is surely a foolish fantasy.

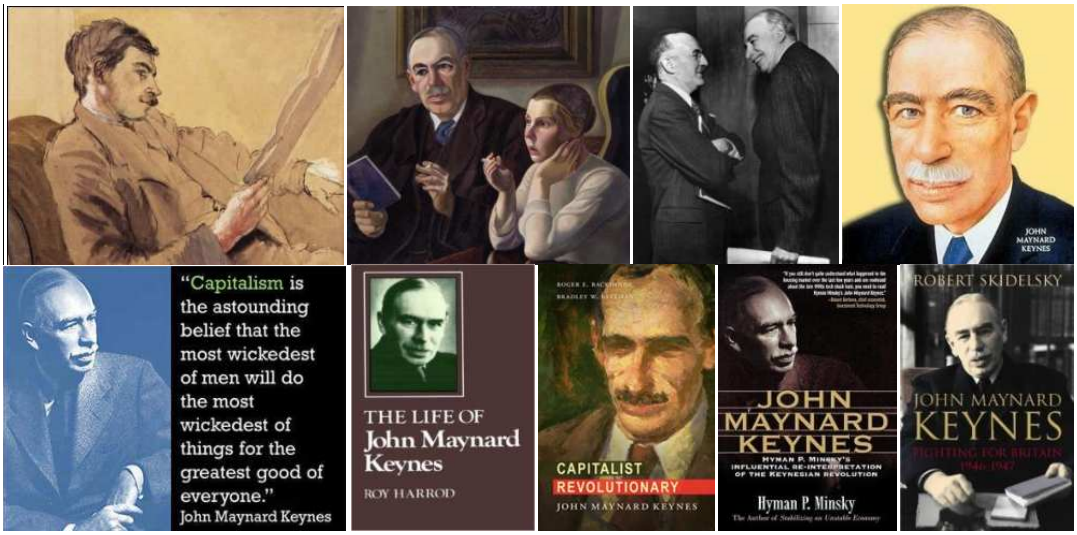
Then I ruminate on the overuse and abuse of the word 'we', as in 'Yes, we can', or 'We need to tackle the challenge of epidemic obesity'. Who are 'we'?

Finally, some shocks of recognition. In the UK an official report on diet and health has been suppressed. In the UK and Mexico militant health professionals have succeeded in pressing for a continued tax on soda (sugared soft drinks). And then the new horror stories about beef, pork, bacon, hot dogs, ham, chorizo and cancer. So I reminiscence about my own part played long ago, in revelations on expert report suppression, on sugar taxation, and hot dogs, burgers and bowel cancer. Also I enjoy a lunch of fried and steamed vegetables – with slices of sausage. Delicious! Healthy!



***WN** Development*

What they believe: 21. John Maynard Keynes
The Keynes of all times



John Maynard Keynes painted by Gwen Raverat, and later (with his wife Lydia Lopokova) by William Roberts (above left), then (above right) negotiating at Bretton Woods with Harry Dexter White of the US, and in his glory as a Lord. One of his sardonic penetrating sayings (below, left), and covers of some of the books about him, including by Roy Harrod and especially, Robert Skidelsky

'I find Economics increasingly satisfactory, and I think I am rather good at it', wrote John Maynard Keynes (1883-1946) before the First World War to his intimate friend and fellow member of the *Bloomsbury Group* Lytton Strachey. Twenty years later, before the Second World War, he wrote to his close friend the playwright and eminent Fabian socialist George Bernard Shaw, 'I believe myself to be writing a book on economic theory which will largely revolutionise – not, I suppose, at once but in the course of the next ten years – the way the world thinks about economic problems'.

These two letters epitomise Keynes and his times. He had the calm self-assurance of that widely educated, socially and culturally networked, extremely intelligent generation of British leaders in public life who lived when the British Empire still amounted to a fifth of the world's population and almost a quarter of its land mass. Keynes himself had extra special qualities. Educated at Eton and King's College Cambridge in classics, history, religion, philosophy, politics and mathematics, he was a phenomenal writer, a very senior servant, patron of the arts, and gentleman farmer. Also – the reason to celebrate him here – he became the most influential economist in the world, from the late 1940s to 1970s. He has much to teach us now. After his eclipse in the dark and still pervasive period of casino capitalism beginning in the 1980s, his vision of resources and wealth in the equitable service of humankind is again shining bright.

Box 1

Some sayings of Keynes

The policy of reducing Germany to servitude for a generation, of degrading the lives of millions of human beings, and of depriving a whole nation of happiness, should be abhorrent and detestable – abhorrent and detestable, even it were possible, even if it enriched ourselves, even if it did not sow the decay of the whole civilised life of Europe. Some preach it in the name of Justice. In the great events of man's history, in the unwinding of the complex fates of nations, Justice is not so simple. And if it were, nations are not authorised, by religion or by natural morals, to visit on the children of their enemies the misdoings of parents or of rulers.

The Economic Consequences of the Peace, 1919

When the accumulation of wealth is no longer of high social importance, there will be great changes in the code of morals. We shall be able to rid ourselves of many of the pseudo-moral principles which have hag-ridden us for two hundred years, by which we have exalted some of the most distasteful of human qualities into the position of the highest virtues. We shall be able to assess the money-motive at its true value. The love of money as a possession – as distinguished from the love of money as a means to enjoyments and realities of life — will be recognised for what it is, a somewhat disgusting morbidity, one of those semi-criminal, semi-pathological propensities which one hands over with a shudder to the specialists in mental disease ... But beware! The time for all this is not yet. For at least another hundred years we must pretend to ourselves and to everyone that fair is foul and foul is fair; for foul is useful and fair is not. Avarice and usury and precaution must be our gods for a little longer still... If economists could manage to get themselves thought of as humble, competent people on a level with dentists, it would be splendid.

Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren, 1930

The decadent international but individualistic capitalism in the hands of which we found ourselves after the war is not a success. It is not intelligent. It is not beautiful. It is not just. It is not virtuous. And it doesn't deliver the goods. In short, we dislike it, and we are beginning to despise it. But when we wonder what to put in its place, we are extremely perplexed.

National Self-Sufficiency, 1933

The ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed, the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influence, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist.

The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money, 1936

Too large a proportion of recent 'mathematical' economics are mere concoctions, as imprecise as the initial assumptions they rest on, which allow the author to lose sight of the complexities and interdependencies of the real world in a maze of pretentious and unhelpful symbols.

The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money, 1936

Speculators may do no harm as bubbles on a steady stream of enterprise. But the position is serious when enterprise becomes the bubble on a whirlpool of speculation. When the capital development of a country becomes the by-product of the activities of a casino, the job is likely to be ill-done.

The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money, 1936

The statements quoted in Box 1 above, give a sense of Keynes's style and attitude – playful and sardonic, and yet at the same time also wise and humane. By inclination and experience – and as said by Nobel economics prizewinner Paul Krugman in Box 2, below – he was also acutely aware of the impact of intangible factors such as mood on public as well as private affairs and events. Having been himself almost wiped out financially in the Great Crash of 1929, he regarded the idea that economics could be an efflorescence of mathematics, as a bad joke. Like politics, inasmuch as economics is a science, it is a social science, best understood by people who in their own lives and times remain vividly aware of human instinct, intelligence, frailty and folly.

To know more of Keynes's achievements, please refer to Robert Skidelsky's one-volume life, or his shorter *The Return of the Master,* listed in Box 3. Paul Krugman is right to say that this now is again an age of Keynes, meaning renewed commitment to equity and justice, the duties of governments, the restraint of corporations, and to public works, public goods, and the public interest – or it better had be.

The lessons of failure

Keynes's two greatest endeavours failed – inevitably, because his driving motives were ones of reason, logic and compassion, and he was faced with brute force wielded by leaders of the most intransigent powerful nations. As head of the British delegation at the Bretton Woods conference in July 1944 during the Second World War, when defeat of Germany and Japan was foreseen, his task was to protect the interests of Britain and to set up an international banking system designed to create political as well as economic stability and fair dealing in the postwar world. But the US delegation was all-powerful. The result was the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, both located in Washington – followed by the United Nations headquarters in New York. Thus began US hegemony.

In 1919, 25 years previously, Keynes represented the British Treasury at the conference convened in Paris to settle the terms of amnesty after the First World War. The result was the Versailles Treaty, dictated to a defeated and exhausted Germany, much of whose population was starving. Keynes's chief preoccupation was the scale of reparations to be imposed on Germany. The dominant mood of the European victor nations was driven by lust for revenge, and imposition of a debt so heavy that Germany would be reduced to servitude, unable ever again to be powerful.

To this, Keynes made three objections at the conference, and as set out that same year in his masterly *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*. His first point was logical. A burden of debt on Germany, or any nation, has to be within the capacity of that country to repay. If the debt imposed is far too high, as Keynes proved was the case, this would defeat its purposes. A debtor who cannot pay will not pay. His second point, summarised in the first quotation in Box 1 above, was moral. A victorious or powerful nation does not have the right to ruin a defeated nation by financial, military or any other methods, and by so doing wreck its society, its industry and civilisation, and the lives of its people then and in future.

Box 2

Now is the second age of Keynes

Extracted from a review by economics Nobel prizewinner Paul Krugman in The Guardian

'At research seminars, people don't take Keynesian theorising seriously any more; the audience starts to whisper and giggle to one another.' So declared Robert Lucas of the University of Chicago, writing in 1980. At the time, the influence of John Maynard Keynes, the British economist whose theory of recessions dominated economic policy for a generation after the Second World War, seemed to be virtually at an end. But Keynes is having the last giggle. Lucas's 'rational expectations' theory of booms and slumps has shown itself to be completely useless in the current world crisis. It offerS no guide for action, and more or less asserts that 'market economies' cannot possibly experience the kind of problems they are, in fact, experiencing. Keynesian economics, on the other hand, which was created precisely to make sense of times like these, looks better than ever.

Many economists agree that their field went off track, that in some important ways it lost touch with reality, and that a return to some of the ideas Keynes laid out more than 70 years ago is part of the cure for what ails us. Robert Skidelsky's book *The Return of the Master* is part critique of the current state of economics, part biographical sketch, part programme for the future. It also offers a compelling account of the anti-Keynesian counter-revolution.

In his 1936 masterwork, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money*, Keynes asserted that the core of his theory was the rejection of Say's Law, that said that income is automatically spent. If it were true, Say's Law would imply that all the things we usually talk about when trying to assess the economy's direction, like the state of consumer or investor confidence, are irrelevant; one way or another, people will spend all the income coming in. Keynes showed that Say's Law isn't true, because in a monetary economy people can try to accumulate cash rather than real goods. And when everyone is trying to accumulate cash at the same time, which is what happened worldwide after the collapse of Lehman Brothers, the result is an end to demand, which produces a severe recession.

Some of those who consider themselves Keynesians, myself included, agree with what Keynes said in *The General Theory*, and consider the rejection of Say's Law the core issue. On this view, Keynesian economics is primarily a theory designed to explain how market economies can remain persistently depressed.

Living with uncertainty

But there's an alternative interpretation of what Keynes was all about, one offered by Keynes himself in an article published in 1937, a year after *The General Theory*. Here, Keynes suggested that the core of his insight lay in the acknowledgement that there is uncertainty in the world – uncertainty that cannot be reduced to statistical probabilities, what the former US defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld called 'unknown unknowns'. This irreducible uncertainty, he argued, lies behind panics and bouts of exuberance and primarily accounts for the instability of market economies.

In this book, Skidelsky says that Keynesianism is, or should be, essentially about uncertainty and how it leads to economic instability. And from this he draws some radical conclusions, He argues persuasively that Keynes spent much of his life deeply focused upon, even obsessed with, the question of how one acts in the face of uncertainty. This is a wonderfully stimulating book. We're living in the second Age of Keynes.

Box 3

Books by and about John Maynard Keynes

Indian Currency and Finance, 1913. *The Economics of War in Germany*, 1915. *The Economic Consequences of the Peace,* 1919. *A Treatise on Probability,* 1921. *The Inflation of Currency as a Method of Taxation*, 1922. *Revision of The Treaty,* 1922, *A Tract on Monetary Reform,* 1923. *Am I a Liberal?,* 1925. *The End of Laissez-Faire,* 1926. *Laissez-Faire and Communism*, 1926. A Treatise on Money, 1930. *Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren*, 1930. *Essays in Persuasion*, 1931. *The Great Slump of 1930*, 1931. *Essays in Biography*, 1933. *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money,* 1936. *How to Pay for the War. A Radical Plan for the Chancellor of the Exchequer*, 1940. *Two Memoirs* (ed, David Garnett), 1949. Books by Robert Skidelsky about Keynes: *John Maynard Keynes: Hopes Betrayed, 1883-1920*, 1983. *John Maynard Keynes: The Economist as Saviour, 1920-1937*, 1992. *John Maynard Keynes: Fighting for Britain, 1937-1946*, 2000. *John Maynard Keynes 1883-1946. Economist, Philosopher, Statesman*, 2003. *Keynes: the Return of the Master*, 2009.

Keynes wrote from Paris to his intimate friend the painter Duncan Grant: 'The Peace is outrageous and impossible and can bring nothing but misfortune. Thank God I shall be soon out of it'. For his third reason, that of a statesman, was political:

> An inefficient, unemployed, disorganised Europe faces us, torn by internal strife and international hate, fighting, starving, pillaging, and lying… If we aim at the impoverishment of Central Europe, vengeance, I dare say, will not limp. Nothing can then delay for very long the forces of Reaction and the despairing convulsions of Revolution, before which the horrors of the later German war will fade into nothing, and which will destroy, whoever its victor, the civilisation and the progress of our generation.

Thus in 1919 in effect he predicted the collapse of the postwar democratic Weimar Republic, financial chaos, despair and hatred in Germany, the rise of extremist movements, and what would amount to another Great War. He felt Hitler coming. Those who are ignorant of mistakes made in history are condemned to repeat them. Keynes's analysis of the consequences of intolerable debt is repeated now by *Yanis Varoufakis* – a keen student of history and of Keynes – on behalf of his own country of Greece, and of all countries in Africa that have been and are prostrated and corrupted by intolerable foreign debt.

It did take a decade for the thesis of Keynes's *General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money,* referred to in his letter to George Bernard Shaw, to permeate many policies and actions of leading governments, which they did from the late 1940s to the end of the 1970s. His principles include those of stability, decency, equity, balance, respect, and maintenance and strengthening of the public interest, including decent reliable education, food supplies, transport, health services and pensions. But then again came the ascendancy of the robber barons, now in the form of corporate casino capitalism, a ruinous system based on avarice connived in by governments who abandon their duty to govern. If against what often seem to be impossible odds, human society does move towards real civilisation based on humane principles, one of the very best guides now, as a century ago, is John Maynard Keynes.

Language. Rhetoric and reality

Who are 'we'?



The meaning of 'we' is pretty clear in most of the examples here. But the word is also constantly used in ways that evade engagement with reality and that convey nothing more lasting than a warm glow

Who is 'we'? The meaning of the word is clear in most examples above. Rosie the Riveter is speaking to working women in wartime. The demand for volunteer soldiers is coming from Uncle Sam – the US government. The Occupy Wall Street declamation is on behalf of all but the 'super-rich' (and could be 99.9 per cent). 'We shall overcome (some day)' is a Louis Armstrong number, on behalf of the US black population.

The one abuse of the word is on US dollar bills, in an adaptation of the US national anthem 'The star-spangled banner'. Here it is a rhetorical device. It sounds nice, it reads well, but it is obviously not true, unless it is code for something like 'we, who publish this phrase, want you to trust in God'. Here I am asking, who is 'we'?, because the word is now typically abused in such ways, that evade engagement with reality, as part of a kind of rhetorical hoax or ectoplasm. Barack Obama got elected US president with the slogan 'Yes we can'. But who is 'we', and can do what? The warm emotional glow produced by the phrase, especially when roared out of loudspeakers at mass rallies, indicates fraudulence. Really what he was saying was 'you, US citizens, vote for me, and I can' – which mostly he could not and cannot. This is now standard practice of speechwriters for powerful people. Take United Nations secretary-general Ban Ki-moon on the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and on climate disruption:

> Saving our planet, lifting people out of poverty, advancing economic growth... these are one and the same fight. We must connect the dots between climate change, water scarcity,

> energy shortages, global health, food security and women's empowerment.
>
> The clear and present danger of climate change means we cannot burn our way to prosperity. We already rely too heavily on fossil fuels. We need to find a new, sustainable path to the future we want. We need a clean industrial revolution.

The meaning of 'we' (and 'our') slips and slides in these thrilling phrases, which have other troublesome aspects – like what does connecting the dots between climate change and women's empowerment mean, and how could an industrial revolution be clean? The general effect is to disconnect rhetoric from reality. The phrases float free of what is really happening, and to whom.

First person plural syndrome

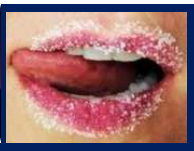
Another use of what can be called 'First person plural syndrome' is to make officials and professionals feel and seem important or even omnipotent. This happens all the time, in journals (but not I trust in *WN*!) and in statements quoted in popular media.

Examples go something like this. 'We must ensure that adequate primary health care is available for all'. 'Together we can strengthen healthy global food systems'. 'We need to tackle the global burden of obesity'. Here it is apparent that 'we' refers to the professional group to which the writer (and, it is assumed, the reader) belongs. But once this is revealed, the phrases fall into dust. How can any professional group alone, or with others, succeed in such epic tasks? (The third example includes another favourite, the use of the word 'tackle', whose normal meanings are either as a noun referring to equipment, or else as a verb, to assaulting an opponent in hands-on variations of football. How this might improve public health is unclear).

Abuse of the word 'we' is not just sloppy phrasing. It shows disconnect between the official and professional world, and everybody else – the 99 per cent, one might say. Bill Gates is an inveterate we-sayer, in what can be termed 'First person plural syndrome *var. billbill*'. Usually what he really means by 'we' is Bill Gates and his fellow billionaires and his employees and followers. Examples:

> We need new ways to bring far more people into the system – capitalism – that has done so much good in the world.
>
> If we can spend the early decades of the 21st century finding approaches that meet the needs of the poor in ways that generate profits and recognition for business, we will have found a sustainable way to reduce poverty in the world
>
> We can make market forces work better for the poor if we can develop a more creative capitalism – if we can stretch the reach of market forces so that more people can make a profit, or at least make a living, serving people who are suffering from the worst inequities.

So what to do? *WN* itself needs a policy style manual. One of its rules should be: 'The word "we" can be used only when it is clear to whom or what "we" refers to'. We (the *WN* editors) commend this to our contributors.

WN Hot stuff. Sugar. Tax

Speak, memory! (1)

Access this issue Update on Sugar taxation here
Access this issue Marion Nestle, Tina Rosenberg on Soda wars here



THE SUNDAY TIMES

3 July 1983

BATTLE FOR THE BRITISH DIET

A vital report on health risks in the typical British diet is stalled in the health ministry. Many in the food industry do not like it.

GEOFFREY CANNON reports on a four-year Whitehall struggle

REVEALED – THE DIET HOW THE EXPERTS THINK BRITAIN SHOULD CHANGE ITS DIET OVER THE NEXT FIVE YEARS

LESS

MORE

July 1983. My front page lead scoop story, 'Censored: a diet for life and death', for The Sunday Times – the revelation that an expert report on food, nutrition and public health commissioned by the UK government had been suppressed for two years by order of the prime minister, then Margaret Thatcher. Above, the splash news feature page. The more things change the more they remain the same

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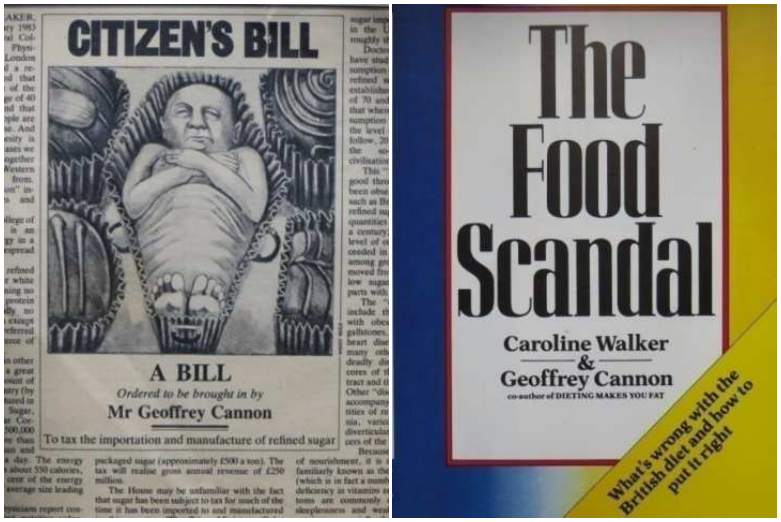
My first story here is about taxation of sugar, and also about dark deeds. *Plus ça change, plus ça reste la même chose.* That is, what goes around comes around. For me, October has been one of those months, *and access the lead Update item* in this issue of *WN*. This includes two revelations that have hit the headlines in the UK. The first is that a report commissioned by government – from Public Health England, a branch of the department of health – has been suppressed for some months probably as instructed by the prime minister, because it includes some hot stuff about sugar. Now it has been forced into the open, following pressure and leaks from outraged people in the know,

Ha! Been here, done that! In the early 1980s I was a journalist on *The Sunday Times*, then the leading UK newspaper for setting national news agenda, and in July 1983 I scored a front page lead news story, headlined 'Censored: a diet for life and death'. The headline and introduction to the inside splash, rendered down in half a day from my 13,000 word essay by genius news features editor Don Berry into 2,500 words of sparkling investigative journalism, is reproduced above.



March 1983 and June 1984. First at left is my first substantial national newspaper story, advocating a tax on sugar. Then at right, a year and a bit later, The Food Scandal, my second co-authored book which became a #1 best-seller in the UK. This was then withdrawn from sale because of a successful legal attack on the book in response to our concerns about amounts of sugar in ultra-processed products

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Suppressing reports

The sting in the story was that after a couple of months of sleuthing and digging, I had proved, with inside information and an irrefutable stack of documents, that an expert report on food, nutrition and health – forever known as NACNE – commissioned by government, had been suppressed by government not for a paltry few months, but for two years. This dark deed was surely as directed by then prime minister Margaret Thatcher. Before entering politics she was a food chemist, responsible for devising fillings for mass-produced cakes, and inventor of a technique for aerating ice-cream, one of whose trade names was Mr Whippy. As prime minister her cabal of advisors included captains of the cake and biscuit industries. My scoop, as shown above, did indeed set the national agenda on food and health, and changed perception of nutrition as technical and dull. It became political and dangerous. It still is.

Taxing sugar

The second October revelation was that the Public Health England report had been 'delayed' because it – rather cautiously – makes a case for taxing sugar. Ha, again! My first substantial story on food politics for *The Sunday Times*, published in March 1983, was in the form of a bill to be put to Parliament advocating – yes, a tax on sugar. 'My bill proposes that a tax on sugar, similar to the tax now levied on alcohol and tobacco… will help to make us a healthier nation. It will also prove a useful source of income to the Exchequer' – to the tune at a level of 20 per cent, I estimated, of £250 million a year, which in 2015 money would be about £1 billion a year.



THE TIMES

12 June 1984

TUESDAY PAGE

The cover-up that kills

THE FOOD SCANDAL

Few now doubt the fatal connexion between eating western food and suffering from western diseases. Yet this important message is not reaching the public. Geoffrey Cannon exposes the conspiracy of silence keeping Britain unhealthy

How the food in gets its own

THE POLITICAL FRONT

Treasury

Common Agricultural Policy

Department of Trade & Industry

Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries & Food

SUGAR

FAT

SWEET FAT

PROCESSED CEREALS

Advertising, Public Relations

Media

Universities, Research, Schools

British Nutrition Foundation

THE PUBLIC FRONT

June 1984. A year after my Sunday Times revelation, The Times commissioned three full-page features on The Food Scandal, published in the week of publication of the book. This one exposed the UK power structures that include the sugar, fat, processed cereals and sweet fat industries, their front organisations, and supportive government ministries, that ensure a national deadly diet, then and now

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One point in my proposed parliamentary bill has not been made recently, but should be. Seen historically – always wise in any matter of public health – there is nothing unusual about sugar taxation, as I explained:

> Sugar has been subject to tax for much of the time it has been imported to and manufactured in this country… The government of the day raised the tax on sugar to help pay for the Crimean War. Tax of one type or another continued to be levied on sugar until 1919. [Relaxing] the tax on sugar, the principal occasion being a Bill enacted by [prime minister] Gladstone in 1874, has had a calamitous effect on the national health. In 1850 the average consumption of refined sugar in the United Kingdom was 20 pounds weight a year. After the Bill of 1874 the consumption of refined sugar rose steeply, so that by the end of the 19th century every man, woman and child in the United Kingdom was [on average] eating 72 pounds of sugar a year, and expenditure on sugar matched that on bread.

Injuncting scandal

In 1983 Gail Rebuck, now three decades later the UK's most powerful woman book publisher, commissioned Caroline Walker and me to write the book of the story of NACNE, and gave us its title, *The Food Scandal* – as you see above. So we did, and Caroline, already famous as a campaigning public health nutritionist, told the sad, sordid tale of the degraded and degenerated British diet in plain, direct words.

The book radicalised a lot of health professionals, and it remains a good read. Published in the second week of June 1984, it shot up the UK best-seller charts. A big boost was given by *The Times* (see above) for I was commissioned by Nicholas

Wapshott its news features editor to write three full-page features in the week of publication of *The Food Scandal*. This gave me the opportunity to go further than the book, and to start to sketch out the politics of food – the title of a later book. The diagram by John Grimwade commissioned by genius art director David Driver shows the central positioning of the industry's trade body, then as now the Food and Drink Federation (FDF) and the British Nutrition Foundation (BNF), then as now an ambiguous organisation whose core funding is from corporations. Thus:

> The more highly food is processed, the more it contributes to the gross national product through 'added value'. So the industry has a friend in the government department of trade and industry… The multinationals both influence the Treasury, which in turn presses the department of health and social services (DHSS)… Civil servants representing social services (the SS in DHSS) point out that healthy and long-lives citizens will increase the cost of state pensions. The most recent DHSS publication *Eating for Health* says 'what we eat is not necessarily the most important key to good health – it is an aspect which is often misunderstood or neglected. Not by the British food processing industry.

This kind of penetrative analysis was all new in those days. The UK Big Food corporations were not happy. They met at FDF headquarters – or so I was told – and with attendant lawyers and advisors, decided to go for us. Thus it was that a few days later two heavy statements of claim for damages arrived from leading firms of solicitors, one from a transnational manufacturer of breakfast cereals, the other from a drug and food corporation whose branded meat extract contained caramel.

We had indeed made a mistake. In our chapter on sugar, remarking on the fact that many savoury food products contain added sugar, we named the brand of meat extract, in the belief that the caramel declared on its label was a form of sugar. So it is, when made in a saucepan, but it is something else when formulated by industry. The corporation went for an injunction on the grounds of product defamation, meaning that if they won the book would be removed from sale. To our lawyer's disgust, later in June the High Court judge ruled that we had indeed defamed the meat extract, and granted the injunction. *The Food Scandal* is as far as I know the only book in the history of the world to be listed in the top twenty *Sunday Times* best-seller lists as #1, while being (with an asterisk) 'withdrawn', which is to say, suppressed. A new edition without the name of the meat extract was rushed out, followed in 1975 by a revised, enlarged and more political paperback version. But we were damaged.

A few years later a sugar trade executive who was a relative of Caroline, told her to warn me that the industry had a list of ten top public enemies, and that I was #1. Not long afterwards at a packed meeting of the Guild of Food Writers, at which Big Sugar executives had been invited to explain the health and other benefits of sugar, I made public mock of Michael Shersby, the member of parliament who combined his public duties with being director of the British Sugar Bureau, the national trade lobby. During cocktails I introduced myself cheerily, but he was still red-faced. He poked me, and warned 'You be very, very careful'. Colleagues who are consistently critical of sugar should know that they are on a list.




WN Hot stuff. Meat. Cancer

Speak, memory! (2)

theguardian

Processed meats rank alongside smoking as cancer causes – WHO

Bacon, sausages and ham among most carcinogenic along with cigarettes, alcohol, asbestos and arsenic

Salami, Parma ham, chorizo have cancer risks.

Sarah Boseley Health editor



Bacon, ham and sausages rank alongside cigarettes as a major cause of cancer, the World Health Organization has said, placing cured and processed meats in the same category as asbestos, alcohol, arsenic and tobacco. It places red meat in group 2A, as "probably carcinogenic to humans". Eating red meat is also linked to pancreatic and prostate cancer.

The Guardian sub-editors and writer cannot be blamed for the melodramatic coupling of processed meat products with tobacco, arsenic, asbestos and alcohol, as equally carcinogenic. This misdeed was apparently done in the WHO monograph. Its clumsy presentation has been the basis for the pictures and the caption above, a mild version of melodramatic stories now published all over the world

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Now for meat, processed meat products, and cancer. Late October included a third revelation with a nostalgic appeal for me. This one has made headlines all round the world, so will not surprise you. The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), an agency of the World Health Organization, has apparently concluded that red meat is probably carcinogenic (group 2A) and that processed meat products are

definitely carcinogenic (group 1, a category that includes arsenic, cigarettes, gamma rays, plutonium 239, and surgical implants).

Specifically, the IARC monograph, advertised by an *editorial in The Lancet Oncology,* states that red meat is probably and processed meat products are definitely a cause of colorectal cancer. These judgements were apparently made by a majority of the 22 experts responsible. But the monograph itself, the apparent fount of global media hullabaloo, has not yet been published! Perhaps IARC was 'bounced' by *The Lancet,* whose editors enjoy making news. Meanwhile *IARC has issued a 'Q&A' guide for the perplexed,* whose occasional incoherence suggests a rushed job. Thus:

> Data from 10 studies estimated that every 50 gram portion of processed meat eaten daily increases the risk of colorectal cancer by about 18 per cent… the risk of colorectal cancer could increase by 17 per cent for every 100 grams of red meat eaten daily.

These, the Q&A guide says, (referring to the *Global Burden of Disease* project for which IARC and its expert panel is not responsible) globally cause 84,000 deaths a year from colorectal cancer, of which 34,000 are from processed meat products and 50,000 from red meat. This contrasts with 1 million deaths a year caused globally by tobacco, and 800,000 by alcoholic drinks. Still, 84,000 is a big number.

Ha! For in the 1990s I was the director for the World Cancer Research Fund/ American Institute of Cancer Research, of *Diet, Nutrition and the Prevention of Cancer: a Global Perspective.* After five years of panel meetings the report, published in 1997, concluded that red meat probably, and various processed meats possibly, are a cause of colorectal cancer. In the 2000s I was chief editor of the second WCRF/AICR report, which after another five years of panel meetings upped the conclusion on red meat and on processed meat products and colorectal cancer, both to 'convincing'.

This is the same as IARC's Group 1. The methodology in 2007 was much the same as is that of the IARC monograph in 2015, the numbers of 17 and 18 per cent are identical with those now published by WCRF International, the evidence piling up still points the same way, and many of the experts are the same people. So what is the big news? One answer is obvious – a World Health Organization agency feels more important than an independent non-government outfit.

Bungled thinking

The main reason is that the apparent judgements of the IARC monograph have been phrased so as to provoke media sensationalism. After 'sugar, the new tobacco' we have 'bacon, the new arsenic'. Media headline writers love this sort of stuff. And see the quote from the IARC guide above. This is horribly phrased – a bungle (mess). It can be read as suggesting that any 50 or 100 gram portion is a cancer hazard, which is rubbish. What it should say, is something like that dietary patterns including a regular average over a sustained period of 350 or 700 or more grams a week, certainly or probably increase the risk of colorectal cancer.



October 2015 – and 1997 and 2007. Meat contains important nutrients. So do high quality meat products. The big issues of animal welfare and of environmental impact should not cloud judgement on meat and risk of cancer. What is done to meat before slaughter, and how it is processed, prepared and cooked, more than meat as such, may very well be what is important in assessing cancer risk

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Before I go any further, there are strong ecological and ethical objections to industrially reared meat – its environmental impact, and the outrageous abuse of and cruelty to intensively reared animals. But this is not an excuse for sloppy thinking.

Are the conclusions apparently made in the IARC monograph true, without qualification? No, they are not. Thus, was the IARC panel – and were the WCRF-AICR panels – referring to red meat of any type? Does this include meat from wild animals and free-range animals, or only from intensively reared animals? Does it refer to meat cooked any way, or are there differences between boiled or stewed meat, and roasted or fried meat, and (see above), grilled, barbecued or charred meat?

And perhaps most important, there must surely be a difference between effects of meat at the amounts specified, eaten as part of diets based on meals made with fresh foods, contrasted with meat in diets largely based on ultra-processed products. Good judgements are on whole diets and dietary patterns. But this would require considerations of quality, which are beyond current conventional nutrition science.

Compounded confusion

Practically all epidemiological studies on meat and cancer – or meat and any other outcome – are on intensively reared meat. Countries that can pay for such studies are those whose food supplies are industrialised, and where beef and pork, the main meats produced and consumed, are from animals reared in close confinement, medicated with antimicrobial and other drugs, and given feed they would not consume in free-range conditions. The fatty acid composition of the meat from such animals is very different from that of wild animals, as is the fat-protein ratio.

So why did the monograph apparently not take such these points into consideration? The IARC Q&A guide cheerily admits that its 22 experts had no answer to most questions like these. Nor was the panel able to identify any lower limit of consumption that can reasonably be said to be safe. It would be interesting to know what the minority of panel members who did not sign up to the final conclusions think, and why. If I had been an IARC panel member I would have insisted that the report made clear that its findings could not be applied to wild and free-range meat, and failing agreement on this point I would have insisted in writing a minority report. If I had been director of the project I would have ruled that the draft as presented was unfit for publication.

Verdict: a disgrace

Similar objections apply to processed meat products. The *European Prospective Investigation of Cancer and Nutrition* (EPIC) initiative, whose detailed epidemiological studies try to pin down exactly what is meant by 'processed meat', have reasonably grouped together industrial products that are salted, cured, or smoked (hence the chorizo, ham and sausages in the *Guardian* picture above).

But are there differences between the impact of artisanal and of industrial products? Yes, of course. One obvious difference is the nature and amount of preservatives used in the products. Take sausages. You may wonder why sausages made at home or on offer in farmers' markets prepared from ground meat, despite addition of salt, herbs and spices, should be eaten within a few days, whereas industrially manufactured sausages have a much longer 'shelf-life'. The reason is that industrial meat products are crammed with preservatives, some of which are known or thought to be carcinogenic. The same point applies to other meat products.

By analogy, there are different types and varying degrees of intensity of smoking and curing and salt-pickling and other methods of meat product preservation, as every cook and food-lover will know. So why did the IARC panel apparently make no distinction between artisanal and industrially produced meat products? You may well ask. And what about burgers? Despite their appearance in the *Guardian* picture, they are not mentioned in the IARC Q&A guide. As with other processed meat products, much depends on the quality of the ingredients and the techniques of manufacture. And as with meat, is there a difference between the impact of processed meat products eaten as part of a junky diet, and the same products as ingredients of dishes and meals mainly made from fresh food? Answer apparently came there none.

This explains the media backlash which now as I write is in full swing against the sensationalised projection of the apparent IARC findings. Editors and writers, including those who know about food as produced, prepared and enjoyed, are now ridiculing the 'food police' who, they contemptuously say, want to ban any food that tastes good, including meat and meat products which, enjoyed sparingly, are part of practically every great authentic cuisine in the world. They are right to do so.

Now I come to the lunch I enjoyed today. As you see below, one of its dishes is peppers, tomatoes, onions and other fresh foods, plus herbs, fried and then steamed in a cast-iron pan, with slices of locally-made sausage added, served with boiled cassava (manioc) and kale. It was very delicious. Meals like this are healthy. The case for plant-based diets is rock solid. But to claim or imply that safe diets avoid or even eliminate meat, and meat products, is sloppy science and rotten public health.



October 2015. Here is a dish for today's lunch, as I write this story. As you see, it is made of fried then steamed sliced peppers, tomatoes and onions, together with garlic and herbs, plus slices of locally made sausage. It was served with boiled cassava and kale. Eaten like this, as one part of a dish based on fresh foods, processed meat products are a sensory delight, and are in my judgement harmless

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