

Food, Politics, Health. Untangling a Complex Web

A lecture series by Michael Freund

The Bruno Kreisky Forum for International Dialogue, the Embassy of the United States of America and *Der Standard* kindly invite you to

WHAT TO EAT: PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY OR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

A lecture by

MARION NESTLE

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New York University, Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development

Moderated by **Michael Freund**

Welcome address:

Eva Nowotny, Member of the Board of the Bruno Kreisky Forum, former Austrian Ambassador to the U.S.
Representative US-Embassy

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Marion Nestle is Paulette Goddard Professor in the Department of Nutrition, Food Studies, and Public Health at New York University, which she chaired from 1988-2003. She also holds appointments as Professor of Sociology at NYU and Visiting Professor of Nutritional Sciences at Cornell. Her degrees include a Ph.D. in molecular biology and an M.P.H. in public health nutrition, both from the University of California, Berkeley. She has held faculty positions at Brandeis University and the UCSF School of Medicine. From 1986-88, she was senior nutrition policy advisor in the Department of Health and Human Services and managing editor of the 1988 Surgeon General's Report on Nutrition and Health. Her research examines scientific, economic, and social influences on food choice. She is the author of three prize-winning books: *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health* (2002; revised edition, 2007), *Safe Food: The Politics of Food Safety* (2003; revised edition, 2010), and *What to Eat* (2006). Her most recent book, *Pet Food Politics: The Chihuahua in the Coal Mine*, was published in 2008. She writes the *Food Matters* column for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and blogs daily (almost) at www.foodpolitics.com and at the *Atlantic Food Channel* at <http://food.theatlantic.com>.

Michael Freund born 1949 in Vienna, Austria, head of the Media Communications Department, Webster University, Vienna, editor and writer for *Der Standard*. Studied social sciences in Vienna, Heidelberg and at Columbia University, NY (Ph.D.).

Food, Politics, Health. Untangling a Complex Web.

We are what we eat (Der Mensch ist, was er isst). But what we eat is not only our personal decision. It has always been determined by a complex web of political, cultural and business dynamics. Today more than ever, nutrition is related to issues of environmental destruction, special corporate interests, illnesses and health risks. The way most food is produced depletes our energy reserves, reduces biodiversity and is considered harmful to soil and air – and to our bodies. This view is not fear-mongering by radical food purists, but shared by many serious experts in the field. The issues are most widely discussed in the United States because “Big Food” – a term coined after the fashion of Big Tobacco, Big Pharma and others – is most advanced there. But, as Nestle and other authors in the field argue, the problem is not limited to North America or to the advanced industrial nations. Not only do U.S. food processing companies invest some 50 billion dollars abroad annually, but the ensuing and often enforced changes in dietary habits mean that even in poorer countries you can be overfed and undernourished. Soft drinks, fast food, processed and engineered artificial snacks etc. are more cheaply and easily available than fruits or vegetables. Choosing what to eat is a personal as well as social responsibility. *Food, Politics, Health. Untangling a Complex Web (Ernährung, Politik, Gesundheit. Eine kompliziertes Geflecht und seine Lösung)* is a series of lectures and discussions that addresses the problems and shows the potential for change.

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Eva Nowotny

Good evening everybody. I'm a member of the board of directors of the Kreisky Forum for International Dialogue and in this capacity I welcome you very much to this evening's lecture and discussion. I see there are many new faces in the audience today and so I thought it might be appropriate perhaps to say a word about where we are

and why we are here. Some of you, but not all of you, will probably know that this was really the home of former Chancellor Bruno Kreisky. He used to live here, he used to work here, this was his house for many, many years. This was also the place where he received international visitors, where he had many discussions, and cultivated his main interest in international relations and in international affairs. After his death this house was put in trust for the Kreisky Forum for International Dialogue and it is in his spirit that we try to continue the work here, to have it as a forum for international encounters, for international exchanges, dialogue, many interesting visitors, and to in a way keep the spirit that he brought to that house alive. If you have the opportunity after the lecture to perhaps have a look out into the garden. There are wonderful old trees here and it's a very valuable and really wonderful property and we are very proud and happy that we can do the work here.

We have under the leadership of our Secretary General, Gertraud Auer, a couple of years ago introduced into our work program thematic lines, horizontal lines so that you don't have series of lectures like pearls on a string, one after the other, but that you have thematic lines where you follow one particular issue over a longer period of time and with a lot of different viewpoints and different arguments. We have one for instance about Africa, we have a continuing series about the Middle East, we have one about diaspora and the way people live in diaspora or return from diaspora. So there are a lot of different issues that we are following through. And one of these issues which was introduced into our work on the initiative of Michael Freund who will take over in a second concerns food.

Now, we are not talking about food here in the way of what are we going to cook tonight and where has my appetite gone. We are looking at food in a larger perspective. And you will see as we go through this discussion that the ramifications and the implications of food are really enormous and whichever way you can look at it you follow in a number of issues that are intrinsically connected. You can look at food and go into social questions, poverty, malnutrition, undernourishment, but also poverty for countries, food production and the problems that are connected to it. You may have heard today in the morning news that they suspect there are about 600.000 people in Austria who are either or are in danger of becoming diabetic. Now, that is a huge health issue, it's a work related issue, it's a social issue of enormous implications for the social system, for the health services, for the work force. So this is also a food issue. You can look at biodiversity, you can look at environmental questions. There are lots of different angles we can deal with this issue. And I'm sure we are going to have a very, very interesting evening here with our guest from the United States who will be introduced by Michael Freund, who will also moderate this evening. Welcome again and I hope you will enjoy the discussion.

Ashley White

Good evening everyone. I want to give you all a warm welcome from the American Embassy. My name is Ashley White and I am responsible for press and culture for Germany, Austria, and Switzerland at the State Department in Washington. Before we begin I want to express the Embassy's great thanks for our co-host tonight without whom this event would not have been possible.

We are in for a real treat tonight. We at the Embassy are very honored and I personally am quite happy that Marion Nestle has accepted our invitation to come to Vienna. She is certainly one of America's leading scholars on nutrition and public health and an authority in this field. She is also a bestselling author and her books have won several awards and something of a celebrity as well. So we are very happy that you are here. I wish us all a very interesting evening.

Michael Freund

Thank you for the nice introduction. I just wanted to say a few things. One is that this is the first part of a series at the Kreisky Forum called "Food, Politics. Health. Untangling a Complex Web"; Ernährung, Politik, Gesundheit. Ein kompliziertes Geflecht und seine Lösung. It is my great pleasure to introduce to you again, for the third time, Marion Nestle, the first guest speaker on the subject matter. We wanted to start the series with you, [Marion](#). You are after all the author of one of the standard books on the subject, namely Food Politics, which gave us the title to this whole series, a book that analyzes what we eat, why we eat what we eat, who determines, who influences this at what business and governmental levels, either by pushing certain agendas or neglecting them, and what repercussions this has on our health, our society, and on the environment. The [book book](#), published in 2002 and

revised in 2007, is already a standard reference in the field, and [thanks I want to thank](#) my colleague at Webster University, Dorothy [CopeluKopel](#), [here in the audience](#), who pointed it out to me years ago and who uses it in her lectures all the time.

A few more details about you before you finally can talk yourself. Marion, a born New Yorker, studied molecular biology at UC Berkeley and has a master in public health nutrition. She also has held faculty positions at Brandeis and at the UC San Francisco School of Medicine. And in the course of her research and teaching she realized more and more that food can be a focal point of her interests, one that she could communicate as a relevant topic. She has been doing this for more than twenty years, including as a nutrition policy advisor to the US Department of Health and Human Services. Last and foremost Marion Nestle is Professor in the Department of Nutrition, Food Studies, and Public Health at NYU, and not just a regular Professor but a Paulette [Garder Goddard](#) Professor. And thanks to the money of the late movie star this means no administrative work and much time to do research, teach, and even give a lecture in Vienna, an academic ['s drstream](#), I guess. I could now go on and read [to](#) you the eighteen pages that list all her achievements and her tremendous body of work, but I won't. Instead I just want to mention three recent books that you wrote or co-wrote. One is *Pet Food Politics* which basically argues that the same things plaguing the human nutrition in the US also appear in pet food. Another one is called *What to Eat? A Guide to the Supermarket Jungle* or, I guess, better still outside the supermarket, and a contribution to the book *Food Incorporated*, a companion to the documentary film that was recently shown in Vienna. As one critic once said, if you eat you should [read](#) Nestle. One last detail: Marion Nestle is not related to the Nestlé company -, one might say quite the opposite. So please, Marion, let us hear your talk about "What to Eat. Personal Responsibility or Social Responsibility"? The floor is yours.

Marion Nestle

Thank you Michael for the lovely introduction, thank all of you for coming. I particularly want to thank those of you who are here because your teachers made you come. I often give lectures where students come up afterwards and I have to sign them notes to prove that they were here. If you are in that category I'd be happy to sign your notes.

It's a great honor to be here, to be kicking off this series of lectures. And I hope that what I'm going to say is going to be a good beginning to them. Let me start with a brief summary of my own work over the last ten or fifteen years. I started out in nutrition, but I quickly learned that you can't really understand what nutrition is about unless you understand what agriculture is about. And my work now integrates agriculture, food, nutrition, and health with obesity and food safety being the areas of public health that I am most interested in. My starting point for this always is public confusion about what to eat. I hear all the time from people that they find the research impossible to understand and they are completely confused about what it is they are supposed to be eating. I think that's really too bad because I don't think to be a genius to figure out what it is you're supposed to be having for dinner. In fact it's so simple that I can summarize it in one slide, eat plenty of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, don't eat too much junk food, enjoy what you are eating, and please don't eat my book. But if it seems more confusing than that it's surely because of the effective bad advice of the food industry, advice to eat less is not good for business.

And this was beautifully explained by an executive of Coca Cola a few years ago who explained that the food industry didn't have to worry about obesity. They could just say, obesity, that's a personal problem. We as a food company don't need to worry about that. But that has changed. And today food companies are absolutely obsessed with the effect of advice like eating less on their economic benefits, and it has become a huge problem for them. And the reason it has become a huge problem for them, as you know, is that rates of obesity are going up. These are rates of the United States over the last twenty years or so. Obesity is not just a cosmetic problem, it raises the risk for diseases like type II diabetes. And it's not that everyone who is overweight is going to get type II diabetes. In fact the percentage is quite small. It's just that it's rising and it's rising in parallel. And of course what we're all really worried about is Type II Diabetes in young people because it is a lifetime disease. And in the United States we don't have a health care system that can manage this very well.

So if obesity is a problem then there are two approaches to dealing with. The first is the personal responsibility approach which was beautifully described by this fairly offensive cover in *The Economist* from a few years ago with a quote saying basically if you're fat it's your fault. You want to eat yourself to an early grave, fine, go ahead, we don't care. That's the personal responsibility approach. And if you're a public health person as I am and you want to do something about personal responsibility you teach people what it is they are supposed to be eating and they will eat that way, won't they. No, they won't. And the reason they won't is because they can't. And the reason that they can't is because they live in a food environment that encourages people to eat more, more food, more choices, and more eating. And here if you want to do something about obesity you need to change society and change the food environment. And that's much, much harder to do and much harder for public policy people to think about.

So the question is if, as I will argue, society needs to be changed the question that we need to ask is, what is it about society that needs to change. And in order to answer that question we have to go back to the dawn of the obesity epidemic in the United States which can be dated quite precisely to the early 1980s. If you look at rates of obesity which are shown here they were pretty much the same for decades, and decades, and decades. And then in the early 1980s they started to go up quite dramatically. So the obvious question to ask at this point is what happened in the early 1980s to make people eat more and move less. I'm not going to say anything about moving less because in the United States at least the evidence really doesn't show any difference in activity patterns between the early 1980s and now. What it does show is a very big change in eating patterns, people are eating more.

So what was it that happened in the early 1980s that made people start to eat more? Let's blame women. The first reason that is always given is that women went back into the work force and created a demand for convenient foods. Convenient foods have a lot of calories, and therefore it's women's fault. It's what you always do first. But if you look at the actual data women had been going back into the work force for a long time and they still have a long way to go. So that may be part of it, but it's only a small part. A much larger part had to do with a very serious change in agricultural policy, something that we don't usually think about when we think about what we are having for dinner. In the 1970s in the United States agricultural policy shifted from a policy that supported farmers for not growing food or for limiting the amount of food that they grew to one in which they were rewarded for growing as much food as they possibly could. And the result of that was that in the United States the number of calories available in the food supply for every man, woman, and child went from 3200 calories a day which it had been for a century to the present 4000 calories a day which is what it is now. 4000 calories is roughly twice average need. And the number of calories available in the food supply per capita is not what people are actually eating, thank heavens. It's what's available. It's production plus imports less exports. And that figure is now 4000 calories a day. And that's for every man, woman, and little, tiny baby in the country. What that did, and even if a lot of it is wasted as the Department of Agriculture claims, it's still a big increase in calories available. What that did was make the food industry very competitive. If you were a food company in a situation in which there is twice as much food available as anybody could possibly eat you're in a competitive situation. But that's not the only problem that the food industry faced starting in the early 1980s.

The other was the beginning of what is called the shareholder value movement which was the movement of people who owned stocks to try to get Wallstreet to evaluate companies and to force companies to provide immediate and higher returns on investment. Prior to the 1980s Wallstreet valued blue chip stock which were stocks that gave slow but steady returns on investment. Starting in the early 1980s in a speech attributed to Jack Welch who was then the head of General Electric, a very large corporation, he said, we want higher returns on investment now. And the result of that was that Wallstreet began to evaluate corporations not only on their profitability but on their ability to make their profits higher every ninety days. Four times a year companies have to report profits to Wallstreet, and they are expected to increase their profits every ninety days. This put lots of corporations in a very difficult situation, and we are seeing the results of that on Wallstreet now. But for food companies it was particularly difficult because they were already trying to sell food in a situation of enormous competitiveness in overabundance. The result of that was that food companies had to find new ways to sell food.

And in the next series of slides, every time you see an exclamation point that's shorthand for, if you're in this situation you're going to be eating more calories than you ordinarily would if you're eating at home for example. So food outside the home. Because there was so much food, food was very cheap, people could afford to eat outside the home. Food outside the home has more calories than food that is cooked at home. Another one, larger portions, that's the obvious one. Larger portions have more calories. If there is one thing that I could teach it would be that larger portions have more calories. Trust me, it's not intuitively obvious. This is my former doctoral student, now Dr. ... At her thesis defense she measured the size of portions in the food supply. The white cup on the left is the Department of Agricultural standard serving size for soft drink. If it doesn't have too much ice in it it holds eight ounces and 100 calories. The cup on the right, she bought at a local movie theater, it holds 64 ounces and 800 calories. And the evidence shows that that cup is not passed down the aisle in the movie theater and shared among friends. It's consumed by one person.

I say that it's not obvious because of the work of Brian Lansing who was a professor at Cornell, who wrote a book called *Mindless Eating*. It summarizes his research. And I'm going to tell you about one of his experiments, the results of which are shown here. This is his famous super bowl experiment. The super bowl is a big football game. That is one of America's largest eating occasions. He invited his own students to his home to watch the super bowl with him and divided them into two groups. He put one group of students in one room with two liter bowls of popcorn. And he put the other group in another room with four liter bowls of popcorn. And they watched the game. And at the end of the game he just simply counted up the amount of popcorn that they had eaten and showed that those who had the larger bowls ate almost twice as much popcorn as those that had the smaller bowls. And when he asked them how much they had eaten, they underestimated the amount that they were eating by a much larger amount than those who had the smaller bowls. Now, these were his own students and they should have known better. They were trained to know that larger portions induce overeating and yet they overate anyway. Everybody does with larger portions.

Another is ubiquity, food is everywhere. And I like to ask the question, when did it become okay to eat in book stores. I went to several book stores today in Vienna. I didn't see any cafes in any of them. If those cafes were there you'd be eating in the book store. We have cafes in every book store in America. Another is proximity. This is another one that you are probably not familiar with. Schools are filled with soft drink machines these days because they generate revenue for the schools. And of the reasons why nutritionists like me are so concerned about that is because the research shows that the larger the number of vending machines the more products get bought from them. So this is an eat more strategy. And the strategy of Coca Cola and Pepsi Cola is to have soft drinks within arm's reach of everyone 24 hours a day. The last is low prices. And it's very hard to argue about low prices. But you can still go into McDonalds here and get five hamburgers or one salad for whatever the cost is. It's roughly a five to one price differential. That raises the question how come. How come a salad costs five times as much as a hamburger? It has a lot to do with agricultural policy and which foods are subsidized and which foods are not subsidized.

So these are the kinds of things that were discussed by a colleague of mine, Michelle Simon, in a book which she wrote a couple of years ago called *Appetite for Profit* in which lays out the kinds of pressures that are placed on food companies by advocates like me, by regulators, by lawyers who are very eager to sue them, and by Wallstreet who simply wants food companies to make more money every ninety days. And food companies began by going through all the stages of death and denial, and at first denying that they had anything to do with people overeating. And then when they realized there weren't going to get away with that they did two kinds of things. First of all they started lobbying and working with government and attacking their critics and blaming everything on personal responsibility and blaming everything on inactivity. And I'm not going to be talking about that. If you want to read about that you can go on my website foodpolitics.com and read the letters that they write me. I post them. What I do want to talk about is how they have been changing products because here, too, this is something that has not happened here yet. But food companies are working very, very hard with the EU to try to get the kind of regulations or the kind of non-regulations here that we have in the United States.

So I want to show you the ways in which products in the United States are changing in terms of their health claims, in terms of functional food, and in terms of self endorsements of the nutritional quality of the products.

Let me start with health claims. We didn't use to have health claims on food packages. They only started in 1990 when Congress passed the law that put the present nutrition facts label on food products and food companies said, if we have to put on food products what's bad about our products you have to let us say what's good about them and you have to let us make health claims. And Congress agreed and forced our Food and Drug Administration to begin allowing health claims for the first time. I'm going to show lots of pictures of breakfast cereal because they are at the advanced edge of food marketing. The soy cereal says that it will help prevent heart disease and cancer, it'll help lower cholesterol, it'll help promote a healthy heart disease. And both are ... claims that were approved by the FDA on the basis of some kind of scientific evidence. But the companies that had health claims that were turned down by the FDA took the FDA to court and argued that they had the right to say anything that they wanted to about the health benefits of their products on the grounds of free speech. And for the most part the courts agreed and ruled in favor of the companies, and the FDA went out of the business of regulating health claims. The result is a very noisy market place. What I'm showing here is a very standard Kellogg cereal, by no means the worst of Kellogg cereals, with six different kinds of health claims on it. Those little nutrition tokens that I noticed that you cereals have those, so you know what those are. I'll make you smarter, it'll make your heart healthy, it doesn't have any transfat in it, it will lower both your blood pressure and your cholesterol level, and it has an endorsement from the American Heart Association which doesn't care at all about anything except fat and cholesterol even though sugars appear nine times in the ingredient list in nine different ways. So that's health claim.

Something about functional foods. Functional foods are the big new marketing in the food industry. The idea is that you add something to the food over and above its standard nutritional value, and then you can market it as functional for its benefits. An easy example is vitamin ... which is now owned by Coca Cola. And it comes in these beautiful packages, each with its own accomplishment of vitamins, and nutrients, and sugars. But it's advertised as a health food and sales are doing very well which is why Coca Cola bought it. In 2008 omega 3 fats were put into absolutely everything. They were put into milk, they were put into peanut butter, they were put into mayonnaise, and they were put into ... type cookies. But omega 3s are so 2008. We are now in 2009 and we have moved on to vitamin D which is the nutrient of the year. It's just being put into everything. And we also have antioxidants for their immune function benefits. This crispy cereal has in letters two inches high that it's going to protect whoever eats this about immunity. Now, I have to say that the courts are taking a great deal of interest in this, and I'm not sure how long that package is going away with. But this is the kind of thing that's quite typical of food packages these days. The immunity one is really interesting because it's been pushed very hard. And this is a Nestlé product actually and it's a juice drink for babies. It's designed for very, very young children. And the one on the left has Omega 3s added to it and it has in big letters on the front that it will aid children's brain development. The one on the right has vitamins and minerals, and that's another one of these immunity ones. And you can tell by the way this advertisement is set up that it's meant for children who use sippy cups. They are not even able to drink from a cup yet. So if you're a mother and you go the store you look at this and think, if I feed my kid this it's going to make my kid smart, wouldn't that be nice.

So functional foods raise a very serious philosophical question and one that I think is very, very much worth discussion which is is a food product that's better for you necessarily a good choice. Is a functional food that has something added to it to make it "better", does that make it a good choice? And I think that that's something that's quite arguable. Part of the reason that it's a concern is because a lot of this marketing is aimed at young children. One of the wonderful things about being an adult is you get to eat anything you want whenever you want to. With children it's quite a different matter because children are dependent on their parents for what they eat. A very prestigious think tank in Washington, the Institute of Medicine, did a report in 2005 on marketing to children and youth in which they did an investigation of the research enterprise that is devoted to teaching food companies how to market more effectively to children. There is such a research enterprise. It gives prices for the best marketing to children. And it looked at the methods that these organizations and companies are using. It looked at the money that is spent on marketing to children and the effects of it on children's requests for food and on family food purchases, and they connected all of the dots between all of those and came out with results based on 123 studies that showed what you would guess if you gave it even a moment's thought that advertising is very effective and it's particularly effective among children.

The amount of money that is spent on marketing to children is a matter of great controversy part in part because very, very little data are available to tell you the precise amounts. The companies consider this information proprietary. But every now and then an advertising age puts out a few figures. For three breakfast cereals, all of them by Kellogg's, these were expenditures in 2008 for just the kind of advertising that goes to advertising agencies, that is radio, television, and print for the most part. For Frosted Flakes 66 million dollars, for Pop Tarts 90 million dollars, and for Fruit Loops just a little bit under 11 million dollars. Fruit Loops sells really well and they don't need to spend a lot of money advertising it. These are staggering amounts of money compared to the amount of money that the government spends on nutrition education, for example. It doesn't even come close.

Why would marketers spend so much money on marketing to children? What turns up there are three reasons. The first is brand loyalty. If you start thinking Coca Cola when you are a child the idea is that you will never switch to Pepsi as long as you live. The second is called the pester factor and that's the trade name for it. And anyone who has ever been with a small child in an American supermarket knows exactly what the pester factor is. It's getting kids to pester their parents until they buy the product. You can watch kids having tantrums in supermarkets, it's kind of fun. That's food marketing in action. But the third reason is the one that really troubles me the most. And that's illustrated here by kid cuisine. And that is the objective of marketing to children is to get children to think that they are supposed to be eating food products that are made just for them. They're supposed to have kid's food. They are not supposed to be eating the boring foods that their parents are making for them at home. They are supposed to be having food in packages with cartoons on the front, in funny shapes, and sizes, and in colors, unidentified food objects, and all that sort of things. And I think that's reason enough to be really very, very concerned about marketing to children and maybe looking at ways in which it should be restricted.

Let's move on to self endorsements because that's a very big issue in the States right now. About five years ago companies started putting green stickers on their own products indicating that those were healthier, better for you options. And the way that they did this was that they would set up their own nutritional criteria and then apply those criteria to their own products. And if they did this well lots of their products would qualify for this sticker. So these are a couple of products actually made by PepsiCo, the maker of Pepsi, ..., and Quaker, products that are owned by PepsiCo and these are Canadian products, but it's the same in the United States. And they have this smart spot logo on them indicating that these cookies and these chips are better for you options. Remember, is a better for you option a good choice? You have to keep asking that. Here is another one. This is a kid's food called ... that is made by Kraft and it has a sensible solution logo on it, even though it has a full ounce of sugar and a quarter of the day's allotment of saturated fat and sodium. That's an adult allotment, so for a kid it would be much higher. And yet this product qualifies for Kraft's logo because it's better than some of the other products in this same line.

Now, what happens if independent nutritionists set up their own criteria? Something quite different happens. And that experiment was done by a supermarket chain in a north east New Hampshire, Main ... states called Haniferd. And Haniferd for reasons that I still cannot fathom recruited a group of nutrition experts to set up criteria for food products with the idea that they would award one, two, or three stars to products that met the nutritional criteria that was set up, with one being good and three stars being absolutely outstanding. And to their absolute dismay, when they applied those criteria to 27,000 products in the supermarket only 23% qualified for even one star. And of that 23% 80% were fruits and vegetables in the proto section. So do the math. About 5% of the products in the store qualified for even one of the food products. Eat fruit, not fruit products.

So where are we now with this and why do I think this is a burning concern? Well, for one thing in the UK they started to talk about traffic light on the front of food packages where you can take just a quick look at the product, at the traffic lights where green means it's a healthier choice, yellow is kind of neutral, and red means you really shouldn't eat this very often. And I have a product here that I bought at a supermarket in London a few weeks ago and it's got two red lights and one yellow and one green light. It's an okay product, but not anything that would qualify for stores at Haniferd. And I also see that McDonalds here in Vienna is giving out brochures in

which they talk about the nutritional quality of their product and they are using a traffic light system. Go take a look.

Now, this has become very important in the States because the food industry spent just under two million dollars to bring a bunch of nutrition organizations, federal people together and food companies together to try to have a uniform system for judging food products, called the smart choices program. And that's the list of all of the different companies that participated in this. It's being managed by the most prestigious nutrition society in the United States, the American Society of Nutrition, and it set up the criteria that are shown here which only have 10% of the calories from saturated fat, added sugar no more than 25% which seemed high to me, and sodium no more than 480 milligrams which also seemed high to me. But I didn't really understand about the exceptions. Because when I went to a supermarket to see what the first products looked like, the first program that I found that had the check mark on it was Fruit Loops, a sugary cereal from Kellogg's that is so sugary that 44% of the calories are added sugars, and sugar is the number one ingredient on the ingredient list which in our system means that it's the one that's there in highest weight. This is basically a sugary desert and yet it qualified for this check mark. Well, this has caused an absolute furor in the States, was written about by the New York Times which is our most influential newspaper which headed its article "For your health Fruit Loops" and in which it quoted one of the people who was on this smart checks committee as saying, well, Fruit Loops are better than a doughnut. And so now the program is being called better than a doughnut. And there have been 4,000 signatures, 4,000 people have written to the Smart Choices Program complaining about this. This was organized by internet. Three nutrition organizations have pulled out of it and have distanced themselves from it. And one of our Congress Women from Connecticut has written to the Food and Drug Administration asking to investigate this. So maybe we'll get some action on that. But it's been interesting to be in the middle of that. What we have in general is a situation in which the food industry, nutrition academics, and sometimes government officials have collaborated in creating a food environment that encourages people to eat more and not less. So the question is, what can we do about it? And that's where policy comes in.

This is not a strictly American phenomenon. You don't have it here because the EU is trying really hard, the food standards agencies are trying really hard to keep this away. But I was in Panama earlier this year and picked up this box of cereal there and it has an endorsement from the Pediatric Association of Guatemala on this chocolate sugary cereal. So this could happen anywhere. You have to be vigilant.

I want to spend a few minutes just relating food safety because if we want people to eat fruits and vegetables and eat more healthfully that food has to be safe or people won't eat it. In the United States over the last few years we have had a series of dramatic outbreaks of foodborne illness. In 2006 it was spinach. In 2007 it was pet food, a case study that I thought was so interesting I wrote a separate book about it. In 2008 it was tomatoes. And after the tomato industry was destroyed because they all had to be recalled it turned out it wasn't tomatoes after all, it was ... peppers. Just this year, in 2009, we have had dramatic outbreaks from peanut butter, from pistachio nuts, and most peculiarly from Nestlé's Tollhouse Cookie Do. Everybody eats Cookie Do raw and there was E-coli in this particular one and a lot of people got sick. I'm not going to say very much about food safety except to say that in the United States we do not have a viable functional food safety system. I think we need one really badly because we have a food supply that is global and what isn't working in one country is not going to work in other countries as well. And it's very clear that we need better regulations, at least in the States. And that's why I wrote the book *Pet Food Politics* that you are in a coal mine because that you are in a coal mine is kind of a joke, that's the canary in the coal mine, to indicate that if we didn't do something about making pet food safely there are going to be problems with human food as well. Sometimes I just hate being right all the time, but right after that was when the melamin turned up in the Chinese infant formula because nobody took the pet food melamin contaminations seriously.

So we have a global food supply. We know what it takes to produce safe food. Our government accountability office has been writing reports for the last ten or fifteen years, one after another, after another complaining about the inadequacies of our present food safety system and making suggestions about what they think we need. And those suggestions have been summarized by the Department of Agriculture. We need one food agency, we now have several that are involved. The food safety system needs to examine the risks and take

measures to prevent the most risky situations. It has to be science based. It needs to oversee the food system from farm to table. And we need standards and real standards with real regulations and real accountability and a lot of education to go with it. We are now in a situation where Congress is looking at different bills. From what I hear they are not going to act on it this fall. But I just yesterday while I was here got an email from a lawyer in Seattle whose business is to represent the victims of food poisonings. And that's what he's been doing for the last almost twenty years now and it has made him a very wealthy man. He produced this poster saying "put a trial lawyer out of business, pass food safety legislation by thanksgiving". That's what he is trying to do because he says, nothing would please him more than to be put out of business and just not have any people getting sick from these unnecessary foodborn illnesses anymore. Another way to look at it is just to deregulate salmonella. The Onion which is a satirical newspaper in the United States published this illustration last year, and I thought it was just a perfect solution to all our food safety problems, just have the FDA approve salmonella and make it legal, and then we won't have any more problems.

So I would be depressed about some of this and very frustrated at how slowly our government moves to take action if I didn't think that we are in the middle of an enormously exciting food revolution. This was from an article in the New York Times last March. And as the New York Times says there is a food revolution, there is a food revolution. Just within the last two or three weeks Time Magazine came out with a cover story on the real cost of cheap food, talking about all the problems in raising animals. Time Magazine is decidedly right wing. And at the same time a decidedly left wing magazine, The Nation, also had a cover story on food for all in which they are talking about how important food is for growing democracy. So part of the food revolution is because this is a democratic revolution and it includes government of the people, by the people, for the people and the best elements of Americans democracy.

A lot of this is being fuelled by Michael Pollan who is an internationally known author who writes very good books that a lot of people are reading. Before the election he wrote an article for the New York Times Sunday Magazine that was an open letter to the new, whoever the new farmer in chief would be. He made three suggestions for improving the food system. He made up some words. Re-solarize the American farm. There he was talking about making farms less dependent on imported oil. Re-regionalize the food system. There he was talking about trying to have a more locally grown food system. And then rebuilding America's food culture. And here he was talking about emphasizing the eating of real food rather than the eating of processed foods. His work has had an enormous impact on Americans.

I'm now a practicing sociologist but without a license and teaching a course in food sociology this semester. So I'm very aware that the kinds, that the elements of this food revolution are not the classic elements of the women's movement, or the civil rights movement, or even the environmental movement. It's highly fragmented and decentralized. But I'll mention some of the elements of it. One is the slow food movement. I know that it's in revolutionary terms, the slow food revolution, which emphasized a food production that is good, clean, and fair. Good for health, clean for the environment, fair to the workers who are producing it, and then eaten slowly and savored and enjoyed. So that's one aspect. Another is a movement towards eating real foods not processed foods. A group in San Francisco Bay area did a big survey of nutritionists, asking nutritionists what they thought healthy food is about. And everybody said that healthy foods are foods with minimum processing, with no added nutrients, no added additives, no hormones, no antibiotics, produced sustainably, and also fair to the workers who are producing the food, and accessible and affordable to everybody. I think most of us would agree that that's a terrific description.

I live in New York City which has a really remarkable situation. We have a director of our health department in New York City who is actually interested in public health and he has a mayor who backs him up. The last commissioner and the current commissioner looked at ways in which they could try to get people in New York to eat more healthfully, and first they got rid of trans fats, and then they forced fast food places to begin doing calorie labeling, something that came as a revolution or as a revelation, I guess, even to somebody like me. I had no idea how many calories there were in all of these things. So I'm showing some of the elements of their campaign. It was quite shocking to go into stores and discover that a cookie had 670 calories for example. No wonder people are gaining weight. The health department this year has taken on soft drinks. And they have taken

on soft drinks because soft drinks have sugars and nothing else. They have no nutritional value. And because excess calories from soft drinks go into fat. And because there is increasing amounts of research that people, particularly children, who drink a lot of soft drinks, take in more calories are fatter and have worse diets than kids who don't. Here is a poster from this series. These posters were distributed in subways, "don't drink yourself fat, cut back on sodas". You can only imagine what the soda companies are saying about this campaign. But the campaign has a pretty serious research base behind it. And the New England Journal of Medicine which is the most prestigious medical journal published a couple of weeks ago a very serious piece on public health implications and the economic benefits of cutting down on soft drinks. And this was picked up by the New York Times and widely publicized. And I think we're going to see a really big push back on soft drinks over the next few months.

The business about soft drinks and calories are about consumption. What about production? On the production side we have the organic movement. And this is actually quantifiable because sales of organics in the United States have been booming, going up very, very rapidly. They've slowed down a little bit in the last year with the economic downturn, but that's mostly a leveling off rather than an actual downturn. It just slowed down in the growth. One of the reasons for the interest in organic food is the fact that so much food in the United States is genetically modified. The latest figures on genetic modification show that corn, soybeans, and cotton, between 90% and 95% of those commodities are now genetically modified varieties. This slide shows the increase in genetically modified corn, soybeans, and cotton from 1996 to the present. What the slide does not show is sugar beets which are now 95% genetically modified. And this was something that slipped below the radar. And a group has just taken the Department of Agriculture to court to argue that they did not go through proper approval processes in approving genetically modified sugar beets. I don't know how far that lawsuit will go, but the judge has just ruled in favor of the people who are doing the lawsuit.

Now we don't have much protest about genetically modified foods in the United States because they are not labeled and nobody knows that they are there. So I was very interested when I was in England a few weeks ago to pick up this brochure at McDonalds which is given out in the U.K. And it's one of the information brochures that McDonalds gives out, and one of the things it does in this brochure is to assure its customers that none of the foods that McDonalds serves are genetically modified. I was interested in the U.K. to discover that candy bars are now labeled that they are genetically modified. And this is a Hershey's ... cookie candy bar with a label that's mostly in Arabic, I don't know why. But in the part that I've circled down there it says it contains genetically modified sugar, soy, and corn. What that tells me is that the arguments in the United States that labeling would be too difficult and complicated are clearly wrong because the labeling is really very simple. And this is an American company that's able to label it in Great Britain. If they can do that in Great Britain they can do that in the United States. I don't exactly understand what McDonalds is doing these days. It's kind of amazing.

A friend of mine who was in Scotland last week sent me these slides of a McDonald's truck. One of the trucks has on it "our beef is reared on British and Irish farms, it's locally grown, and our eggs are of free range and laid in one place". So this is locally grown food. So McDonald's is now going green. I think that's kind of great. Locally grown food is the hot new part of this revolution. I was in Alaska for quite a long time this summer, in Fairbanks, which is 200 miles north of Oslo. It's really very north and they have a growing season that's about five minutes long. And yet in their Safeway I saw locally grown foods. I visited an organic farm outside of Fairbanks. And what's interesting about this farm is that all those beautiful young people who are working on it are interns who have chosen to spend their summer working on an organic farm as part of the internships. And they are not being paid for it, they are just getting room and board. They were some of the happiest people I'd seen in a long time. We also went to a school that has an absolutely gorgeous school garden.

Of course that school garden raises the whole question of food in schools which in the United States is a really big problem these days. What a lot of people are thinking about is how they are going to convert the present school lunch system which is heavily based on sodas and fast food to something that's more organic, seasonal, sustainable, and so forth. There are a couple of books here that are really quite good, that tell you how to do all that. And then the pamphlet that I've shown on the right is an ... pamphlet put out by a food service company that is a step by step guide to doing a school food program and a school garden program that takes you all the

way from how you prepare the land to how you harvest and sell the vegetables or use the vegetables in a school food program. This has now been worked out so clearly that anybody can do it. And actually it's a pretty useful guide to how to do gardening for people who don't know how to do it.

If you have all this food that you are growing you got to do something with it. And so farmers markets are the other big place or that are part of this movement. And this too is quantifiable. You can count the increase in the number of farmers markets in the United States over the last ten years, and they are booming. The most recent addition is this one. On September 17th Michelle Obama opened the new farmers market that is in front of the White House as an enormously symbolic statement that this something that's important to Americans.

I just want to say a couple more things about locally grown food because it's so easy to do. This is the street that the building I work in is on. NYU doesn't have any land at all, but it has 83 planter boxes. Last year our gardener planted vegetables in the planter boxes. This is when they were at the height of their peak this summer. There are also a couple of guys who made a movie a few years ago called "King Corn". I think it's one of the best of the food movies. They have a sense of humor. Their new movie is called "Truck Farm", and there are segments of it on Youtube. If you go on Youtube and type in truck farm, I'm in episode 2, so I love it. What they mean by truck farm is that they've grown a vegetable garden on the back of a pickup truck. It's a community supported agriculture. They come around and deliver your share. I bought a share for twenty dollars. I thought it would be twenty dollars of entertainment value, and it certainly has been. So locally grown food, big.

That brings me to the personal responsibility. If you go and exercise personal responsibility about food I say you eat food, not products, you eat smaller portions, support local farmers, grow your food at home, cook at home, and teach kids how to cook. That would be revolutionary in and of itself. At the same time I think we need a great deal of social responsibility about food issues. And this is my shopping list of the policies in the United States that I'm interested in having change, to support a healthier and more environmentally sustainable food system. And they include school food and restrictions on marketing to kids, passing of food safety legislation, changing the way we support farms, and a whole bunch of differences in tax policies, something about income equity to everybody can afford to eat healthfully. And then the source of the corruption in the American political system is the way we do our campaign financing laws. And I think we need to make some changes there. And I also think it's time to take a look at the way we regulate Wallstreet. I'm not the only one who is suggesting that these days because that too is the root of a great deal of difficulty. So here is Michelle Obama planting an organic garden on the ground of the White House, an extraordinary symbolic act that has been cartooned a little bit. But I think what they are doing about food is wonderful and sending a very important message to Americans and maybe even to the rest of the world. Thank you very much.

Michael Freund

Thank you very, very much for this presentation. I don't even know where to start to ask you a whole lot of questions, so I won't, because otherwise I'll never stop. Who else in the audience besides me would like to know more or argue [about something?](#).

Question

Your background would qualify you to comment in more depth [on the genetic](#) technology, the manipulation. Here there is a very negative response. Most of the studies that I have seen seem to say that there is no health danger. I would be interested in your opinion.

Marion Nestle

About half of my books save *Food* is devoted to a discussion of genetically modified foods. There are two ways of looking at genetically modified foods. They don't mesh very well. In fact, they talk past each other. The question that you asked is from one perspective which is a science based perspective, which is what is the evidence that genetically modified foods cause health problems. But there are other ways of looking at genetically modified foods which have to do with other kinds of issue that have nothing to do with health and are not really amenable to scientific investigation. And they have to do with concerns about the politics of genetically modified foods. Who owns the seeds? Who owns the [pattens patents](#)? How are the [pattens patents](#) being used? What about

corporate control of the food supply and whether the foods have been adequately tested and improved? The arguments go right past each other and they are not really solvable without a great deal of very careful listening on both sides. Because I think both kinds of issues are very important and they have equal weight in my view. So that even if they are safe it doesn't necessarily mean that they are acceptable.

Question

One of the reasons why we have that prosperity is because we have reduced the rate of farmers to less than 1% of the population. Big parts of our welfare go back to a system in which everyone **is was** a farmer or pretty much everyone. Small communities have big portions of farmers.

Marion Nestle

I don't think we'll ever go back to that. But we could have more than we have now. 1% seems like an awfully small number and that's what it is in the States also. I think a lot of people want to go into farming. I certainly know lots of young people who want to go into farming because they think it would be a very nice life. They want to grow food. They want to raise animals. They want to be attached to nature in that way. They're not greedy. They're not necessarily trying to become enormously rich. They just want to make a living. That seems okay to me.

Michael Freund

You said the number is increasing for the first time in history.

Marion Nestle

For the first time in a hundred years there was a small increase in the number of farms last year. I think that's a good sign. We're never going to go back to being an agricultural society. We have areas of America that are dead. They have corporate farms, they are no ..., because you can run a corporate farm with a very, very limited number of people. There are no people in those towns. The towns are closed down. The stores are boarded up. There is nothing to do there. And it's being run by immigrant labor. That's not a healthy situation for anybody, not for the immigrants, not for the people who used to live in those towns, or for rural America which is vast amounts of land. We could do much better with farms which are smaller and more diverse.

Michael Freund

Do you see a chance to de-construct this situation? You cannot **role roll** it back completely. You cannot re-institute small town farming in Iowa or Nebraska.

Marion Nestle

Yes, you can. Of course you can.

Michael Freund

How would you do that?

Marion Nestle

If you stopped subsidizing the large corporate farms in Iowa they would go out of business immediately and that land would then be available to do something else with. I mean you could grow food on the farms instead of food for animals. Again, not all, but some. It's not an all or none proposition.

Question

I thank you very much for the lecture and for the thinking. I'm a public health person. I am responsible for women's health in Vienna. And we are very sad about the development of the rising numbers of eating disorders, young girls, 12 year old girls are worried about their figure because they are anxious of being too fat. And on the other side we do know that the numbers of obesity are rising in very young kids. How can we lobby? Being a very political person and being in the administration of health in Vienna, how can we lobby the politicians? Do you have any answers?

Marion Nestle

You're going to answer that question. I don't know anything about Austrian politics. In general? But lobbying to what? What would you change? In the United States where food marketing is such an important part of the culture you try to do something about lowering food marketing. We try to teach people, young people, about what it's like to eat real food instead of food products. So if they are eating real food they are not as hungry. The food is more satisfying. It's more nursing. You don't need as many calories. You don't feel like you're eating candy all the time. I think we need a healthier food culture. And the first thing that I would do would be to teach kids to cook. Teach children how to cook.

Michael Freund

Which you told me is happening in certain schools. But right now it's a minority elite proposition.

Marion Nestle

Yeah, their parents are working, they are not doing it. Teach kids how to cook. You teach a child where food comes from and how to cook that food and they have a completely different relationship with food and it's much healthier.

Question

There is this tremendous industry on the other side.

Marion Nestle

Yes. So teach kids to cook. It's the most subversive activity I can think of.

Question

My first question is the definition of organic food. And second, I would like to ask you about Alaska if they have just a short period of time where they can grow food, where would the food come from in their winter time? I would like to see the world as one home so it could come from another place and they could eat home grown foods.

Marion Nestle

In the United States there is a very precise definition because it's regulated. If something is certified organic, if a plant is certified as organic it must be grown without chemical or artificial fertilizers or insecticides, and it cannot be fertilized with sewage sludge. It can't be genetically modified and it cannot be radiated. If it's animals, the animals cannot be treated with hormones or antibiotics, and they must be allowed access to the outdoors. There are great, big, long rules. The other question I liked very much because I like to eat berries. In New York City we can't grow berries in January. So we get them from Chile or Argentina. A lot of people are very concerned about that because they think it uses too much fossil fuel. But I think that's a good use of fossil fuel because it's also helping farmers in Argentina, in Chile. And I think that's your point.

Michael Freund

You're saying you're not really in favor of this movement, they call themselves locavores, meaning eating only local food or trying to ...

Marion Nestle

No. First of all it's very hard to do and in Alaska it's impossible, and it's impossible in New York to do. But it's an interesting exercise. They are called eco... these days.

Michael Freund

If you do it in the extreme way it's probably impossible. But the idea that food is seasonal, that you not necessarily have to get all food at all times is not unreasonable, is it?

Marion Nestle

It depends. I don't think it's all or none. Again, that's an all or none question. And I don't see it as all or none. I tell people in the United States that if each of us tried to eat a little bit of locally grown food we would create a

tremendous market for local farmers. And that's really what you want to do. I like having small farms in the cities. I think that's nice. I like knowing the farmer who grows my food. I'm not going to be growing my own food.

Michael Freund

A lot of people start doing this, too.

Marion Nestle

Well, they are doing it, but they are doing it in small amounts. It supplements, it adds. I think that's good. And we have a mixed system. I think a mixed system is the healthiest.

Question

You talked a little bit about food claims, vitamin supplementation. I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about folic acid supplements in cereals and the like in the US. I know they are thinking about banning that in the EU because they think it might lead to cancer etc.

Marion Nestle

The question was about folic acid which is a vitamin that's present in leafy green vegetables and never caused any problems when it was in leafy green vegetables. But research ten or fifteen years ago indicated that low levels of folic acid predisposed women to have children with neural tube defects, a very, very serious problem. And so under enormous pressure the Food and Drug Administration agreed to fortify grain foods, the flour that makes bread, with folic acid. I have to say that the Food and Drug Administration took a very conservative position in doing that and they did not fortify the grain products with as much as the proponents of fortification wanted them to. They took a more conservative position. So actually I think we are okay on that. Now there is evidence increasingly coming out that relates high levels of folic fortification to a bunch of different kinds of diseases, and so there is a big concern about it. This situation reminds me a lot of iron fortification because iron was put into the food supply to raise the level of iron particularly in young women who menstruate, and bleed iron, and were iron deficient. But having more iron in the food supply is not good for men who have a disease called hemochromatosis in which they absorb too much iron. And so by fixing one kind of problems you create another kind when you fortify. And I thought the Food and Drug Administration lost a wonderful opportunity over the folic business in recommending that people eat more fresh vegetables containing folic acid. That public health educational measure was discounted because they said it wouldn't reach enough people. And now we're seeing the result of that. So I'm not in favor of fortifying. The fortification was necessary when people didn't have enough to eat. But we don't have very many people in our country who don't get enough to eat. In fact the problem is the opposite. So we need different kinds of public health measures for different kinds of problems in society and changes in society.

Question

I have a question about advertisement because I'm observing here in food advertisements, there is an advertisement for Omega 3 fatty acids. You see a family sitting there with a huge pile of fish, raw fish, and they sit in the forest. And then you see a family and they have a huge pile of nuts. And then they say, "Do you want to fulfill your needs of fatty acids by eating this pile of fish?" And then they show this family having a picnic, all very beautifully dressed and have this little sandwich and they put on margarine, and they say, "this is how you can meet your needs of fatty acids". And the other point which I think is very scary, they say a child in order to fulfill his need of iron he has to drink twelve liters of cow milk. And we have here this little bottle of a drink and you can fulfill the need of your child. They suggest that you are not able to fulfill your need of vitamins and minerals by eating natural food. This is a big danger.

Marion Nestle

Isn't it amazing that humanity has survived as long as it has without all the fortification and without measuring the exact amount of each nutrient that you were eating. It's really a miracle. Thank you for that.

Question

I want to ask a question which you have not touched upon. This is the social dimension of the whole thing. We lived in Washington. And I noticed that in Whole Foods you only see very rich people and the prices are very high. On the farmers' markets in Washington there are always very elegant ladies who have ample time to choose and select. On the other hand obesity, that's clearly a sign of poverty and in fact the correlation is very close. There are two aspects to these differences. Probably the less one is price because those organic foods are much more expensive. But the second with more relevance is the ease of preparation, of readiness. You have a century long training towards processed foods. I don't think that with the lifestyle, with the women in the work force, that this is going to be very easily reversed. I think that perhaps as long as the organic food is that expensive it will be difficult, but much more difficult because as long as you cannot put organic food in the form of a product that you just put in the microwave and it's cooked, I think it will be very difficult to reverse the trend. You might do something with sugary pop sodas, but the basic trend to eliminate this divide, to reverse this social differentiation.

Marion Nestle

I heard two questions there. One had to do with the differential price of food and the inability of the poor to shop at Whole Foods which is a very expensive supermarket chain or to buy organic foods which are very expensive. And the other was the loss of ability to cook and the inability of poor people in particular to cook because their lives are conducive to having the amount of time or the resources for it. I see both of these as matters of public policy. On the price issue I like to ask the question, why are fruits and vegetables so expensive? Part of it is that the Department of Agriculture considers them to be specialty foods and not suitable for subsidies. We could change that. We could subsidize organic foods if we wanted to. That's a political decision. So that's a decision that could be made. This is not a policy that's set in concrete.

Michael Freund

Isn't that the Iowa syndrome? The problem is where does the big money for the political contributions come from.

Marion Nestle

Iowa has a particular problem because that's where the elections start and nobody wants to do anything to upset anybody in Iowa. But these are political decisions that could be made. When we talk about what we are going to do about the sociology of the poor then we're getting into a whole series of issues just dealing with food. Lack of access to food. There are no supermarkets in poor areas. The inability to pay for it. Lack of transport. And in New York City which is taking a very active stance in trying to do something about this, they are looking for incentives to move supermarkets into low income areas. They are sending vegetable cards out and they are doing something with subsidies. Everybody wants food assistance programs to reward people for buying healthier food. So if you use your food stamps for fruits and vegetables they go twice as far. That would be a policy change, and not a bad one. I think it's a really good idea. I'd like to see that implemented. I think on the policy level there are lots of things that could be done and I hope this government will do them.

Question

You were talking about organic food. I wonder, have you heard about this huge British study during the summer months that came out which I found very unsettling because I am much in favor of organic food. They were stating that it made absolutely no difference if you ate organic food or not.

Marion Nestle

No, that's not what they said. They said that there was no nutritional difference overall although organic foods were higher in some nutrients than others and the same in some nutrients than others. They were not looking at pesticide levels, at long term health levels, or any of the other features of organics that might be a reason for people to want to buy organics. They were just looking at nutrients. That's a nutrient based approach. It was a very serious study. Actually they looked at a group of papers. Some of the papers found higher levels of nutrients in organics than others. Some of the papers found lower levels. Some of the paper didn't find any difference. So from that they concluded that there is no nutritional difference. There may not be. But they weren't looking at pesticides. They weren't looking at sustainability. They weren't looking at soil. I see it as exactly the same issue as

the question about genetically modified foods. There are two different questions here. One of them is a science based question and one of them is a value based question. And I think both are important.

Question

Do you think that the American health care reform that's going on hopefully right now will help in nutrition and the obesity epidemic? As a public health person do you support the public option?

Marion Nestle

I think we need single payer, never mind public option. This is already so compromised from my standpoint. I just hope they'll pass something and get a foot in the door and then maybe over time we can improve it to the point where we really have a decent health care system. Food and nutrition has been astonishingly lacking in the discussion about health care, and so has food safety which I also find amazing. They are handled by different agencies for the most part. And so that's part of it. Certainly the Food Safety Bill is being held up until the health care business gets settled. So let's hope they settle it soon. I would like to see something much stronger. I think it's already compromised. But if it insures people who are uninsured now that would be a step forward. So I support whatever it is.

Question

A point and a question. I live in Vienna right now, I normally live in California. The part you mentioned earlier about organic being very expensive, in California there is almost no difference between organic and non-organic stuff.

Marion Nestle

Oh, that's California.

Question

Amazing. Bio, it's an incredible thing. You pay more for it on Naschmarkt, it's very strange.

Marion Nestle

No, you pay more for it everywhere except in California because it's grown in California.

Question

It's interesting because you made this point earlier on but it didn't get followed up on really, and that is the shareholders. You are speaking to a group of people who believe most of what you say. But the reality is that where I grew up, really small number of people ...

Marion Nestle

Let's grow it.

Question

Okay. But the profit motive is an incredible force. To me it's like on the one side you got the Cascos of the world and on the other side you got the farmers' market. And you know who is going to win. It's not going to be the small guys in the farmers market. I just don't see any solution unless somebody comes up with a really creative way to make money in what you're talking about.

Marion Nestle

I think there are plenty of ways to make money, the real question is how much. I'm very optimistic mainly because of the enormous interest that I see in food issues and in these kinds of food issues. Now, we may be talking about 3% to 5% of the American population, but it's growing. I think it's about democracy, I really do. So I think it's important for us to develop a pluralistic food system in the way we have a pluralistic democracy. And these democratic values which I hold very dear are displayed in a lot of the kinds of things I was talking about. And I'm just delighted beyond belief that so many people are interested in it. I see it growing. It's not going to take over the world. I don't see it, I'll say it again, I don't see it as either or. I see it as pluralistic, a mixed system. I

want to see a mixed system in which the mix is a little bit more equal. Maybe not totally equal, maybe not 50/50 maybe, I'd like to see 15%, 20%, anything in that direction, this movement, and I consider that very promising, very exciting, and much cause for optimism.

Question

I don't know if your research covers this topic, but I noticed that of course the food industry is a very big industry and it bothers a lot of people, and there is a lot of money and a lot of capital. Of course the industry generates a lot of money, it's a big part of our economy. Yes, of course, they want to sell a lot of food and they want people to eat a lot and pay more. They do care to a certain degree, but of course money before health more or less. It's like with the cigarette industry. The cigarette industry was promoted at one stage and now it's being attacked. Or like the oil industry, the fossil fuel, this is my field of specialty. We know of the problems through this, but it's a big industry and therefore one can find alternatives for energy, one can find an alternative for cigarettes, but I think it's going to be difficult to find an alternative for food.

Marion Nestle

There are alternatives. That's what I was talking about with all of the different alternatives. They don't have to be 100%. They don't have to be 90%. But they can be 10%, 15%, 20% without causing a collapse of the economy. And people would eat a lot better if they had more choices.

Michael Freund

This morning we spoke and you said you visited an Austrian supermarket and you were surprised about how quiet it was. By quiet you meant the marketing was **not** screaming as much, it was more civilized perhaps. But as I came to see you I got offered this free package of rice in the middle of the street which contains of course sugar and corn syrup and stuff like that.

Marion Nestle

It does?

Michael Freund

Yeah, it says sugar corn.

Marion Nestle

That just means sweet corn.

Michael Freund

Okay, but it has a lot of things added to the rice. Then at the hotel of course I got all my free candy bars and cookies and everything. And then I read a magazine and it has an ad by the Minister of Health which said, yeah, you can keep your meatloaf sandwich – “Leberkässemmel” -, just maybe subtract a little bit of the “Leberkäse” and add one pepper. I think in the United States you wouldn't even be allowed to say that from any official side because the meat association would be on your back right away. My question really is, what's your impression of the food situation here as compared to the US?

Marion Nestle

Big food companies are trying to sell more food.

Michael Freund

Same thing.

Marion Nestle

Yeah. They are trying to open up markets, certainly. And to the extent that the EU keeps the lid on most of the more egregious forms of advertising it'll continue to be quieter. If it were up to me I would take the cartoons off food packages. I have my food package rules. But nobody asked me.

Question

It worries me because we think we are under the power of a huge industry. We had the last ten years a lobby of doctors against smoking or against the smoking industry. We don't have yet in Austria any bit of consciousness about the food industry and what they do. It's not an issue of public health. And all the important professors blame the obese people. And also the dialogue with the social insurance system, some conservative people or politicians say, we should blame them and they should pay more insurance because they are obese and they create costs. So I'm really very curious and I think we have to take in the field of medicine, the professors, and the doctors. There are some public health doctors, but they are not here, and there is no consciousness about the financial part of this huge issue like you showed us.

Marion Nestle

You have work to do. Just think of it as an opportunity.

Question

I wanted to move a little bit in a different direction. I was thinking as you were talking, one of the founding fathers of the European Union, Jean Monnet, once said, if you have difficulty getting an answer, enlarge the question. And that's a very good recipe if you think it's true. It seems to me that we will have only significant a progress in this issue if we enlarge the alliance that you have. At the moment it seems to me we are sort of in a here is the consumer and there is the huge pressure of the industries, and there is a small group of people and they are laboring and fighting and trying to do as good as they can. The costs of malnutrition, obesity, food related health problems, loss to the work force, investment on the other side. In Washington they started to reinforce the trolleys of ambulances because they couldn't carry the people anymore. You have enormous fringe costs that are involved. I think if we don't get to a big alliance of all those people who are affected, similar to what happened in the tobacco industry, it will be difficult to have a significant breakthrough. I think we have to work also not only on the individual person and changing the habits, but one has to create a larger alliance of interest here.

Marion Nestle

The business about alliances is very important and also the parallels with tobacco. There is a very, very good review of the parallels between food and tobacco that came out in the Milbank Quarterly a couple of months ago. And I post all of these things on my blog site foodpolitics.com. If you click on tobacco it'll pop right up. And it's a very serious review of all of the parallels, the ways in which they are the same and the ways in which they are different with policy suggestions about what could be done.

Michael Freund

So is there a feeling that it may go in a different direction ultimately? That the producers of bad processed food go down the road the same way the tobacco industry does?

Marion Nestle

Well, look at what McDonalds is doing. Is that good, better, and different? I think it's good. And McDonalds is making some significant changes unless they are lying which I don't think they are.

Michael Freund

In the US too?

Marion Nestle

In the US it's different, it's more here. But there are some things that they are doing. I think they made some stipulation about the kind of meat that they are going to buy. That would have an enormous impact. Walmart which is the biggest retailer in the United States are now going to ask their suppliers to demonstrate what they are doing for sustainability. That will have a very big effect. That didn't come about because somebody at Walmart independently said, gee, it would be nice of our suppliers. They were forced to do it. So you become part of this force, you have a voice, you make small changes. I think small changes are important. And these are happening. And this is about democracy and using the democratic process to make changes that are better for people. It seems to me it's a really good thing to do.

Question

You asked when people started to eat in book stores. I ask when did they start to eat in the streets, while working, while watching TV, while listening to music, all the time. I think we can't go back to the agricultural system, we have a totally different way of life now. And nobody spoke about this. We can't in the early morning grow our seeds, and then go to our work, and then cook for ourselves, and chop for ourselves. We all wanted to do that perhaps, but the way of life and the reality of working opportunities don't allow this. It seems to be for me a little bit romantic to speak about all these organic farming on the office window. We can't afford that. And on the other hand one has to remember that in the 18th century in Vienna the proletariat had for dinner a glass of beer and a dumpling. It seems an enormous success to have more opportunities now. It seems to be a little bit cynical in a way to say now stop eating, when in the first time in history they can chose between different kind of meals because they have the feeling there is enough. It is an illusion, but the industry gives this illusion.

Marion Nestle

I don't think it's cynical at all, I really don't. And I don't think that everybody has to grow food on their window sill. I really don't think that it has to be one way and only one way. Just a little bit moving in that direction would have a very big effect. That doesn't require complete revolution in individual lives. It just requires small changes. I think they would be very effective and I've seen the results of that. Well, I talked about some of the results of it. I think these small changes are making a very large difference. And if we don't make them then nothing will happen.

Question

I would be interested in how to solve these problems for most of the people.

Marion Nestle

You change policy, that's what you do. We change policy. Not so easy to do. But you decide what it is that you as a society think is best for people in that society, and you develop policies that promote that. Right now the policies promote something else. But these are policies that were developed by people, they can be changed. So I'm interested in changing policy.

Question

I'm from California also and we've got a major water problem. Water is very expensive. On top of that we have a lot of polluted water. How do you see farmers being affected by that?

Marion Nestle

Farmers are responsible for the pollution to a great extent. I'm not sure exactly what you're asking.

Question

How will the farming in the future be affected with the water droughts and the polluted water?

Marion Nestle

California made a decision quite a long time ago that they were going to drain the Colorado River in order to support agriculture in California. Whether that was sustainable or not, nobody ever talked about. Nobody ever expected that the population of California would rise to the level that it is now. So that by the time the Colorado River gets to the Gulf of Mexico, it gets to the Gulf of Baja California it's a trickle. So that water is going in the California agricultural land, and you say that it's expensive but farmers have never paid the true cost of that water. Whether that's good, bad, or indifferent is something that's arguable. California is in big trouble right now economically. How that's going to play out I don't know.

Question

We live in Santa Barbara and the water is astronomical, 400 dollars during the summer in July, my water bill, it's unbelievable.

Marion Nestle

So is there any effort made to stop watering lawns and maybe plant cactus instead of lawns?

Question

I don't have a lawn. I have a garden, do a lot of composting, a lot of mulching.

Marion Nestle

That's the problem. You have to recycle your water. That's what we'll all be doing.

Question

I would just like to add to your comment that I find that fast food is really catching on, has been catching on in the last five or six years. With every new subway system there have been new fast food stations. People moving to their work place, all of a sudden you see people eating their lunch in a queue, or in the subway, or in the busses. It's a big nuisance. But people have no other choice, I find. They just race around. I think this is a rather new phenomenon that has caught on here whereas in your country you're already going in the other direction again. We are now taking on your bad things, imitating everything you have been doing. You find out it's wrong, and now we are in that process.

Michael Freund

I have the same impression. Wherever [you go](#) they build new centers of anything, subway stops, [downtown plazas](#), it's always the fast food chains. [EBut](#) even in the hospitals you see fast food chains.

Question

You need to go visit a Viennese cafe where it takes three hours to settle yourself in and out and beg to pay.

Question

You've been talking a lot about the food situation in the US probably also concerning Europe. The big problem there is processed food, overeating, and too much junk food. I just wanted to know if you also did any research on actually the majority of the population of the world that doesn't have enough to eat and about their problems.

Marion Nestle

I'm glad you mentioned that. Actually the numbers are equal now. It's not the majority. Roughly the same number of people are obese in developing countries as are not having enough to eat. And so developing countries are faced with the dual problem of having on the one hand to deal with not having enough food for part of the population and on the other hand dealing with a part of the population who is overeating. And the numbers are roughly equivalent now. So that's a whole different set of policies. There is plenty of food in the world. It's not that there isn't enough food. It's how it's distributed. So what this gets down to then is what are we going to do about poverty, and what do you about those social issues having to do with poverty.

Question

Wouldn't it solve the overeating of some people with the same sets of policies that could help people that don't eat enough?

Marion Nestle

Well, that's for those countries to decide, isn't it. Each country has to work that out for itself.

Michael Freund

And of course they are being influenced by the big corporations as well that expand into those countries.

Marion Nestle

Let me just give one example. The World Health Organization four or five years ago wanted to come out with a set of dietary guidelines for all of the member countries of the World Health Organization. And one of the guidelines was to consume no more than 10% of daily calories from added sugars. The soft drink makers and food

companies objected so strongly to that that the United States threatened to withdraw funding from the World Health Organization. And that recommendation was dropped.

Michael Freund

Would that be different under Obama?

Marion Nestle

Oh, I don't think there is any question about it.

Michael Freund

Since you mentioned the opposition, you showed some labels saying this does contain, this does not contain genetically modified. This would not even be possible in the US from what I know.

Marion Nestle

No. Neither is possible.

Michael Freund

You're not allowed to say that for example your corn is not genetically modified because it creates, what was the argument, unnecessary confusion.

Marion Nestle

The argument is that there is no difference between genetically modified and not genetically modified foods. And therefore it would be misleading to say that corn is genetically modified because that would imply that there was something wrong with corn that wasn't. And you can't say that it isn't because if you do that you have to prove that there is a difference, and that would be misleading. So it's hopeless.

Question

Labeling was the big compromise in the fight between the European Union and the United States.

Michael Freund

They allow it, but it has to be labeled.

Marion Nestle

I actually think that not labeling was a huge mistake not only for public interest but also a huge mistake for the industry because people are very suspicious of genetically modified foods like what are they trying to hide. Why aren't they labeling it? So I thought it was a mistake. But they don't listen to me.

Question

I have a lot of questions but I will confine myself only to two. First of all I didn't know that you had a new edition of Food Politics out and I wondered what you had added to that, if you changed case studies or what new information was in there. My second question would be, what are you working on now, what to anticipate in the next two years being your research focus.

Marion Nestle

Thank you for asking that. Food Politics was updated with a new afterword which is a chapter that brought it up to date through 2007. I covered a lot of the same issues, but brought them up to date. And I've done the same thing for Safe Food which has been re-titled The Politics of Food Safety, and that will come out next year. The new book is a book about pet food, dog and cat food. That is an analysis of the pet food industry because pets eat the same foods that we do. It's just they eat the parts that we don't eat. So it's one food system and its food politics for pets basically. And then the book after that will be a book about calories, what calories are about and why people don't understand them.

Question

Considering that water is the most precious resource of the century probably, do you see a correlation between the use of water in bad food and the use of water in good food? If so, that would be an avenue for taxation.

Marion Nestle

I never thought of that. The question was whether there is a difference between water that's being used to grow good food and water that's used to grow bad food. But water is used to grow plants, and it's the processing that changes those foods from something that is healthful to something that is less healthful. And I don't know how much water is used in there. I don't know what the percentages are. That's a really interesting question. But I have never thought about it before. Thank you for asking it. I don't know the answer.

Michael Freund

That may not be a bad ending that we leave you with something to worry about and to think about.

Marion Nestle

If you asked me about bottled water I have a lot to say about that.

Michael Freund

Well, I think we've come to an end although there is no end to this topic. It's a huge, big topic. That's why the Kreisky Forum, Gertraud, graciously agreed that this will be a whole series. I think we have a tremendous opening of this new series. I want to thank you for giving your time, giving your energy, and your brain power to this topic and to this evening. Thanks to all of you for being here, asking the questions, listening —, and of course bon appétit!.