

The politics of food

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Two-thirds of men and 60 per cent of women in the UK are either overweight or obese. Not only are we eating too much, we are eating the wrong things: merely 14 per cent of men and 27 per cent of women eat the recommended five portions of fruit or vegetables per day. These are terrifying statistics, especially when we consider the sharp upward trend in the first pair of figures, which also reflects how pervasive the problem of obesity is becoming amongst children and young people.

We have clearly developed a dysfunctional relationship to food – characterised by over-consumption and under-nourishment. Some form of collective response seems necessary, perhaps including action by government. And we have seen the beginnings of this response, ranging from, in the market, an increase in the sales of low-calorie processed foods, to, as a matter of public policy, restrictions on what foods can be advertised to children. There are a range of issues under the broad rubric of food policy, including obesity but also the use of industrial production techniques, genetic engineering, the market dominance of supermarkets, and food miles; and interest in these issues is deepening, with broad consequences for how we produce food, what we eat, and even our relationship to nature. Yet I believe that the politics of food creates particular problems for the progressive left. This article aims to describe these problems and to suggest a progressive response.

Why the left is badly suited to the politics of food

One way to focus the problem for the left is to look at a particular issue: obesity. A comparative analysis of the figures on obesity quickly reveals that the rates are particularly acute in the US and the UK. Though it is nevertheless increasing, the rate of obesity is significantly lower in France or in Japan, countries with a comparable level of affluence (the seemingly obvious cause of over-consumption). This is an important starting-point because one suggested explanation for the difference in rates of obesity is that France or Japan have retained a traditional culture of food to a much greater extent than either the US and the UK. Hence people are more likely to observe mealtimes and eat freshly prepared food, less likely to snack or eat processed food instead. This is a persuasive argument and, walking through any supermarket or town centre in the UK, observing how processed food and junk food have become our cheapest and most convenient options, confirms that we have lost touch with a culture of fresh, traditional or local food.

But what should we do with this insight? Trying to conserve what is left of a distinctively British culture of food to compete with the products offered by supermarkets and

food processing companies feels like an unlikely project for the left. Do we feel comfortable favouring British producers over producers in developing countries? Do we feel strongly enough about shepherd's pie? Similarly, even if it is true that the disappearance of the home-cooked, traditional family meal is partly responsible for our vulnerability to unhealthier options, only a conservative social policy would seek to restore what we have lost. After all, the traditional family meal has declined because we don't live in traditional families anymore. It would be an odd sort of progressive politics that sought to recreate the role of the housewife.

An alternative solution is simply to guide ourselves to make healthier choices than we would otherwise make. Placing restrictions on advertising junk food to children is an example of this approach. Labelling food products to make their health qualities or hazards more obvious is another. However, this implies an image of a state that knows better than its citizens. This too is an uncomfortable connotation for a progressive politics. The state is supposed to enable, not scold, to help us to realise what is best in us, not to engender guilt or shame.

There are also pragmatic, as well as philosophical, dangers in both of the approaches to the politics of food that I have identified here in the context of obesity. The progressive left's discomfort with a narrative about regaining or rebuilding a traditional culture of food, as a response to our range of anxieties about food, is likely to be in contrast to the response of the centre-right. As awareness of the problems of food deepens, the centre-right is likely to profit. What has become regarded over the last generation as an anachronistic stance, on the part of the Conservative Party, in favour of the countryside, farming, and traditional communities may gradually mutate into a seemingly cutting-edge response to new and modern problems. The disadvantage to the progressive left will only deepen, I expect, if the alternative narrative that it presents comes too close to the second alternative that I described above. Especially after a decade of Labour Party government, it is dangerous to adopt an approach to food policy that opponents can characterise as 'nannying' or creepingly authoritarian.

Towards an alternative

Developing an alternative, therefore, seems like an important task for the progressive left. There are real problems in the realm of food policy that will need to be addressed and there is a danger that the political right will offer a more immediately compelling narrative for dealing with them.

As I begin to sketch an alternative, let me begin with two observations about the problems for the progressive left that I have already described. The first is that building local networks can be part of the left's response, as it has been in health or education. I am not hostile to the sense of localism that the progressive left has adopted but, as in other contexts, the local networks do have to be part of a suitable narrative. 'Defending the countryside' or 'buying British' strikes the wrong notes for a progressive politics; however, there may be other and better reasons to have strong local networks for food.

My second observation is that the force of the ‘nannyng’ argument should not be over-estimated. After all, it should apply equally in the context of universal healthcare; only a nanny state would create and sustain a National Health Service rather than simply leave people alone to make their own arrangements. However, this suggestion has little salience in the context of healthcare because we believe that healthcare is a basic good and we don’t want anyone to go without it.

This insight is important because it helps us to develop the progressive alternative for food policy as well. We can’t stand for anyone to be without access to healthcare and, in the same way, we should not stand for anyone to be without nutrition. We worry that, if left to make their own arrangements, some people, due to cost, lack of knowledge or competing priorities, may fail to make adequate provision for healthcare, so we don’t allow that situation to arise – we make collective arrangements through the NHS. The problems associated with poor nutrition, including obesity, arise due to the same reasons: the cost of fresh food and its preparation, lack of knowledge and competing priorities. By the same logic, there is therefore a case to make collective arrangements to ensure provision of this basic good as well.

This may seem like a radical argument premised on the supposition of a new basic good. But, in fact, we have long understood nutrition to be a basic good. The difficulty for our modern debate about food is that we have traditionally understood nutrition in narrow terms and thus limited the role of the state to preventing starvation, which has largely been achieved through income support. It is the qualitative aspect of determining what people eat that seems new and leads to the charges of ‘nannyng’. Nevertheless, we should realise that the state is already heavily involved even in this enterprise – this helps to prove both that we have understood nutrition to be a basic good before and that thinking of it this way need not attract a negative political charge.

One way that the state is involved in delivering the basic good of nutrition is via the Food Standards Agency. It decides, for example, that certain food ingredients are dangerous and must not be used; we don’t each make that decision for ourselves. In addition, it is government that sets the standards for the meals offered to over 7 million schoolchildren every day and 10 million hospital patients per year. There is direct financial intervention as well. In 2005, the British farming industry earned £2.4b and the government contributed over £3b in subsidies to support the production of fresh food. It is possible, in essence, to think of agriculture as a public-private partnership, set up to provide the basic good of nutrition - and it is probably more popular than other, more recently-created, examples of this form.

Looking again at elements of public policy, in this way, to consider whether they embody the role of nutrition as a basic good is an important exercise. Very few people think in terms of basic goods. We are not typically so philosophical. I doubt that we would be so sure that healthcare is a basic good unless we had the National Health Service. Institutions and other arrangements for living are founded on our moral and political intuitions, that is true, but, once we have the outward forms, sometimes it takes some digging to recover the intuitions. Obviously, we do not have a National Nutrition Service,

but that is simply an institutional difference – it does not prove that nutrition is not a basic good or that we will fail to find broad support for that proposition. My suggestion is that many of the functions that a National Nutrition Service would deliver have simply been delivered in other ways, for example, through income support, farming subsidy, food regulation and school meals.

But what consequences does this have? To begin with, I think that thinking of nutrition as a basic good provides a solid and productive basis for the progressive left to get involved in the politics of food. There are other ways to get involved: preventing future health problems; defending a traditional culture of food; or protecting consumers. But there are problems with each of these. The objective of simply preventing future health problems requires clear proof of particular causative links between diet and health. Though we may easily acquire that evidence, this way of thinking about the issue nevertheless provides only a technical, problem-solving rhetoric, poorly-suited to a topic that clearly has great cultural resonance. For different reasons already discussed, defending a traditional culture of food is also a bad approach for the left. And the rhetoric of consumer protection will lead to charges of nannyism.

Using the idea of nutrition as a basic good, by contrast, has many philosophical as well as political advantages. The progressive left is well-associated with arguing for and delivering basic goods; it is almost a matter of bringing the debates in food policy on to home ground, away from more conservative notions of nature or tradition. This way of thinking also helps to provide a focus on issues of inequality. Just as inequalities in health become important and urgent when we think of health as a basic good, the same ought to happen in the context of nutrition. It is also important that thinking of nutrition as a basic good does not determine a particular set of policy interventions. The progressive left has become accustomed to thinking creatively about different ways in which to deliver different aspects of basic goods – and I expect that this agility will be necessary in dealing with issues in food policy.

Finally, nutrition also shares one other important quality with other public goods such as health and education. Achieving public goods in common helps to build and sustain civic solidarity. That children from different backgrounds are educated according to a common curriculum is critical to a sense of citizenship. Similarly, the politics of nutrition may make the same contribution. Ultimately, the greatest benefit of this approach may be that we will create some of the camaraderie of a Weight Watchers group: we will succeed in becoming fitter and healthier and we will have done it together.

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