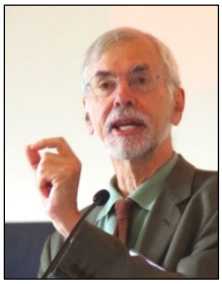
Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development
ISSN: 2152-0801 online
www.AgDevJournal.com



2014 UVM Food Systems Summit Keynote Commentary

Choice, responsibility, and health: What role for the food movement?

Nicholas Freudenberg
City University of New York School of
Public Health and Hunter College

Published online March 11, 2015

Citation: Freudenberg, N. (2015). Choice, responsibility, and health: What role for the food movement? *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development, 5*(2), 19–21.
http://dx.doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2015.052.012

In making decisions about how best to improve the food choices people make, the food movement faces a dilemma. On the one hand, individuals decide what to put in their mouths and swallow, suggesting that improvements require changing what's inside people's heads: their knowledge, skills, and motivation. On the other hand, growing evidence shows that these choices are shaped by external forces: the food that giant corporations produce; the relentless advertising of some products but not others; the taxes and subsidies of governments; and the proximity, price, and products offered at local retail outlets. Taking on these external influences will require changing organizations, policies, and environments.

Many of our national food fights pit proponents of changing demand for food against those who advocate changing our food supply by changing the business practices of the food industry. In theory it should be obvious that we need to do both, but in practice food activists are often polarized by this debate. More broadly, the food movement's trouble in articulating the connections between changing individuals and changing institutions and environments makes it more difficult to enlist the public in mobilizing for either type of change.

To address this obstacle to progress, I propose an ongoing dialogue within the food movement on

The keynote speakers at the 2014 University of Vermont Food Systems Summit were invited to contribute commentaries to this issue of JAFSCD, which also includes presenters' papers.

Nicholas Freudenberg is Distinguished Professor of Public Health at the City University of New York School of Public Health and faculty director of the New York City Food Policy Center at Hunter College. He is author of *Lethal but Legal: Corporations, Consumption, and Protecting Public Health* (Oxford University Press, 2014). He can be reached at +1-212-396-7738 or nfreuden@hunter.cuny.edu.

Photo of Nicholas Freudenberg by Stephen Mease.

how best to reconcile and integrate these two levels of change. Such a dialogue would need to include all sectors of people seeking food change: from urban gardeners, vegan activists, and food scavengers to food studies scholars, parents organizing for better school food, and food workers seeking safer working conditions and fair wages.

Some questions that may help to inform such a dialogue include:

1. How do food industry practices, government policies, and other institutional forces influence how people think about food?
Posing individual and institutional change as polarities assumes these two levels are separate. In fact, much of what we know, believe, and feel about food is shaped by advertising, supermarket design, and the food environments in which we live, shop, work, and play (Nestle, 2013). How can we better understand the pathways by which the food industry gets inside our heads to make the choices that bring them profit seem natural and immutable?

Under what circumstances can our desires for health, community, fairness to others, or safeguarding the planet trump our craving for sugar, fat, and salt, or for paying the lowest price possible?

2. Are there "authentic" desires, needs, wants, and fears, and how are they different from the emotions "manufactured" by those seeking to profit? Can tapping more authentic emotions lead to different food choices?
Each of us is motivated by a complex web of desires and fears. Under what circumstances can our desires for health, community, fairness to others, or safeguarding the planet trump our craving for sugar, fat, and salt, or for paying the lowest price possible? How can food activists illuminate these different motivations and engage individuals and communities in assessing the costs, benefits, and mutability of these desires?

3. When is "nudging" individuals to make healthier daily choices appropriate, and when do we need to shove institutions away from practices that harm the public?
Behavioral economists urge us to structure choices so that it is easier, for example, for children on the school food line to choose fruits and vegetables than French fries and soda (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008). This approach provides one way to understand the connections between environments and behavior. How can food activists persuade our schools, supermarkets, and fast-food outlets to maximize this potential? And what are the limits of this approach? When, for example, does a society say to soda makers, no—you simply cannot advertise products that cause children to die prematurely or suffer preventable illness?

4. What kinds of education can prepare individuals to engage in both personal and political change?
The social movements of the last few decades have created pedagogies that prepare individuals for activism. The Brazilian educator Paulo Freire urges teachers to engage learners in critically analyzing their own environments so as to understand what they can change (Freire, 2000). Counter-advertising campaigns unmask the real motivations of industry advertising to diminish its appeals to consumers (Agostinelli & Grube, 2002; 2003). How can the food movement use these pedagogies to prepare children, young people, and others to be informed consumers and politicized food activists?

5. What type of movement will engage people working at each of these two levels to find common ground?
In the 1960s and '70s, the feminist movement insisted that "personal problems are political problems" (Hanisch, 1969). Women joined the movement because they believed that in order to solve their daily problems related to health care, work, sexuality, reproduction, and parenting, they needed to act politically. Can the food movement of today apply this same perspective? Can the mundane tasks of choosing foods that don't make you or your kids overweight or sick, or deciding where to shop, be connected to the questions of whether having cheap groceries and fast food is

worth letting Walmart and McDonald's not pay their workers living wages?

In the past, social movements that could link people's daily concerns with the deeper questions of who has power and how they use it to maintain injustices were often able to mobilize and unify people across class, race, gender, and other lines and to sustain action across the years needed to bring about meaningful change.

The coming years are unlikely to be easy for the food movement. The food industry is well organized to defend any threats to profitability. The current Congress is unlikely to support any meaningful changes in food policy; action in Washington will be more focused on defending past gains. In times like this, it is easy to insist that we have to focus on the day-to-day fights—or to give up on policy change and focus instead on personal-level change. Neither of these approaches is likely to take the food movement to another level. Unless we take a step back to consider the deeper questions of how to connect the two levels food activists have been working on, we are unlikely to step forward anytime soon. 

References

Agostinelli, G., & Grube, J. W. (2002). Alcohol counter-advertising and the media: A review of recent research. *Alcohol Research and Health, 26*(1),15–21. http://pubs.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/arh26-1/15-21.htm

Agostinelli, G., & Grube, J. W. (2003). Tobacco counter-advertising: A review of the literature and a conceptual model for understanding effects. *Journal of Health Communication: International Perspectives, 8*(2),107–1-27. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10810730305689

Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (30th Anniversary Edition). Bloomsbury Press.

Hanisch, C. (1969). *The personal is political.* Retrieved January 10, 2015, from http://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.html

Nestle, M. (2013). *Food politics: How the food industry influences nutrition and health* (10th Anniversary Edition). Berkeley, California: University of California Press.

Thaler, R. H., & Sunstein, C. R. (2008). *Nudge: Improving decisions about health, wealth, and happiness.* New York: Penguin Books.