

INFORMED EATING

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Fair-Trade Coffee: Enlightened Public Policy or Java Jive?

By Rich Ganis

Among the local items on last year's midterm election ballot to garner national headlines was Measure O, Berkeley, California's so-called "fair-trade coffee" initiative. The mainstream media were predictably quick to dismiss the proposal as yet another screwball scheme cooked up by Berkeley's cranky, tie-dyed activists. About the nicest thing most pundits could bring themselves to say about Measure O was that it was well intentioned but impractical.

What no one seemed to notice, however, was just how ill conceived the initiative was as a public health policy. Had it passed, the city of Berkeley would have entered the business of promoting the sale and consumption of a nutritionally worthless and potentially harmful substance, albeit one grown under much improved social and environmental conditions.

Measure O would have made it a crime for local businesses to sell brewed coffee that was not certified organic (no agricultural chemicals or genetic engineering), shade grown (no soil or rainforest habitat destroyed), or fair trade (providing farmers with a livable wage).

Strangely, the public health implications of this initiative seem to have escaped the attention of both proponents and detractors.

For the opposition, the issue was simply a matter of bad economics. Led by Mayor Shirley Dean, the Berkeley Chamber of Commerce, and just about

every café, diner, and restaurant in town, anti-Measure O forces mounted a formidable, and ultimately successful, campaign to persuade Berkeleyans that the policy would have placed an undue burden on small business owners, who would have faced misdemeanor charges, punishable by fines of up to \$100 or up to six months in jail, for selling coffee brewed with the wrong kinds of beans.

Measure O boosters, organized by organic activist Rick Young, countered that by promoting fair-trade coffee, Berkeley would be working to improve labor conditions for coffee plantation workers in developing nations while providing them with a livable wage and protecting the rainforest environment where the crop is grown. This goal is imperative, they argued, because the livelihoods of small farmers and the integrity of living resources in the global South are being increasingly jeopardized by the predatory practices of large agribusinesses, which have made coffee a chief export of many Third World nations and a staple of the global commodity market.

Unfortunately, the deplorable social and environmental costs of commercial coffee production seem to have blinded fair-trade advocates to the fact that this crop is a nutritionally barren substance that poses significant health risks for those who regularly consume it.



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Beyond Potlucks: Why Vegetarian Advocates Should Broaden Their Agenda

By Michele Simon

When I embarked on my journey as an advocate for a healthy, plant-based diet back in 1996, I decided to fill what I perceived to be a gaping void. While there were numerous organizations, doctors, and nutritionists extolling the myriad health benefits of a vegetarian diet, nobody was making the political arguments strongly enough.

Vegetarians, I have noticed, have a tendency to consider food issues in rather narrow, apolitical terms. One need only look at recent topics of discussion on one San Francisco Bay Area listserv to get the idea: Which Krispy Kreme donuts are vegan? Is William Shatner an “ethical vegetarian”? Which company sells the best vegan shoes? Have you heard about the latest vegetarian restaurant? And so on, *ad nauseum*.

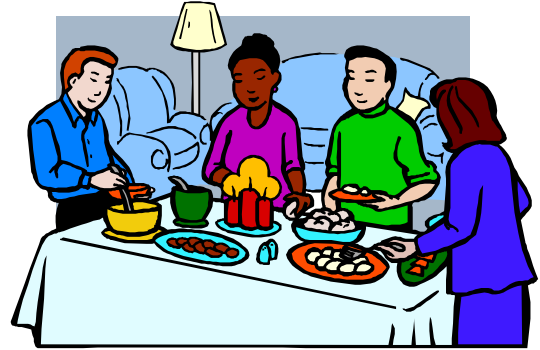
Disenchanted with this limited set of concerns, I began researching and writing articles about the politics of food, pointing out how government agencies and the massive, multibillion-dollar food industry impact our food choices and the information we receive about them. I also began offering my services as a speaker at various vegetarian events, with mixed results. While some groups have welcomed me, others have been less hospitable, largely out of fear of that my lectures would be perceived as too “political.” One

group that initially accepted my proposed topic on the condition that I take the word *politics* out of the title (which I reluctantly agreed to do) subsequently had a change of heart, explaining that it wanted to keep its event centered on people making “individual food choices,” and that my talk on the politics of food would “not be in keeping with this focus.”

What this group and others like it fail to understand is that “individual food choices” do not occur in a vacuum. Rather, they are inextricably embedded in the broader society in which we all live, breathe, shop, and eat.

By refusing to widen their membership base and educational agenda, vegetarian organizations are missing out on a golden opportunity to bring more people into the fold.

Keeping everything focused on the “individual” is a meaningless and naïve strategy. Such thinking only furthers the misconception in vegetarian advocacy that all we need to do is change personal behavior. The real world is much more complex than that and there’s really no escaping it, no matter how hard we try to comfort ourselves with the illusion that all will be well with the universe if consumers would only come to their senses and choose



Boca Burgers over Whoppers.

Indeed, many vegetarian events (food fairs, potlucks, etc.) are expressly organized as “celebrations” of the personal/consumerist approach to social activism, replete with cooking classes, health workshops, and table after table of ersatz meats and other animal-free junk foods.

At such gatherings, a talk on the politics of food runs the risk of being perceived as a bit of a “downer,” far too “highbrow” and “negative” for folks who simply wish to make the world a better place one veggie dog at a time.

But who, exactly, are these “enlightened” consumers vegetarian organizations are inviting into the choir? Too often, they are white, middle- to upper-class people who can afford to shop at stores like Whole Foods Market. Vegetarian groups have long suffered from a glaring lack of ethnic diversity, along with an insensitivity to issues affecting low-income communities. And yet questions such as why some people have greater access to healthy foods than others are

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Informed Eating

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CIFIC is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization founded in 2000. We advocate for a diet based on whole, unprocessed, local, organically grown plant foods, and educate the public about the politics of food. Through lectures, workshops, and special events, CIFIC brings people together to share ideas and resources to help create a more just, humane, and sustainable food system. Please contact us for more information.

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America's drug of choice

Coffee, even in its organic, shade-grown, and fair-trade incarnations, is typically loaded with an addictive stimulant, caffeine, and served with sugar, milk, cream, or one of their synthetic equivalents — foods that are of dubious nutritional value in their own right.

The effects of "caffeineism," a condition caused by the continuous ingestion of excessive amounts of caffeine, are well documented. They include muscle tension, headaches, ringing in the ears (tinnitus), stomach irritation, and dehydration. In a December 8 feature in *The San Francisco Chronicle*, Sam McManis notes that high caffeine intake has also been linked to elevated blood pressure levels, disruption of REM sleep cycles, impairment of thought processes, heightened reactions to stress, and increased risk of pancreatic cancer, osteoporosis, stroke, and rheumatoid arthritis.

What's more, a recent study in the journal *Nature* by University of Texas Southwestern psychiatry professor James Bibb suggests that caffeine al-

ters the brain's biochemistry in the same manner as Ritalin, methamphetamine, and cocaine. Like cocaine, caffeine stimulates adrenaline production, blocks the connection of adenosine to nerve cells (preventing drowsiness), and increases levels of dopamine, a neurotransmitter that produces feelings of pleasure. McManis notes that although caffeine's effect on dopamine receptors is less pronounced than that of "harder" substances, it helps account for the "mass addiction to what [Bibb] calls 'America's drug of choice.'" (See sidebar on page 3.)

The modern food industry has gladly fed America's caffeine jones by enticing kids and adults alike with a dizzying compendium of sugary, caffeine-rich junk foods, including "high-energy" colas, iced teas, coffee yogurt and ice cream, and, of course, a plethora of products made with chocolate.

Like coffee, cocoa is a caffeine-laden rainforest bean whose principal benefit is entertainment, not nutrition (although the chocolate industry has sponsored numerous studies that purport to substantiate its numerous

"3-A-Day" Payday for Milkmen — and Doctors



American dairy producers have embarked on a multi-year marketing and "education" program aimed at boosting consumption of dairy products from the current average of one-and-a-half servings a day, as recommended by the Agriculture Department's *Dietary Guidelines*, to three servings. The new "3-A-Day" campaign will be administered by Dairy Management, Inc. through the federal dairy checkoff program. By putting the 3-A-Day logo on their packaging, and using it on their Web sites and in other promotional materials, manufacturers will be poised to move more milk, cheese, and



yogurt from supermarket shelves. According to a Dairy Management press release, the program is needed to address America's "calcium crisis."

Critics counter that industry is using the calcium-crisis card as a thinly veiled pretext for shoring up its bottom line, conveniently ignoring its products' contribution to the nation's rapidly rising rates of obesity, heart disease, and other diet-related conditions. Many also view it as an insulting parody of the poorly funded federal "5 A Day" program, which seeks to improve public health by promoting the consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables. ■

“medicinal” benefits). And like coffee, it’s a crop that groups such as Global Exchange and the Organic Consumers Association have targeted for fair-trade certification.

Rethinking fair trade

It’s a little hard to fathom why fair-trade campaigners have placed unhealthy foods like coffee and cocoa at the forefront of their efforts to promote a more ecologically sustainable planet. Indeed, is getting more organic mocha Frappuccinos into giant coffeehouse chains like Starbucks really a goal that’s commensurate with the ideals of traditional organic agriculture, which has been concerned with cultivating a diverse, healthful, and locally produced food supply?

To be sure, fair-trade advocates are to be commended for exposing the reprehensible treatment to which coffee and cocoa plantation workers have been subjected; for working to assure social justice and equality for farm laborers; and for calling attention to the need to safeguard the ecological well-being of rainforest environments.

This work should be supplemented, however, with efforts to wean developing economies away from their dependence on nutritionally valueless food exports like coffee, and their attendant reliance on foods imported from abroad. Not only does such dependence undermine the do-

mestic food security of Third World nations, it also helps perpetuate a privatized, import-export model of global food production. This highly resource-consumptive system is predicated on shipping monocultural food crops to distant locations, processing them into nutritionally deficient products, and delivering them to giant supermarkets and restaurant franchises.

Non-governmental organizations should work with local communities and farm labor groups to reduce the amount of arable land that is currently being used to grow coffee, cocoa, sugar, tobacco, and other unhealthy crops, replacing these with whole, organic fruits, vegetables, and grains grown for domestic consumption.

Is getting more organic mocha Frappuccinos into giant coffeehouse chains like Starbucks really a goal that’s commensurate with the ideals of traditional organic agriculture?

Of course, given that nutritionally worthless crops constitute the economic lifeblood of many Third World nations, such efforts will probably not succeed in the absence of formidable social mobilization. Indeed, establishing a more sustainable, democratic, and socialized global



food system may require nothing less than an international movement of farm workers, community groups, NGOs, activists, and others dedicated to wresting control of the food supply away from private transnational corporations and the regimes that support them. Building such a movement will be no simple task. But it’s one that’s essential if we are to improve social and ecological conditions around the world, and promote good nutrition based on whole, healthful foods. ■

Rich Ganis is coeditor of Informed Eating.

The World’s Drug of Choice

Statistics on coffee use appear to corroborate recent research on its addictive properties. More than half the adults in the United States consume coffee regularly, with the average drinker downing approximately 3.1 cups per day, according to a recent survey by the National Coffee Association (NCA). On average, the NCA reports, an American coffee drinker spends \$164.71 per year on the beverage.

Of course, the U.S. is not the only nation hooked on the brew. Rates of coffee consumption are even higher in many European countries, and are rapidly rising in the developing world. Not surprisingly, coffee manufacturers are poised to make sure that this trend continues. A recent item on the food industry Web site Just-food.com notes that Swiss food giant Nestle, which has “already successfully introduced coffee

into countries famous for their tea-drinking culture such as the U.K. and Japan,” is now “working to improve the taste of its coffee and to diversify [its] products in a bid to increase its market share in China.”

Converting China’s billion-plus tea drinkers into cappuccino connoisseurs is also on the agenda of coffeehouse behemoth Starbucks. According to a December 13 story from the Reuters news-wire, the company plans to increase the number of its stores in the greater China area to 6,000 (up from the present 600). Worldwide, Starbucks hopes to expand to 10,000 shops by the end of 2005, and to 25,000 not long thereafter.

Another worrisome trend is the growing number of teenagers who are jumping onboard the java junkie bandwagon. Though statistics on teenage coffee use are hard to come by, Sam McManis, writing in a recent issue of *The San Francisco Chronicle*, observes that “a drive past any coffeehouse near a high school would show that it’s replaced the iconic malt shop of the ‘50s or 7-Eleven of the ‘70s as the place to socialize.”

In return for spending their lunch money at Starbucks (where a 20-ounce “Venti” sells for upwards of \$3), teens, like the trendy, latte-swilling adults they’re emulating, are rewarded with a tasty midday pick-me-up and the camaraderie of their fellow java fiends. While their money buys them little in the way of nourishment, it does put them on the road to developing an unhealthy but perfectly legal drug habit. ■

—R.G.

“Beyond Potlucks,” continued from page 2

critical to understanding how our food system works and why it’s not simply a matter of personal choice.

I’m convinced that by refusing to widen their membership base and educational agenda, vegetarian organizations are missing out on a golden opportunity to bring more people into the fold. People respond very well to my talks and are often quite grateful that finally someone is drawing attention to this part of the picture. Not everyone will be motivated by health concerns, the environment, animal welfare, or even by information on how to cook or where to shop. Some people are actually turned on by the political angle.

Events that focus solely on what and how to eat do a disservice to the public by shutting out a legitimate piece of the puzzle. To just send people home with a few vegetarian recipes denies them the chance to examine the larger implications of their food choices, and come away with insights that could strengthen their resolve to eat a healthy, plant-based diet. Why not give people more credit for being able to understand the social, economic, and political complexities of the world around them, and make decisions accordingly?

Today a growing number of

mainstream nutrition professionals are acknowledging the role that corporations and government policies play in shaping our dietary patterns. For example, Marion Nestle, chair of the Department of Nutrition and Food Studies at New York University and veteran government policymaker, recently authored an illuminating and extremely well-researched book called *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health*. Also, Kelly Brownell, director of the Yale Center for Eating and Weight Disorders, has argued that we

are all living in a “toxic food environment” that does not support healthy dietary decisions (food industry propaganda notwithstanding).

Other food advocates have become combatants in the so-called “Junk Food Wars.” They have pinned much of the

responsibility for America’s numerous diet-related health problems — such as epidemic rates of obesity, hypertension, and diabetes — on the corporations that have saturated our food supply with salt, sugar, and grease. These companies, they claim, are just as culpable for undermining public health as Big Tobacco. (Indeed, many of them are owned by Big Tobacco!).

Encouragingly, such analyses are making the rounds at public health conferences, and have even gotten the attention

Why not give people more credit for being able to understand the social, economic, and political complexities?



Media Spotlight



of the mainstream press. Vegetarian advocates should take advantage of the growing notoriety of this work and incorporate it into their activism. If they insist on keeping vegetarianism walled up within the safe confines of the “personal behavior” approach to social change, they will, I’m afraid, guarantee their continued political marginalization and irrelevance.

But it doesn’t have to be this way. Embracing a more broadly defined agenda and joining forces with other advocates will give vegetarian organizations more political clout and a voice strong enough to counter the industry and government misinformation about food to which people are subjected every day. In short, by expanding the scope of their agenda, they will be in a better position to carry out their core mission: getting more people to adopt a vegetarian diet. ■

Michle Simon is founder and director of CIFIC and coeditor of Informed Eating.



Our pick for the best piece of food-related reporting of the still very new year is a fine article by Barry Yeoman in the January/February issue of *Mother Jones* magazine. Yeoman looks at how the National School Lunch Program has essentially become a conduit through which the federal government is able to unload more than \$800 million worth of farm commodities a year, principally meat and dairy products, into school cafeterias across the nation.

“At a time when weight-related illnesses in children are escalating, schools are serving kids the very kinds of foods that lead to obesity, diabetes, and heart disease,” says Yeoman — everything from chicken-fried steak to three-meat subs with Fritos. While the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which administers the program, is doing an exemplary job of carrying out its mandate to subsidize the meat and dairy industries through purchases of surplus beef, pork, cheese, and grease, this accomplishment comes at the expense of the other part of its mission: to provide healthy, low-cost meals to American school kids.

Regrettably, notes Yeoman, even modest efforts at reform, such as establishing fat limits for school lunch menus, have essentially been doomed to failure, given the enormous political and financial clout of U.S. agribusiness.

Also noteworthy in the same issue of *Mother Jones* is a piece by David Goodman on “socially responsible businesses” (SRBs) in the food industry. Goodman examines recent efforts by giant food con-

glomerates to acquire small SRBs, in hopes of capturing their share of the 63 million consumers who base their purchases on issues such as the environment, social justice, and health.

He notes that these takeovers have been motivated less by “crunchy sentiment” than by interest in increasing market share and profits while adding a touch of folksy, greenwashed respectability to the corporate image.

Goodman focuses mainly on Ben and Jerry’s (now owned by Unilever) and Stonyfield Yogurt (soon to be acquired by Groupe Danone, the parent company of Dannon yogurt), but he does include an illuminating chart illustrating how many other ostensibly small, down-home food companies are actually subsidiaries of huge multinationals.

Though Goodman nicely explicates the issues raised by the corporate co-optation of the SRB agenda, he leaves a few salient points hanging. For example, he seems to accept the idea (advanced by economist David Korten, among others) that all would be well if only the big predators would leave the little “sustainable” firms be. It’s worth asking whether, in an economy that demands profitability and growth before all else, simply being small and “virtuous” is enough to keep SRBs wedded to their professed ideals. Judging by the swelling ranks of once-small sellouts, predatory corporations may be only the proximate cause of the problem; the real issue may be capitalism itself. ■

We Don't Want You: Extra Pounds Keep Teens Out of Military

According to a recent study in the *American Journal of Medicine*, a growing number of young people in the U.S. are carrying too much weight to serve in the military. As reported in a December 11 story in the *Fresno Bee*, the study found at least 13 percent of men and at least 17 percent of women ages 17 to 20 (the prime age for military recruitment) don't meet the weight guidelines established by all four branches of the armed forces. In fact, each year, between 3,000 and 5,000 U.S. armed service members are forced to leave the ranks for being too thick in the waist. We're all for young people shirking the call to drop bombs on unarmed civilians, but surely there are more creative ways to come out as a young conscientious objector. For God's sake, put down those super-sized McNuggets — Canada's right across the border! ■



Fast Food Merchants Vie for Sick Children's Business

Overlooked by last November's election-saturated press coverage was a startling finding from the Urban and Environmental Policy Institute. The group surveyed 47 children's hospitals around the country and found that 13 (more than a quarter) have a McDonald's, Dunkin' Donuts, Wendy's, or other fast food outlet on the premises. These figures recall a similarly disturbing June study from the University of Michigan, which revealed that a third of the nation's top 16 hospitals have at least one fast food franchise onsite.

Sure, their greasy fare is in large part responsible for soaring rates of obesity and other diet-related health problems among children. But this pesky reality has not deterred profit-hungry fast food retailers from marketing their artery-clogging burgers, fries, and milkshakes to captive audiences of sick toddlers. And sadly, America's hospitals have been all too willing to accommodate these shameless efforts. At Children's Hospital in Nashville, Tennessee, kids can even order their Big Macs and Sausage McMuffins directly from their rooms. This, apparently, is cradle-to-grave health care, American style. ■

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Fighting Back

McDonald's employees around the world are mad as hell and are not going to take it anymore. On October 16, a loose-knit international network known as the McDonald's Workers Resistance (MWR) helped spearhead a "day of global action" to call attention to the corporation's long and shameful track record on worker rights and the environment. Since the mid-1980s, October 16 has been designated as "World Anti-McDonald's Day" (to coincide with United Nations World Food Day), but MWR dubbed this year's event "the first-ever coordinated, international, worker-led mobilization by the McDonald's workforce."

The actions, which received scant coverage in the corporate press, included strikes, work stoppages, walkouts, collective resignations, absenteeism, and other acts of defiance and disruption by small groups of McDonald's workers and their supporters. They took place in countries throughout the world, including the United States, Argentina, France, Russia, New Zealand, England, Scotland, Ireland, Canada, Denmark, Spain, Germany, Aus-

tralia, Sweden, Serbia, and Italy. In Mexico City, a group of about 80 people identifying themselves as members of the "Collective Front of Anarchist Vegetarians" protested outside restaurants and spray-painted slogans on a McDonald's outlet, prompting speedy arrests.

MWR also called for a similar, though somewhat "less spectacular," day of protest on December 21, encouraging McDonald's workers worldwide to engage in work slowdowns as a way of registering their opposition to the company's exploitative, anti-union labor policies, its cruelty to animals, and its destructive environmental impact.

According to its Web site, the anarchist-leaning MWR was formed in 2000 in Glasgow, Scotland "as a determined response to the idiocy of our working lives. It's an angry rebellion against boredom, exploitation, poverty, and discipline; it's a rebellion against the idiocy of McDonald's and capitalism." For more information on MWR and reports on the October 16 and December 21 actions, see <http://mwr.org.uk>. ■



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