

## We Are What We Eat

How industrialization of food is negatively impacting formation of personal identity

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### Abstract

How and what people eat are fundamental to who they are; yet, Americans still search for the "right" way to eat. Critics of the stereotypical American fast food diet point fingers at corporate monopoly, government manipulation, or naïve consumerism for the rapid degrade in nutritional health. However, this Capstone suggests that actually industrialization may be at fault for shaping the grounds on which one bases personal identity. The principles of industrialization have become so entrenched in every aspect of American life, that one's development of his or her own personhood is largely based on those ideals of productivity and control. And so, by qualifying identity on these terms, food's significance in one's life has diminished to the purpose of "fuel" for economic output. Seeing food as merely fuel is causing serious illness -- among them obesity and eating disorders. With a more balanced valuation of personhood, Americans can eat more wholly and develop a healthy relationship with food.

## Preface

This Capstone project began when I was in the trenches of an 8-year battle with an eating disorder. During a class lecture taught by my Capstone advisor and then food politics professor, Simon Nicholson, I was moved to tears by the gravity of malnutrition and starvation in developing nations, and that here in the United States, I struggled to allow myself the nutrients that were so easily available. I found the hypocrisy debilitating.

Months later, I finally sought the treatment that I had needed for so long, but in the process found was that my eating disorder was merely an intensified manifestation of what the Western world lives and breathes daily. I saw the workings of an eating disorder in my friends, family, and even strangers. My personal experience and subsequent research has illuminated the severity of America's dissolution with food; however, its potential to build positively to our notion of "self" is substantial. I have found that embracing food as an important contribution to who I am has given it a significant place in my life; a higher meaning than fuel.

### A Vexatious Question

There is something serious going on with America's food system. A variety of factors are conspiring to make agricultural production unsustainable and "what's for dinner" a vexatious question.<sup>1</sup> The results of this shift are all around us—from fad diets to fast food popularity, the prevalence of microwave dinners, and the severity of obesity and eating disorders simultaneously.

Grocery stores and bookstores equally promote diets, while fast food centers are booming. Diet books and magazines on how to eat fly from the shelves at the same time that the food industry spends \$11 billion on advertisement.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, those who have the financial means to eat a more healthful diet (which invariably costs more, at least in terms of time) stock their pantries with packaged and processed foods with more unpronounceable substances than cleaning supplies but the promise of weight loss. Impoverished populations have no choice but to buy packaged and processed food because that's what is cheapest and fresh options are not available. However, these options look more like Twinkies and Doritos than anti-oxidant Acai berry bars. Finally, food is often so fast and easy to prepare that its authenticity to real food is questionable. But that isn't stopping anyone.

The most striking symptom of our nation's food crisis, however, may be the juxtaposition of obesity and the prevalence of eating disorders. Headlines scream of an obesity epidemic while girls as young as eight years old enter eating disorder treatment centers. There is no question that obesity, especially in children, is an extreme concern. The American Obesity Association calculates that approximately 30.3 percent of children ages 6 to 11 are overweight

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<sup>1</sup> Bill McKibben. *Eaarth*. (New York: Time Books, 2010)

<sup>2</sup> Marion Nestle and Michael F. Jacobson. "Halting the Obesity Epidemic: A Public Health Policy Approach." *Public Health Reports* 115 (2000), 18.

and 15.3 percent are obese, and 30.4 percent of adolescents ages 12 to 19 are overweight and 15.5 percent are obese.<sup>3</sup> And the prevalence of overweight youth is increasing at an alarming rate. Obesity in children has tripled since 1980,<sup>4</sup> and the rate in children ages 2 to 5 has increased by 10% in a matter of ten years.<sup>5</sup> According to the Center for Disease Control, “up to 40% of today’s children will develop Type 2 diabetes during their lives if something doesn’t change,”<sup>6</sup> and they are much more likely to develop other adult conditions, like blood pressure and cholesterol, gallbladder disease, joint problems, and serious mental complications such as anxiety, poor self-esteem, and depression due to implications of obesity. However, at the same time, the prevalence of eating disorders is skyrocketing. In the United States, as many as 10 million females and 1 million males are battling an eating disorder, and anorexia nervosa has become the number one highest cause of death among all mental illnesses. America’s pathological state of eating is at crisis.

Some attribute poor nutrition and disease to food additives or processing, others to the lack of nutrition education, and some blame the advertising industry. Environmental harm associated with food production is increasingly viewed as a product of inherently destructive agricultural methods that emerged with the Green Revolution post World War II. These “supply

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<sup>3</sup> “Childhood Prevalence,” American Obesity Association, March 2005, <http://www.obesity.org/subs/childhood/prevalence.shtml>

<sup>4</sup> CL Ogden, KM Flegal, MD Carroll, CL Johnson. “Prevalence and trends in overweight among US children and adolescents,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 2002. 288:1723-1727.

<sup>5</sup> US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. “Pediatric Nutrition Surveillance: 2003 Summary Report.” [www.cdc.gov/pednss/pdfs/PedNss\\_2003\\_Summary.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/pednss/pdfs/PedNss_2003_Summary.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Kathleen Zelman. “School Nutrition: Making the Grade?” 16 Sep 2006, <http://www.webmd.com/diet/features/school-nutrition-making-grade>

side” changes are obviously crucial to understanding the pathological state of contemporary American eating, but something else is going on, too, that has received less attention. It is not just agriculture that has been industrialized, *but the very act of eating*.

This is a paper about the transformation of the American eater into a consuming machine—a body that requires food-as-fuel, but that has lost much else that is rich and meaningful about food. Authors like Michael Pollan and Eric Schlosser have noted that with the industrialization of agricultural production, the bulk of us know less and less about the food that goes on to our plate. This is a part of the puzzle. There is more, though, working to produce the modern American eater. I have identified and examine here a contribution to these food politics that dates back centuries—that specific Western philosophies prepared a backdrop for the age of industrialization to influence how we form our identities, and how food contributes to it. I look here at how our “qualification of personhood” is based on a philosophy that glorifies the soul and demonizes the body, trivializing the role of food in our lives. The basic argument of my paper is that production of person-as-machine is driven, in part, by this philosophic tradition, and that the further industrialization of the entire chain of food provisioning is serving to reinforce it. Food has lost its meaning as nourishment and taken on the role as fuel for human productivity. We are what we eat, as the saying goes, and so, the industrialization of eating has not only changed what is on our plates, but it has changed, and continues to change, how we see ourselves.

### Challenging America’s Food Paradigm

There has been an explosion of literature, commentary, and popular interest in the topic of food politics and the changing landscape of culinary traditions. Analysis has focused on the scope and depth to which food systems have evolved, and discussion critiques the level of

intricacy to which food systems have grown so that “we don’t know where our food comes from, what’s in it, and how it got to our plates.”<sup>7</sup> Most of the food in grocery stores has a commodity chain that traces around the world. To increasingly more Americans, this is distressing. Consequentially, eaters turn to books, magazines, professionals, scientists, friends, television or the even the government for the most salient advice on just what to eat. What is so basic and so essential to human life, couldn’t be more complicated. Eric Schlosser says in *Fast Food Nation* that, “a nation’s diet can be more revealing than its art or literature.”<sup>8</sup> So what does a national perplexity with food say about the United States?

The manipulation and secrecy of massive agriculture and food production industry is, for many, even more concerning than the mysterious routes our food travels from soil to store. The output of food production only continues to grow, while the number of agricultural companies and material providers whittle down to a mere few. Marion Nestle, author of *Food Politics* and *What to Eat*, finds the nepotism between the food industry and the government most distressing for the general population. When the government dictates federal dietary recommendations but is also funded by those firms that it is intended to regulate, there is a problem. There are reasons besides one’s caloric needs as to why the U.S.’s food pyramid looks the way it does, and it has more to do with politics and money than citizens’ best interest. With dense politics steadying the foundation for such nutritional claims, people believe to have all the information they need to

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Pollan. *The Omnivore’s Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*. (New York: Penguin, 2006), 411.

<sup>8</sup> Eric Schlosser. *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal*. (New York: Perennial, 2002), 3.

make healthful decisions, but, writes Nestle, “we cannot do so if we are oblivious of the ways food companies influence our choices.”<sup>9</sup>

Much attention has been focused on the growing waistlines of Americans. For a country that is so obsessed with eating healthy, it is ironic that it should be one of the *least* healthy developed nations. Schlosser points to the growth of the fast food industry as the culprit to most of the nation’s dietary problems. By following the economic principles of the retail economy: “wiping out small business, growing, dominating, and replicating all over the country,” fast food has grasped a control of the food-consumerism culture that is inescapable.<sup>10</sup> These changes required a level of acceptance on the part of the public to actually take hold, but since it has, “buying fast food...has become a social custom as American as a small, rectangular, hand-held, frozen, and reheated apple pie.”<sup>11</sup> To Schlosser, the free market economy has been more destructive than democratic, and it has served to homogenize American life, and too, what we eat.

Proposed solutions to these problems vary to some degree, but not far off from one another. All of the aforementioned authors critique the methods and motives of industrialization as a root cause of our culinary traditions—or lack thereof. Some see the need for government legislation and heightened regulation. Nestle and Schlosser especially call for a regulation of food marketing, safety, production, and sales. *Fast Food Nation* challenges its readers to vote with their dollar by purchasing unprocessed food.

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<sup>9</sup> Marion, Nestle. *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health*. (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2007), 360.

<sup>10</sup> Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation*, 3

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.



All of these critiques of the modern American food system are part of what I investigate, but I contribute a philosophical approach few others have even mentioned. I look at how people create their personal identities, and how food contributes to it. Authors who have taken similar perspectives tend to unravel food as a means of control for an individual status gender, but not as control of identity. All of the problems mentioned so far significantly contribute to the curiosities of America's current food chaos, but the relationship between one's identity and the food he or she eats is more deeply rooted and could be one of the missing precursors to all of these problems. The fact that we even need to rely on the government to tell us what to eat is troubling when "for countless generations eating was something that took place in the steadying context of a family and culture, where the full consciousness of what was involved did not need to be rehearsed at every meal because it was stored away like the good silver, in a set of rituals and habits, manners and recipes."<sup>12</sup> There is something to this. We have forgotten about a relationship to food that once flowed through our veins. It is not lost, I suggest, but overshadowed by the zealous force of industrialization and its principles. To gain back that place where food is experience, where it is cultural, historical, and artful, Americans must reconsider how they characterize identity and consider themselves more holistically—a person of body and soul and all that contributes to its health.

#### Food: It's Who We Are

We are what we eat. The nutrients from food build our most fundamental existence – our organs, tissues, and cells are reliant on what we feed them. We literally are made of the food we put into our bodies, and eating is one of the most fundamental human activities—it sustains life.

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<sup>12</sup> Pollan, *Omnivore's Dilemma*, 411.

On an anthropological level, food significantly contributes to our identity. Food represents heritage, family values, geographical ancestry, language, culture, and personal character; in other words, "food identifies who we are, where we came from, and what we want to be."<sup>13</sup> Anthropologists have been able to match ancient ruins with specific time periods based on discovered culinary traditions. Historically, what humans ate was based on what the surrounding land could provide, so culinary practices are quite different from one region to another. Food habits, like when we eat or who we eat with, also depended on religious traditions and cultural norms. Food's reflection on who we are is inescapable; "food reveals our souls," says sociologist Gary Alan Fine, "we are entangled in our meals."<sup>14</sup>

It is impossible to ignore the significance that food has in our lives, yet Americans still downplay its role in daily living and personal identity. Although obtaining food is somewhat of a no-brainer for most of Western society, "our lives still revolve largely around eating and the inevitable results that eating has on our bodies."<sup>15</sup> So why do most Americans say that meals are of little importance in their day-to-day lives? Historically, there have reasons why a division from food has been celebrated. From 1978 to 1993, the time Americans spent in the kitchen decreased from three and a half hours to thirty minutes.<sup>16</sup> For many, this is seen as a triumph because the industrialization of food allowed women to leave the kitchen for other work outside of the household. Faster food meant the liberalization of women.

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<sup>13</sup> Warren Belasco. *Food: The Key Concepts*. (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2008), 1.

<sup>14</sup> Gary Allen Fine. *Kitchens: The Culture of Restaurant Work*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 1.

<sup>15</sup> *Why We Eat What We Eat: The Psychology of Eating*. Edited by Elizabeth D. Capaldi. (Washington, DC : American Psychological Association, 2004), 3.

<sup>16</sup> Humphrey, McQueen. *The Essence of Capitalism: The Origins of Our Future*. (Montreal; New York: Black Rose Books, 2003), 237.

Large-scale food production also lessened the strain of labor for farmers and agricultural workers. Around the 1920s, many technological innovations replaced human labor in agriculture productivity. The invention of the tractor and other machinery, chemical fertilizers, and plant and animal breeding promised less back-breaking work. The onset of World War II increased the need for urban employment by millions of jobs, so underemployed farm laborers left for work in factories, causing the farm population to decline by 35 percent in fourteen years. Some 31 million workers left the farms in 1939, and they continued to do so until about 1953.<sup>17</sup> Technological progress allowed the agricultural system to keep up with the loss of man-power and increasing population. Farmers were able to reduce their unit costs and expand their farm output at the same time.

The developments of machinery practically eliminated all hard physical labor from farming. Between 1940 and 1950, farming declined by some 26 percent, “by some 35 percent between 1950 and 1960, and by some 39 percent between 1960 and 1970.”<sup>18</sup> Over this time, machinery’s contribution to farm productivity increased by 212 percent, and the input of chemicals by more than 1800 percent.<sup>19</sup> The increase in size of farms and productivity changed the structure from family farming and local markets, to large industrial farming for highly commercialized markets by 1970. From the 1930s to 1970s, the number of farms in the United States declined by 56 percent.<sup>20</sup> The daily visibility of food production vanished. Once again, like the liberalization of women from the kitchen, the removal of human interaction with food

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<sup>17</sup> William Wesley Cochrane. *The Development of American Agriculture: A Historical Analysis*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 125.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 127.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 132.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*.

production was celebrated. Food was less a part of individuals' lives so that they were able to focus on other things.

To a degree, these occurrences as “liberalizing” events is marks Western progress for freeing women from the kitchen and releasing overworked and underpaid farmers to more desirable industries are important contributions to gender equality and standard of living. But we have also lost some important aspects of food culture since, and eating has become routine rather than a social tradition. Many support that faster meals allow people time for activities they value more or get more out of. Working is rewarded with money and success, eating is not. But after considering the role that food actually plays in building one's physical body and personal identity, I question the celebration of food's declining impact on our daily lives. When did eating become a burden? And why was food demonized in the first place? Why are so many other activities in daily life more important than nourishing our bodies? The fact that the kitchen and the farm were like prisons, chaining their workers to unappreciated labor, is disconcerting. That food production and preparation became a means of subjugation in the first place is what this paper tends to. Answering these questions requires looking back centuries to a Western philosophical tradition that punished the body and its desires for inhibiting the motivations of the soul.

### Soul over Body

While the body is a product of genetics and organic disposition, it is far from being “some fundamentally stable, acultural constant.”<sup>21</sup> The body has always been constituted by

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<sup>21</sup> Susan Bordo. “Anorexia Nervosa: Psychopathology as the Crystallization of Culture.” in *Food and Culture: A Reader*, edited by Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 165.

culture, and how culture manifests through the body is crucially dependent on that culture's philosophical traditions and societal priorities. Some western philosophical traditions demonize the body for its necessities, pleasures, and entrapment. Susan Bordo identifies specifically those philosophies of Plato, Augustine, and Descartes that contribute to this dualistic heritage, but also mentions traces of similar theory in Christianity's ethic of anti-sexuality.<sup>22</sup> All philosophies imply that those spontaneities—such as, hunger, thirst, illness, desire, or pain—are a “hindrance,” in the words of Plato, to reaching wisdom. Plato's dialogue in *Phaedo* testifies that the body's nurture “affords us countless distractions,” leading to the assertion that reaching truth is only achievable “if we consort with the body as little as possible, and do not commune with it, except in so far as we must.”<sup>23</sup> Plato, Descartes, and Augustine accuse the body of confinement from which the soul fights to escape. The soul is “bound fast by body,” with “a sort of rivet” that “pins it there.”<sup>24</sup>

Plato further suggests that the body is not only an impediment to seeking wisdom, but ruinous of personhood. Those who value their body and are afraid of death are “no lover of wisdom after all,” Plato writes, “but what we may call a lover of the body. And this same man turns out, in some sense to be a lover of riches and of prestige.”<sup>25</sup> To care for the body at all constitutes a moral degradation, and so, the body is not only a hindrance or confinement, but it is the soul's enemy. Plato calls the lusts, desires, fears, and fantasies “trash” that inhibit the soul

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 166.

<sup>23</sup> Plato. *Phaedo*, ed. David Gallop. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 65b, 67a.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 83d.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 68b.

from thinking of anything else at all so that Plato concludes, “it’s nothing but the body and its desires that brings wars and factions and fighting.”<sup>26</sup>

The body and the soul are in conflict between insatiable needs on one hand and the pursuit of wisdom on the other, but according to these philosophers, soul’s victory is possible if man refrains from any indulgence of needs and desires. “The slimy desires of the flesh,” says Augustine, infect us.<sup>27</sup> Like a plague, Plato, Augustine, and Descartes prescribe that we cut off the lure of the body’s desires as far as possible, and “not infect ourselves with its nature, but remain pure from it.”<sup>28</sup> The soul is not only capable of suppressing the body’s needs, but able to dominate, to become master of oneself by having the higher soul rule over the body, “which means reason over the desires.”<sup>29</sup> Ultimate mastery of personhood, is to be rational and restrained; to be without whim. And so, if the body is an obstruction to virtue and truth, then surely the appetite—and one’s surrender to it—are nothing more than a failure of self. Giving into hunger and lust are a defeat of character. This is an important concept to hold onto, for it reemerges during the Industrial Revolution and plants societal beliefs that are omnipresent through American culture even today. These notions of control over impulse as qualification of a person’s worth, set the grounds for a tradition of mistreatment and control over the body, in many ways leading to the control of eating.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 65b.

<sup>27</sup> St. Augustine. *The Confessions*, trans, R. S. Pine-Coffin (Middlesex: Penguin, 1961), 164.

<sup>28</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, 67a.

<sup>29</sup> Charles Taylor in *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard Press, 1989), 115.

The disenfranchisement of body and food from ultimate personhood is revealing of food's role in the subjugation of women and the undervaluing of farmers' labor as previously mentioned. Food and eating are *not* despised everywhere in the world. The United States is exceptionally obsessed with the effects eating has on the body and most cautious of its influences. With this preconditioning of the body's obstruction to control and rationality, it is clearer why food has become a demon to self-worth.

### Control: Human Versus Natural

Industrialization marked more than just a period of economic productivity, technological shift, and social change; it was also in some ways an extension of Western ideological progress. This progress was based on the advancement of control over natural processes; control that would put nature and wildness in the hands of humanity to reach rationality and order. With a strong philosophical background that suppressed the body as a means of control, such as Plato's, the ideology based on control of industrialization was not alien to American society. The body and its desires were wild and untamed; they represented what is "natural" in a person. The mechanization of society embraced the body so that it too began reflecting the industrialization principle of control. Management of the body seemed possible, as management of many other natural entities and phenomenon was achieved, and so industrialization's grip on personhood and its contributions (like food) ensued. American society moved closer and closer to the industrialization of self.

The ideological progress of industrialization of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was propelled by the ideas of control, the attainment of needs, power over the natural world and its processes, and

efficiency. Machines replaced man-power and technological processes replaced natural ones. Freedoms of many sorts, in the words of Herbert Marcuse, were “designed to replace an obsolescent material and intellectual culture by a more productive and rational one.”<sup>30</sup> Assembly line systems replaced skilled craftsmanship, machines replaced workers’ motor and mental coordination, and then humans worked beside or below machines in the factory. People were relieved from their laborious jobs, like those on farms, and freed from the restriction of rural living, as urban factories increased demand for workers. Underlying the celebration of these shifts and innovations, society saw the progress as a glimpse to what more was to come. There was a belief that,

The technological processes of mechanization and standardization might release individual energy into a yet uncharted realm of freedom beyond necessity. The very structure of human existence would be altered; the individual would be liberated from the work world's imposing upon him alien needs and alien possibilities. The individual would be free to exert autonomy over a life that would be his own. If the productive apparatus could be organized and directed toward the satisfaction of the vital needs, its control might well be centralized; such control would not prevent individual autonomy, but render it possible.<sup>31</sup>

The control and technological development of processes seemed to promise a better future, one that gave greater agency to the individual.

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<sup>30</sup> Herbert Marcuse. *One Dimensional Man*. (Boston: Beacon, 1964). Online version, <http://www.marcuse.org/herbert/pubs/64onedim/odm1.html>

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.



Industrialization served a dichotomy similar to the soul-body dualist perspective, but it was a human-nature dichotomy, both of which strive for rationality and order based on control. If suppression of needs and desires were control of the body to Plato, “modernity’s appetite for mastery over the wild and unbidden character of the world” characterized control for industrialization.<sup>32</sup> Society has traditionally looked at nature as irrelevant to humanity or even prohibitory to progress. As mechanization increased, view of the natural world even more captured the idea of nature as a reserve of resources, as production capacity, and as distribution routes. And so, the quest for rationality became the control of what’s natural—nature and the body.

The more mechanization caught on, the more controlled was human life. Even time itself was mechanized: timers on household tools like ovens and washing machines directed precise action of individuals. Farmers, who had once risen for work with the sun, were arising with alarm clocks instead. Nearly every aspect of life was measured, monitored, or altered over the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Living was mechanized, and the control and rationality of human life was celebrated. Machines did most of what had once been human work while people supervised, which was an achievement to society, for it freed many from back-breaking labor, it liberated women from the home, and it offered families and individuals many new opportunities for work and lifestyle. These positive outcomes have resumed through to today, and because of the technological shift, economic progress, and the social change, the United States has continued to make developments. The U.S. has made huge bounds towards a more “comfortable” and efficient lifestyle; however, the life of an individual has increasingly come to mirror the existence of machinery, where people go through life pushing buttons, following repetitive tasks,

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<sup>32</sup> Paul Wapner, *Living Through the End of Nature*. (MIT Press, 2010), 41.

responding to timers, and judging self-worth on productivity. It is worth a second look at whether this actually is comfort, but Americans tend to believe it is. Harry G. Johnson, a prominent historian and scholar of economic thought said that, “the laborer is himself a produced means of production, an item of capital equipment.”<sup>33</sup> Mechanization of the individual reached a climax at the point that food and agriculture were industrialized also.

### Industrialization of Farming and Food

As integral as eating is to any human, food was also caught up in the mechanization of social life. In a relatively quick span of time, 10,000 years of agricultural tradition was transformed to one of completely new qualities during what is known as the Green Revolution occurring between the 1940s and 70s. Small, versatile family farms that provided for the local community were overridden by large-scale, monoculture farming. The introduction of technology, like the gasoline-powered tractor, chemical fertilizer and pesticides, and hybrid-seed specialty created a powerful farming industry that only the richest farmers could keep up with. These farmers took over numerous plots of land at once and homogenized the crop selection to only one or two, which, like other developments underlined by the pillars of industrialization, created uniform and standardization. Farmers could then specialize on one crop and its care only.

These changes brought notable benefits. The production of monoculture crops combined with fuel-powered technology reduced man-power and increased crop specialization so that the farmer could invest all of his efforts into the success of one crop instead of many. Also,

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<sup>33</sup> Harry G. Johnson. *Money, Trade, and Economic Growth*. (London: Allen and Unwin, 1962), 177.

chemical fertilizer synthesized the naturally occurring process of nitrogen-fixing in the soil for crops so that land could be used year after year. Before, crops were rotated with legumes to replenish the soil, but with synthetic fertilizer, rotation was obsolete. These developments of agricultural industrialization marked a few of the most impactful changes to agriculture in America because of the resulting increase in yield and revolution of agriculture landscape—both ecological and anthropological. Food production expanded at shockingly unprecedented rates, quelling the moment's fear of resource drain with the exponentially growing population.

So food, along with nearly everything else had been industrialized to fit the mechanized world. The process of growing food became scientific, impersonal, efficient, and based on productivity. Once again, the assertion of human control over nature had become clearer.

It was not long until the very act of eating mechanized as well. It began with the speeding up of preparation processes in the home. Between 1978 and 1993, time spent in the kitchen reduced from 3 ½ hours to thirty minutes. Groats, a staple hot cereal, took four hours to cook over a stove until rolled oats replaced the cereal with a twenty-minute preparation time. Breakfast finger food, like bagels and Pop-Tarts then replaced cereal that required added milk and a bowl until Kellogg's invented the "Breakfast Mate," a single serving of cereal packaged with a spoon and a container of long-life milk.<sup>34</sup> The 1950s saw the introduction of foods frozen, canned, dehydrated, and pre-cooked. Since then, grocery shelves stock microwaveable, super-sized, bite-sized, and on-the-go meals. Food can be consumed, anywhere, anytime. Without the need for kitchen preparation or dishware and utensils, social eating has become a thing of the past. One can relieve hunger in a car, train, on bicycle, or waiting at a crosswalk. It has become merely, that—consuming to relieve a need, to bring order, ease, rationality, or productivity.

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<sup>34</sup> McQueen, *The Essence of Capitalism*, 237.

The industrialization of eating has reduced the social and cultural act to a mechanical one. As human life was grasped more and more by the ideology of industrialization, our bodies and their nourishment became just another part of the process, and humans themselves are resembling machines. It began in the factories—when humans were placed among the machinery, they were reduced to just another part of the industrial process. A worker's self-worth was qualified in the same way as a machine—by efficiency, productivity, and usefulness. Now this kind of judgment of person pervades all levels and nooks of American society, not just factory workers. As proved thus far, the daily processes of mere living have been mechanized, so that he who lives, mimics machine. We judge our self-worth by how much we accomplish in a day, how far we are able to run, or the amount of praise we receive at work. We evaluate our own worth by the same standards that we would a machine.

Likewise, food has been diminished to fuel for this machine; plastic-wrapped and frozen, microwavable and “ready to go.” Whatever our soul may desire of our body is now possible through technology. So, this disconnect of body and soul, along with increasing industrialization, has brought us to define our personhood by our productivity, controlled by the wills of the mind and soul. And the body acts like a machine by which we qualify (or often quantify) our productivity. The food industry has capitalized on this machine mentality by breaking the body into parts and selling them separately with fuel and remedies for each. Cereals benefit a healthy heart, granola bars for a functioning digestive tract, antioxidants keep a glowing complexion, and calcium builds a sturdy frame. Growth hormones make one a better athlete, surgeries perfect physical attributes, dietary supplements make us faster and stronger. Food author Marion Nestle

calls these “techno-foods,” in which “the value of food is reduced to its single functional nutrient.”<sup>35</sup> We might as well drink from the gas pump to re-fuel our bodies.

Our society’s view of the body as a machine, at our disposal for the means of productivity, and our food as fuel to power that productivity, has brought about serious illness—obesity and eating disorders, which affect not only physical health, but also identity. The technology we have developed to improve our own control and comfort now defines *us*. It directs our goals, our actions, and our nourishment. Even eating is no longer acknowledged as an “agricultural act,” as farmer-poet Wendell Berry calls it. In a new-age essence to eating, we rarely see our plate’s connection to the earth and elements; our experience with food is “passive and uncritical.”<sup>36</sup>

The best example of the passive and uncritical eater is the proliferation of McDonald’s at the same time as the promotion of “natural” food products. The irony of these two simultaneous trends speaks of the essence of industrial food. At McDonald’s, standardization is the key so that people can refuel quickly and effortlessly. Culinary commentator Jeremy MacClancy calls McDonald’s not a ‘restaurant’, but a “smoothly functioning assembly line manufacturing a uniform and reliable product.”<sup>37</sup> There is no gastronomic experience but rather efficiency and utility; people go for a rapid re-fuel. At the same time, however, people are also persuaded to care about the health of food—to some extent. Nearly all food products on supermarket shelves today boast of “natural” and “real” ingredients. At first thought, it seems that McDonald’s

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<sup>35</sup> Nestle, *Food Politics*, 296.

<sup>36</sup> Wendell Berry. “The Pleasures of Eating.” *Journal of Gastronomy* 5 no.2 (1989), 126.

<sup>37</sup> MacClancy, Jeremy. *Consuming Culture: Why You Eat What You Eat*. (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1992), 189.

popularity and “natural” food products’ standardization are at odds with each other. But actually, they follow the philosophical outlines of self and the submission to the industrial age quite perfectly. If the body is a machine of productivity, it must be fueled efficiently (McDonald’s) and adequately (natural foods). Separately, McDonald’s and natural products further the efficiency that we liken to define ourselves by. However, their inherent opposition to *real* health is why our health is at such odds with our current food philosophy.

### Our National Eating Disorders

Our society’s view of the body as a machine, at our disposal for the means of productivity, and food as fuel to power that productivity, has brought about serious illness—most especially, obesity and eating disorders. Those who opt for efficiency of processed foods over the nutrition of whole foods (like fruits, vegetables, and whole grains) often fall into the obesity trap. However, for others whose productivity is measured not by efficiency but by their Plato-inspired conquest of body as the ultimate attainment of self, then complete control becomes the goal.

As seen in the McDonald’s example, efficiency is key to productivity, which means quicker and easier meals. An industry has designed exactly what we need to succeed: packaged foods made to eat on the run without any preparation at all. The problem with these foods, though, is that the processing strips them of nutrients and adds nutritionally-barren ingredients like fat and sugar substitutes for shape and taste.

Obesity is one extreme of what happens when a culture adopts the pillars of industrialization as ultimate truth. A 2000 Roper Poll found that 70 percent of American adults

said they were eating “pretty much whatever they wanted.”<sup>38</sup> But it is important to question what exactly *want* is. Who decides that? Who influences that decision? The problem is that want rarely refers to a body’s natural craving for something, but rather a constructed craving imposed by industry, marketing, and convenience. The advertising industry spends billions of dollars per year to make us want certain foods, regardless of any nutritional value.

Eating disorders make the opposite extreme of the soul over body mentality. Control is exercised over appetite. In a culture that makes self-control a moral imperative, “Western women’s strong concern to control their food intake is a metaphor for their efforts to control their own bodies and destinies.”<sup>39</sup> Eating disorders like anorexia nervosa are the climax of self-control. To women (and increasingly more men) with the illness, eating is giving into the body’s desires, and so often the goal is to kill off the appetite altogether, just as Plato suggests in *Phaedo*. In her article “Anorexia Nervosa: Psychopathology,” Bordo recalls a woman with anorexia say, “[I want] to reach the point...when I don’t need to eat at all.”<sup>40</sup> With the basis of industrialization being the attainment of something better, fasting is seen as a way to attain an absolute standard of perfection—mind over body. Any progress at all, celebrated by industrialization, like losing weight or succeeding at a diet, are successes.

And so, abandonment of the physical body and a culture propelled by productivity causes severe illnesses. Is it rational—to accept a definition of self that causes illness? In *Cooking, Eating, Thinking*, Deane Curtin points out that “one can adopt such a position from ignorance,”

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<sup>38</sup> Harvey Blatt. *America’s Food: What You Don’t Know About What You Eat*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 236.

<sup>39</sup> Hilde Bruch. “Anorexia Nervosa and Its Differential Diagnosis” in *Food and Culture*, ed. Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik. (New York: Routledge, 1997), 106.

<sup>40</sup> Bordo, “Anorexia Nervosa: Psychopathology,” 167.

but with full knowledge of its consequences, that decision is “tantamount to saying one wants to be ill.”<sup>41</sup> The current problem is that people actually are *not* aware of these conditions causing poor health, so until they are fully exposed and retaliated against, these illnesses will prevail.

### Food as Self

A revolution of “self” is essential. How can food, so crucial to survival, be trivialized to fuel? Our relationship with food and eating as it stands today has little to do with our definition of self besides its contribution to our productivity. In our quest to consume that which will most benefit our health (to ultimately benefit our productivity), we see no choice. Guidelines and prescriptions tell us what to eat rather than our senses and appetites, and so food’s actual significance and personal relativity is ignored. We forget what food actually looks like in its natural form, and we submit to eating what Berry describes as “inert, anonymous substances that have been processed, dyed, breaded, sauced, gravied, ground, pulped, strained, blended, petrified, and sanitized beyond resemblance to any part of any creature that ever lived.”<sup>42</sup> This is not food for a complete and whole person. As long as we qualify our personhood in the same way that we assess machinery, the food we eat will continue to be seen as only fuel. Food should be nourishment.

How do we do this? It begins with rejecting the soul over body philosophy and considering one’s existence as a cooperation between all levels personhood. Body and soul are one, both contributing to one’s identity. The concepts driving industrialization of seeking control, order, and rationality only hold one back from achieving this. But following this

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<sup>41</sup> Deane W. Curtin. “Food/Body/Person” in *Cooking, Eating, Thinking*, ed. Deane Curtin and Lisa M. Heldke, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 14.

<sup>42</sup> Berry, “*The Pleasures of Eating*,” 127.



ideology, we are caught up in a preoccupation of reaching something “better,” says Jan Chozen Bays, MD author of *Mindful Eating*, so that the concern of past and for the future leaves no room for acceptance of the present moment.<sup>43</sup> Part of this way of thinking is also embracing humanity’s connectedness with the natural world; essentially the opposite of industrialization’s principles. In *The World We Have*, Thich Nhat Hanh describes this interconnectedness as one “of the Earth, all living beings, and ourselves.” He rejoices in that “each bite of vegetable,...soy sauce,...tofu contains the life of the sun and of the Earth. We can see and taste the whole universe in a piece of bread!”<sup>44</sup> Finding meaning and value in the food that contributes to our organic composition and our character connects us to a natural world and gives a sense of wonder.

With this lens as the understanding to food-related illnesses and conditions like obesity and eating disorders, it appears that our society’s tactics at solving them is not addressing the root of the issue. For example, many initiatives push to increase children’s activity to fight weight gain. This is a main component of the newest government effort: “Let’s Move,” an program designed to fight childhood obesity. While physical activity is certainly crucial to a person’s health and happiness, it does not address one’s personal relationship with food. Neither does food industry reform or regulation. In an article on food marketing, Nestle states that the Institute of Medicine (IOM) study found that food marketing “intentionally targets children who are too young to distinguish advertising from truth and induces them to eat high-calorie, low-nutrient ‘junk’ foods.” She has identified over 600 new children’s food products introduced since

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<sup>43</sup> Jan Chozen. *Mindful Eating: A Guide to Rediscovering a Healthy and Joyful Relationship with Food*. (Boston; London: Shambhala), xiii.

<sup>44</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh. *The World We Have: A Buddhist Approach to Peace and Ecology*. (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 2008), 22.

1994, “half of them being candies and chewing gum, and another fourth are other types of sweets or salty snacks.”<sup>45</sup> Marketing to children is undoubtedly influencing their food choices in harmful ways, however, again, marketing is separate from how a child identifies with food. With a stronger understanding of one’s family, religious, or regional culinary history, people can feel a deeper connection to the food they eat, and would most likely opt out of brightly colored, plastic-looking cereal that boasts no significance to oneself besides a sugar rush.

How can America move forward to promote a personal relationship with food? The holistic initiatives in Berkeley, California are on to something. Programs are addressing individuals’ relationship to food on all levels and at all times of the day. Especially for children, this effort looks promising. Schools are implementing gardening into the curriculum and natural food cooking education. Biology classes are occurring in the spaces that children have planted their own vegetables, and they are able to witness first-hand the process of a carrot’s growth and how it gets onto a dinner plate. In Berkeley Unified School District eleven schools used a curriculum called “Harvest of the Month” by growing and cooking seasonal fruits and vegetables—snap peas in March, peaches in June, and heirloom tomatoes in September—all from the schools’ backyards.<sup>46</sup> Students have been more enthusiastic about the program than its implementers even expected, and are actually choosing to eat their fruits and vegetables. At Le Conte Elementary, each month is dedicated to a seasonal fruit or vegetable that the children have watched grow in the school garden, which they harvest, and finally hone their culinary skills by chopping and cooking for all students to taste and enjoy. Programs like this foster an

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<sup>45</sup> Marion, Nestle. “Food Marketing and Childhood Obesity—A Matter of Policy.” *New England Journal of Medicine* 354 no. 24 (2006), 25-28.

<sup>46</sup> Melanie Okamoto. “Nutrition News.” *Network for a Healthy California: Berkeley Unified School District*. Berkeley 6 (2006-2007), 1.

understanding and appreciation for the life of food before it makes its way to the grocery store. Involving oneself in the growing process is a key ingredient to a healthier relationship with food.

Food *should* contribute to who we are. I agree with Curtin that the definition of self is a participatory process; “we come to be as persons by shaping the world according to our dispositions, as it reciprocally shapes us.”<sup>47</sup> Food nourishes our body and mind, it drives everything we do and think that defines our personhood. To see food as nourishment to our character brings forth a relationship with the earth that produces our food, those people with whom we share a meal, and how we prepare our meals. We are brought back to our roots, to a time when Americans only had culinary traditions. We must define ourselves wholly as body and soul, and realize that we are what we eat.

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<sup>47</sup> Curtin, “Food/Body/Person” 20.

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