

Food Inc—Questions of Temperance and Justice



“ Tell me what you eat “, the French gastronmist Anthelme Brillat-Savarin famously quipped, “ and I will tell you what you are”. By that standard, Americans might be said to be as corny as Kansas! Corn represents the central staple of American agribusiness. American cattle fatten on corn (although farmers may have to force feed them compensating antibiotics to do so. Cows’ stomachs were made for grass, not corn). We turn to corn to feed our sheep, poultry and pigs. Corn is now even being fed to fatten farmed fish.

Corn starch, corn oil and corn syrup make up key ingredients in many prepared foods. High fructose corn syrup sweetens everything from juice to frozen yogurt to toothpaste. Corn can be found in our ketchup, mayonnaise, mustard, hotdogs, salad dressings , vitamin pills. Corn, of course, has been heavily subsidized by our government. What we have been eating has been making Americans obese—cf. Greg Chitser’s Fat Land: How Americans Became the Fattest People in the World (Houghton-Mifflin,

2003) It has also led to epidemic levels of type 2 diabetes. As Americans become more diet conscious, they often enough despair that, no matter what they seem to do in the way of exercise and attempts to control their diet, they do not easily slough off their fat.

The brilliant, muckraking, documentary film, Film Inc easily ranks with Michael Moore's Sicko and Al Gore's An Inconvenient Truth in raising questions about healthy life-styles, temperance and justice. Variety snappily claimed for Food Inc. that it is " a civilized horror movie for the socially conscious, the nutritionally curious and the hungry". It also suggested that the documentary takes us to the 3rd circle of food hell ! The basic premise of the film is that the American diet is unhealthy; wasteful of resources (it takes oodles of petroleum to produce, process and ship, all over the world, those surprisingly multiple forms of that corn); ecologically destructive and leads to a dangerous concentration of power (4 meat packing companies control 84 percent of all the beef presently sold in the United States, up from 21 % in 1970).

That Inc in the title is illuminating. Fast food franchises are big business. Mc Donald's has, at one time or another, employed one in eight Americans. Americans yearly spend more money on fast food than on higher education, personal computers or new cars. Industry does not want us to know what we are eating and colludes with governmental regulatory agencies or members of congress to make it fairly hard to find out. Lobbyists for agribusiness, for example, were able to table a proposed bill in California to force labeling of meat which comes from cloned animals. They have fought the attempts to get fast food franchises and restaurants to list the calories in that big mac.

The film cleverly follows the food cycle from farm to our forks. It is hardly surprising that Tyson, Purdue or Smithfield do not want us to see what a C.A.F.O (the

acronym stands for” concentrated animal feeding operations”) looks like. Seeing pictures of chickens, cooped up in dark pens, being fattened faster than ever, in such a way that they, often, can not even stand steadily on their feet or watching herds of cows mauling over one another in their shared fecal matter is not a pretty sight. Who knew about a million dollar flavor industry which virtually creates any flavor it wants in food through artificial additions? If we are what we eat, industrial producers of food seem to be making it excessively hard for us to actually find out what we are eating. I looked carefully at my box of cereal the morning after I saw the film and am trying to find out what I am really eating ever since.

The film focuses on five main dramatis personae. Two are well-known authors. Truth be told, perhaps, if you have already read their books (I had not, but now plan to) the film adds nothing new. Michael Pollan is the author of Omnivore’s Dilemma (Penguin Press, 2007). Eric Schlosser wrote the best-selling book, Fast Food Nation (Harper Perennial, 2005). Joel Saladin, ornery but often charming , runs Polyface Farms in Virginia which bucks the trend to feed cattle on corn and shows what seeing food as a matter of nutrition and health, rather than as an industrial output, might mean. In places, Saladin steals the movie. Gary Hirshberg’s Stonyfield Farms specializes in organic foods. He also now sells to Walmart. Barbara Kowalczyk’s two year old son, Kevin, died from e-coli transmitted from a hamburger bought at a fast food store. She has been fighting for greater transparency about food ingredients, government regulation of food safety (which is not adequately stringent) and a guarantee of healthier food in our markets. She has also been systematically harassed by large corporations for her advocacy.

The issues the film raises are many: (1) concern for small non-agribusiness farmers (an anachronism really). Monsanto, for example, can successfully prosecute any small farmer for infringement on Monsanto's property rights, if Monsanto's genetically modified soy bean seed accidentally sneaks into their field; (2) The role and fate of low-skilled immigrant workers. Meat packing is among the nation's most dangerous jobs. A third of the meatpacking workforce annually suffers injury that requires medical attention beyond first aid. Death rates in the industry are high. Fast food organizations have lobbied to prevent raising the minimum wage, to restrict union activity and minimize health and safety regulation. (3) Child-focused marketing which lures children to lust after non-nutritional fast-foods. To turn kids into faithful and long-time consumers, fast food organizations forge crucial alliances with toy companies, sports' leagues, Hollywood, our nation's school districts; (4) The political clout of big business in avoiding food safety regulations or truth in advertising about what is in what we eat. (5) animal abuse in the gulag-like CAFO's of America.

Food Inc is better at limning the myriad problems which have made US obesity rates the highest of any industrialized nation in the world. It is less good at proposing remedies. Eric Schlosser's Fast Food Nation and Michael Pollan's The Omnivore's Dilemma propose a raft of possible solutions: free-range, grass-fed cattle production; family restaurants, farmer's markets; restaurants supplied by local farms; consumer activism; independent processors; efforts to preserve farm land; support for chains with worker friendly practices (including a minimal wage of \$8 dollars an hour, with health and retirement benefits and sick and vacation leaves); They called for efforts to curb industry malpractice and strengthen labor, consumer and environmental regulations; a

ban on advertising of foods high in fat and sugar targeted at children; strict enforcement of minimum wage, overtime and child-labor laws; the integration of food safety responsibility into one federal agency; tougher laws improving sanitary conditions in the nation's slaughterhouses.

In fact, America's cheap food is not really so cheap, if we factor in its costs to health, to the environment, to farming communities and to the taxpayers (due to high farm subsidies). New Zealand competes as an agricultural power without farm subsidies and Australia is weighing a complete cessation of its farm subsidies. For a Catholic sensibility, the major needed shift would involve not viewing land and livestock as simply commodities but seeing them as values in their own right. Clearly, Food Inc raises moral issues about the virtue of temperance (honoring the body by eating healthy food in a temperate way) and the virtue of justice (organizing society so it protects health, safety, working conditions and the balance of power between consumers, business, government). Whether taking on Food Inc is a realistic or utopian task I am not sure. But I resonated with the words of Roger Ebert in his review of Food Inc : “ This review doesn't read one thing like a movie review. I figured it wasn't important for me to go into detail about the photography and the editing. I just wanted to scare the bejesus out of you which is what Food Inc did to me”.