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**Translated by Hemi Weingarten**

**Even at 80, the “Taliban of Food” Keeps Fighting with Coca Cola**

**Marion Nestle, a nutrition professor, blames food companies and supermarket chains for harming public health. Participating in a conference in Israel, she explains why we should doubt studies claiming scientific breakthroughs.**

“Food Politics” deals with the question of who controls the food system, from production to consumption, and how government regulation balances between the interests of corporations and public health. Since food companies have more money and power than individuals, the balance is in usually in their favor.” This is the essence of the term “food politics” that Nestle created.

Nestle, 80, is a well known figure in the US. Formally, she is a professor of nutrition, food studies, public health and sociology at New York University (NYU), but she became famous for her battles with food companies and grocery retailers. Food companies are fighting back. Over the years they have called her the “Taliban of Food” (in the pre-ISIS days), obsessive, and more. The conference in Israel is organized by the Israeli Forum for Sustainable Nutrition, the Manna Center Program for Food Safety and Security, and NYU.

**Why do we even need to eat healthy? It’s pretty bothersome dealing with it, personally, and publicly.**

“Improper nutrition influences the health of people consuming it, but also on society in its entirety,” answers Nestle in an email interview. “Unhealthy people are unproductive and are a burden on the health system. Obesity is both a social and political issue, not just a personal one. Governments can do much more to improve the nutrition and health of children and adults. Taking care of public health before corporate profits is the easiest and simplest way to create a healthy and sustainable food system.”

**The connection between Coca Cola and Health**

**What do you eat?**

“I eat everything, and live in New York, where most of people’s social lives center on eating out. When I do buy groceries, I try to go to my neighborhood farmers market. In both cases, I operate by my personalized nutrition plan - don’t eat too much, have lots of vegetables, and limit junk food. This leaves me plenty of room to enjoy the food I eat.”

**What’s the most annoying thing you’ve encountered in your battles with the food industry?**

“I think I’ll never accept the contamination of science. Just today, I read about a sugar manufacturer that paid scientists to show how a sugar-rich diet is actually healthy. I will never understand the audacity of both the food companies and the researchers.

When Nestle says “contaminated science”, she means private funds that flow from food companies to scientific institutes and researchers to study topics and reach industry favorable conclusions. She has written several books on this topic. The latest, in English, is “Soda Politics”, was published in 2015. In starring roles are the forceful Coca Cola and PepsiCo, alongside smaller firms, all funding research to help fuel their marketing organization.

**What’s wrong with this? It’s more money for important scientific research?**

“I’ll answer with an example: The Pennington Biomedical Research Center at the University of Louisiana received funding from Coca Cola for research. The conclusion of the study was that the main reason for childhood obesity is lack of exercise, not excessive sugar intake.”

Around the time her latest book was published, the New York Times reported on a group of researchers from the University of Colorado, who founded the "Global Energy Balance Network". The goals of this research group were similar, finding scientific evidence that food does not influence body weight, only the amount of exercise does. The Times exposed that the source of funding was again, Coca Cola. “The reporters and readers were shocked that Coca Cola would be doing something like this, that scientists would take money from the company, and that Universities would allow this type of behavior on its premises.”

Following the public outcry, Coca Cola initiated a “transparency” campaign, in which it revealed the organizations and individuals it funded from 2010 to 2015, to the tune of 120 million dollars. Amongst the funding recipients were the American Pediatric Association, the American Family Medicine Association, and the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. The Pennington Biomedical Research Center was the recipient of the highest amount, 7.5 million dollars.

“Soda Politics” was well received in the US and amongst English readers worldwide. Rotem Mimon, Haaretz Food Editor wrote: “Nestle tears apart the beverage industry in 508 pages, starting with brilliant marketing, through profits at the expense of public health, and painfully concluding with the stark truth of what’s hiding in our carbonated beverages. A must-read book for anyone who ever drank Coke and became addicted.”

The book’s subtitle “Taking on Big Soda (and Winning)”, is indicative of where the soft drink industry is headed, at least in the western world. Nestle explains that the era of kids regularly drinking soda pop is nearing its end. In general child nutrition and marketing to kids are matters that are very important to her. “Why does there have to be food for kids and food for adults?,” she asks and then answers. “Because its good for marketing and generates more sales. The food industry manipulates parents and kids using a variety of tricks, including superheros and brands kids love, colorful packages, and gift toys.” Nestle does not recommend taking kids to the supermarket; she recommends not buying foods designated just for kids.

Back to sweetened soft drinks. In her book, Nestle comments that white, well-to-do families have drastically reduced their soda intake, 25 percent in the last decade alone. She wholeheartedly believes that minorities and poorer folks will soon board this speeding train, similar to what happened with cigarettes.

**How does Globalization influence this trend and food politics in general?**

"Food companies are not social service organizations. Their top priority is to service their shareholders, and when sales in the US plummet, they peddle their products elsewhere. As the CEO of Coca Cola once said -'India is home to 1.2 billion people, and not enough of them drink Coke.’ Soft drink companies are investing billions of dollars in setting up beverage manufacturing facilities in South America, Africa, and South and East Asia, all planned to be operational by 2020.”

The marketing budget for food and beverage companies in the US is about 40 billion dollars and Nestle is facing them with all she’s got - her website [FoodPolitics.com](http://foodpolitics.com) and her twitter account. In the past, she had a weekly column in the San Francisco Chronicle, and appeared in documentaries such as “Supersize Me” and “Food Inc.”. She is the recipient of multiple awards from organizations, research organizations, and universities.

She started out as a molecular biologist. After completing her PhD, she started teaching at Brandeis University where she taught “Molecular Biology of Food”. She immediately fell in love with the field and decided to dedicate her career to it. In 1996 she founded the department for food studies at NYU, thinking that its program will “raise public awareness of food’s role in our culture, society, and private lives”. Following the success of the food program, similar programs popped up in other universities in the US and abroad, with Nestle anointed as the pioneer of the genre.

Nestle’s book “What to Eat” is the only one translated to Hebrew (Kineret Zmora Bittan, 2007). The book is a guide through the aisles of a supermarket. Amongst its findings: fruits and vegetables will always be at the entrance to the supermarket to create a sense of plenty and freshness, and also to address people’s guilt - “hey we bought fresh produce, now we can continue to the less healthy foods”; Dairy is always at the farthest end of the supermarket, because most people come to buy some, and will thus have to walk through many products on the way; the most profitable products are placed on shelves that are at eye level, prime real estate that food companies pay hefty fees to obtain; sugary nutrition poor foods will be found at the endcaps between 2 aisles, and usually in huge packages - again to make profitable products easily accessible; and the large bottles and packages will be at eye-level, and small packages on the bottom shelf.

Nestle recommends buying products from the periphery of the supermarket or from the high or low shelves, to avoid those products that are profitable but too big, highly processed, and unhealthy. She suggests preparing a grocery list in advance, to prefer smaller packages, and not to buy products with more than 5 ingredients. Anything with a longer ingredient list is a food product, not food.

**What is the happiest finding you’ve discovered in your research?**

“The food movement, of course. There is now a huge interest in healthy food for people and planet. So many young and creative people are working towards these goals, that I can’t keep track.  Don’t tell anyone, but overall, I’m quite optimistic”.