

Health and Nutrition

MARION NESTLE

Paulette Goddard Professor of Nutrition, Food Studies, and Public Health, New York University (2014)

Marion Nestle is one of the leading authorities and respected critics of the food system. She has a doctorate in molecular biology from the University of California, Berkeley, and is the author of numerous academic articles and of popular books for lay audiences like *Food Politics*. Her books, teaching, and lecturing have led to an increasing awareness of the shortcomings of our current food system. Thanks to her efforts, the public has responded by being more aware of the relationship between food and health and more willing to take political and economic action to change the system to make it more nutritious and health oriented. Nestle points out that the most important predisposing factor for poor health and nutrition is poverty.

RG: Dr. Marion Nestle is the Paulette Goddard Professor of Nutrition, Food Studies, and Public Health at New York University. How did you end up becoming such an unusual leader in the nutrition field? What was the motivation of your doing what you're doing today?

MN: It happened one step at a time. I got a doctorate in molecular biology, took a teaching job, and was given a nutrition class to teach as part of that job. It was like falling in love. I've never looked back. I've always loved food, and I realized right away that you could use food to teach undergraduate biology or just about any other subject for that matter. Also, the fact that my teaching could start from the science of nutrition but go immediately to its politics was very appealing. I taught nutrition

to undergraduates and then to medical students for years, and then went to Washington as a nutrition policy adviser.

Soon after I moved to NYU, I was invited to a meeting at the National Cancer Institute that was run by former surgeon general C. Everett Koop. The meeting was about two behavioral causes of cancer—cigarette smoking and diet. I knew cigarettes caused cancer but had never heard anti-cigarette physicians talk about cigarette advertising in any systematic way before. They showed slide after slide of cigarette marketing in developing countries, in remote areas of the Himalayas, and in the jungles of Africa. Next, they did the same for cigarette marketing to children. I knew perfectly well that cigarette companies marketed to children. I just had never really noticed it. This felt like a revelation. I thought we nutritionists who care about childhood obesity should be doing the same thing for Coca-Cola.

So I started paying attention to food marketing, its astonishing ubiquity, and its subtle and not-so-subtle methods. I started writing articles about the effects of food marketing on food choices. Those articles turned into *Food Politics*, published in 2002, and now in a third edition. That's really when it all started, although plenty led up to it.

RG: You are considered the expert in looking at the impact of food on the health and well-being of people. You work with the private sector, the public sector, and the not-for-profit consumer activist sector. How do you see people responding to the fact that food plays such an important role in their health and well-being, and in their economic development? How do you see people understanding the importance of it, and actually wanting to do something about it in all three sectors?

MN: Food is very personal. It's something that you put inside your body, so it has deep emotional and cultural significance. I'm interested in political aspects that go beyond the personal. I want to make the personal political for people who think that what they eat is simply a matter of free will and personal choice. The way I see it, we have the choices we have because of the food system we're in. Food makes it possible to talk about political issues in a way that people can hear and respond to. Everybody can understand how the marketing environment influences what people think and do. Everyone relates to food. It's easy to talk about the politics of food; it's much harder to talk about other kinds of politics.

I'm interested in trying to get people interested in changing the food system to make it better, and in working for a healthier food

environment—one that's healthier for people and healthier for the planet. It's easier to do that around food issues than trying to work on climate change or, heaven help us, changing the political system in Washington, DC.

RG: If it's much easier to do that, why do we have such an enormous problem with obesity everywhere in the world?

MN: We have an enormous problem with obesity because of enormous changes in the food system starting around 1980. That's when everything got deregulated. In the early 1980s, we had deregulated farming; farmers were paid to grow as much food as they possibly could. Farmers did a really good job of it, produced more food, increased the number of calories available in the food supply to twice as much as we all needed, and made the food system very competitive. Right after President Reagan was elected, Wall Street changed the way in which it judged corporations. The Shareholder Value Movement forced companies to provide higher immediate returns to investors and to report growth, as well as profits, to Wall Street every ninety days. For food companies, this was really difficult, because they were already selling products in a food environment with far more calories than anyone needed, so it was competition on top of competition. Food companies had to find new ways to sell food. They got a break when deregulation made it possible for all corporations, but food companies in particular, to advertise and market their foods in ways that had not been possible before.

The result: food companies made food ubiquitous and socially acceptable to eat food 24/7, and in very large portions. Large portions are a sufficient explanation for obesity. If I had one thing that I could teach the American public, it would be that larger portions have more calories! This may sound absurd, but the relationship between portion size and calories is not intuitively obvious. Large portions are a sufficient explanation for why people are gaining weight. It's not because of lack of exercise; it's because we're eating more.

RG: It sounds so simple, and yet, the problem is tremendous. Why do companies like Walmart start working with insurance companies to tackle the obesity problem from a marketing point of view, from a supermarket point of view? Do you think they can help, or do you think it's just another marketing ploy?

MN: Obesity poses a tough problem for food companies, because if people want to do something to prevent gaining weight, they have to eat less, eat better, and move more, and avoid eating too much junk food. The

“don’t eat too much junk food” goes under the “eat less” category. But eating less is very bad for business. The job of food companies is to sell more products and grow their returns to investors. That’s their job. Healthier food is more expensive to produce and maintain, and that cuts into profits. Obesity puts food companies in a terrible position, and they know it, so they do as much window dressing as possible to get regulators off their backs. They’re terrified of regulation, so they do a lot of nice things publicly. But behind the scenes, they’re lobbying government not to make any rules, and doing everything that they can to fight public health measures. Even if people in these companies would like to do something about obesity—and many do—their hands are tied. They really can’t take actions that might decrease returns to investors.

RG: It sounds like a terrible problem. At the same time, many of these companies—using Walmart as another example, again—they sit down with the Walmart moms, who care about their children, who care about health, who care about obesity, and they talk to them about health, and they talk to them about obesity. Do you think it’s just talk, or do you think they actually have a way of working with them to help them understand to eat less and to eat better?

MN: Walmart’s job is to sell more food, not less. I live in New York City; we don’t have a Walmart. But I spend time upstate in Ithaca, which has a Walmart. I go to it regularly to see if what Walmart says in public is consistent with what I see in the store. I’m astounded by the discrepancy. Walmart may say it’s trying to promote healthier food, but I don’t see it in the store. Walmart’s job is to sell food as cheaply as possible, pay its employees as cheaply as possible, and force its suppliers to provide products as cheaply as possible. That’s its business model. Walmart has been astoundingly successful doing that, so expecting them to interfere with that model seems quite unrealistic. They’re not going to do it because they can’t.

RG: Do you think that it’s just window dressing when they say they want to do it?

MN: No, I’m sure they want to do it, and I’m sure they’re sincere. I’ve met Walmart officials. They care about promoting health, but they can only make changes that will keep sales increasing. Even though Walmart is privately held and has more flexibility with Wall Street, its hands are tied by its business model. The most effective thing Walmart could do to make America healthier is to pay its employees decent wages so they could buy better food.

RG: You really are tough on the people in the food system, and yet, when we have meetings they seem to be quite sincere about trying to improve the health of their customers, trying to find ways of getting more fruits and vegetables available to them at a more reasonable price.

MN: The Walmart in Ithaca is half a mile from a Wegmans. Wegmans is also family owned, but does all this much better, and at prices remarkably similar to those at Walmart. So I'm not impressed with what Walmart looks like on the ground. What does impress me is that a lot of Walmart's employees—I don't know the exact percentage—get food stamps. Taxpayers are subsidizing Walmart, by closing the gap between what Walmart pays its employees and what people need to live. If we want to improve the health of Walmart's employees and other low-wage workers, we have to pay them better.

RG: Forty-eight million people are on food stamps.

MN: They are indeed, and a substantial number of them work at Walmart apparently.

RG: If they were here, they would say they're trying to have low prices and be more efficient, because people are having a difficult time buying food, and what they're trying to do is actually helping them, so—

MN: Yes, but at Walmart, there's aisle after aisle of junk food at very low prices. A few little areas have fruits and vegetables, but the produce section is not well maintained, at least from what I've seen.

RG: Let's look at other parts of the system. The chairman of Nestlé, Peter Brabeck, wants to create shared value by making sure that both small-scale producers and end consumers are better off. They have health and nutrition experiments going on. The chairman was in the hospital, and the food was so miserable, he decided the whole system is at fault. Do you think they are doing anything about nutrition or not?

MN: They're changing their products in various ways, but they are still food products. If you want people to eat healthfully, you want them eating fruits and vegetables, and to increase the plant foods in their diets. That's not what Nestlé does. Nestlé makes ice cream and products you buy in packages. That's fine; they have a place in diets, just not the main place. Nestlé has the same constraints as every other food company. Profits are the number one criterion. Unless they can find a way to make healthy foods profitable, they're not going to do it. They are working hard on personalized nutrition and fortified products.

RG: At the same time, a Nestlé will go into the developing world and put a milk plant where not enough milk production is actually occurring,

and wait for as much as ten years before they break even, because they want to find a way for the small-scale producer to have market access in a place for their milk. They think they're helping economic development in that process. Do you think, again, that's not really what they're trying to do, or what?

MN: They're trying to increase milk sales. I don't know whether milk is the best example. Let's talk about sodas, which I know much more about. Soda companies, like Coca-Cola and Pepsi, are going into developing areas very aggressively and setting up small businesses with carts for selling Pepsi or Coke. These people are making money off it, and it's helping raise their income level, but they're selling something the population shouldn't be drinking, or at least not drinking much [of]. So there are contradictions built into this enterprise that are complicated and not easy to sort out. That's an easier example than what Nestlé is doing.

RG: Is there any hope that in the food system itself, there are people who can actually make a difference and change?

MN: I think so, but not when the profit motive is involved. If it's a nonprofit enterprise, it has to be sustainable or it won't last. So the question is, how can you build the kinds of institutions that are sustainable in the long run?

RG: That's a good question; how can you?

MN: Well, it's not something that I'm particularly involved in, so I'm not the person who's going to do this. It's not my job to develop business models. That's your job. My job is to analyze what's going on and advocate for curbing the unbridled marketing of foods that aren't healthy for people.

RG: The people we've been discussing have looked to you for constructive criticism, but at the end of the day, you think they are unable to do what you want them to do because the system forces them to act in a way that adds to the problem rather than addresses the problem.

MN: I've been impressed that the people I've met who wanted to work from within companies to change them didn't last long. Unless their ideas were profitable, they couldn't continue, and either left in despair or found something else to do. It's asking a lot to expect companies to do this on their own. I believe in regulation. If there were regulations that restricted certain kinds of marketing activities, that would create a level playing field for food companies. It would be much easier for the companies that want to do good to actually do good if the playing field were level. Nobody wants to go first, because it puts profits at risk.

RG: Who should be the regulators and who should initiate the regulations?

MN: You could start with grassroots petitions, but we have a government that's not interested in regulation right now and wants to do away with as many as it can. This is a difficult period in American history when corporations have the rights of citizens and regulations are viewed as constraints on corporate growth. If we had a government interested in public health, there's plenty it could do. But the agencies know if they try to do the right thing, they'll be overruled by Congress. Unless we have a Congress that's more interested in public health than corporate health, nothing will change. Campaign contributions have corrupted American government. That's what has to change.

RG: You really have discouraged me in trying to find a glimmer of hope for the future.

MN: There's plenty of hope with the young people. They think the food system is hopeless and totally corrupt, and they want to change it. They know they can't change it at the national level, so they're doing everything they can at the local level. I see this in community after community, state after state. There's plenty of reason for hope.

RG: Well, that's very encouraging. Can you give me a few examples?

MN: The future is in the alternative food system. What's really exciting is what's happening in schools where we actually have some regulations that make it possible to serve healthier foods to kids. A large and increasing percentage of schools are feeding kids in a much better way. Local initiatives around farmers' markets and locally grown food are very exciting and the growth in their numbers is quantifiable. You can count the number of farmers' markets that we have now versus twenty years ago and see a huge increase. You can count the increase in community-supported agriculture programs, in the locally grown food movement, chicken-raising initiatives; people are growing a bit more of their own food. It doesn't have to be 100 percent. Just the idea that people are so interested in taking control of their own food is terrific. The movement is cutting into the market share of industrial food. It's putting enormous pressure on CAFOs [concentrated animal feeding operations] and other kinds of animal-raising operations to improve their quality, the ways they treat animals, and their environmental impact. Individuals can make a difference working in these areas. The list of movement accomplishments is really quite long. If you go into any supermarket and compare it to photographs of supermarkets twenty years ago, you can see the difference in the quality of food that

is available now. The year-round availability of fruits and vegetables is a measureable change. There are vast improvements taking place, not in the conventional area of the food market, but in the alternative food market. This may only account for a tiny fraction of food sales, but the fraction is increasing.

RG: What about organics—do you think they are playing a role or not?

MN: Organics have gotten a big boost because genetically modified foods are not labeled—which I think was a political mistake from the get-go. The GMO industry is going to be paying for that mistake for a very long time. GMO companies should label GMOs and just get it over with. Labeling would solve a lot of problems. Today, if you don't want to buy genetically modified food, you have no way of knowing what is and is not GMO because it's not labeled. But if you buy organic, you know it's not GMO. That has been an enormous impetus to organic sales—the fastest-growing segment of the food system. Again, organics are only a tiny fraction of total food sales in the United States, but organics are growing. If you buy organics, you are not buying conventional foods. People can only eat so much. Buying organics is voting with your fork.

RG: If these movements are gaining strength, are the obesity problems getting less?

MN: Yes. Obesity rates have flattened out among the educated and wealthy, even among some children. Young boys seem to be a problem, and obesity is increasingly a problem of poverty. Social inequity is where we should be placing attention. Obesity is becoming a class issue and needs to be addressed as a class issue. That's why paying Walmart employees decently is so important, and why there's a national movement to get low-wage workers in farms and restaurants paid \$15 an hour. Wage equity is a good place to begin.

RG: How does this relate to immigration?

MN: The wonderful thing about food is that it relates to everything. There are jobs for immigrants, but if we want people to be healthier, they have to be paid enough to buy decent food. There's all this talk about income inequality these days and its enormous effect on middle-class buying habits. If we want a flourishing, vigorous economy, people must have enough money to spend. It makes sense to me.

RG: It makes sense, I think, to many people. When you meet with different people in the food system, I think they'd all agree with what you're saying.

MN: I'm not so sure.

RG: Don't you think that they want the same results that you want?

MN: I think the individuals do, but I'm not sure about the institutions.

The public face of major food corporations is, We don't want to add to the problem; we want to be part of the solution. Yet behind the scenes, the corporations are doing everything they can to defeat public health and consumer initiatives—everything they can. Look what food corporations did to defeat the GMO labeling initiative in Washington State. They put millions to fight something that I see as in their best interest. If they want the public to trust them, they have to be transparent. If food companies really cared about consumer issues, they wouldn't be fighting them the way that they're fighting them, secretly, behind the scenes, lobbying in Congress, and opposing soda taxes. I read reports about food company lobbyists, and there they are, this great big long list of issues. Every single issue I care about is on the list of what they are lobbying about, but I know they're not arguing in Congress from the same position I would be if I had the same access to Congress they do.

RG: Do you think they'll change?

MN: I hope so. If enough young people move into positions of reasonable power, the food companies will have to change. I see this in food studies. At NYU, we started food studies programs—undergraduate, master's, and doctoral—in 1996, which now seems like a century ago. When we started, we were it. There wasn't another food studies program in the country. Everyone thought we were crazy: Who would want to study about food? Now, there are five or six food studies programs in New York City alone. Every university in the country is teaching about food, because everybody has figured out that people really care about it.

RG: I know that everybody cares about it. As you talk to young men and women in food programs around the country and see a change in their interest, don't you see a change in the corporate philosophy of the companies themselves?

MN: I'm not privy to inside information about corporate philosophy. I only see the public face, and the public face is profit driven. It has to be.

RG: Historically, the food industry was considered consumer oriented. They were the face to the consumer, and consumers trusted the food system as that face. Do you think the consumer has lost faith in that system today?

MN: I can only speak for some consumers. The students I deal with, and the groups that I speak to, now see corporate food as quite similar

to corporate cigarettes or corporate drugs—companies that put profits above public health and behave as those other industries have behaved. They are not mistaken. Food companies do behave the way cigarette and drug companies behave. They’re using exactly the same techniques—the tobacco industry “playbook”—to win friends and influence people, discourage critics, and undermine public health initiatives. There’s plenty of evidence for that. The system requires it.

RG: Why do these companies try experiments with health companies like Zoe Finch Totten’s The Full Yield to reduce employee insurance premiums? Do you think they’re just bumping their heads, or do you think they’re making a difference?

MN: I see it the same way, because the insurance companies are largely for-profit companies. I ask myself, what industry would benefit if Americans were healthier and ate better? I am hard pressed to think of any. The one shining exception? Not-for-profit HMOs. I met with education executives at Kaiser Permanente in California and their analysis is right to the point. They spend 90 percent of their health care costs on 10 percent of their patients. If they could reduce that 10 percent by a percentage point or two, they would have vastly more money to spend on prevention, to spend on hospitals, to spend on doctors, to spend on nurses, to spend on other components of their system. But that’s rare. The insurance industry is in it for profit. I belong to a for-profit medical care system, because I don’t have any choice. It makes me uncomfortable. I worry that every decision in every health care interaction is profit driven. You would think that the system would change, and maybe it will if we ever get a single-payer health care system that everyone has to belong to. Then it might be obvious that we must focus on prevention to keep costs at a reasonable level. The system will change, but I don’t see it changing now.

RG: I must admit, Marion, this is one of the more discouraging interviews I’ve ever had in my life.

MN: I’m sorry you’re discouraged, Ray. I’m just trying to describe what I see.

RG: I know that, and frankly, I was always very anxious to interview you, because you’ve been a gadfly to the whole industry forever, and a good gadfly, I think, a proactive one, not a reactive one. If we were having this conversation ten or fifteen years from now, how will the landscape look on these issues?

MN: I have no crystal ball. I'm deeply worried about government in America right now, and the fact that the gap between rich and poor has gotten so much worse, and people on the lower end of the spectrum feel like they have no power in society. These are great threats to our democracy. People aren't voting because they feel helpless, and the political system is set up to keep as few people voting as possible. These trends are deeply undemocratic and do not bode well for the future. People concerned about America's future should be deeply concerned about the increasing threats to our democratic institutions. I've lived long enough to see how things have changed. I was lucky enough to live at a time when poor people really could get ahead. I was one of them. My single mom could not afford to send me to college, but I could go to Berkeley and get an education without ending up with hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt. I regret the disappearance of that society very much. That's what we all should be working on—ways to bring education and health to young people and not saddle them with debts it will take their whole lives to pay off. I'm trying to do it through food. I hope my students at NYU will pick up the challenge and run with it, because the future lies with them, not me.

RG: At the same time, when we started this conversation, you were quite optimistic that the younger generation gets it.

MN: I think they do.

RG: Don't you feel they're capable of making the system change?

MN: I hope so. They don't feel powerful, and how they're going to get power is a big question. The big issue in the food movement is to unite all of these diverse little organizations into one that has real political power. There are some signs that organizations can get together. I chaired a mayoral forum in New York City put together by eighty-five organizations. Twelve organizations set it up—the first time I've seen groups that usually work on different issues get together in a common cause. I wish I were more confident that they can keep that momentum going.

RG: When I ask people about consumer leadership and education, and consumer leadership and action, they all said, we've got to have Marion Nestle.

MN: That's very flattering.

RG: But also very true, and they were from all walks of life, from poor and rich, from in the food system and out of the food system, in the

government and in the nonprofits. You have an enormous respect by a lot of people. Some of the people you probably don't respect, but they respect you. Do you think that an organization like PAPSAC makes any difference, or is it just a discussion group?

MN: I can't answer that question, Ray. I've never understood what your goals were. As I recall, you wanted PAPSAC to explain to food advocates why the food industry was not their enemy. That was my impression, at least. I'm not sure it's succeeded in doing that. I don't think of the food industry as my enemy, but the reality is that the goals of public health and the goals of food companies aren't the same, and they can't be as long as profit drives food company actions. Does that mean individuals won't change their minds? I cannot say. I can say it's been enormously interesting over the years to hear different points of view expressed, particularly by people who I would otherwise never get to meet. I don't spend much time with people who work for food companies, so this is a rare privilege. It's been interesting to hear the views of people at the cutting edge of issues, and useful to hear what they have to say. That's why I've enjoyed coming.

RG: Well, I've always enjoyed having you, because you've always been so forthright. Maybe, as a naïve North Dakotan, I feel somewhat more positive than you do. I worry about the same issues you worry about. I worry about the inequalities. I worry about the issues that you've raised so eloquently, but somehow, I have more faith that people in these companies realize that their long-run profitability in a poorly served society is at more risk than their quarter-by-quarter operations. A goodly number of them are looking many more years ahead, and think quite differently about the future than the generation before them. As an older person, I guess I'm more optimistic than you. You have forced people to think very differently, and have influenced people more greatly than you think.

MN: That may well be, but I'm not able to assess my impact. That's for others to do.

RG: You are rightfully impatient and upset by the slow progress that's been made. I hope you keep battling away. In closing, are there elements of hope to make the system more responsive to the real needs of society, especially those who are being more left out?

MN: The big area of hope is at the local level—getting involved in grassroots political activities. Many people get involved in food issues because they like the way food tastes. They are in it for the pleasure without realizing how political food is. If you want to change the food system,

you have to get involved in the politics. I tell people to start local. Make sure your local school is serving delicious, healthy foods to your kids. Make sure that you've got farmers' markets, locally grown food, resources and people going into farming, and city councils concerned about foodshed issues. You can do that at the local level. If enough people do these things on the local level, then the issues get to the state level. And if enough states do things, the federal government has to act. I tell students: run for office.

RG: That's a wonderful way to end. Thank you so much.

SUSAN COMBS

Past Commissioner of Agriculture, State of Texas (2004)

Susan Combs, an elected commissioner of agriculture of Texas, has been a leader in collaborative efforts to provide healthier food in Texas public schools. As commissioner of agriculture in Texas, she recognized the seriousness of the obesity problem in the state, with 60 percent of the children's intake of food taking place through the school lunch program. She changed the program by getting the support of the parents and the commissioner of health, insurance, and education to get rid of all foods of minimal nutritional value. They were successful in spite of the lack of support from industry. She comes from a ranching family and has been running a cow-calf operation for nearly a quarter century. She has worked on Wall Street, has served as a state legislator, and has been a prosecutor where she handled child abuse and neglect cases.¹

RG: You are commissioner of agriculture of Texas at a time in our country when we have so many real issues about obesity, about natural resources, about hunger, about competitiveness, about trade, about BSE, about foot and mouth disease. All of these end up at your door. How did you develop the background to be able to address these issues today?

sc: My family's been in agriculture in Texas for a very long time. We've been ranching out in the Big Ben since 1882, and I've been running my own cow-calf operation for about twenty-four years. I went east to college, then worked in New York for about six years in international advertising, Wall Street, and for the federal government. Came back, went to law school and was a prosecutor, and that was sort of a necessary predicate to part of what I'm doing now. I handled child abuse and neglect cases. Then in the early '90s I ran for office and was elected to