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Food politics

Voting with your trolley

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Can you really change the world just by buying certain foods?



HAS the supermarket trolley dethroned the ballot box? Voter turnout in most developed countries has fallen in recent decades, but sales of organic, Fairtrade and local food—each with its own political agenda—are growing fast. Such food allows shoppers to express their political opinions, from concern for the environment to support for poor farmers, every time they buy groceries. And shoppers are jumping at the opportunity, says Marion Nestle, a nutritionist at New York University and the author of “Food Politics” (2002) and “What to Eat” (2006). “What I hear as I talk to people is this phenomenal sense of despair about their inability to do anything about climate change, or the disparity between rich and poor,” she says. “But when they go into a grocery store they can do something—they can make decisions about what they are buying and send a very clear message.”

Those in the food-activism movement agree. “It definitely has a positive effect,” says Ian Bretman of Fairtrade Labelling Organisations (FLO) International, the Fairtrade umbrella group. Before the advent of ethical and organic labels, he notes, the usual way to express political views using food was to impose boycotts. But such labels make a political act out of consumption, rather than non-consumption—which is far more likely to produce results, he suggests. “That’s how you build effective, constructive engagement with companies. If you try to do a boycott or slag them off as unfair or evil, you won’t be able to get them round the table.”

Consumers have more power than they realise, says Chris Wille of the Rainforest Alliance, a conservation group. “They are at one end of the supply chain, farmers are at the other, and consumers really do have the power to send a message back all the way through that complicated supply chain,” he explains. “If the message is frequent, loud and consistent enough, then they can actually change practices, and we see that happening on the ground.”

The \$30 billion organic-food industry “was created by consumers voting with their dollars,” says Michael

Pollan, the author of "The Omnivore's Dilemma" (2006), another of this year's crop of books on food politics. Normally, he says, a sharp distinction is made between people's actions as citizens, in which they are expected to consider the well-being of society, and their actions as consumers, which are assumed to be selfish. Food choices appear to reconcile the two.

How green is your organic lettuce?

Yet even an apparently obvious claim—that organic food is better for the environment than the conventionally farmed kind—turns out to be controversial. There are many different definitions of the term "organic", but it generally involves severe restrictions on the use of synthetic pesticides and fertilisers and a ban on genetically modified organisms. Peter Melchett of the Soil Association, Britain's leading organic lobby group, says that environmental concerns, rather than health benefits, are now cited by British consumers as their main justification for buying organic food. (There is no clear evidence that conventional food is harmful or that organic food is nutritionally superior.)

But not everyone agrees that organic farming is better for the environment. Perhaps the most eminent critic of organic farming is Norman Borlaug, the father of the "green revolution", winner of the Nobel peace prize and an outspoken advocate of the use of synthetic fertilisers to increase crop yields. He claims the idea that organic farming is better for the environment is "ridiculous" because organic farming produces lower yields and therefore requires more land under cultivation to produce the same amount of food. Thanks to synthetic fertilisers, Mr Borlaug points out, global cereal production tripled between 1950 and 2000, but the amount of land used increased by only 10%. Using traditional techniques such as crop rotation, compost and manure to supply the soil with nitrogen and other minerals would have required a tripling of the area under cultivation. The more intensively you farm, Mr Borlaug contends, the more room you have left for rainforest.

What of the claim that organic farming is more energy-efficient? Lord Melchett points out for example that the artificial fertiliser used in conventional farming is made using natural gas, which is "completely unsustainable". But Anthony Trewavas, a biochemist at the University of Edinburgh, counters that organic farming actually requires more energy per tonne of food produced, because yields are lower and weeds are kept at bay by ploughing. And Mr Pollan notes that only one-fifth of the energy associated with food production across the whole food chain is consumed on the farm: the rest goes on transport and processing.

The most environmentally benign form of agriculture appears to be "no till" farming, which involves little or no ploughing and relies on cover crops and carefully applied herbicides to control weeds. This makes it hard to combine with organic methods (though some researchers are trying). Too rigid an insistence on organic farming's somewhat arbitrary rules, then—copper, a heavy metal, can be used as an organic fungicide because it is traditional—can actually hinder the adoption of greener agricultural techniques. Alas, shoppers look in vain for "no till" labels on their food—at least so far.

Fair enough

What about Fairtrade? Its aim is to address "the injustice of low prices" by guaranteeing that producers receive a fair price "however unfair the conventional market is", according to FLO International's website. In essence, it means paying producers an above-market "Fairtrade" price for their produce, provided they meet particular labour and production standards. In the case of coffee, for example, Fairtrade farmers receive a minimum of \$1.26 per pound for their coffee, or \$0.05 above the market price if it exceeds that floor. This premium is passed back to the producers to spend on development programmes. The market for Fairtrade products is much smaller than that for organic products, but is growing much faster: it increased by 37% to reach €1.1 billion (\$1.4 billion) in 2005. Who could object to that?

Economists, for a start. The standard economic argument against Fairtrade goes like this: the low price of commodities such as coffee is due to overproduction, and ought to be a signal to producers to switch to growing other crops. Paying a guaranteed Fairtrade

The Guardian

premium—in effect, a subsidy—both prevents this signal from getting through and, by raising the average price paid for coffee, encourages more producers to enter the market. This then drives down the price of non-Fairtrade coffee even further, making non-Fairtrade farmers poorer. Fairtrade does not address the basic problem, argues Tim Harford, author of “The Undercover Economist” (2005), which is that too much coffee is being produced in the first place. Instead, it could even encourage more production.

Mr Bretman of FLO International disagrees. In practice, he says, farmers cannot afford to diversify out of coffee when the price falls. Fairtrade producers can use the premiums they receive to make the necessary investments to diversify into other crops. But surely the price guarantee actually reduces the incentive to diversify?

Another objection to Fairtrade is that certification is predicated on political assumptions about the best way to organise labour. In particular, for some commodities (including coffee) certification is available only to co-operatives of small producers, who are deemed to be most likely to give workers a fair deal when deciding how to spend the Fairtrade premium. Coffee plantations or large family firms cannot be certified. Mr Bretman says the rules vary from commodity to commodity, but are intended to ensure that the Fairtrade system helps those most in need. Yet limiting certification to co-ops means “missing out on helping the vast majority of farm workers, who work on plantations,” says Mr Wille of the Rainforest Alliance, which certifies producers of all kinds.

Guaranteeing a minimum price also means there is no incentive to improve quality, grumble coffee-drinkers, who find that the quality of Fairtrade brews varies widely. Again, the Rainforest Alliance does things differently. It does not guarantee a minimum price or offer a premium but provides training, advice and better access to credit. That consumers are often willing to pay more for a product with the RA logo on it is an added bonus, not the result of a formal subsidy scheme; such products must still fend for themselves in the marketplace. “We want farmers to have control of their own destinies, to learn to market their products in these competitive globalised markets, so they are not dependent on some NGO,” says Mr Wille.

But perhaps the most cogent objection to Fairtrade is that it is an inefficient way to get money to poor producers. Retailers add their own enormous mark-ups to Fairtrade products and mislead consumers into thinking that all of the premium they are paying is passed on. Mr Harford calculates that only 10% of the premium paid for Fairtrade coffee in a coffee bar trickles down to the producer. Fairtrade coffee, like the organic produce sold in supermarkets, is used by retailers as a means of identifying price-insensitive consumers who will pay more, he says.

As with organic food, the Fairtrade movement is under attack both from outsiders who think it is misguided and from insiders who think it has sold its soul. In particular, the launch by Nestlé, a food giant, of Partners' Blend, a Fairtrade coffee, has convinced activists that the Fairtrade movement is caving in to big business. Nestlé sells over 8,000 non-Fairtrade products and is accused of exploiting the Fairtrade brand to gain favourable publicity while continuing to do business as usual. Mr Bretman disagrees. “We felt it would not be responsible to turn down an opportunity to do something that would practically help hundreds or thousands of farmers,” he says. “You are winning the battle if you get corporate acceptance that these ideas are important.” He concedes that the Fairtrade movement's supporters are “a very broad church” which includes anti-globalisation and anti-corporate types. But they can simply avoid Nestlé's Fairtrade coffee and buy from smaller Fairtrade producers instead, he suggests.

Besides, this is how change usually comes about, notes Mr Pollan. The mainstream co-opts the fringe and shifts its position in the process; “but then you need people to stake out the fringe again.” That is what has happened with organic food in America, and is starting to happen with Fairtrade food too. “People are looking for the next frontier,” says Mr Pollan, and it already seems clear what that is: local food.



It makes me feel so good

“Local is the new organic” has become the unofficial slogan of the local-food movement in the past couple of years. The rise of “Big Organic”, the large-scale production of organic food to meet growing demand, has produced a backlash and claims that the organic movement has sold its soul. Purists worry that the organic movement's original ideals have been forgotten as large companies that produce and sell organic food on an industrial scale have muscled in.

This partly explains why food bought from local producers either directly or at farmers' markets is growing in popularity, and why local-food advocates are now the keepers of the flame of the food-activism movement. Local food need not be organic, but buying direct from small farmers short-circuits industrial production and distribution systems in the same way that buying organic used to. As a result, local food appears to be immune to being industrialised or corporatised. Organic food used to offer people a way to make a “corporate protest”, says Mr Pollan, and now “local offers an alternative to that.”

Think globally, act locally?

Buying direct means producers get a fair price, with no middlemen adding big margins along the distribution chain. Nor has local food been shipped in from the other side of the country or the other side of the world, so the smaller number of “food miles” makes local food greener, too. Local food thus appeals in different ways to environmentalists, national farm lobbies and anti-corporate activists, as well as consumers who want to know more about where their food comes from.

Obviously it makes sense to choose a product that has been grown locally over an identical product shipped in from afar. But such direct comparisons are rare. And it turns out that the apparently straightforward approach of minimising the “food miles” associated with your weekly groceries does not, in fact, always result in the smallest possible environmental impact.

The term “food mile” is itself misleading, as a report published by DEFRA, Britain's environment and farming ministry, pointed out last year. A mile travelled by a large truck full of groceries is not the same as a mile travelled by a sport-utility vehicle carrying a bag of salad. Instead, says Paul Watkiss, one of the authors of the DEFRA report, it is more helpful to think about food-vehicle miles (ie, the number of miles travelled by vehicles carrying food) and food-tonne miles (which take the tonnage being carried into account).

The DEFRA report, which analysed the supply of food in Britain, contained several counterintuitive findings. It turns out to be better for the environment to truck in tomatoes from Spain during the winter, for example, than to grow them in heated greenhouses in Britain. And it transpires that half the food-vehicle miles associated with British food are travelled by cars driving to and from the shops. Each trip is short, but there are millions of them every day. Another surprising finding was that a shift towards a local food system, and away from a supermarket-based food system, with its central distribution depots, lean supply chains and big, full trucks, might actually increase the number of food-vehicle miles being travelled locally, because things would move around in a larger number of smaller, less efficiently packed vehicles.

Research carried out at Lincoln University in New Zealand found that producing dairy products, lamb, apples and onions in that country and shipping them to Britain used less energy overall than producing them in Britain. (Farming and processing in New Zealand is much less energy intensive.) And even if flying food in from the developing world produces more emissions, that needs to be weighed against the boost to trade and development.

There is a strand of protectionism and anti-globalisation in much local-food advocacy, says Gareth Edwards-Jones of the University of Wales. Local food lets farming lobbies campaign against imports under the guise of environmentalism. A common argument is that local food is fresher, but that is not always true: green beans, for example, are picked and flown to Britain from Kenya overnight, he says. People clearly want to think that they are making environmentally or socially optimal food choices, he says, but “we don't have enough evidence” to do so.

What should a shopper do? All food choices involve trade-offs. Even if organic farming does consume a

little less energy and produce a little less pollution, that must be offset against lower yields and greater land use. Fairtrade food may help some poor farmers, but may also harm others; and even if local food reduces transport emissions, it also reduces potential for economic development. Buying all three types of food can be seen as an anti-corporate protest, yet big companies already sell organic and Fairtrade food, and local sourcing coupled with supermarkets' efficient logistics may yet prove to be the greenest way to move food around.

Food is central to the debates on the environment, development, trade and globalisation—but the potential for food choices to change the world should not be overestimated. The idea of saving the world by shopping is appealing; but tackling climate change, boosting development and reforming the global trade system will require difficult political choices. “We have to vote with our votes as well as our food dollars,” says Mr Pollan. Conventional political activity may not be as enjoyable as shopping, but it is far more likely to make a difference.

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