The Food System Is Not Broken

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Some people will tell you that the food system is broken. Not so say my guests in this episode, Gabriel Rosenberg at Duke University and Jan Dutkiewicz at the Pratt Institute. We talked about their new book, *Feed the People! Why Industrial Food is Good and How To Make it Even Better*.

One of the guiding principles of the book is an idea they call democratic hedonism, which is where we began.

Gabriel: So democratic hedonism is the idea that everyday pleasures have moral worth and moral value, and that we should invest ourselves politically in making them more abundant and accessible for people on a daily basis.

Jeremy: And you contrast that with some of the hedonism associated with foodie culture. What's the difference?

Gabriel: Well, one is about being concerned with not just your own pleasures, but also the pleasures that your neighbours, your friends and your community are able to enjoy. And the other one is a narcissistic or selfish kind of spiral. So we think that hedonism alone isn't really worth defending. It only becomes defensible when it meets democracy, which is an ethos of broadly sharing power and goods in society.

Jeremy: I guess you've got two poles of a spectrum here. One is the kind of eat to live. You know, it's just fuel. So long as you get enough of the right stuff, who cares what it tastes like? And the other pole of the spectrum, if you like, is the live to eat where, you know, a perfect peach is a thing to die for. Most people seem to seem to want, if not just eat to live, they seem to want some kind of pleasure. But supplying that pleasure seems to underlie a lot of the problems of of agriculture and the food system. Do you agree with that?

Jan: Yeah. Look, I think the modern food system, understood ... So the industrial food system, understood as a food system that produces food at scale, makes it affordable, produces it to set standards, and does it within regulatory frameworks is arguably the system that has provided the most varied, potentially most nutritious diet in human history to most consumers, at the very least in the global North. And of course, the book is about the United States. So when it comes to actual food pleasures, the range of food pleasures readily available to most people, be that a peach in season, or out of season, or the ingredients for a green smoothie, or our running example, which is the Waffle House waffle, are all readily available. And we contrast that with a sort of foodie vision that sees some foods as inherently flawed and inherently unpleasurable.

This idea that someone who enjoys a Waffle House waffle or a fast food burger is just, in Wendell Berry's terms, an industrial eater. So, someone who suffers from some kind of food false consciousness that leads them to derive pleasures from the wrong things. And we think that that's both a very poor analysis of the nature of food pleasure. We think someone who enjoys a Waffle House waffle or some Doritos is not suffering from food false consciousness. And we think that if we're going to make a better food system, one that improves the diet of the average person, then we need to grapple with those pleasures. It doesn't mean saying that every food pleasure should just be pursued. This is sort of pure hedonism. But the idea that perhaps telling people that their food pleasures are sort of tawdry or false is not the best basis for a politics for improving the food system.

Jeremy: One of the things that's very clear — I mean, I'm happy to hear you talk about a food system — but one of the things that comes across very strongly in the book is that you kind of deny the notion that the food system is broken, because you say there are so many components to the food system that saying it's broken is kind of meaningless. Can you expand on that?

Jan: So a food system is a complex system, which is to say that what it does — sort of what it delivers, for whom, who benefits, who doesn't benefit, what its impacts are — is the result of a very complex interplay of a number of individual factors, right? And layered on top of this are the different aspects of the food system, which is the political system and the set of regulatory schema and policies

within which these operates, the social system which determines where people get food, pleasure, how they decide what to eat, how they adjudicate the ethics of eating. So all of this is extremely complex.

So saying it's broken, the example we use in the book is that let's say you're in your house on a sweltering summer day, and the air conditioner doesn't work. And you say, my house is broken. Well, that's a meaningless statement. Your house is not broken. You can identify a particular problem, which is your air conditioner not working, and then have it fixed. And then your house is comfortable and fine. And we think that similarly saying that a food system that regularly provides an abundance of cheap food to most people, saying it's broken is just a misrepresentation of the facts on the ground.

Jeremy: I think a lot of the people who study food systems approach them in the way you're describing. Some people focus on the health outcomes, some people focus on the externalities, some people focus on labour. Well, what what I think you've done that's a little bit different is you've tied it into to a kind of expanded version of food security, so that people not only have access to affordable food that they like, and that delivers nutritional benefits, but you're bringing in labour as well. And yet ... and yet in the United States, there is a huge level of food insecurity. What's the cause of that?

Gabriel: I mean, just to boil it down to the basics, um, the cause of food insecurity is poverty, right? Overwhelmingly in the United States, the reason why people are food insecure is not because there's not food on the shelves. It's because they don't have money in their pockets. If you start from that sort of assumption and you work from that, you come to a very, very kind of like, I would say, simple lesson about how policy can effectively reduce food insecurity. And that is, through resource distribution and through food distribution. So we have two existing policies in the United States that work quite well, but that are underfunded, in SNAP and school lunches. And the book is really invested in making an argument for those programmes as ways to harness the abundance of the industrial food system and put it to fighting hunger and food insecurity in a broader sense.

Jeremy: I see where you're coming from with this. But in the past few minutes, you've said how abundant and cheap food in America is, and yet you still have this problem of people not having enough

money to to buy the food they need. And I'm wondering where the change begins. Does it begin by reducing the cost of food even further? And the reason is ... Because the food is so inexpensive is because we're not paying the full cost of it. Or does it come from people changing their diets so that they're eating less expensive food that is as nutritious, or perhaps even more so?

Jan: I mean, I would say that the burden of addressing food insecurity for food insecure Americans does not necessarily lie with food insecure Americans themselves. It lies with policies that have actually often relatively little to do with food, as Gabriel said. So that the idea isn't to make food that is, objectively as a percentage of spending as a part of per capita GDP, statistically very cheap. It's not about making it cheaper. It's not about changing people's diets. It's about broadening their food budgets.

And you do that primarily through policies that affect budgets, which are not necessarily traditionally understood as food policies or as consumer behaviour related to food. And so here we're talking higher wages, lower rents through rent freezes or the building of more affordable housing, or policies that, as Gabriel said, get people food or more resources. So SNAP, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program in the United States, which quite simply gives people ... stretches their household budget for food. Or things like school lunches, which is probably the single most effective food insecurity solution because you get food to kids, you improve their educational outcomes and you take stress, financial stress and time stress, off parents.

Jeremy: What is the industrial food system, or industrial food manufacture — you use waffle House as the example. We could use hot dogs. We could use hamburgers, whatever — where do they come into this? Because one of the things you say in the book is about the externalities about the cost of producing food in terms of the environment, in animal welfare, in labour conditions. And one of the solutions you propose is better regulation and better oversight. And both of those are strongly under attack at the moment. The food industry is fighting back. And it's getting a lot of help from the current government. Do you, in fact, see a possibility of change in the short term and even in the medium term?

Gabriel: Well, we certainly wouldn't have written the book if we didn't. I mean, I think what we want to do is get information out there to the public that tries to maybe turn the temperature down on a lot of the scaremongering and hysteria, quite frankly, around food and to sort of like take in candidly what are the advantages of the food system that we have. And that really is the incredible, abundant, accessible food that is available at restaurants and supermarkets everywhere throughout the United States, right?

This is obviously a very challenging political moment. We wouldn't go so far as to say that we trust the regulators who are currently at the USDA or at the FDA to do the job as well as we would like it to be done. But there are real policy solutions to a lot of the problems associated with food that do involve simply closing agricultural exceptions to labour laws and environmental laws. They involve in investing in better technologies. They involve helping workers to organise and advocate for better pay and better working conditions. And they would also include like increasing the minimum wage. Those are all sort of policies that are available and ready at hand. They may not be easy asks in the current political climate, but we know what to do. What we really need to do is muster the political energy to do it.

Jeremy: Hasn't that always been the case? I mean, especially recently. Political will, political energy seems to be in very short supply.

Jan: I would say that political energy is not in short supply, but I would say that it is often misdirected, right? I mean, if you look at food, if you look at very recent history, I mean, if there's someone who deserves tremendous credit for mustering political energy to, in very positive ways, substantially change the food system in the United States, it's Michelle Obama with her focus on healthier foods. I mean, everyone thinks to, you know, the veggie garden at the White House, but the actual policies that came out of the Obama administration, such as, for instance, the community eligibility provision for school lunches, which opens the door to universal school lunches at the city level, especially in large cities like New York, was made possible through policies about under what circumstances the federal government would reimburse school lunches. So, I mean, what I'm trying to get at is that policy tools exist, and we've got a track record of policies. I think it's simply incorrect to say that we've known we need political energy, and there either is no political energy or hasn't been political energy or there haven't been policies.

Jeremy: The recent guidelines for food, food guidelines for Americans, have kind of turned everything on its head. Inverted the pyramid. Meat's up at the top. More protein, more dairy. It seems to me that that is appealing to what people want to eat, rather than what somebody else thinks they should eat. Does that mean we're suddenly going to see more adherence to the food guidelines and people are going to be saying, oh, well, it's great. People are adhering to the guidelines. There's nothing wrong with the way things are.

Jan: In short, no. The food pyramid as it appears — and we've written about this, we have an article about this in The New Republic from last month — it's more of a sort of memetic tool than a direct representation of the actual guidelines. The actual recommended guidelines, other than the quite large increase in protein, has not changed. And Americans historically ... There's this thing called the HEI, the healthy eating index in the US, which compares, based on long term survey data, it compares people's diets to the recommendations. And where people fall short is not protein, but it's on whole grains and fruit, which still features centrally in these new dietary guidelines.

So to the extent these guidelines are a sort of memetic political message, what they're doing is signalling to the pro-meat, pro-dairy folks that they should continue doing that. Which, you know, peer-reviewed science suggests they shouldn't. Americans already eat far more protein than they should, and far more animal products than almost anyone else on Earth. But as far as the rest of that inverted pyramid, which does contain whole grains and fruits and vegetables and pulses, it's still technically signalling to the public that they should move in the same direction as previous guidelines in a way that they haven't.

But I also don't know if this is about statistically provable, better outcomes. I think it's much more about signalling things to particular political constituencies and scoring wins in this culture war into which diet has now been pulled.

Jeremy: You're quite gung-ho in the book about cellular agriculture and plant based meat substitutes; different things, I want to talk about them separately. First of all, the transformation of soybeans into Impossible Burgers, or all the other plants that are converted into something else that resembles meat. In many ways, it seems to be a complicated process that feeds the need for meat by disguising the

fact that it's plants. And I wonder, is that because of, you mentioned Americans historically high consumption of meat, is it because it's easier to get somebody to eat a burger than a falafel?

Gabriel: I mean, I think our attitude is probably that we need to meet Americans where they are in terms of their diets. So if the general objective is to reduce the amount of meat in the American diet, because meat is the primary thing in their diet, that is going to have such an outsized environmental and nutritional impact. So it's generating all these harms. But I think the reality of the situation is, at least in the immediate term, we want to be able to access the meals that they're already eating, and we want to make them better. We want to improve them with these kinds of food technologies. So I think that makes a lot more sense than sort of castigating them as unnatural somehow because they happen to be simulations of meat.

Jeremy: And to some extent, I suspect that's also driven by the fact that a lot of food is eaten out of the house in restaurants. I mean, I love the ... You make a point that the national cuisine of America is fast food, which I thought was rather good. And if you can get into that food supply and reduce the amount of meat in there, presumably you will do a whole lot of good.

Jan: Exactly. And look, ultimately, this is part of what we try to grapple with in the book. Among the many changes to food system issues, changing individuals diets is one of the hardest. And so there's this wicked problem you face with meat, which is that meat production, especially industrialised meat production, is the single biggest source of harms broadly understood within the food system: emissions, land use, both for animals but also specifically for feed crops, water use, eutrophication, harms to animals, dangerous labour. And on top of that, a lot of red meat, especially processed red meat, is also a known carcinogen. So we know along any number of these metrics of harms that we need to reduce meat consumption. That's just a fact. But then the question is how do you do it? And telling people to eat less meat, telling people to go vegetarian or vegan may work for some people. I'm vegan, I eat some alt protein products. Not a lot of them, but that's me, right? And to the extent that Americans aren't rushing out the door now to eat falafels suggests that maybe we should tell them to eat more falafels. But maybe we should also lean into technologies that meet them where they are with products that have far smaller harms.

And this idea that these products require tremendous technological sort of changes, that applies to cellular agriculture. It does not apply to an Impossible Burger. An Impossible Burger is basically a bean burger with a few extra bells and whistles. Cellular agriculture is a different story, and but I think it should be treated separately, in part because it's not on the market yet.

Jeremy: Okay. Not on the market in America. But there are ... You can get your chicken in Singapore and what have you. Let me ask you, Gabe, about cellular agriculture specifically. Do you really think it has a role to play, given how much energy it takes, the problems of distribution, the problems of creating products that will satisfy people's desire for having meat. Do you do you really see promise in cellular agriculture?

Gabriel: I do. And, both Jan and I have eaten the cellular agriculture. We've had chicken, we've had salmon, we've had pork links. I think they're really quite remarkable.

Jeremy: As an achievement?

Gabriel: I mean, remarkable also in how much they taste like meat, right? That I wouldn't really be able to distinguish them if you hadn't told me in advance that it was something else. You know, you raise, I think, what are a lot of serious technical challenges. The technical challenges at this point are not really around creating a product that is delicious or close enough to meat to, like, pass the taste test for consumers. The technical challenges are overwhelmingly being able to produce that product at a price point that people are going to be able to afford. And then, of course, you do ask the correct question, and that is, will people eat it? We don't know. I've eaten it. I thought it was pretty good.

Jeremy: Jan, as a vegan. Do you ... I think Gabe said "we've eaten it". So you have.

Jan: Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

Jeremy: You're still a vegan?

Jan: Yes. Yeah. As far as if ... No, look, I mean, I think veganism, itself for me is about not participating in harms caused to animals directly. It's

not about an aversion to meat. It's about an aversion to harms to animals.

Jeremy: I want to come back to the pleasure of eating and the democratic hedonism, which I think is a really good way of putting it. And I have a problem with that, which is that one of the accusations levelled at industrial foods — you often use the example of Doritos — is that beyond pleasure, they've been engineered to be, frankly, almost addictive. And you say — again, the Waffle House, great example of the intricacies of delivering a waffle at two in the morning. A good waffle at two in the morning. And you say "a few of those waffles now and then is both good for the soul and not all that bad for you". And I agree with that. And I agree that a bag of Doritos is not all that bad for you. But how do you get the food industry to produce the kinds of democratic, hedonistic pleasures that you're talking about, which will almost certainly require them to reduce their profitability, if they're going to maintain sales? How do you do it? How do get industrial food manufacturers to go along and reduce their impact on the environment and also make foods that, frankly, we're not quite so motivated to eat? We've seen already that the impact of GLP-1 inhibitor drugs has changed the way the food industry is approaching snacks. How do you even get started on that road?

Jan: The food system doesn't require nudges to produce healthier food. The modern food system produces and sells a tremendous amount of healthy, nutritious food. It also sells a tremendous amount of unhealthful food, much of which, or some of which, as you say, is produced, is designed, with a view to being hyper palatable and potentially slightly addictive. And where we come down is that on the one hand, consumers should be aware of this and eat healthier. There's a tendency, I think, in a lot of conversations about food, especially lately, to disempower the consumer completely. The consumer does have some agency, right? Agency which is sort of diminished through food environments that may be full of unhealthy, less healthy foods, but nonetheless. And second of all, we write at length in the book about different policies that should disincentivise the production or sale or consumption of the least healthy foods.

So just to give you two examples, as far as policies that already exist. Removal of arguably the most noxious form of foods, which is sugar sweetened beverages or sodas. We believe that they should be removed from environments, especially around vulnerable

populations. So we think there should not be soda machines in schools, in hospitals. And there is a lot of precedent around these kind of policies. And then when it comes to processed foods, which is a much bigger conversation, but if we just figure, if we just focus on this question of access, we propose a scheme in the book, which is sort of like a value added tax on those processed foods that are not processed with the view to attaining particular nutritional outcomes. So, for instance, an Impossible Burger or like a frozen pre-made palak paneer. But ones that are basically vehicles for the things we already know are bad. So the ones that deliver too much sugar, too much salt, too much fat. But beyond that, right, beyond that, we believe that we live in a liberal market economy, and we can't just ban everything. Like, we live in liberal democracies, to some extent, and we cannot go in and ban and micromanage the ... Yeah, we can't ban every product we don't like.

Jeremy: And Gabe, at the other end of the pipeline, do you think it is feasible to tax the externalities in a better way than they are at the moment? So the overuse of fertilisers, the shit lagoons, the er — well, you can't stop cows burping. Can you address the problems at the other end of the of the pipeline with with incentivisation?

Gabriel: Most definitely. In the United States, certainly, we incentivise the production of crops primarily for biofuels and animal feed. And we do that not only through direct subsidies, but also through exceptions to environmental and labour regulations. And so there are very simple and straightforward ways to address this. They involve, one, shifting the subsidy regime away from biofuels and animal feed and into fresh and healthy produce, and, two, closing exceptions to all of those regulations and saying that farms have to operate according to the same standards that every other kind of economic actor in the economy operates according to. And that means no special dispensations, no special get out of jail free cards if you want to have your hog waste run off, going into the groundwater. We're not going to play that game anymore. Closing those exceptions is incredibly important. It's important not only in terms of the environment, but also in terms of animal welfare and, I think, as well nutritional outcomes.

Jeremy: And incredibly difficult, incredibly important and incredibly difficult because farmers, not just in the United States, but here in Europe too, they seem to wield a completely disproportionate power

over politicians. Yes, we need to eat, but they don't vote that much — or rather, there aren't that many of them to vote. And it seems that they do hold the upper hand in rejecting precisely the kind of changes that you describe as so important. Is there a solution to that?

Gabriel: Well, we encourage people in the book to look at farming without the rose-coloured glasses of nostalgia. And to think about farmers as economic actors who are primarily incentivised under our capitalist economy to maximise their profit, often at the expense of the environment and society writ large. I don't think it's unfair to farmers to characterise them in that fashion. I think that's the reality of the situation. And if you ask them to explain their own thought processes driving their decisions, they would probably tell you that that's what's going on.

Jan: Farmers are a well-organised lobby group. They're a well-organised special interest group. And taking on special interest groups is not unfeasible. It just means developing the political constituencies and the political will to do it right. Like, for instance, if you were to regulate effluent and groundwater contamination more tightly, you would not make all farming impossible. You would just disincentivise industrial chicken farming, for instance. That doesn't mean that that land cannot be used for agriculture, right? You've just now set constraints within which farmers can do business. And so absolutely treating farmers not as this category apart, so therefore as farmers, but treating them as businesses who should be regulated tightly and whose behaviour should be constrained to serve the social good, is the only rational way of approaching regulating farming.

Once you start treating farming as something exceptional, and you start treating farmers as something other than business people, as these sort of like exceptional avatars of whatever, like a rural past or rural identity, you've already lost. You've already lost.

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