

**BOOK REVIEW: Tim Lang and Michael Heasman,  
*Food Wars: The Global Battle for Mouths, Minds, and  
Markets*. London: Earthscan, 2004, xvi + 365pp.,  
\$35 paper. ISBN 1-85383-702-4.**

*Food Wars* offers a panoramic view of the evolving global food system, and has the potential to renew readers' fascination with linkages between food markets and social welfare. The authors are not economists (Lang is Professor of Food Policy at London's City University, with formal training in social psychology; Heasman is a Visiting Research Fellow at City University), but the issues they discuss are directly relevant to the *Journal of Agribusiness* audience.

The authors reduce the complexity of the food system and its policies by identifying a dominant but declining "Productionist" paradigm and two potentially ascendant paradigms: the "Life Sciences Integrated" and "Ecologically Integrated" paradigms. The Productionist paradigm is represented by a familiar commodity-oriented emphasis on improving the productivity of land, labor, technology, and chemical inputs to prevent food shortages. As judged by sharply reduced global hunger rates, the Productionist paradigm responded successfully to the dominant needs of the period. While fully recognizing that a staggering number of people still go hungry on a daily basis, the authors emphasize that today's challenges include overconsumption, its resulting welfare impacts, and threats to ecological sustainability.

The Life Sciences Integrated paradigm emphasizes the role of biotechnology, broadly defined, in resolving nutrition and dietary challenges. Attendant issues include corporate intellectual property rights and market power, a shift toward viewing food not only as a source of calories but also as a bundle of health-related attributes, and equality of access to health-enhancing attributes by the rich and poor. The Ecologically Integrated paradigm also emphasizes quality over quantity objectives, but encompasses a much broader set of roles for food policy. Environmental sustainability, social justice, and ecological diversity are among the public goods promoted under Ecologically Integrated policies. The authors argue that the Ecologically Integrated paradigm is likely to be a superior perspective on long-run social welfare grounds, but consider it the current underdog due to weak political and corporate support.

After introducing the conflict between the Productionist paradigm and the two main alternatives, Lang and Heasman focus heavily on the shifting relationships between food, health, and consumer responsibility. Consistent with the Productionist perspective, food is often viewed as a source of calories and nutrients that, if consumers take responsibility for making appropriate choices, can result in the absence of disease. Consumption choices are an element of personal liberty, the health care system mainly plays a curative versus preventive role, and health scientists have a weak influence on food policy relative to corporate interests. Skepticism about food manufacturers' commitment to public health is commonplace and viewed as relevant enough that it even appears in comic

strips. The November 13, 2004, "Dilbert" comic strip shows Dilbert asking, "Is it immoral for my company to sell forty-thousand calorie, shard-filled doughnuts?" Dogbert replies, "You're not forcing anyone to eat them, you're just making them irresistibly delicious." Dogbert scoffs when Dilbert wonders, "How's that different?" Lang and Heasman's calls for change are motivated by high external costs of private food consumption choices, the ineffectiveness of moral suasion as a policy tool, and the ideal of evidence-based policy versus political expediency.

Lang and Heasman devote a chapter each to diet-related policy, the evolving food economy, consumer behavior, and environmental/ecological health. Since the 19th century, governments have justified public health investments on the grounds that ill health erodes the social fabric. In the case of food, however, policy has been dominated by production rather than health objectives, despite widespread evidence of diet-related public health impacts. Moreover, existing food policies are directed mainly at individuals (e.g., dietary guidelines), while much public health policy is directed at populations (e.g., city sewer systems). Individualist public health approaches are characterized by the primacy of market solutions, responsibility for self-protection, externalized health costs, and the right to be unhealthy or to patronize niche markets for health. Conversely, population health approaches emphasize a citizenship model of social responsibility, social insurance, prices reflecting internalized health costs, and the right to expect a food system structured to deliver health.

Health-related food policy is much more complicated than, say, policies providing safe drinking water. In addressing health cost externalities of obesity, the appropriate public role is complicated by debates about the causes of obesity (genetics versus behavior, diet versus exercise), the presence of healthy and unhealthy attributes within certain product groups (e.g., dairy products), the predominance of food sales through private and largely competitive markets, many decades of public transfers to the agricultural sector, political influence disparities between industry and consumers, and debates about the individual's function as consumer versus citizen. The public role in protecting society from unsafe food (as opposed to unhealthy food) is much less contentious. Not coincidentally, we find a disproportionate policy emphasis on food safety relative to obesity, despite obesity's greater impact on social welfare.

The authors detail how the politically powerful food manufacturing industries are adapting to threats and opportunities posed by the obesity epidemic. Legal liability in the United States was limited by passage of the Personal Responsibility in Food Consumption Act in 2004. By placing responsibility for healthy choices on the consumer, but retaining the legitimacy of serving obesity-enhancing products to willing consumers, a wealth of product differentiation opportunities arise. Food manufacturers are moving swiftly to introduce products spanning the preference spectrum. Thus, we simultaneously observe rapid growth in functional foods claiming health benefits beyond those of nutrition, and the introduction of the Hardee's "Monster Thickburger" containing 107 grams of fat. The ability to earn rents from product differentiation is a key reason the authors anticipate corporate support for elements of the Life Sciences Integrated paradigm, and a distinct lack of support for the Ecologically Integrated paradigm.

The evolution of global food company clusters is viewed as an outgrowth of the dominant Industrialized paradigm. The modern food supply chain relies increasingly on

technological advances, vertical integration, transnational sourcing, access to inexpensive labor, and intellectual property rights. Management and marketing services previously performed by farmers can be more efficiently supplied elsewhere in the value chain, implying lower returns to farming. Global sourcing provides incentives for developing countries to devote agricultural resources primarily to export markets in wealthier nations, leading the authors to compare elements of modern food industry structure to colonial control.

Food culture is also evolving rapidly. On the one hand, annual U.S. fast food expenditures grew from \$6 billion to \$110 billion between 1970 and 2000. On the other hand, organic products have now entered the U.S. mainstream, and food is increasingly viewed not just as fuel, but as preventative medicine. In describing the diversity of consumer segmentation, the authors cite a “food aspiration” analog to Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs, starting with food safety and nutrition, and peaking with environmental and ethical concerns. Special attention is devoted to links between obesity and food marketing targeted at children, an audience considered highly susceptible to emotional manipulation and deserving of policy intervention.

Lang and Heasman provide detailed arguments that the Industrialist paradigm ultimately leads to unsustainable use of critical natural and ecological resources. The concept of “food miles” (distance between primary producer and end consumer) is used to illustrate the contribution of modern consumption habits to energy use and pollution. Evidence is also provided regarding the external costs associated with various food production modes, ranging from 3% of consumer price for local organic production to over 16% for global conventional production. The ineffectiveness of private markets to internalize public environmental costs, especially in a globalized food system, represents yet another trigger for a paradigm adjustment and a rationale for state intervention.

*Food Wars* reminds us that the most pressing issues in today’s food system have broader dimensions than those by which many academic and agency appointments are defined. For that reason, I found it refreshing to read this coherent perspective encompassing marketing, industrial organization, production, and environmental/resource issues. Comprehensive treatments can create knowledge spillovers that inspire new research or policy ideas, and I can also see this reasonably priced book being useful in the classroom. Libertarians, Chicago economists, and members of the Ayn Rand Institute may find some of the authors’ normative prescriptions disagreeable, but many will find the book’s assessment of the public health costs and externalities associated with our rapidly-evolving food system compelling.

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