

Elephants in the Food Room: Consumer Culture, System Change and Values

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Tim Lang, Emeritus Professor of Food Policy, Centre for Food Policy, City, University of London

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Preamble

Thanks.

I am honoured to be here.

It's a poignant experience for me to be give this lecture here at Windsor Castle.

With my mother, I came here to tea with Canon GB Bentley in the late 1950s.
My mother and grandmother had known the Bentleys when in Lincoln.

I had my first experience of vertigo just here, looking over the walls!

In this lecture, I'll try to stop you getting vertigo when we consider the enormity of the challenges facing society over food consumption.

But enormous they are.

The approach taken in this lecture

My purpose is to explain why the act of consumption and thus the culture of consumers is so important yet being side-stepped by policy makers and consumers themselves.

I will sketch 10 known Food Problems (FPs), widely analysed in science and food policy, and pose Ethical Consumer Food Problem (ECFP) which receive less attention. I will give my own answers where I can.

Some of these Ethical Consumer Food Problems are long term. Others are more recent.

Some can only be addressed at societal and population level due to their scale.

Others are immediate and personal, even when societal.

By 'ethical' I mean matters which can be addressed by the application of moral principles. Hence the values in my title.

Food is about values not just nutrients or land or whim.

The transition from 'value-for-money' to 'values-for-money' - sketched in a paper a decade ago challenges food capitalism worldwide and the UK.¹

Why is this, when the planetary and culture clocks are still ticking?

It's not all gloom. The recognition of the overall challenge is growing. The pace of response is not.

Much therefore depends on societies deciding what those principles are.

As a policy analyst, a social scientist, I see those food principles as socially determined meanings. These can be changed, challenged and chosen.

They are social constructs, not set in stone.

With colleagues, I have sketched some of this in relation to England's recent National Food Strategy for those who are interesting. It's our *Testing Times* report published by the Food Research Collaboration.

ECFP1: Can food consumers become citizens?

To some extent, this is my central argument.

Consumers are the elephants in the food room.

Their / our consumption is so immense, so critical to the transitions now needed that consumer involvement in change is essential.

So big they dominate the room. So essential if the room needs to be repainted or, as in the food room, reconstructed.

Despite this centrality, consumers *en masse* are assumed and almost ignored.

This is no surprise, as the difference between big, rich consumer societies and poor, under-consuming consumer societies has been normalised.

It should not be.

At the same time....Policy-makers' attention is mostly on the farm rather than consumption. We see this at national and global levels. Ironically, just as the UK left, the EU *Farm to Fork Strategy* emerged as a food systemic approach.²

Some policy attention is also on industry which the UK Gov't sees as in control

- I call this the 'leave it to Tesco et al' default strategy.
- Hence efforts to shave a bit off carbon here, and plastic wrapping there.
- But the mass population effects and impacts continue to grow.
- And now industry is itself unhappy as (a) it'll be blamed and (b) it knows the scale of change requires framework change.

The tweak strategy defies the scale of change now needed. And quickly!

No wonder insiders are sober about 'events, dear boy, events'.

Politicians are ducking this. But the challenge cannot be left to the ebbs and flows of events or to momentary political expediency or whim.

We live in times when actions will either change the food system towards sustainability in its widest sense or continue food's dire effects.

There is a danger that inaction and fear of addressing consumption is accelerating crisis.

We are more familiar with films of glaciers melting or vast ice sheets crashing off into the sea than we are with wholesale societal change to sustainable diets.

Eating differently isn't spectacular TV ...

...but the moral dilemma is one with high stakes.

Food citizenship is a notion much discussed by academics and the consumer movement but not by mass consumers themselves.

Our problem is that food citizenship ought to be central in political discourse.

Eating Culture, ideally, would normalise low impact healthy diets.

Food trends suggest otherwise.

- The rise and rise of ultra-processed foods.
- The distance between primary producer and end consumer grows.
- The politicians are content to leave retail efficiencies and opaque trading supply chains to put exploitation in far off places out of sight and out of mind.

Somehow culture has to be put back in 'synch' with necessity.

Wants – and manipulated wants are distorting eating norms.

Food citizenship is coy. Consumerism is triumphant.

Culture is the everyday articulation of social meanings. Some are shared. Others diverge.

Culture is thus always contested space within lived experience – what Kurt Lewin called 'life space', people's total terrain.

Instead it is left to whim.

ECFP 2: Sleep-walking into a food crisis: are consumers told enough or not being helped to engage?

Food now epitomises the challenges which face humanity.

We have...

... developed ways to increase output.

... feed people across the whims of weather or location.

... learn our dependence on nature.

... experiment with sharing foods, tastes, cultures far and wide.

Yet in doing all this, food is now a major – often THE major – driver of danger over

- Public health nutrition
- Safety
- Biodiversity loss
- Water use
- Land use
- Climate change
- Soil health
- Social inequalities
- Life expectancy differences
- Quality of life

(see my *Feeding Britain* for a summary of this for Britain)³

The Ethical Challenge for Consumers is:

Do consumers even need to be informed about the scale of this crisis?

At present, there's only a drip-feed – a small feeder given the enormity and gravity of the data.

And the serious debates are too often couched in 'on the one hand, doom, on the other hand someone (? A 'they'?) will sort it out.

Climate change or biodiversity loss is presented as 'out there' or reduced to single factors, when many of those reports about single factors make similar pleas.

Look at the scientific advice for the UK which is to:⁴

- cut greenhouse gas emissions by 78% by 2035, compared with 1990 levels.
- reduce meat and dairy by 20% by 2030 and by 35% by 2050.

But it's also to stop destroying biodiversity. That's harder to translate at the supermarket shelf.

And it's to halt run-away transition to diets high in fats, salt and sugar (HFSS).

- Hence the fight over HFSS in processed foods
- flagged in the UK National Food Strategy.

The SCALE of the food Problems is IMMENSE.

Normality is in a state of denial, constantly allowed to reassert itself as 'choice culture'.

Surely, Consumers en masse must now be treated seriously as sentient beings and brought into the urgency of the sustainable diet and food transition.

ECFP 3: The limits of Individualism in an era of Mass Impact

How have we got to this? Where individual action is not enough. Only if there is mass change might consumer culture change get ecosystems, health and culture onto some kind of survival and resilience track.

It's a long and complex story, but some core features can be grasped.

Slowly from the mid 18th century, faster in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and then very rapidly in the late 20th century, food science and industries have:

- unleashed food productive capacity
- developed new foods and nutrient streams
- Canalised nature
- Developed extraordinary means for moulding choice
- Enticed entire populations to eat their way to ill-health and costs.

This is both the brilliance and folly of our current model of consumer capitalism.

JK Galbraith in his reflective 1992 book *Culture of Contentment* spelled out some of the cultural aspects of the ethical problem.⁵

Individual choice – the Chicago School's favoured economic rationale – is part of what has to be put back into proportion.

Sure, I like some foods more than others but should my likes undo future generations? My desire to eat endlessly warp whether others eat well now?

The model of progress since World War 2 has been so successful, so seductive that the factors favouring its continuity outweigh those demanding a reset.

Rampant, run-away consumerism triumphs over dire need and lack of commitment to change course.

Consumers are barely aware of how fragile the food system is.

The old philosophical distinction between Needs and Wants is back with a vengeance.

Modern food world is characterised by massive over-, under- and mal-consumption side by side.

Often within the same societies, regions, even households.

Just-in-time systems in the West.

Hand-to-mouth in vast tracts of the world.

The Ethical Challenge for Consumers is:

How to reset the policy framework to hold back unnecessary food products and to maximise the foundations of good ecological public health.

This perspective proposes the reshaping of material, biological, social and cultural conditions to ensure good health for all.⁶⁻⁸

ECFP 4: The limited value of (individual) *choice*

I know this moral challenge is unsettling in and for some in the Anglophone political economy.

These are the heartlands of choice culture as what drives economic life.

In fact, individual choice *rationalises* rather than *drives* living. In the Thatcher-Reagan late 1970s and 1980s, it certainly was a disrupter of the post war investment in civil infrastructure and the creation of inter-state collaboration such as the Common Market (now EU) but, as a driver, it is now past its sell-by date. But like many a paradigm, it continues for lack of a clear replacement.

Out must go the use (even exploitation) of consumers rationalised as the motor force, the providers of feedback loops which determine not just growth but likes.

Choice is demeaned if it is reduced to an on/off switch. You have choice or not. You apply it. Or not.

As Yiannis Gabriel and I suggested in our 1995 *Unmanageable Consumer*,^{9,10} and as others have expounded too,¹¹⁻¹³ choice is shaped by circumstance much more than by choice alone.

Choice is a spectrum.

People in prison or concentration camps get little. The mega rich get lots. But even they are framed by circumstance.

Wants triumph over need.

History teaches us that all societies, cultures and civilisations face the problem of food.

Is there enough? Where does it or could it come from? How secure are supplies? How equitable is the food system?

Who and what determines adequacy and sufficiency of food?

Food ethics, in this sense, are woven into the nature of existence. Food is one of the primal pathways linking humans with other species, the ecosphere.

And economics needs to be given a public not only individualised human face.¹⁴⁻

The history of Ancient Rome reminds us of how even mighty civilisations as are secure as their port defences. Ostia was constantly at risk of silting up, let alone of being captured.¹⁷

With early industrialisation, the precariousness of food was rephrased most infamously by Malthus, who argued that supplies could not grow as fast as population.¹⁸ This Malthusian problem continues to stalk some wings of modern food policy.

In fact, revolutions in production, storage and distribution allowed massive increase of food and its better availability.

Genetic chance in theory should no longer determine survival but it does in that where you are born, and to what class, income level and food economy still do determine life expectancy and food insufficiency or sufficiency.

***The Ethical Challenge for Consumers is:
How can culture put choice in proportion? How can we distinguish
between selection and choice, which choice reserved for high level
options? And retaining food choice as mere selection?***

ECFP 5: How to replace naive market thinking

The term 'market economy', beloved of some neo-liberals, does not really capture modern food system realities at all.

To put individualism into proportion, we need to see economics as founded on morality. The founding fathers certainly did. But TikTok Facebook world has exceeded the Thatcher-Reagan dreams by reducing it.

The Chicago model of perfect balance / interplay of supply and demand is far too crude to represent the astonishing power of giant traders who dictate markets ...

... or the hypermarkets who developed out of the transition from greengrocery to self-service supermarkets.

Vast food companies can be bought and sold, broken up or dovetailed into others with zero consultation of consumers.

Here in the UK, we are seeing Morrisons sold to Private Equity Funds with barely a comment from Government.

Knives sharpening for J Sainsbury, too.

Meanwhile cross-border market power is symbolised by the rise of;

- Amazon Prime et al
- The battle of delivery firms vying to get food to you quicker, Deliveroo, Getit

Meanwhile, too, the behemoths of food processing eye new upstarts – oat milks rather than dairy – while fighting for who gets Gross Value Added from longer food chains.

The pre-industrialisation food era was characterised by:

- mostly short supply chains – only hugely expensive ingredients like spices were not local

The industrial era was characterised by a rise of processing, and rise of what years ago I termed food miles. Innovation bloomed:

- Tins and pressure cooking from the Napoleonic Wars.
- Pasteurisation from the late 19th century.
- Railways and steamships enabled food to travel long distances.

- The first chilled New Zealand meat arrived in imperial London in 1882. Methods had to be developed to address the rise of large urban settlements.

Now in post-industrial societies – such as the UK has become – food has slipped down policy-makers agenda. Until there is a crisis.

Why does it take a crisis to get food taken seriously?

How can we reshape 'food markets' and reset mass consciousness?

Academic disciplines have been trying for decades to do this for environmental and health reasons:

- most recently the Dasgupta report¹⁹
- or the Sustainable Food Trust's calculations of the true cost of food.²⁰
- The World Business Council for Sustainable Development now recognises the need to redesign for full and true costs of food.²¹

These are riveting and sophisticated advances. But they have not so far changed policy-makers' minds.

Lovely work for us academics but do they change consumers' minds? Hmm.

At what point will the paradigm shift?

ECFP 6: Redefining a 'good diet' is now a defining issue for the Age

A key feature of the needed consumer transition is the need to redefine what a good diet is.

The challenge is how to narrow the gap between scientific consensus and consumer behaviour.

Not one country has a clear set of National dietary Guidelines which are a fully evidence-based approach to sustainable diets.

Many countries have seen attempts at National levels to create such advice, only for it to be subverted or rebuffed.

- Sweden issued the first in 2008 only for EFSA to ask them to be withdrawn for infringing the single market. It came back in 2015 with cultural advice. Good for Sweden but the rational new look was not full.
- USA Dietary Advice for Americans are revised every 5 years. Attempts to include environmental advice, despite huge popular support, was ignored by the Agriculture Secretary.
- The UK began the process only for it to be lost with a change of Government.

Meanwhile the scientific consensus from diverse sciences has grown:

- Climate
- Water
- Phosphates

This issue of dietary aspiration and the mismatch of aspiration, options and the future is again one of the pressing issues for humanity.

It's one the Western world is mostly denying yet which events and data insist we face.

I do think there is now sufficient consensus across the food system, among scientists, between countries (who all see the dire impact of diet/food on their healthcare budgets and more) about what needs to happen and why.

It ought to come out of the UN Food Systems Summit on Sept 23. It won't. It ought to come from COP15 on Biodiversity but is unlikely to Ditto for COP26 on Climate at Glasgow.

ECFP 7: The battle for food data: why do consumers collude?

There is an important food battleground over data and information.

One feature is how food culture is distorted by commercial messages. Consumers have to negotiate this mix of over- and under-information (yet they are supposedly informed in the marketplace).

Take the issue of food labels.

Information is one of the first rungs on the Nuffield Council of Bio-Ethics' 'ladder of intervention'. That report explored how to get change at the population level for public health.

The ladder starts with 'do nothing' then goes to give information and labels, and rises at the top to more firm change measures – laws, fiscal measures – and theoretically the elimination of choice altogether.

Information and labelling, on this scale, are 'soft' measures. The evidence for effectiveness is slight. Labels are used fleetingly, literally quickly. Their main advantage is that they can encourage processors to reformulate.

In theory, this isn't so.

In 1962 President John F Kennedy gave a seminal speech outlining 4 Consumer Rights for post WW2 capitalism. Kennedy presented:²²

- Right to safety; to be informed; to choose; and to be heard.

Today, those Four are now Eight Consumer Rights recognised by the UN affiliated Consumers International, the umbrella for bodies such as the UK's Which? (formerly Consumers' Association). They are:²³

...The **Right to basic needs, Right to safety, Right to information, Right to choose** (Kennedy's four)

... plus the Right to representation, Right to redress, Right to consumer education, and Right to healthy environment.

Given, labels are such a weak intervention, it is surprising that they have not been given, if only as a sop to environmental demands. Nutrition pressures did achieve nutrient labelling after decades. And in diverse forms worldwide.

In my experience, labelling can be fiercely resisted by industries. It took decades to win QUID – quantitative Ingredients Declaration – labels in the EU. This simply

lists all in a food product in declining order of weight. QUID meant companies had to declare precisely what is in their foods.

But why don't we now have more comprehensive labels about what is in food?

Not just nutrients or ingredients but how made, where from, what its embedded carbon, water, impacts etc are? Food labels are where morals, markets and mouths meet.

13 years ago in a paper to the British Association I proposed an omni-label which broadened this ingredients perspective.²⁴

With colleagues I proposed to have one labelling system which pulls together diverse types of information to which consumers really want or deserve access.

These include:

- ingredients (what's in the food),
- nutrients (health),
- environment (carbon, water, biodiversity),
- processes (how it is made, animal welfare),
- social conditions (workers, trade)
- and more.

In formal terms, what consumers need is *multi-criteria information*.²⁵

This captures not just what the food actually is but what consumers want to know. Or do when they find out about it. The depth and breadth of information which food actually is!

Today a coalition has suddenly emerged wanting this and more from the 2021 UN Food Systems Summit.²⁶

In the 2000s, the idea could be rebuffed, arguing that there wasn't enough data or that the technology wasn't there.

Today, companies are working hard on producing their own labels, their own logos. And there is a plethora of apps, QR technology and web-based data storage solutions.

The hard politics is to stop multi-criteria information being at the whim of commercial interests but to do it and get it in modes which suit consumers.

ECFP 8: Making visible the hidden labour as part of Food Democracy

Anthropology taught us that primary human relationship with food was via hunter-gatherer cultures.

Settled farming came relatively recently. About 10 millennia ago at the earliest, and six thousand years ago in Britain.^{27,28}

The link between land use and food culture has been lost relatively recently.

It happened in ancient Rome, and any large city. Globally, urban populations overtook the rural only recently.

Long supply chains are now the norm.

The labour process behind food is now mostly hidden. The barrista, the delivery bike rider, the checkout till,.... These are late in long chains.

...so how can we narrow the gap between what we know needs to be done to put the food system on the right track and what currently is being done?

Consumers need help to reorient what and how they / we all eat. Reconnection has to be the key theme: land + labour to the mouth

ECFP 9: Food Democracy is more than Check-outs in a Big Data era

Crises in Western democracies are not new. Nor are food crises.

For centuries, people/movements struggled for enfranchisement:

- to have a voice.
- to be represented.
- to pursue the common good.
- To build fairer societies.

This struggle continues in ebbs and flows.

It fissured the 20th century in the titanic battles of

- Authoritarian vs democratic rules
- Communism vs capitalism
- East / West
- North/ South

Food was a central feature in this over:

- The right to land
- The right to food
- Human and labour rights.

HG Wells articulated in his 1940 *The rights of man : or what are we fighting for?*²⁹ the set of aspirations which became the 1948 *UN Declaration of Human*.³⁰

It generated laws, process, audits, and institutions. For good reason.

He and that generation knew that common frameworks are essential to shape decency.

The much criticised initiatives such as the modern UN or the EU came from that. In this social process, the UK was a major player.

Now what does democracy mean in a world of Amazon and the internet. When accountability is lost in cyberspace?

Food retailing and hypermarketisation technology mean that the neo-liberal case that we don't need the state except for defence or to pump prime change as all decisions are quickly conferred to business by what people buy IS NOW PART OF WHAT HAS TO BE ADDRESSED FOR A MORE JUST SOCIETY.

Engaging consumers in the multi-criteria food analysis is key, as it was in the 1940s.

The emergence of Big Data is rightly seeping into public policy but not sufficiently into public consciousness and behaviour.

Not why do I tick this or that consent form on a website but what happens to my collusion?

Data power goes to food companies. Tesco's Club Card heralded this new food dimension. The carrot was the reward system. Its market share rocketed.

Data plus Just-In-Time (JIT) logistics – itself a vehicle of and contributor to Data mining – meant more is known about our behaviour and when we want this or that food than we do and certainly Governments do.

The ethical issue here is the inequality. Data are power.

Henry Dimbleby's favourite of his 14 National Food Strategy recommendations for England is to accelerate inter industry but public data system.

A new dynamic is emerging where long chain food systems

- Keep sourcing out of sight
- Make it hard for companies let alone others to know what's going on
- Loss of verifiability in formal audits
- Decline of vertical integration in supply chains
- Fraud (as trumpeted by Prof Chris Elliot over meat and by others, too)^{31 32}

Bitcoin deepens this opaqueness.

- Done in consumers' name but putting ownership behind screens.

The EU set out to recalibrate this with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).³³

Its effectiveness remains to be seen but is emerging. Data privacy is not, however, the same thing as democratising data or engaging food citizenship.

ECFP 10: Moral implications: take the elephant for a walk

The challenges I have sketched are immense.

But they point to a deficit so far in food political leadership.

Science and policy analysts can sketch what we think needed, but its politics which must reshape the food system.

The enormity of what needs to happen still eludes leaders.

They and consumers mostly want business as usual with a few tweaks.

It's time we took the elephant for a walk. Change rooms. Take exercise. Shake a leg.

Realisation is growing, but not fast enough.

To be positive, international and national gatherings are coming thick and fast where engagement could be committed to.

- UN FSS, UN CBD, UN FCC.
- Companies, fearful in the past, know their survival depends on acting.

The imponderable remain consumers.

Blocks at the door are many.

But this is a time for political courage. To face and welcome consumer change. There are many reasons to do so:

- Survival
- Future generations
- The planet
- Being able to look fellow citizens in the eye
- History shows that ducking challenges often – not always – rebounds.

We must stop politicians fear of consumer change. It's in our interests.

This is a new age for Enlightened Self-Us-Interest

This is not a time for me, me, me but us, us, us.

Brexit has weakened our liaison with neighbours

It brings a new (welcome) realism to our diminished status as a country

It poses important challenges to the ENGLISH National Food Strategy

This barely talked of consumers in its recommendations yet the analysis all points to the urgency of engaging with us as a culture.

Honourable support for low-income consumers is not the same thing as addressing inequalities.

Conclusions

Where has this got us?

I have argued that momentous ethical matters are upon us, not just ahead.

I have argued that their significance is that consumers are central to change not peripheral.

In an overweight and over-/mal-/under-consuming age, consumers are the policy Elephants in the Room.

I am not blaming consumers for this situation.

But we/they are being used as the excuse to do nothing or to do little.

The data, however, point to the need to do much and fast.

I repeat. The scale of change is now known.

The political will to be straight with the consuming public is not there.

But politicians do not lead. They follow.

If we kick up trouble, they will follow. Or in democracies we can boot them out.

This is not a time to say 'they are all the same'. Cynicism is a luxury in which neither the planet nor we can afford to indulge.

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