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### The Importance of Considering Different Perspectives When Discussing Food Politics

The politics of food are rules and guidelines about food and eating that govern how we eat every day. These rules can be laws enacted by the government, cultural or societal norms that we are expected to follow, or personal decisions we make about food. Restaurants, for example, must follow strict health codes that are meant to ensure the safety of food they serve. Some food and eating politics are not enforceable, but are cultural norms that we are influenced to follow, or choose to abide by. For example, those who practice Islam fast, or do not consume food or drink (as well as abstain from sex and smoking), from sunset until sundown during Ramadan (the ninth month of the Islamic year). There are very specific rules regarding how to fast, and who can or should partake in fasting. These food politics are religiously based, and are followed because of a dedication to the religion. As individuals, we make personal choices and rules about food and eating. A person can decide to eat gluten free because they have Celiac disease, or because they believe gluten is unhealthy.

Some food politics are societal; they cannot be enforced, but are adopted by the masses. Starting in the late 1970's, the "low-fat" dieting trend began, and has continued to influence Americans eating patterns to this day. Ironically, scientists today argue that "low-fat" foods and diets actually make us fatter (Aubrey). But this doesn't change the fact that many people still refuse fatty foods in an attempt to be healthy—the trend was so pervasive that even doctors still recommend low fat diets. In society today, we are constantly seeing new diet fads and food

crazes like this. As a culture we've developed a rather unhealthy relationship with food; we are obsessed with health, fitness, and thinness, and yet we have seem to be experiencing an "obesity epidemic"<sup>1</sup> in both children and adults. For the 30 million Americans struggling with eating disorders, some food politics can greatly exacerbate the symptoms of their disorder, and for some are a major cause of their disorder. Eating disorders are some of the most harmful results of our societies complicated relationship to food. It is clear that in order to change our society's relationship to food, we may need to reconsider food politics we have in place, as well as how we discuss them. The opinions, needs, and experiences of those with eating disorders should be taken into account when considering food politics, because they offer unique insight that may help solve our culture's unhealthy relationship with food.

If you've recently been to a Dunkin' Donuts or McDonald's, you've most likely noticed that there is a number other than price besides your favorite menu item. This number marks the calorie content of the food or drink. In 2014, the FDA decided that chain restaurants of 20 or more locations would be required to "clearly and conspicuously display calorie information for standard items on menus and menu boards" (FDA). This has not always been the case. In 2002, David Zinczenko, wrote an opinion piece for the *New York Times* discussing why he thought it should be mandatory for restaurants to display nutritional information for their food. Zinczenko makes some compelling arguments, particularly regarding the disconcerting rise in childhood Type 2 ("obesity-related") diabetes: "Fast-food companies are marketing to children a product with proven health hazards and no warning labels" (Zinczenko 243). His main argument is that

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<sup>1</sup> Friendly reminder that "obesity" is diagnosed through an equation developed over 200 years ago by a mathematician. Body Mass Index (BMI) is not an accurate method of measuring health. Many metabolically healthy individuals are deemed "overweight" or even "obese" because of an equation that is *only* based off of height and weight. This does not mean that Americans are not struggling with illnesses related to obesity, or that these struggles do not matter. It just means that not everyone who is "overweight" is unhealthy.

consumers deserve to be informed about their purchases, especially when they will *literally* consume the products. Zinczenko's article is missing an important perspective, however. For an eating disorder sufferer, or someone in recovery, having calorie content displayed beside the price of their morning coffee and bagel can be extremely difficult. A common symptom of eating disorders, that has become horrifyingly mainstream, is an obsession with counting calories, and/or other nutritional facts (such as fat or sugar). The blatant placement of calorie content could potentially be triggering to those in recovery, as discussed by Anna Kilar in a blog piece she wrote for the National Eating Disorder Association: "Recovering from an eating disorder involves an emphasis on eating intuitively and listening to your body, and now with calorie information screaming in your face, it presents the opportunity to base food intake off of a piece of data" (Kilar). Displaying calorie information in such a way is not only a potential trigger, but it also tells people that calorie content is the only nutritional information they should care about, and that tracking the number of calories you eat is a healthful decision. In reality, it is far more healthful to eat intuitively, as mentioned by Kilar. A better solution could be a requirement for restaurants to provide detailed nutritional information upon request, or perhaps have it contained in a brochure separate from the menu. That way, individuals who want to see the nutritional information can obtain it with ease, but those who avoid counting calories are not confronted with information they either don't want or don't need to see. With this particular food politic, considering another perspective could have created alternative solutions to the problems Zinczenko discussed in his article.

Vegetarianism is a hot topic in society today. The decision whether or not to eat meat (and for vegans, any animal product) is personal and based off a variety of factors. Some people

avoid meat because of taste or preference. Others decide to adopt a vegetarian diet because it is a good choice for the environment. Many vegetarians choose not to eat meat due to moral convictions. In an article written for *Gourmet* magazine, David Foster Wallace contemplates whether the way we eat lobster is unethical. He spends much of the article describing the unavoidable fact that lobsters show a clear preference for *not* being boiled—while they may not scream, or seem to experience excruciating pain, lobsters will scramble to escape a pot of water, which shows there is something they don't like about the situation. At the end of his essay, Wallace poses difficult questions to his readers about how, if they eat meat, do they deal with it: "...what ethical convictions have you worked out that permit you not just to eat but to savor and enjoy flesh-based viands...?" (Wallace 471). For some, vegetarianism is less of a personal choice based on moral codes but a choice that their eating disorder makes for them. A recent study published in the *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Diabetics* found that 52% of women who had been diagnosed with an eating disorder had been vegetarian at some point. This is a huge proportion compared to the 12% of women with no history of eating disorders that had tried vegetarianism (Jeltsen). Restricting is an eating disorder behavior in which someone refuses to eat or consume food; sometimes this can mean restricting *specific* foods, such as meat. For some people with eating disorders, becoming a vegetarian is an easy way to restrict calories or food in a "socially acceptable" manner. The results of the study do not indicate that vegetarianism is unhealthy or wrong in any way, but suggests to medical professionals that sometimes it can be a symptom of an eating disorder. In the ongoing argument of the ethics of meat eating, it's interesting to consider that for some, vegetarianism is not a choice based on moral convictions but a symptom of a serious disorder.

Considering the viewpoint of an eating disorder sufferer in certain food politic debates can add unique perspectives that otherwise would be ignored. Most people would not consider the downfalls of displaying calorie content in restaurants, but when you think about the potential difficulties this law poses for those in recovery, you can see that there is another side to the argument. Similarly, by adding this perspective to the vegetarianism debate you are able to see a side that most people would never consider—that becoming a vegetarian is not always a choice based on morals, and sometimes it isn't a choice at all. The perspective of someone with an eating disorder is not *more* important than any other perspective, but it is a frequently forgotten about perspective that deserves to have a voice. In any debate, it is important to consider all the opposing sides, and the same is true when discussing food politics.

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