

Response to Michael Pollan's The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals
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I just finished reading The Omnivore's Dilemma. I'm currently 200 miles away from home, vegging out at my grandparents' house. I've had a nasty cold for over a week and have spent a huge amount of time just lying around, either sleeping or reading. Practically all of the remaining time has been spent dealing with food, though, due to the holidays. These are rare circumstances for me, indeed, but this juxtaposition of reading about food and dealing with food has stimulated my thinking about, well, food.

But not just food, because that isn't really what this book is about. Well, yes it is obviously, but Pollan is also using food as a mirror to hold up against society. But *what* society? For roughly the first half of the book, Pollan seems to dwell primarily on corn (though justifiably so) and in doing so manages to address the everyman of America. This part of the book is not universally applicable, but it comes closer than the second half, which becomes increasingly centered on assumptions of privilege that are never really addressed beyond some cursory interactions on Joel Salatin's Polyface Farm.

My grandparents' house is situated in a place called Pleasant Valley, in the Appalachian mountain range--a place potentially in peril of being "fracked." That sounds a lot like the mountain is about to get fucked, and that wouldn't be far off. Fracking is an invasive mining technique that can increase the rate at which fuel can be extracted from the mountain. It can also pollute air and water quality on that mountain (not to mention the integrity of the mountain structure itself)--so much so that areas subject to fracking are often unlivable after the damage is done. Companies who do the fracking typically make huge payouts to landowners for rights to frack on their land, and initially that sounds like a good deal--land which might not have been worth much suddenly pulls \$2,000 an acre just for rights, not ownership. So the original owners retain ownership of the land, get to stay there, and receive a nice sum for doing nothing. Yet the environmental consequences of this payout aren't as seemingly trivial and sentimental as a few polar bears dying or the bald eagles going extinct: the people who originally think they're getting a great deal will end up in deeper poverty, or without a place to live. The land which might not have been very valuable before is now worthless, as its uninhabitable and damaged.

But this is what happens when there is a "cheap" solution to poverty. Writing in more depth about the economic logistics behind industrial food would be writing an entirely different book, but Omnivore's Dilemma brings on a flood of questions about the economics in play here. Of course, economics are not solely to "blame"--if women want to get out of the kitchen, and men don't replace them, there needs to be a faster or easier cuisine. Hello, microwaveable dinners. What I haven't actually said but have been thinking about, though, is how so much of our food decision making comes down to dollars and cents.

One of my uncles used to insist that it cost more to cook at home than to eat out at a restaurant. While that's only true if you count labor cost, he's not entirely wrong in that there *is* a huge cost to eating at home. Pollan addresses many cultural, emotional, and intellectual costs associated with eating through the industrial food chain (which is also possible in one's home, and does not in fact equate to eating at McDonald's, although we like to stereotype it that way--that is to say, it is equally possible to have an industrial-ag produced meal at home), but he glorifies the meal-making to the extent that I think he weakens his claims against industrial agriculture.

One of the biggest assumptions Pollan makes is one I am having difficulty pinning down, but which boils down to (I think) some intrinsic desire for "culture." Intrinsic, that is, for Pollan. I am reminded of Maslow's hierarchy of needs: the first four layers of the pyramid--the largest four--are

all “deficiency needs,” needs which are felt through lack of something (food, shelter, safety, friendship, etc.). Only the fifth, the tip of the pyramid, goes beyond filling a gap: that is self-actualization, and it’s clearly the part of the pyramid Pollan is working on.

You can’t blame him for his privilege, but it is something to be taking into consideration, and I’m not sure he did enough of that as he was writing. Too often his prose leans towards the romantic, and he gets a little too wrapped up in his meal creation. Because food is really lower on the pyramid, down in the most base category--physiological needs--and for a huge part of the world’s population is something that really can’t be taken for granted.

Of course, I come from privilege somewhat like Pollan’s--certainly I come from a family that can afford the luxury of paying extra for organic eggs at the supermarket. Pollan’s book isn’t really about food justice, so I can’t blame him for basically avoiding this issue. However, it’s easy to start picking at his prose in light of food justice issues. When he talks rhapsodically about how the ingredients of his fourth and final meal, the foraged one, are essentially free and mostly require knowledge, he is forgetting another important part of culture, beyond the culture of the table. Eating locally, eating sustainably, eating foraged foods--these specialty dietary habits all form communities nowadays, but they’re pretty exclusive. Pollan is an established writer; he can take off with 48 hours’ notice and pursue mushrooms or wild pigs with a European epicurean with no problem.

For many, access to this community would be impossible. That’s not to say that it isn’t valuable or rich or an important source of knowledge and community--it is, of course it is! However, many of the worlds Pollan delves into would be inaccessible not just to the very poor but even to the “not outgoing” or the “working a regular 9-5 job” or the “woman.” In my own family, most of the men on my mom’s side hunt deer or elk. Had I been born male, I would probably have been offered induction into the hunting rituals they go through. As it is, I’m nineteen and attempting to homeschool myself on butchering. At this point, I’ve started expressing interest--and my parents have started expressing interest on my behalf--to the extent that an uncle at dinner last night told me he has a meat grinder, he’s ready. But gaining admittance to the gender of the family that gets in touch with primordial rhythms isn’t easy.

I thoroughly appreciate this book, but its limitations must be addressed (and I should address them more eloquently than I have here). This book provides excellent insight into why eating is important, why food matters, and how food culture and biology intertwine. But it falls short when Pollan starts cooking elaborately masturbatory meals. That’s a gruesome conjugation of descriptors, but I think it’s apropos. Pollan’s entirely book is okay for “the choir,” but I worry that to anyone not already prepared to accept his ideas, his book could actually weaken the urgency of making alternatives to industrial agriculture. To me, it would be nearly impossible to come away from this book without at least thinking twice about what’s for dinner, but beyond that it risks the more at-risk segment of the potential audience for this book.