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The Politics of Food: An Exploration on the Indigenous History of Four Meals through The Omnivore’s Dilemma by Michael Pollan

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Abstract

*Ecological balance is a dire factor when it comes in contact with the food chain. It commences with the producers and culminates with the detritus food chain. Consumer food systems are classified as Herbivores, Omnivore, Carnivores. Omnivores are the most significant, particularly Human beings who function both as autotrophs and heterotrophs. Have you ever felt the dilemma while consuming food? The dilemma arises as consumers must choose between processed, industrialized foods and more sustainable, ethical options. Comprehending the food web complements in making informed decisions that support both personal health and environmental well-being. This paper centres on the four categories of food chain which prevailed and existing in human diversity elucidated by Michael Pollan in his work *Omnivore’s Dilemma* and his integration of food cycles that supplements the insights from notable authors whose works of non-fiction such as Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*, Dan Barber’s *The Third Plate*, Nina Planck’s *Real Food: What to eat and why* and Robin Wall Kimmerer’s *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Omnivores are baffled on which web of ingestion to be abided in modern society.*

Keywords: Food Cycle, Omnivores, Trends, Colonialism, Corporate

Introduction

The perplexed food style people abiding is elucidated in an intelligible work

Omnivore’s Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals by the American author Michael Pollan released in the year 2006 by the publishing house The Penguin Press. The New York Times named The Omnivore’s Dilemma one of the ten best books of 2006, additionally, Pollan received a James Beard Award for the work. Deciphering the title, Omnivores act as both autotrophs and heterotrophs who are currently in a catch 22 situation on the sort of food cycle to be followed in the modern times. Pollan suggests that the dilemma is popped because of the modern food preservation techniques and transporting technologies that could be resolved by the influence of culture.

Pollan states four types of meal in three food chains in the cyclical novel which are,

1. Industrial food chain
2. Organic and traditional farming
3. Local and sustainable food systems
4. The foraging and wild-food tradition.

Pollan argues that Americans are suffering from mass confusion about what to consume, thrust into persistently swapping food trends and conflicting diets. This is a quirky human problem, since humans are omnivores by nature who can eat most plants and animals and, therefore are faced with the shackles of being decisive on what to consume. This mix-up is especially acute in a country with boundless food choices many of which are highly processed and far removed from their natural origins. In the proceedings of the paper there will be an elucidation of all the food cycles from Omnivore’s Dilemma integrated into the notable non-fiction Oryx and Crake (2003) by Margaret Atwood,

Real food: what to eat and why (2006) by Nina Planck, The Third plate (2014) by Dan Barber, Braiding sweetgrass (2016) by Robin Wall Kimmerer.

Origins of the Food Chains Broached in Omnivore’s Dilemma

In The Omnivore’s Dilemma by Michael Pollan, he traces the origins of four different meals to explore where our food comes from and the implications of our food choices. The origins are broken down into four main food chains:

1. Industrial Food Chain

Main Origin: Corn

Pollan explores how corn dominates the American food system. From processed foods to livestock feed, corn plays a pivotal role. He follows a meal from McDonald’s to show how industrial agriculture is disconnected from nature and heavily dependent on fossil fuels and synthetic chemicals.

2. Industrial Organic Food Chain

Main Origin: Organic farms, but still part of the industrial system. This food is organic in name but often still comes from large-scale farms and travels long distances. Pollan buys a meal from

Whole Foods and discusses how “organic” doesn’t always mean small-scale or environmentally friendly.

3. Local Sustainable Food Chain

Main Origin: Poly-Face Farm (Virginia)

Pollan visits Joel Salatin’s farm, where animals are raised in a rotational grazing system that mimics natural ecosystems. This meal represents a sustainable and ethical alternative to industrial agriculture.

4. Foraged Food Chain

Main Origin: Hunting, Gathering, and Gardening

Pollan creates a meal from ingredients he personally hunted (wild boar), gathered (mushrooms), and grew. This meal is the most direct and personal, raising questions about self-sufficiency and our connection to food.

Each food chain evidentsnumerous insights into the environmental, ethical, and health impacts of what we consume.

Historical Framework of the Novel

The historical context of *The Omnivore's Dilemma* supports to explain why Michael Pollan wrote the book and why its message resonated when it was published in 2006. *The Omnivore's Dilemma* is Pollan's deep dive into this modern confusion: with so many food choices, how do we know what to eat? He presents a historical and investigative journey through the food chains shaping the American diet, asking us to reconsider our relationship with food.

Here's a breakdown of the key historical context:

1. Rise of Industrial Agriculture (Post-WWII to 2000s)

Succeeding World War II, there was a massive shift in how food was produced in the U.S. Synthetic fertilizers (made from leftover bomb-making materials) and pesticides became widespread. Farming became mechanized and focused on high-yield monocultures, especially corn. Government subsidies encouraged overproduction of corn and soybeans, making them cheap and widespread.

2. Processed Food Boom (1970s–2000s)

As corn became cheaper, it found its way into everything: high-fructose corn syrup, feed for animals, and countless processed products. Americans became more dependent on packaged, processed, fast foods. Obesity, diabetes, and other health issues began rising alongside the consumption of these industrial foods.

3. Organic Movement and Its Commercialization

The organic food movement began as a grassroots push for healthier, more sustainable agriculture. By the early 2000s, organic food had gone mainstream sold in major supermarkets like Whole Foods. However, many "organic" products were produced on a large scale and shipped long distances, losing touch with original organic ideals.

4. Growing Environmental and Ethical Awareness (1990s–2000s)

Concerns about animal welfare, climate change, and environmental degradation were becoming more mainstream. Consumers began asking more questions about where their food came from and how it was made.

Books like *Fast Food Nation* (2001) and documentaries like *Supersize Me* (2004) fueled interest in food systems and corporate influence.

Indigenous Food Supremacy and Cultural Heritage

Indigenous food sovereignty is a robust concept that ties together food, culture, land, and self-determination. It is about the right of primeval peoples to define their own food systems including how food is grown, harvested, distributed, and consumed based on traditional knowledge, values, and practices.

For Indigenous communities, food is not just nourishment it is a living part of cultural identity. Traditional foods are fastened to ceremonies, stories, and ancestral knowledge, passed down through generations. Disruptions to these food systems (e.g., colonization, land theft, industrial agriculture) have directly defaced ethnic continuity. Colonization, forced relocations, and residential schools disconnected Indigenous peoples from their land and foodways. Many traditional foods like wild rice, bison, salmon, or medicinal plants have been pushed to the brink due to overharvesting, pollution, and climate change.

Today, Indigenous food sovereignty movements work to reclaim traditional practices, seeds, hunting rights, and fishing grounds as a form of resistance and healing.

Food sovereignty is deeply tied to land rights and access. Without land, Indigenous communities can't fully practice traditional food systems.

Restoring sovereignty over food often goes hand in hand with land back movements and environmental stewardship.

The loss of traditional foods has contributed to nutrition-related diseases in Indigenous populations (e.g. diabetes, obesity).

Reviving traditional diets improves physical, mental, and spiritual health and helps heal intergenerational trauma.

Examples of Indigenous Food Sovereignty in Action

- Seed saving and farming cooperatives like the Indigenous Seed Keepers Network.
- Buffalo restoration efforts by Plains tribes as a cultural and ecological revival.
- Fishing rights advocacy by Pacific Northwest tribes.
- Land stewardship programs that combine traditional ecological knowledge with modern science.

The Power Dynamics Framing How, Why, and Why We Eat

The dispute of ‘what, how, and why we eat’ is not just about personal preference, it is deeply shaped by power dynamics involving politics, economics, culture, and social hierarchies.

Our food systems are conditioned by intersecting power structures economic, political, social, and environmental. These forces determine not only what we eat, but who gets to decide and who benefits. Understanding these dynamics is key to creating more equitable, just, and sustainable food futures. Here is a breakdown of the major forces at play:

1. Corporations and the Global Food Industry

Multinational food companies dominate vast parts of the supply chain from seed to shelf.

These corporations shape diets through marketing, pricing, and product placement, often prioritizing profit over nutrition or sustainability. The promotion of ultra-processed foods in low-income and developing communities can lead to malnutrition and rising health issues.

2. Government Policies and Subsidies

Agricultural subsidies often favor large-scale, industrial monocultures like rice, wheat, corn over diverse or traditional crops. Food policies can reflect urban biases, ignoring rural or Indigenous food systems.

In India, for example, schemes like the Public Distribution System (PDS) have historically focused on wheat and rice, marginalizing millet and other indigenous grains.

3. Caste, Class and Gender

Caste hierarchies in India influence who can cook, eat with whom, and what foods are considered pure or polluting. Class determines access to healthy, fresh and culturally appropriate foods. For many, cheap, processed options are the only available choices.

Gender roles shape who cooks and who eats first; in many households, women bear the burden of food preparation while eating last or least.

4. Colonialism and Cultural Imperialism

Colonialism disrupted local food systems by promoting cash crops and export-oriented agriculture. Traditional diets were devalued in favor of European tastes creating lasting impacts on food cultures. Today, Western diets and beauty norms still influence food choices globally, including in urban India.

5. Media, Marketing, and Social Norms

Food advertising targets emotions and status selling not just products, but lifestyles.

Social media creates pressure to consume trendy “superfoods” or follow certain diets, often disconnected from local realities. Cultural narratives label some foods as “modern” or “backward,” influencing choices and eroding traditional food knowledge.

6. Land Ownership and Access

Who controls the land controls what gets grown and who benefits. In tribal and Dalit communities, loss of land and common resources means a loss of food sovereignty and dependence on external food systems.

7. Climate Change and Environmental Policy

Climate decisions impact crop patterns, food prices, and food security. Marginalized communities suffer first and worst, even though they contribute least to climate change.

8. Economic Exploitation

Small farmers, especially in the Global South, face debt traps, low crop prices, and land alienation. Corporations and middlemen capture most of the value, while the producers often struggle to survive. Workers in food industries (plantations, food processing, restaurants) are often underpaid and exploited.

It led to the Impact of Poverty among food producers, farmer suicides, and growing inequality in food access and wealth.

Conclusion

Technology has made foods that were previously seasonal and regionally available that can be now availed anytime. The relationship between food and society once moderated by culture is now perplexed. The archetypes of food chain is an evolution of food cycle from rudimentary to modern. The culture of passing down indigenous knowledge on food now is at stake. It is the onus of every individual to make their intake proper and keep them fit as fiddle, despite opting lousy food habits.

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