

# FEASTS, FAMINES, AND WAR ZONES



The connections between food, health and conflict have begun to make their way back onto the agenda of geopolitical debate. In a few small steps they will become enmeshed in the politics of greed. President Bush took a break from his war on terror to launch a first strike on unsuspecting and overweight Americans. With one in five US citizens officially qualifying as obese it may be perfectly legitimate for the President to declare a war on fat.

Bush's own eating and exercise schedule is laudable. But even as he urges fellow Americans to regard their body as their temple, people are asking how come all the pews have been sold to the junk food industry.

The powerful trade group representing packaging, processing and snack foods has heavily bankrolled Democratic and Republican campaigns in the USA. Its influence, in Britain and America, reaches more effectively into government than the tobacco lobby. Both are anxious to avoid being taxed, blamed or sued for their contributions to social (ill-)health. They willingly contribute to advertising sport and exercise, but what both industries fear is an audit of damage.

In the UK this manifests itself in the determination to keep 'nutritional value' off the food standards agenda. But without this we will never have a food justice agenda that addresses the needs of the food poor. By allowing the junk food industry to fill the hunger gap, society turned its eyes from the realities of a widening health gap. Now, in an interesting twist to the argument, research has just been published about the costs of conflict that come as part of the same package.

Researchers from Oxford University gave vitamin, mineral and fish oil supplements to groups of prisoners in a high-security prison. It was meticulous research, with some prisoners getting placebo capsules and others getting the vitamins. The results were startling. Prisoners getting the supplements showed an overall reduction of 25 per cent in the incidence of prison conflict. Violent behaviour by them fell by 40 per cent. There was no change in the behaviour of the other prisoners within or outside the trials.

At the press launch, Sir David Ramsbotham, former Chief Inspector of Prisons, took the research findings towards its obvious conclusion: if this was replicated in schools, perhaps people wouldn't end up in prison in the first place. It is revolutionary common sense to presume that if we feed our children well, health, education and society as a whole will all benefit. And the cost? The supplements came to less than £1 per day per person.

Do this in the form of fresh foods rather than supplements and the costs tumble even further. Grow the food ourselves and farmers stay in work, food miles (and pollution) are reduced, and the ties of food accountability between producer and consumer are strengthened and shortened. Sadly the logic of all this is defeated by the potential losers.

Food processors and global agribusiness stand to lose mega-bucks if nutritional standards and food accountability begin to redefine the politics of food. Perhaps this is why Home Office officials were so quick to trash the research as too small-scale to be worth noting, too insignificant to continue. The mentality that boxes in our thinking in this way is a microcosm of what is happening on a global scale and a logic almost certain to drag us into food wars.

African leaders have just come away from the World Summit in Calgary, Canada. They had taken with them a \$64 billion plan for African development and self-sufficiency. They left with \$1 billion and a promise of more free trade. The disappointment was obvious. Africa has been led down this road before. Coffee growers in Burundi, Kenya and Uganda have been fantastically productive. So much so that the world price of coffee has collapsed and they cannot even get a subsistence existence out of selling it to us. It would cost a Kenyan plantation worker two week's wages to afford a cup of Starbucks coffee made from the beans he grows for them.

In Poland, where the country is more or less self-sufficient in food, the EU is demanding radical reform of agriculture to produce for export. Two million (out of today's 3 million) farm workers would lose their jobs. Poland would be thrown into a social and economic crisis, but the West would get cheaper food.

In Andhra Pradesh, India, the UK is pumping millions of pounds into the Vision 2020 agricultural reform programme. It is a plan for intensive agricultural production for export. Some 25 million farm workers will be displaced from the land. You don't have to live in a prison to understand the conflict this will generate. Sustainability of food production, and accountability of food standards, is nowhere to be seen. Africa asked the West for a lifeline - the right (and resources) to be able to feed itself before it has to feed us. They also want consumers in the industrial world to have the right to know what it is we are buying and eating. They believe this would transform the fair trade agenda; that the public in industrial societies would then choose not to buy food we believed would damage the health of those who would eat it or grow it.

Farmers campaigns in the developing world against the imposition of GM crops have worked on the same premise. As long as consumers in the industrial world have a right to know if the food they buy is GM-contaminated they will not buy it. As a result, farmers in the South will not be forced to grow what corporations in the North cannot sell.

How helpful then that officials in DEFRA have been briefing British MEP's to vote against the Socialist Group in the European parliament over GM labelling. The Socialist Group supports the current proposal that all GM products should have a label saying 'This product contains genetically modified organisms'. DEFRA only wants to label those products that can guarantee they are GM-free. It is the politics of non-information, driven not by public interests but by private ones.

There is a common strand that runs from BSE to GMO's, from junk food to food the poor must grow but cannot afford to eat. It is the question of who makes money out of a food culture that generates wealth but not health? Answer that, and you will understand the basis of food (and nutritional) insufficiency. It is why we are more likely to see attacks on nutritional research than a tax on junk food; a blaming of the food poor rather than the politics of food production. Ultimately it is why Bush will be out jogging for the rich but not for the poor.

