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4/4/11

Soul Force through Food: Gandhi's Relevance to the Modern Food Industry

Every human requires food in order to live. With this basic requirement of living comes the issue of how to feed the world adequately. Since World War II, the production of food in the United States has become increasingly dependent on chemicals and industrial farming of crops and livestock. This revolutionary change in food production has had serious side-effects on the planet. The modern food industry has caused an increase in pollution, poor labor standards as well as the increased use of fossil fuels. In response to these problems it is necessary for Americans to move away from this unsustainable method of food production. In analyzing opposition to the food industry, it is helpful to apply the philosophy of Mohandas Gandhi, a major leader in India during the Indian independence movement. Gandhi argued the only way for India to achieve swaraj, or self-rule, was for Indians to first rule themselves. The only way to reach this ideal of swaraj for Gandhi was through satyagraha or truth-force. Satyagraha involves using personal suffering in order to resist oppression. While the aspect of prioritizing ethics over material comforts embodied in Gandhi's philosophy of satyagraha can be effectively used to resist the modern food industry by allowing individuals to use eating as a political act, nevertheless, the success of this resistance also relies on working with the government to minimize the power corporations have over food.

Modern food production revolves around the ability to produce the most amount of food that people will buy for as cheap as possible. With this model for production, companies that

produce food have made decisions which maximize efficiency of production without regard to the external costs to society that do not affect the profits of food corporations. The first external cost is to the rights of workers. Food companies have standardized the production of food so much that they do not need to pay workers very much to produce food. An example of how companies use this to their advantage is a plant owned by Smithfield in Tar Heel, North Carolina. Smithfield attracts illegal immigrants who cannot demand wage increases, or safer working conditions in the slaughterhouse, because they do not have the legal rights to do so. This exploitation of new immigrant labor is exacerbated because Smithfield, which hired the illegal immigrants, proceeds to turn some of its workers in to the authorities to protect the company from being in trouble with the law. These unfair labor practices represent an utter disrespect for human beings and are unacceptable in a fair society (Food Inc.).

The disrespect the food industry represents to life does not end at its workers. The industrial production of food exhibits contempt for the environment as well. It does so by burning massive amounts of fossil fuels, accounting for thirty percent of greenhouse emissions, the cause of global warming. The main contributor to these emissions is the production of meat. The food industry produces more meat than it ever has before. The livestock that is used for this meat produce massive amounts of methane, a powerful greenhouse gas. Besides this direct release of greenhouse gas emissions, feeding the livestock takes more energy. Half of the world's production of corn and 80% of soybean production are used to feed livestock. This means massively more amounts of energy are needed to produce fertilizers, requiring more fossil fuels. Furthermore, much of the Amazon rainforest has been cleared to produce soybeans for animal feed, making the carbon footprint of meat even greater (Koneswaran 579). The production of other food also has large environmental side affects. To produce crops, there is a reckless over

usage of fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides then ever before. These all require a lot of petrochemicals to produce. To meet the demand for certain types of foods year-round, food has to travel further and more often, and more energy has to be put into preserving it. All the energy that now has to be put into food makes it increasingly unsustainable (Food Inc.).

Given the problems that the modern production of food causes, the need for a shift away from these methods is increasingly clear. To determine the best way to solve this issue, it is important to analyze the causes of the production because, as Gandhi put it, “the removal of the cause of a disease results in the removal of the disease itself” (Gandhi 72). The shift towards industrial production of food came during the 1950s and one of the main contributors was the fast food industry. Eric Schlosser, author of Fast Food Nation, explains in the movie Food Inc. that the McDonald brothers decided to produce burgers with an industrial method, making cost of production cheaper than ever before because the cost of labor was much lower, allowing them to sell the burgers at a lower cost. Eventually this restaurant chain became so large that it now buys most of the meat that is produced. Because of the need for meat to be uniformly produced at large quantities, livestock was then produced like a factory, which ended up being more energy intensive (Food Inc.). While this is a good explanation for the rise of factory farming, it underemphasizes the role of the consumer. Schlosser’s analysis does not adequately take into account the fact that consumers wanted the cheap meat provided by McDonald’s. This is analogous to Gandhi’s analysis of why India was colonized in Hind Swaraj. He controversially stated that India was colonized because the Indians wanted what the British offered (39). Because people supported the increased production of goods that both the British and McDonald brothers offered, both institutions were able to prosper.

The factor that caused both colonization and modern food production is modern civilization. Gandhi argues that the devastation of India is due not to the British people, but rather to modern civilization: “India is not being ground down under the British heel but under that of modern civilization” (Gandhi 42). Modern civilization, according to Gandhi, “seeks to increase bodily comforts” and it does so at the expense of morality (37). The movie Food Inc. shows that the food industry exemplifies the ills of modern civilization that Gandhi describes. Gandhi argues that civilization has forced people to work in dangerous conditions for the sake of millionaires, much like the condition at the aforementioned Smithfield plant in North Carolina (36). Gandhi adds that civilization has brought about many new diseases, and Food Inc. argues that modern food production has brought about new outbreaks of the E. coli virus (36). Civilization specifically has changed the way people eat according to Gandhi. He says people used to eat two or three meals of vegetables and bread but now they eat every two hours. This is where the connection to the modern food industry is most obvious. Through the innovations of fast food and factory farming, among other things, people now eat more meat and fewer vegetables than ever before (36). The food industry seeks to give people the meat, salt, and sugar that their bodies want. This attempt to appeal to bodily wants shows that the modern food industry is a symptom of modern civilization, rather than something to be blamed entirely on a specific company or person.

With the root causes of India’s colonization and the industrial system of food production being similar, it is important to consider how Gandhi’s strategy of opposition could relate to this new struggle we face against the food industry. In Gandhi’s opposition to British rule, he proposes a new way of envisioning swaraj, or self-rule. He describes self-rule as “ruling ourselves” (Gandhi 73). For Gandhi, this means that Indians should not focus on removing the

British, but rather removing the Indians' personal desires to have the modern civilization that is brought about by the British. To do this Gandhi, advocated the use of satyagraha, which is sometimes translated as passive resistance, although this translation is not very accurate (85). Satyagraha means to hold firm to the truth or soul. This means that people should not do something they know to be wrong regardless of the consequences (91). The key aspect of satyagraha is that of personal sacrifice of material comfort for the sake of ethics, morals, or truth (90). Satyagraha relies on individuals making personal choices to resist against immorality.

This is the form of resistance that Melissa Orlie advocates in her article "There Is No Alternative." She argues that although many people agree that something must be done to change the food industry, many people feel powerless to act against such a large force. However, individuals are the most powerful because broader institutions are either composed of individuals or cater to the needs of individuals. Governments only have power when individuals recognize it and corporations only develop products that people will buy. Therefore in order to remove the power that either has, people must make decisions regardless of larger forces. In order to combat this perception of powerlessness, people must change what Nietzsche calls their "table of values," or that which determines what people consider to be successful (Orlie). This change reflects Gandhi's argument that we must prioritize our ethical or moral duties over our bodies in order to create true social progress. In the case of food production this strategy is clear. Organic food promises a more environmentally sound product, but usually costs more. Therefore we must sacrifice the extra money if we are to value the environment over our convenience. However, Orlie complicates Gandhi's idea by saying that pleasure can be had from a more intimate connection to food. Her version of resistance focuses not only on rejecting the material convenience and bodily comfort that the industrial food production offers, but also to emphasize

the immeasurable value that traditional food production offers. Eating a home-grown tomato and cooking one's own dinner are both beneficial to the environment as well as intrinsically valuable experiences to humans. While Gandhi advocates a pure rejection of modernity, Orlie advocates a resistance based not only in a rejection of modernity but also in an affirmation of more traditional methods of production (Orlie).

In forming a resistance, it is helpful to analyze what that resistance might actually look like and its potential limitations. The book Appetite for Change, by professor of American Studies at the University of Maryland Warren Belasco, analyzes how movements in the 1960s against the food industry functioned and the results of those counterculture movements. People opposed to the use of toxins in the production of food that came as a result of factory farming started communities that avoided modern food. These leaders, including the Belasco himself, published periodicals and books that tried to reach mainstream audiences on how changing the consumption of food could lead to healthier lifestyles. While these new organic movements gained some popularity, conventional institutions were able to effectively resist the movement in several ways. First, the mainstream food industry had significant allies in the media as well as the federal government. Mainstream media could not bring too much attention to the problems of conventional food companies because that would risk a substantial portion of their ad revenue (Belasco 155). The federal bureaucracy passed measures that kept regulation of food lax and even endorsed mainstream food through the food stamps and school lunch programs (135). The second way the mainstream food industry reacted to the counterculture was through cooptation. Big producers such as Campbell's relabeled food as natural or advertised food through nostalgia that made processed food seem more wholesome (212). The movement did however introduce many positive mainstream developments. The largest mainstream food companies now also

produce the most organic foods and the idea of vegetarianism is now more popular than ever before (247). Ultimately, Belasco concludes that the movement did little to change the food industry.

Belasco's pessimistic view of the 1960s counterculture does not necessarily prove that individuals will never win against more powerful forces. Considering that organic food was only a \$500 million industry while the rest of the industry totaled \$160 billion, the change that the organic movement caused was large relative to its size (Belasco 111). The limitation of the movement does offer insight on how Gandhi's idea of satyagraha relates to this movement. First, it shows that it is a slow process. In Gandhi's analysis of the Indian National Congress, he shows that a few amount of people sacrificed a lot to achieve an ultimately minor gain in establishing the Congress, however this was important all the same (Gandhi 14). In the same way, the counterculture of the 60s established standards for organic foods: a foundation was laid for more widespread change to come. Secondly, the movement reflected satyagraha in its return to primitivism. In using satyagraha, it is necessary for one to embrace poverty. That is what the people in organic communes did in the 60s by leaving modern civilization. At the same time, this movement complicates the idea of personal resistance by placing it in the context of the possibility of cooptation. With this possibility, it is increasingly important for people to be informed of the true conditions of the food industry if it is to be effective.

This need for information represents a limitation to a movement that makes eating the only political act. Chad Lavin, in the article "The Year of Eating Politically," argues that the idea of eating being political is most clear in the movement to eat locally produced foods. Adherents of this movement buy mostly locally to financially support local growers. The local movement's emphasis on farmer's markets and backyard gardens among other things makes the

act of purchasing and consuming political. They also see the government as an inhibitor of change rather than a useful force. The problem with trying to affect change based on consumer decisions is that it ignores the role government can play in helping the situation. This means that it is up to the operation of the free markets to regulate society, and alienates people from their role as democratic participants (Lavin). Without a reliable government to tell consumers what is in their food, it is difficult to avoid the cooptation that was involved against the organic movement in the 60s. If the government is not able to verify what is and is not sustainable, the food industry will simply re-label food as sustainable to satiate consumers. This means that resistance to the modern food industry involves not only personal decisions, but also to use those personal decisions to petition the government to protect the consumers.

As driving hybrid cars, using energy efficient light bulbs, and recycling are becoming popular activities to save the environment, it is easy to overlook the impact food has on the world. Deciding what food to eat is in fact one of the most important and frequent decisions one can make. When we eat something, we are telling companies what are profitable foods, thereby forcing companies to produce them because, just like Gandhi said of the British, “money is their God” (41). We cannot expect companies to change their ways and, with the amount of political clout these companies have, it is reckless to assume government will change without significant prodding from the citizenry. However, the power of holding firm to our own ethics forces these larger actors to respond accordingly, because no matter how much a company can change your idea of what is materially valuable, what is or is not ethical is immobile and cannot be co-opted.

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