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Writing 2

Mackey Versus Pollan: War of Whole Foods

They are two top guns: one a journalist and acclaimed food critic, the other the co-founder and CEO of Whole Foods. While they are both known to be heavily invested in the organic food movement, they each have their individual opinion when it comes to the other. In *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, Michael Pollan boldly casts a shadow over the reputation of Whole Foods and aims to discredit many of its core principles without an abundance of proof. However, in an open letter back to Pollan, Mackey takes the time to clear up some of the pre-conceived notions regarding Whole Foods. Although Michael Pollan and John Mackey may agree to disagree on some of the finer details, they both share some common ground, each with their own dilemma, as they strive to get consumers to believe and participate in the “reformation” of the American food system.

In the chapter “Big Organic,” from *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, Pollan describes what he believes to be the unsavory truth behind Whole Foods. Pollan argues that supermarkets such as Whole Foods make use of supermarket pastoral, “the evocative prose ...elevating an egg or chicken breast from the realm of ordinary protein and carbohydrates into... aesthetic, emotional, and even political dimensions” (134) to mislead consumers to buy their food. Pollan believes that the meaning behind organic has become somewhat lost in translation because of skills of good marketing, which have only progressed our stray into the realm of industrialized organic. While Whole Foods offers a “landscape of reconciliation” between both nature and culture, all Pollan sees is a

contradiction-- a contradiction between the industrialization of the organic food industry, and the pastoral ideas on which that industry was built (138). Pollan believes the industrialization of organic food diverges from its original inspiration to “find a way to feed ourselves more in keeping with the logic of nature, to build a food system that looked more like an ecosystem that would draw its fertility and energy from the sun” (183). Pollan himself does not condone industrialized organics but through his own investigation, he is able to reveal how misleading supermarket pastoral really is.

Pollan visited numerous farms and saw dozens of animals on his quest for the truth, yet at the end of the day, he seemed to be getting the same results. Whether he was witnessing “free range” chickens cooped up in a tiny shed or organic cows standing in their own manure, Pollan had a hard time finding the “organic” that was so proudly boasted on labels. Pollan believes the word “organic” has been stretched and twisted to “admit the very sort of industrialized practices for which it was once offered a critique and an alternative” (184). Pollan reveals that farms are not what they used to be and how they are now “supersized,” much like everything else in the US. He claims that big companies such as Whole Foods do not engage in business with smaller farms because of high transaction costs and the fact that they simply cannot grow large quantities of any one item to meet demand. In comparing a modern day organic farm to a conventional one, Pollan notes, “the crops, the machines, the crews, the rotations, and the fields were virtually indistinguishable (159). Pollan rightfully declares that even though it’s a “greener machine” being put into action on the organic farm, it is nonetheless a machine, another example of industrialization. Pollan condemns industrialized organics because of its lack of sustainability. The reliance on contract workers to pick the produce piece by

piece, the machines to cut greens with precision, and then hundreds of trucks to drive thousands of miles and use fossil fuel energy to get the food to the supermarkets is far from sustainable, which only furthered Pollan's belief that the "process of industrialization...[has] cost organic its soul" (139).

Pollan's claims and accusations did not rest lightly with Mackey, and shortly after the publication of *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, Mackey issued an open letter to Pollan in which he set out to clear up some of the misunderstandings on Pollan's part. Mackey starts off his letter with praise for Pollan, thanking him for encouraging his readers to be more curious about the source of their food. Mackey, however, is quick to question Pollan's intentions and the reasons for him not conducting more extensive research about Whole Foods and its motives. Mackey soon after cuts straight to the chase, countering Pollan's argument that Whole Foods does not support small local farmers, with some statistics of his own. Mackey points out that Whole Foods does indeed do business with local as well as small farms from all over the US and cites that in 2005 in the produce category alone, "45% of our suppliers were considered to be local (within 200 miles) and 34% were regional (within 400 miles)...with 78% of their suppliers/brokers in the produce category coming from independent/family farms" (Mackey). Mackey even goes a step further to cite specific examples of Whole Foods' commitment to local procurement, supporting local shrimpers in New Orleans, encouraging saplings from local growers in their Austin stores, and buying from over 25 small local farms in Massachusetts alone. Mackey also gives the example of Country National Beef, which he believes is yet another example of small family farms being able to succeed in the whole

industrialized business. Mackey credits this fact to further shows the commitment Whole Foods has to the success and also the sustainability of smaller farms.

Mackey also addresses Pollan's specific claim that some of the milk Whole Foods was providing was "ultra-pasteurized." Mackey goes on to explain that they "walk the talk" when it comes to organic dairy with "certified organic, traditionally pasteurized milk" (Mackey). In fact, Whole Foods' private label milk is from the nation's largest cooperative of organic family farmers, CROPP. CROPP owns around 500 small dairy farms, home to an average of only 66 cows per farm. Mackey also explains CROPP's dedication to humane animal practices. Mackey himself has even visited some of the larger organic dairy farms that supply to Whole Foods to ensure that the quality of animal treatment is at the same level as Whole Foods' current organic dairy standards.

Mackey ends his letter once again reinforcing his opinion that Whole Foods has not gone astray from their initial ideas of organic. He writes that Whole Foods has continued to push forward to offer as much healthy, sustainable food to as wide a consumer base as possible. Mackey even goes as far to say that organic agriculture is what it is today with all of its successes because of Whole Foods. He ends the letter with a sort of peace offering to Pollan, suggesting that they together should work as allies to accomplish their combined mission of continuing to look for "more holistic, ecological, and sustainable food systems" (Mackey).

Mackey's response to Pollan was so civil and righteous that for a second I almost forgot Pollan had actually thrown Mackey's personal business under the bus. However outraged Mackey probably was, he didn't get defensive, he remained open-minded, and respectful, which as a reader, did not make me question him as a professional even for a

second. It was impressive how Mackey could so informatively counter each and every claim Pollan made against him and even cite specific examples. In my opinion, Mackey was able to effectively restore the trust that his customers, me as one of them, had in Whole Foods and potentially convert some that were unsure of Whole Foods and its practices. Mackey left me with the impression that Whole Foods does care. They do everything they possibly can to provide their stores with as much locally grown food as they can and try to do business with small farms whenever possible.

Mackey also emphasized that Whole Foods remains an active part of the organic world as a part of the National Organic Standards board, Organic Aquaculture Feasibility Task Force, and they proudly support their own Animal Compassion Foundation. Mackey was able to prove to me that Whole Foods is still committed to the principles of organic, granted it has been industrialized, but committed nonetheless. Mackey made a good point that we as consumers are part of the reason Whole Foods has to be industrialized in the first place. We are the one's that want fresh meat all the time and fruit even when its out of season. Whole Foods is providing what its consumers want; they aren't trying to force feed us anything that we don't want. This is not to undermine the eye-opening account of Supermarket Pastoral that Pollan gives in *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, because I, personally, will never read a label at Whole Foods the same way again, but I have to agree with the many farmers that Pollan met with that unanimously said "everything eventually morphs into the way the world is" (158). That statement is very valid, and rather than take Pollan's approach of possibly preventing the change, we would be better off embracing and shaping the change to our wants and needs.

The end of Mackey's letter specifically highlighted the fact that he and Pollan are actually on the same team. They not only share the same ideals but the same dilemma, as well. Similar to Pollan's depiction of the "omnivore's dilemma" and how it has left the consumer "struggling...to figure out what is good to eat" (303), Whole Foods also struggles with the ethical and moral dilemma of what is good to eat. They are committed at the deepest level to sort our foods that they believe should be eaten and those that shouldn't. Mackey's ability to conceive and express that similarity once again demonstrates his professional demeanor. Nonetheless, through his letter, Mackey really opened my eyes to how Whole Foods has stayed true to the principles it was founded upon, and I was lucky enough to be assured of these principles firsthand on my last visit to Whole Foods.

Wandering the aisles of Whole Foods last week, with my new found appreciation of food, I found myself scrutinizing things I had never even noticed before. As I picked up a carton of eggs, I wondered if the "cage free" eggs were a product of hens that had actually lived a life outside of some crowded cages. I hoped "cage free" was every bit as heavenly as it inferred, but I put them down as my mom dragged me over to the seafood. "I'll take 4 of this one," she told the tall man with long blond hair behind the counter, as she pointed to the bright orange-farmed salmon. Thinking I could now provide some insight to this situation, I opened my mouth, "Wait, shouldn't we get the wild salmon instead?" Before my mom had the chance to answer me, the knowledgeable fish man chimed in, "Actually, our farmed fish is just as good as our wild," he stated, matter of factly. "They are not given antibiotics, growth hormones or fed other animals. These fish were farmed in the oceans of Norway and we actually send people out there to make sure

everything is up to standard.” He told me if I wanted to know more, that I could look up farmed fish on the Whole Foods website. As soon as I got home, I raced to my computer and read all about aquaculture, or the responsible farming of seafood, which also happens to be environmentally friendly. I also came across their twenty-three page “Farm Standards for Farm-Raised Salmon,” complete with a table of contents, and was genuinely impressed with their high quality standards. That night, I was able to enjoy (guilt-free), the best-farmed salmon I had ever eaten.

After all is said and done, is there a clear winner in this debate? I would say no. Each side presents valid perspectives and reasonable arguments. However, putting aside their differences reveals that what they share in common is far more important, restoring the American food system. Pollan and Mackey want people to be interested in where their food comes from and to consider the social, ethical, and environmental impacts of modern food production. They want more educated and informed consumers. They want a sustainable food system. Although they may go about achieving that goal in different manners, they still face a common dilemma of what is good to eat. When it all comes down to it, Pollan and Mackey both agree on the bigger picture, the values of organic and the need for improvement, and in the end, that’s what really matters.

Works Cited

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