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The Politics of the Public Plate: School Food and Sustainability

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Introduction

The topic of this conference – Children, Food and Youth – resonates extremely well with policymakers in the Global North and in the Global South. It even resonates in academic circles, which was not always the case. When we began our work about 14 years ago, I can still remember some colleagues in Cardiff feeling it was something comical, somehow beneath the dignity of academics, to look at such things as school food, the provenance of school meals, and what ended up on a child's plate. At that time it was not seen as a valid subject of academic inquiry, and I am delighted that in recent years the academy has begun to recognize the validity of these issues. Nowadays, such issues are second to none on the academic agenda, up there in the same category with climate change, dignified elder care, and other important public health issues. They are fundamental issues. Thus, if anyone still feels embarrassed in working with school food and children, s/he has no reason to feel like that today, because these issues have finally reached the top of both policy and academic agendas.

The main themes I want to address in this speech are the following: first, I start with where we began 14 years ago looking at the public plate with respect to school food, and I end up looking at cities because this is the transition that I personally did. I started with *school food provisioning* and ended up with *urban food planning* (Morgan, 2009). During this period the school food agenda has moved on and expanded, and it is now connecting with an exciting array of topics to do with urban food politics, policy and sustainability in the food system. This is what I feel is unique about food: its *multifunctional* capacity to link up with an array of other important issues. Clearly hunger and malnutrition are key topics in food studies around the world, but we can never reduce food studies to nutrition or, for that matter, economics. Second, I will address some of the barriers to creative public food procurement. Third, the compelling work of some school food pioneers over the last 14 years will be examined and, finally, I will show some examples of what civil-society groups are doing in several cities with pioneering municipalities, trying to promote sustainability through their food procurement policy.

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The Public Plate and the Multifunctional Capacity of Food

The term 'public plate' is shorthand, or a metaphor if you like, for public food provisioning whether delivered in the form of school food, hospital food, through care homes, kindergartens, prisons and so on. All these are different food settings but they all share one aspect in common. In different ways, they all deal with vulnerable consumers: people, patients, prisoners and pensioners (the 4Ps!). Until we can reclaim the public plate it is necessary to recover two things we are in danger of losing: one is to reaffirm the right to good food (in an era of nutritional poverty); the other is to recover our collective belief in the creativity of the public sector (now being decimated by the 'age of austerity').

As to the first, the right to good food has never been in more need of reaffirming in the world, even in Europe. The rise of nutritional poverty is one of the most insidious forms of poverty around the world today. Nutritional poverty is now an issue in mainstream politics in many European countries (including the United Kingdom) because of the growth of food banks and other charity food initiatives.

Regarding the second, the recovering of public sector creativity, it means that the state and its public organs and entities can play a creative role in addressing these problems and delivering solutions. However, if the public sector is to be creative, it means two things: competence and confidence. Both are currently being undermined in Europe by the age of austerity. I will come back to these points when I look at urban food pioneers. Our food services and municipal policy pioneers are playing creative and innovative roles *despite* the age of austerity and national regulations, rather than *because* of them. And these are some of the challenges that we all face.

As to the first issue I would like to address – the multifunctionality of food – it reveals how food is absolutely unique in its character, unlike any other topic. It is a business, but it is unlike any other business, it cannot be reduced only to market transactions or economic profit. It is considered a basic need opening up important issues such as the need for a balanced nutritional diet, for tackling hunger and malnutrition but also curbing obesity rates and other food-related disorders. And yet, we should not reduce food to just diet-related diseases and other problems. Food is also a joy and a pleasure, and we must not let our narratives of food studies be dominated by narratives of doom and gloom. Food has a unique status in our lives, more important than any other product. I would even dare to say it is more important than iPads and iPhones, although some children and youths would possibly dispute that! Many middle-class children do not know what it is like to feel hunger and they would perhaps change their minds if they did. Therefore, as I said earlier, while nutrition is second to none in importance, food is more than a nutritional issue: it has social justice, economic, ecological, non-human, cultural, sexual, psychological dimensions. It is a truly multifunctional and multidimensional issue.

In fact, there are many lenses through which we can study and understand food systems. Even so, multifunctionality also creates threats and opportunities. It is an opportunity because all these different dimensions come together to reveal what we may call the *convening power* of food. On its positive side, food can bring people from different walks of life together. On its problematical side, all these different dimensions can create single-issue politics. And this may explain why the food movement around the world often finds itself split and fragmented in each of these different policies. The American food movement partially broke up over the divisions between those who supported hunger and those who backed sustainability. There were issues of class and race that were not being addressed in the American

food movement. So we need to create a big tent where there is room for everybody because without it – the food movement – we will never be able to exert its real power. And then, there is the problem of municipalities and their departmental frictions and divisions. All the municipalities I ever worked with have always had the problem of where to locate food policy. And the answer is: wherever it is most advanced! It is a simple answer to a complex question. People come to food from so many different walks of life, from social justice, public health, ecological integrity, agriculture, it does not really matter where you come from. You end up at food and it gets located in whatever office or municipal department is most advanced to deal with it. But we must always remember: it is a multidimensional issue. So let's make food's convening power work for us and not against us.

The Power of Public Food Procurement: Opportunities and Barriers

Before moving on to the third topic – the public plate pioneers – it is important to recognize the power of public procurement, which currently accounts for some 18% of GDP in the European Union. I have always been astonished, ever since we started our work, at the incredible, untapped potential of public procurement. If you think of a government toolbox, it is pretty much the same toolbox all over the world. Governments have certain policy tools that they dispose of: the power to tax, to regulate, to police, the monopoly of violence, and not forgetting the power to buy goods and services – what we call the *power of purchase*. Of all these policies, public procurement has been the least utilized and the most neglected. The people responsible for public procurement in our public bodies have been back-office people, of low status, and they have carried a 'Cinderella' status about them. This is unlike private-sector procurement, which has moved from the *back room* to the *boardroom*, quite contrary to what happened in the public sector. When we first worked with school dinner ladies, for example, they had never ever met the leader of the municipality, they had never met the chief executive of the city council. It is the only service managed and run by women and, because of institutional sexism, it had a low political status. Chief executives did not know how much money they spent on food, not least because it was part of a comical stereotype with which food had come to be associated – something not important, something that was almost incidental in our lives. But those things are changing. So the paradox is clear: although it is a neglected issue, it has an enormous potential to affect social and economic change.

The following is one of the most compelling definitions of the sustainable public plate. It is by DEFRA, the UK Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs:

'If we are what we eat, then public sector food purchasers help shape the lives of millions of people. In hospitals, schools, prisons, and canteens... good food helps maintain good health, promote healing rates and improve concentration and behaviour. But sustainable food procurement isn't just about better nutrition. It's about where the food comes from, how it's produced and transported, and where it ends up. It's about food quality, safety and choice. Most of all, it's about defining *best value* in its broadest sense' (Defra, 2003, emphasis added).

There are two features in this quote that resonate for all of us, wherever we may live or work. The first is the point about the multifunctionality of food, an aspect that I have already alluded to – *however important, we can never reduce food just to*

basic nutrition. The second point is contained in the last sentence: if we are to design and deliver sustainable food procurement policies, we have to frame *best value* in the widest sense of the term. In many municipalities, particularly in the UK and the United States, low cost and low price masquerade as best value. In other words, they preach best value, but they practice low cost. And this is coming back to haunt us now, as the age of austerity kicks in across many countries. And sadly DEFRA has backed off this definition as well. But it is still important to recognize the high point of official thinking on sustainable public procurement.

Below are the main barriers to sustainable public procurement, and many countries around the world have already experienced some of these constraints when implementing public food procurement initiatives:

- cost – perception of increased costs associated with sustainable procurement;
- knowledge – lack of information and awareness;
- risk – fear of innovation;
- leadership – lack of ownership and accountability;
- inertia – lack of incentives;
- legal issues – uncertainty as to what can and cannot be done under existing rules.

Cost is always the first issue that public procurement officers manage to throw back in your face when you ask them why they are not spending more money on better food ingredients, for example. The way they do the costing is such a narrow and desiccated process that they fail to factor in the diet-related costs of processed food or the environmental damage associated with industrial food production and procurement. It is based on very simple, amateurish and narrowed-down cost-benefit analyses. The level of knowledge in these departments is very low and usually they do not take into account the *life-cycle costs* of a product.

And then we have risk issues and legal issues, all of which conspire to prevent innovation. People are afraid to innovate if they think they might act illegally because they have misunderstood European Union public procurement regulations. There is nothing in those regulations that prevents people procuring sustainable food. If only officers and managers have the skills and confidence, the competence to interpret those regulations in a way that the pioneers have done in their creative public procurement initiatives. The key ingredient here is *leadership*. If we have good public sector leadership, all these other problems melt away as they have with our pioneers.

Creative and Sustainable Public Food Procurement: The Pioneers

Over the years we have been working with several pioneering public bodies. It is important to acknowledge this work, not because we consider they can be simply emulated (we can't emulate work practice!), but we can learn from it. We need to acknowledge these leaders because they have actually done it. And the most powerful form of learning is peer-to-peer learning. Some of the pioneers we have worked with were: the city of Rome, the East Ayrshire municipality in Scotland, New York City, Bristol in England, and Malmö in Sweden. Starting with Rome, the numbers were impressive a few years ago: 150 000 meals supplied every day (27 000 000 meals/year); 92% of the meals cooked in the schools; service entrusted to six catering companies but strictly monitored by the centre; 3,500 inspections by dietitians per year; 1,100 inspections performed by a specialized firm in 2005; involvement of

local health authorities; setting up of canteen commissions with the involvement of families. This was the high point of the Roman system. When Roberta Sonnino and I wrote the book *The School Food Revolution* (Morgan and Sonnino, 2008), Rome was probably one of the best school food systems we had ever encountered. It began to unravel and decline after 2008. Why? Because a right-wing mayor came into office and began to undermine the entire system. This is not where we are today in Rome. But you can see the scale of the public purchase, the importance attached to inspecting quality, the involvement of municipalities, and above all, the canteen commissions, which allow families to be involved in the design and the delivery of the school food system. This is what Rome was really famous for: revolutionizing the rating system with creative tendering criteria. In the 2004–2007 award criteria for tendering contracts, only 51% of the rating went to price. Other rating criteria encompassed the environment of those children, the quality of the projects, the training of catering staff, the inclusion of organic foods, etc. All the things that depended upon political support have sadly now begun to unravel.

Another pioneer we have been working with is the municipality of Malmö in southern Sweden (City of Malmö, 2010). This city is part of a national system, free at the point of use, which is very rare in my experience and makes it a very interesting case study. They use a S.M.A.R.T. model, with each letter standing for a particular aspect valued in the food system (Figure 1).

This initiative was driven initially by climate-friendly policies even though the public-health dividend in Malmö was also very important. Why I am so interested in Malmö is very simple: they have a target to go fully organic by 2020 and they want to do it in a cost-neutral way. I had never ever heard of that before, and I thought it was mission impossible. It still may be mission impossible but I am still admiring them and following them. And one of the ways to deliver a fully organic service in a cost-neutral way is largely through a radical menu redesign that reduces meat in the system. When they told me this, I said: ‘It’s like the British campaign for meat free Mondays’. But they said: ‘No, we don’t frame it in a negative way as part of a narrative of denial by denying children meat. We are giving them good food, which means meat and vegetarian food.’ Taking meat out of the diet – which delivers a double dividend in terms of better public health and lower greenhouse gas emissions – needs to be achieved in a positive way. This is also what it will take to make a cost-neutral transition. It will be a truly impressive achievement if they can do it, a real societal innovation, and they have certainly got the competence and the confidence to do it.

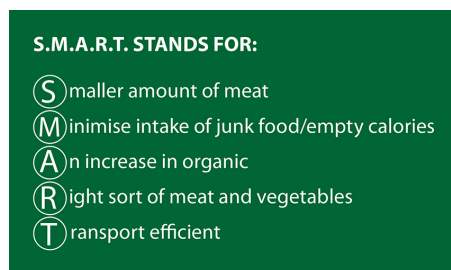


Figure 1: The eat S.M.A.R.T. model.
Source: City of Malmö, 2010.

And competence and confidence are the secret ingredients of public sector creativity. This is my favourite story in Malmö because instead of exalting others to innovate, they are saying: 'we will put our own house in order first'. Before we talk to the private sector, civil society or non-profit organizations, they are saying we will put our own house in order to walk the talk. And they are leading from the front, which is what public bodies ought to do, and what they can do, when they've got the confidence and competence to do so.

I am going to look at the New York City case now because I think there is something extraordinarily impressive and unique going on in New York. And then I want to look at London, to give two examples of how school food is spawning a new urban food politics.

The report *The Public Plate in New York City* (published in February 2014 by the Food Policy Center) is the most recent analysis of the New York public food procurement system. New York City spends something like half a billion dollars every year on its public plate and it serves a quarter of a million New Yorkers every year. In other words, New York City is one of the largest suppliers of meals in the world. It is one of the largest purveyors of school meals in the world. It has an enormous power of purchase, and it is now trying to synchronize its school food policy with a wider array of other policies: with food in the streets, in restaurants, and what children can drink. It is trying to change the climate of opinion in which food is viewed, valued, discussed and consumed in New York. To illustrate, there is a city-wide green gardens initiative that links wider to a green park policy. Thus, it is not a school food policy on its own, it becomes part of a wider urban food strategy. There are also several health campaigns to encourage New Yorkers to drink less fizzy drinks (or soda), which has become one of the most controversial campaigns displayed through the advertisement 'Are you pouring on the pounds? Don't drink yourself fat'. And it is encouraging the replacement of soda with NYC water because 'it has zero calories, it's healthy, delicious and clean', the ad announces. All these health campaigns are linked up with policies that require calorie counts on the menus of food services establishments as well as removing all trans fats from food preparation. I think we can say that New York City is to public health what California is to environmental regulations. These are the leading beacons of public regulation in the United States. This is a good example of what a city can do if it has the ambition to make a difference.

Interestingly, it is also a good example of a counter-rhetoric when Big Corporate Food fights back. A counter-campaign has emerged since these policies driven by Bloomberg, the former NYC mayor, were put in place. Bloomberg is no longer the mayor; he wasn't a particularly radical mayor but he took the city's public health mandate seriously by championing 'good food', trying to eradicate food poverty and reducing the quantities of soda drinking among its population. However, despite all these efforts there was a countermovement emerging and mocking all these health initiatives. A full-page advert in the *New York Times* appeared with Bloomberg dressed up as a 'nanny', personifying the figure of the 'nanny state' with the caption 'New Yorkers need a mayor, not a nanny'. This revealed the backlash of corporate America with this particular advert taken out by Consumer Freedom, an organization that was founded by large corporate agribusiness firms. Not so long ago this organization tried to persuade consumers that smoking was a good habit. This is an incredibly influential organization. And despite its name, which suggests it was founded by mums and dads, it is actually funded by big corporates. And this is the attack they launched on Bloomberg, as part of the nanny state, by sending the mes-

sage that anybody who tries to regulate the market by pushing healthy food will face the wrath of the fast-food industry.

But school food politics are changing. One significant aspect that is driving this change is the fact that civil society groups are adopting new tactics vis-à-vis the local state – from confrontation to collaboration and even co-governance (though this does not prevent them from confronting the local state when necessary). In the past they simply contested, and fought, the local state and demanded this or that. Now they are beginning to enter new engagements, collaborations, and even co-governance arrangements (which is not unproblematical of course).

Such tactics can be illustrated by the work of Sustain and the Soil Association. These organizations are possibly the two most effective food NGOs in the UK. *Good Food for London* is a publication from Sustain (2012), which displays graphical information about a league of the 33 London boroughs classified as leaders (red) and laggards (grey). (London consists of 33 boroughs and food policy is largely devolved to the boroughs.) The tactic here is to name and shame with information that is made visible in the public domain. Whenever the report is out (every year since 2011) they get phone calls from the leaders. In effect we don't have mayors as a much in England, but the leaders of the municipalities ring up and say, 'how come I am at the bottom of the league? I didn't know I was at bottom of the league'. And Sustain is able to say, 'now you know you are at the bottom of the league, what are you doing about it?' In other words, it is a matter of putting information out there, of which the public was not aware. And no leader, by the way, wants to be at the bottom of the league. This is just an example of the tactics Sustain uses regarding school food policy, and they do the same with sustainable fish, fair trade and so forth. So the public begins to be aware of what is going on around that; it is providing an evidence base that people can begin to engage with, and this partly explains the success of Sustain in tackling these issues and being an inspiration to implement change in practices.

Another good illustration of the ways that civil society organizations are changing their campaigning politics is the Soil Association's food policy initiatives. They are implementing one of the finest school food reform programmes in England. For many years the Soil Association was simply an organic certifier and campaigner. However, this organic food body is increasingly recognizing it has to come out of its organic food bunker. Food for Life is the first time the Soil Association has ever come out and embraced and championed non-organic food. Food for Life awards bronze, silver and gold to schools, depending on how much they procure of local, seasonal, fresh, organic food. This is a whole school food policy. It is not just of a few ingredients, it is about enhancing the take-up of school food. It is about offering good training skills and enforcing good quality school food. It is also about sourcing and getting children involved in cooking, in talking about food, in visiting farms. The overall result is pretty encouraging as the evaluations of the programme reveals through the report *Good Food for All: The Impact of the Food For Life Partnership* (Soil Association, 2012). This is the positive side.

Conclusion

Sadly all these little victories that have been made in the UK over the last 10 years are being threatened by the age of austerity. Some of the very best municipalities are feeling that they have to outsource, to privatize their school food services, because they can no longer operate without any public subsidy. And this is an opportunity

for civil society groups to come in and enter an alliance with municipalities, creating what we call, *public social partnerships*. Not public-private partnerships, as we have seen in the past, but public social partnerships where municipalities enter really sustainable food arrangements with non-profit civil society groups (Morgan, 2014). Our work in Cardiff is looking at some of these groups now. Thus, there is an alternative to outsourcing to private companies.

To sum up, over the years I have moved from working on school food policy to the current work on urban food planning. This is a telling trajectory that shows that we need to think about more than the school food service. We need to link those public plates up in schools, hospitals, care homes, prisons, so that we are creating a larger public market that can have more potential to deploy the power of purchase.

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