

Comparing American and French Food Cultures: An Agenda for Policy Research

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Introduction

This paper aims to provide an intellectual justification and roadmap for a comparative study of political institutions and policy repertoires related to food and agriculture policies in the United States and France. I review the literature on French and American food cultures and identify a set of research problems and questions related to how food is produced, marketed, and consumed that I think could be illuminated by a comparative study, then briefly consider what kind of research design would be appropriate for answering them. My goal is to provide the contours for a research project that can contribute a political, policy-oriented dimension to existing comparative work on eating habits and food cultures.

Food policies address many different practices and problems, ranging from labeling and regulating food additives or genetically modified organisms, insuring that the food supply is safe, inspecting slaughterhouses and food processing plants, banning or regulating advertising pitched at young children, specifying the composition of government-subsidized school lunches, prohibiting the sale of soft drinks or junk food in schools, and insuring access to nutritious foods in “food deserts” and among poor populations. Different countries develop different aspects of food policy, focusing on areas of particular concern or activity by interested groups. In this paper, I provide a general overview of such policies, and consider agricultural policies as well as ones that are specifically related to food production, advertising, dissemination and sales. I take “food cultures” as a point of departure, and try to think about how food policies and food cultures connect.

I begin by describing approaches to eating and food cultures in France and the United States, drawing on work by psychologists, historians, anthropologists, and journalists. Understanding food consumption patterns and typical activity levels is important for understanding public health problems related to increasing levels of overweight and obesity and evaluating food and agriculture policies that aim to help populations eat more healthy diets, avoid food insecurity, avoid food-borne illness, label foods appropriately, and encourage people to be more active.

Comparing policy approaches can help us understand political institutions, configurations of political power, and the emergence of policy repertoires that provide the background regulatory framework that influence price, availability, quality, advertising, and concern about health effects of certain foods and diets. (e.g., price subsidies for corn or to support small farms, locating soft drink machines in public schools, decisions to label or restrict foods that contain GMOs, restricting advertising aimed at children.)

I study these two countries because of several pertinent similarities and differences. Both the United States and France are wealthy countries with well-developed agricultural sectors and institutional nodes for researching and making agricultural and food policy. They are also countries where people enjoy eating rich, high fat foods, and ones where the percentages of children and adults who are overweight and obese have been increasingly rapidly in recent years. But they contrast in interesting ways. About twice as many American children are overweight as French ones,¹ and the obesity rate for adults (everyone over age 15) is almost three times higher in the U.S. than in France (obesity is defined here as a BMI over 30).² Although the French diet is high in saturated fat, French

people have lower rates of cardiovascular and other diseases associated with eating a high fat diet than Americans, a phenomenon known as the “French paradox.”³

Further, France communicates expectations about how, what and when one should eat to new generations, while in the United States, few rules, implicit or explicit, govern how people approach eating. Additionally, France treats the increasing obesity of its population as a matter for public concern and action, while the U.S. treats the “obesity epidemic” as a matter for individual effort and self-control, rather than as a matter that warrants collective action to reduce the prevalence of foods high in empty calories or to guarantee that all families have access to affordable nutritious foods.

Such differences suggest that a comparative study of policies related to food and eating in France and the U.S. would be fruitful. But the comparison makes sense on other grounds as well. First, given the salience of agricultural and food issues in the age of expanding waistlines, greater consumption of calorie dense, low nutrient foods, more sedentary lifestyles, and concern about the health effects of populations that are becoming fatter, the field is ripe for a comparative study of food-related policies. There has already been a lot of work comparing the United States and France (see Stearns, 1997; Rozin, 2005; Rozin et al., 2006; Rozin et al., 2011; Druckerman, 2012), as well as a number of recent studies that focus on French and American food and agriculture culture and policy separately (on France, Fischler, 1988; Fantasia, 1995; Abramson, 2007; Heller, 2007; Heller, 2013; on the U.S., Pollan, 2006; Singer and Mason, 2006; Vileisis, 2008). Yet thus far such work has been done mostly by anthropologists, historians, journalists, and psychologists. Although there are political and policy oriented studies of American food and agriculture policy (Nestle, 2002; Guthman, 2011) there are no studies that I am aware of that compare

French and American food policies or the political and policy processes in France and the U.S. with respect to food policy.⁴ Though clearly there are significant cultural differences between the two countries that affect people's attitudes toward food, the policy landscapes are also quite different, leading to different kinds of regulations and laws, and very different attitudes about prescribing what people should or should not eat.

The idea of comparing the U.S. and France began with a set of questions provoked by Michael Pollan's claim in *The Omnivore's Dilemma* that the U.S., in contrast to France, lacks a stable food culture that can help consumers (or "eaters") make intelligent, prudent decisions about what to eat (Pollan, 2006, 2-3, 5). Since reading this and prodding my food policy students to consider what kind of food culture the U.S. has, I have wondered what exactly a "food culture" is, and what role it plays in shaping people's tastes and preferences. Is Pollan onto something in contrasting the U.S. to France? Could it be that Americans lack a set of unwritten rules or norms like those in France that implicitly govern how most French people approach eating? Where exactly do such norms or rules come from, how are they taught and reinforced, and how might we observe and test their salience in guiding most people's food choices? What kinds of variations are there in food cultures, and what accounts for such variations? Evidently some countries have more coherent and effective food cultures than others; why is this? What causes food cultures to break down or become less functional? What forces influence what people eat besides food cultures? What if anything can countries do to establish or reinforce healthy food cultures and provide consumers or eaters with implicit rules that can help them eat well and wisely?

These questions take on weight when we consider that the dramatic changes that have transformed food and agricultural production over the last fifty years. Three major

social changes have utterly changed how we relate to food: the move of women into the workforce, the growth of industrial agriculture, and the proliferation of fast food restaurants. The first change has made the stay-at-home housewife a rarity in most post-industrial countries, leaving no one who is exclusively tasked with planning, buying and preparing meals at home and increasing demand for inexpensive restaurant meals and easy and read-made foods (Fantasia, 1995; Harris, 1985). The second change is an enormous increase in agricultural productivity since the mid-20th century as farmers have adopted industrial agricultural techniques, including intensive use of fertilizers, pesticides, the development of genetically modified seed types that make it easy to apply weed killers like Roundup, monocultures and specialization, intensive animal husbandry in concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) where steers, chickens and pigs are fattened on grain-based and high protein diets, allowing them to quickly grow to market weight (Pollan, 2006; Harris, 1985). The third change is related to the first two. As corn farming has been subsidized and encouraged by agriculture policies in the U.S., farmers grow lots of corn, commodity grain prices are cheap, it has become cheaper to feed animals grain to fatten them for market, and price of producing meat has fallen. Cheap meat and the proliferation of inexpensive fast food restaurants have gone hand and hand, making highly caloric food available to individuals and families who want an inexpensive and convenient meal that can be tailored to each person's tastes (Harris, 1985; Pollan, 2006). As anthropologist Marvin Harris writes, "the rise of the fast-food restaurant was an event that was at least as socially significant as putting a man on the moon.... McDonald's, Wendy's, and Burger King are nothing if not centralized, efficient, and communal-the food is cheap, nourishing, and instantly available in unlimited quantities" (Harris, 1985, 123).

Along with fast food restaurants, cheap industrial food is widely available to consumers at grocery stores, food services, cafeterias, and the like: subsidies to corn farmers in the U.S. have made anything that contains high fructose corn syrup (HFCS) relatively cheap, leading to huge increases in the consumption of soft drinks and snack foods that contain HFCS.

Food Cultures in France and the United States

Given the enormous increase in convenient and calorie dense, nutrient poor foods and drinks, and the fact that most women now work outside the home, creating time pressures that make it harder to shop for and prepare fresh food for meals at home, how are those rules about eating that Pollan and I have dubbed “food cultures” faring? I start with France, then turn to the U.S.

It seems apparent that there are still unwritten rules or norms that implicitly govern how French people approach eating. Numerous sources suggest that French people approach eating with shared expectations and notions of appropriateness about what kinds of food to eat (Druckerman, 2012; Abramson, 2007; Rozin, 2005; Fantasia, 1995). Some detail what sorts of foods French people eat for breakfast, lunch, snack, and dinner, detailing what sorts of foods are consumed, when, and how, and noting variations on weekends and vacations (see Abramson, 2007, chapter 4). Café au lait and a tartine (baguette spread with butter) or a pastry is normal breakfast fare. Lunch is a more formal, sociable and structured meal than most Americans consume, generally a three course meal with an entrée, main course, and dessert or cheese, often followed by a black coffee or shot of espresso. Many people go out to neighborhood restaurants or cafés for lunch, a practice facilitated by employers providing their employees tickets that they can use to pay for lunchtime meals in eligible restaurants (employees buy tickets for 3 euros, but they are

worth 5 euros when they use them to purchase meals, Abramson, 2007). Also common are *cantines* or cafeterias that provide meals at the workplace, at costs about one third of what one would pay on the street, plus lower rates of VAT (Abramson, 2007, 110-11). Like lunches, French dinners are structured in courses (an entrée, main dish, salad and/or cheese or dessert). Usually families sit down and eat together at home, and the evening meal might focus on vegetables and starches a bit more than the midday meal. Often weeknight dinners revolve around dishes that can be prepared quickly, with meals on the weekend featuring more elaborate and time consuming dishes. It is also common to involve children in baking and cooking projects on the weekend, and to enlist them in helping prepare meals and set the table (Druckerman, 2012).

Meals are usually sociable affairs in France; people think it lonely if one has to eat “tout seul,” all by oneself. Snacking or eating between meals is frowned upon. People are supposed to eat three main meals, eat a variety of foods that are reasonably healthful, and to eat in moderation (Abramson, 2007, 111; Rozin, 2005, S110; Druckerman, 2012; Laisney, 2012). Although many people watch what they eat and worry about gaining weight, French college age students and adults do not worry their weight as much as their American peers (Rozin, 2005; Druckerman, 2012). Dieting in the American sense (especially following a regime like the Atkins diet that cuts out most carbohydrates, or purchasing pre-made meals from an organization like Jenny Craig) is unheard of. If people want to lose weight, they usually adjust their portions and activity levels, they don’t cut out entire categories of food.

The fundamental reason why French people aren’t as fat as Americans is due to the fact that they eat fewer calories and get more exercise. Portion sizes are smaller in France (Rozin et al, 2003), people don’t snack much, and French people are more likely than

Americans to run errands on foot or by bicycle and to get more exercise in the course of daily life (Rozin, 2005). French people's attitudes toward food are less fraught and laden with anxiety and self-blame than in the U.S.; people enjoy eating as a culinary and social experience. Food is not used as frequently as it is in the U.S. to pacify children (and adults) when they feel fussy, bored or anxious. People generally accept the notion that it's alright for children and adults to feel hungry before a meal, that parents don't need to stuff something in their babies' mouths as soon as they fuss, or adults to stuff something in their own mouths to allay tension or have something to do. In sum, eating with others at regular mealtimes and moderation about serving sizes and eating seconds are implicit norms.

French attitudes about food as pleasurable are deeply engrained. They are also backed by the formal, institutional value attributed to French food and cuisine. Official documents and commentators alike refer to French cuisine as a "patrimony," central to French identity and pride, and France celebrates a "Week of Taste" (Semaine du goût) every October (Laisney, 2012, 3; Abramson, 2007, 105). Schools (starting as young as babies in crèches) are charged with producing and serving varied, well-prepared and nicely presented meals to children that follow the structure of courses, balance and variety discussed above.⁵ Furthermore, a much higher percentage of the family budget goes to food in France than in the United States (13.8% vs. 5.7%, Rozin et al., 2011), also suggesting that concern with variety and quality underlies French attitudes about food, in contrast to concerns with abundance and choice for Americans (Rozin et al. 2011, Rozin et al. 2006).

The situation with respect to eating tastes and habits in the United States differs dramatically from that in France. In countries like France and Japan, the presence of a coherent cuisine which most native diners regard as delicious and satisfying guides

people's sense of what is a balanced, well-composed, tasty meal (Gaitley et al. 2014; Abramson, 2007). Countries like the United States or Britain, in contrast, never developed an exciting, distinctive repertoire of flavors and corpus of recipes or cooking techniques that virtually all eaters and cooks would recognize or master. (Perhaps this is related to lack of aristocracy—see de Tocqueville, also the theory that *haute cuisine* developed among courtiers). English-speaking countries have a repertoire of relatively bland meat, starch and vegetable type menus that are considered “traditional” (Yorkshire pudding, shepherd's pie, roast beef and potatoes, fish and chips, chicken and dumplings). But several have also adopted a number of different cuisines as part of the national eating culture, including Chinese, Mexican, and Indian.⁶ In the U.S., there are also significant regional variations in terms of how food should taste.⁷

Does the lack of an identifiable, distinctive national cuisine to guide people's decisions about what to eat make a difference?⁸ This is a hard question to answer, but I think that the lack of a core set of distinctive flavors or dishes that people hold up as their gastronomic “patrimony” is not as important as the lack of structure around eating itself. The United States has a food culture that makes cost, convenience, abundance and choice its touchstones. Paul Rozin, a psychologist who studies food preferences, notes in a series of articles he did with research collaborators in the early 2000s that French are more likely to be guided by the desire for unique, memorable experiences and high quality food, and Americans to value large quantities of food, greater choices among menu items or combinations, and feeling that they get a good deal when they go out to eat (Rozin et al., 2003; Rozin, 2005; Rozin et al., 2006; Rozin et al., 2011). Rozin et al. document that French people value moderation in their approach to food, and rarely eat between meals.

Americans, on the other hand, are much less likely to sit down with their families or with friends for a freshly cooked meal at home, and when they do sit down to eat, they spend much less time eating a meal than their French counterparts.⁹

Trying to describe a typical American dining day is harder than it is for French people, because there is much less of a shared notion of what composes an ideal or typical breakfast, lunch and dinner, and much less in the way of shared eating patterns. Most Americans probably eat a breakfast that is easy and quick to prepare, like toast and coffee, but cereal, juice, pastries, and heavier fare are also common, and about 10% of Americans skip breakfast altogether (Daily News, 2011). Lunch is often a simple, fast meal like a sandwich or leftovers brought from (or eaten at) home, but again there is enormous variation in what, where and how people eat at midday. Some eat in school or workplace-based cafeterias, some hop in the car and use a drive-through lane to purchase some form of fast food, some go out to lunch at a restaurant and have a relatively leisurely and sociable lunch, and many eat something at their desk while continuing to work. Dinner is generally the largest meal of the day, and the one where family members are most likely to sit down and eat a meal together. If they eat homemade food, they probably follow the French pattern of cooking something not terribly elaborate that can be prepared fairly quickly, with some balance between protein, starch and vegetables (but almost never served in courses). Many American families are moving in several directions at once, and meals may be geared to making sure that each person gets something to eat before they bolt out of the house to get to school or work, or to engage in an after-school or –work activity. Families eat out about twice as much in the U.S. than in France,¹⁰ because it is inexpensive, allows each family member to order something that he or she feels like eating, and requires no

preparation or clean up (such meals occur at restaurants ranging from fast food to fancy, though take out and fast food venues—pizza, burgers, sandwiches, etc.—predominate because of cost and convenience). Like French households, Americans are more likely to cook elaborate or time consuming meals on the weekend, and more likely to invite friends or family over for a meal then. Americans are also likely to “cook ahead,” making large amounts of whatever they make to eat on the weekend or cooking extra meals, with the plan to refrigerate or freeze them and eat them later in the week.

It is worth comparing the American and French approaches to feeding children in childcare centers, preschools and schools.¹¹ French schools, crèches and preschools pay careful attention to what they feed children (and even more so babies and toddlers), with a view toward exposing them to a variety of different dishes, planning meals that are balanced and well-made, and teaching them to appreciate delicious meals made using varied ingredients, prepared in many styles. American schools, and perhaps even more so childcare centers and preschools, offer food that is easy to prepare and likely to be appeal to kids: chicken nuggets, cheese sandwiches, pasta, pizza, most of it pre-made and only requiring a brief spell in the microwave oven or some easy assembly before serving. Compared to France, few belong to larger distribution or planning networks, as most childcare centers are private, for-profit operations that deal with food on site, and school districts are usually organized at the level of the city or county, or even sub-municipal level in large cities. Twenty or thirty years ago, most public schools had functioning kitchens and cooks who planned and made food on-premises, but budget constraints have pushed most school districts into subcontracting food provision to catering companies. It is not unusual to see a fast food franchisee operating on the premises of a large high school,

offering students food that they would choose for themselves if they were free to seek lunch off campus. Also popular are convenience foods that only require some heating to be ready, like “Hot Pockets” or burritos. One side effect of providing predictable, well-liked, branded entrées to school children is that children learn to like and expect such food, and to be even more deeply suspicious of foods that are not part of their typical repertoire of foods, including vegetables of every sort.

Saving time by buying food that is already prepared means that food is likely to be mediocre in quality, and to substitute time-saving versions of food for tastier, more nutritious ones, for example, frozen fruit salad instead of cut up pieces of fresh fruit. Children are likely to be offered easy, predictable versions of vegetables (cut up or baby carrots, snap peas, canned corn), and they are not likely to be pushed to taste foods that are new to them, certainly not ones that might be somewhat challenging for kids, like Brussels sprouts or spinach. Very few who are connected to planning and providing school lunches are worried about the narrowing of American tastes and the increasing unwillingness of American eaters to try tasty, nutritious food (but see Cooper, 2007).

The approach to eating that unites Americans seems to be practical and unfussy: avoid fights over food by relying on food that the children will eat that doesn’t take much time to prepare and doesn’t cost much money. Avoid the work of shopping, cooking and cleaning up by eating out often, which allows each family member to order a dish she or he likes and can be done affordably at fast food outlets. Rely on take-out and pre-prepared foods that require little time to heat or cook. One can even purchase planned diets like “Lean Cuisine” and others of the same ilk that can be purchased on line and delivered to one’s home. The ultimate convenience food is the “100 calorie pack” which contains a pre-

measured amount of a snack food, the aim apparently being to be able to identify a standard product and know exactly how many calories one is consuming, not to choose a food that is fresh and delicious. Many Americans are attracted to and rely on diets that offer simple formulae for constructing “healthy” meals: for example, the South Beach diet, the Paleo diet, and the Atkins diet all recommend cutting out carbs and emphasizing proteins and vegetables.¹²

When eating is individualized and geared toward grabbing something to eat “on the run,” e.g., while driving, working or multitasking, norms about not eating between meals and only eating with others in sociable contexts are weak or nonexistent. Small wonder that snacking and eating between meals have become usual, unexceptional, certainly not something anyone would be embarrassed by. The notion that people should only eat at three distinct mealtimes, relishing well-prepared meals served in courses, and not eat between meals, seems absurdly limited to most Americans, who take grazing in front of the refrigerator and eating to soothe themselves (whether because they’re bored, anxious, or stressed) to be completely normal, if not exactly admirable.

A study that examined the standard portion sizes available in French and American grocery stores (e.g., for one serving of yogurt, or a soft drink), restaurants, and recipes in cookbooks found that the American portion sizes are consistently quite a bit larger than the French ones. If one and half times as much food is presented as a standard serving size for Americans, the consequence is that Americans end up eating a lot more calories than French people (Rozin et al., 2003). One conclusion the authors of this study draw is that there are ecological reasons why Americans end up eating more than French people: they are presented with more food in their yogurt cups, their soft drinks, and on their plates,

and it feels normal to eat or drink up what one is presented with as a “serving.”¹³ Similarly, opportunities for getting around on foot, running errands, going shopping, walking up stairs, walking to and from subway or bus stops, and the like also suggest ecological or environmental reasons for why people may find it easier or harder to get exercise in the course of the day. It appears that French people do more of their errand running on foot than Americans, who are very likely to use their cars to get to stores, work, schools or restaurants (Rozin, 2005).

In sum, basic eating patterns and attitudes toward food differ in fairly marked ways in France and the United States, and there appear to be marked differences in the structures or unspoken rules that govern eating habits, what I’ve referred to above as “food cultures.” People in France eat at mealtimes, avoid snacking, enjoy high quality food in moderate portions, and get a bit more baseline exercise than most Americans. People in the U.S. are less tied to official mealtimes, less sociable eaters, more likely to eat while they’re doing other things, snack and eat for reasons related to anxiety or boredom, value cost, abundance, and convenience over quality and composition, and tend to be more reliant on their cars to get around (hence get less exercise in the course of the day). Where do these contrasting “food cultures,” or approaches to eating and meals, come from? One could simply say that it’s definitional, that countries develop specific cultural values that are irreducibly different, but I think eating habits and tastes do with the way food choices are structured as well. Discussing the spread of fast food chains in the U.S., Marvin Harris has written that “what is good to eat is what is good to sell” (Harris, 1985, 128). He shows that Americans did not eat more beef than pork until the 1950s, noting that the invention of refrigerated shipping at the end of 19th century and the ability to produce beef

cheaply by feeding steers corn-based diets in feedlots increased demand for beef and made possible cheap, car-oriented fast food restaurants (Harris, 1985).¹⁴

Food and Agriculture Policies in France and the U.S.

I think that the French preference for high quality food eaten in moderate, well-balanced meals, and the American practicality about eating food that is cheap and convenient are reinforced by agricultural and food policies, and I will give some examples of how this works in the next few paragraphs.

Despite my admiring gloss on French food culture, French norms of eating three well balanced meals in a leisurely way and not snacking or eating between meals are eroding. French researchers and policy makers worry about the country's increasing rates of obesity and overweight, and the emergence of food insecurity as an issue (Caillavet et al., 2011; Laisney, 2012; Beck, 2013). In a study for the World Health Organization on improving the lives and children and young people, Beck et al. discuss the marked tendency among many children not to eat fruits and vegetables on a daily basis, and the increases in the amount of time that children and adolescents spend on sedentary activities like watching television and sitting in front of their computers. In 2013 the average reported time on such activities among children was 5.5 hours a day, making French children among the most sedentary in the world (Beck et al. 2013). There is widespread awareness and concern about the fact that weight gain is related to class and education: French surveys indicate that obesity is higher among families where parents are unemployed or where the food budget is limited, and the amount of time spent in sedentary activities is also related to class (Beck, 2013, 34; Caillavet et al., 2011).

Beck et al. discuss the programs undertaken by the French government to address growing obesity rates, noting that “the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Education formed a partnership in 2003 to reinforce schools’ role in health education. It aimed to define common objectives to promote child and adolescent health and develop coherent actions in priority areas. Promoting healthy eating and physical activity are two such priorities” (Beck et al, 2012, 35). The interministerial partnership devised a national food guide based on objectives set out by the Programme National Nutrition-Santé (National Nutrition and Health Program, PNNS) in 2002, which offer information on food choices and what a “balanced diet” means (versions of the guide have been developed for parents, health professionals, and adolescents). In the same vein, the Institut National de Prévention et d’Éducation pour la Santé (National Institute for Prevention and Health Education, INPES) published a multimedia nutrition education tool for students aged 11–15 titled ‘Fourchettes et baskets’ [“Forks and sneakers”] in 2006. This tool aims to educate “education and health professionals in school settings and ... to encourage students to develop a critical attitude towards the links between their environment and eating habits and to enhance their abilities to make healthy choices adapted to their needs, tastes and habits” (Beck et al, 2012, 35-6).

In addition to nutrition education, the Ministry of Education regulates what is served in school lunch programs, endeavoring to maintain well-composed meals which feature fresh vegetables and fruits (see Beck et al., 2012, 34-35, and n.33, cited on p. 34). The French government removed all soda and snack machines from the middle schools and high schools in 2004; prior to the decision to remove them, only one fifth of middle schools and half of all high schools had such machines (Cherfils, 2010).

France also regulates advertising of foods and drinks that are aimed at children and adolescents. Under the Public Health Policy Act and the Social Security Financing Act of 2004, “advertisements for soft drinks and manufactured food products are required to include a message promoting healthy eating and direct consumers to a dedicated web site, or else the advertisers must pay a tax” of 1.5% of the annual expenditure on the advertisement.¹⁵ The website to which consumers are directed is “Manger Bouger” (<http://www.mangerbouger.fr>), as in the expression “manger bien, bouger plus,” “eat well and move more.” It is managed by the PNNS, the National Health and Nutrition Program (Beck et al., 2012, 34-35).¹⁶ This all sounds very progressive and interventionist, until one realizes that the French government had originally proposed to *ban* advertising aimed at children for high calorie, nutrient poor foods. But under pressure from advertising and food industry trade associations, it watered the law down into the requirement that ads either include a nutrition education message, or advertisers pay a small tax (Hawkes, 2007, 1965, 1968).

There are a lots of other food and agricultural policies in France, ranging from the requirements to receive labels like “appellation contrôlée” for wines or “Agriculture Paysanne” to indicate products that have been made according to traditional food culture or techniques (this label was devised by the Confédération Paysanne, a radical farmers’ union, not the national government, Heller, 2007, 609), to policies that address food insecurity among the poor, to contested rules about genetically modified organisms (GMOs),¹⁷ to a variety of payments and subsidies for farmers, some administered through the EU-wide Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), others through French agricultural institutions like SAFER (Société d’Aménagement Foncier et d’Etablissement Rural) and the

CDOA (Commission Départementale d'Orientation Agricole). According to INRA (Institut National de la Recherche Agronomique) scientists, SAFER and CDOA have played important roles in helping to control farmland exchanges to keep farm size inequality from changing much over the period from 1970 until 2007 (Piet et al., 2011, 15, 24-5).

I am still learning my way through the thicket of EU and French agricultural research and policy, so I will venture only a few simple observations. First, it is clear to me that debates about industrial agriculture (the trademarks of which include large scale farming, specialization, using inputs like pesticides and fertilizers, openness to GMO seeds, and CAFOs) are fierce in France. As in the U.S., there are ongoing discussions about humane and sustainable approaches to animal husbandry, but debates over efficiency vs. more traditional, small-scale, craft-like approaches to farming arouse more public interest than in the United States. The agricultural sector is vitally important in France, and the Ministry of Agriculture and its chief research institute, INRA, are huge and well-funded. Both these key institutions seem to be on the same page with “mainstream” or industrial agriculture, represented by the biggest of the farmers’ unions, the the Fédération National des Syndicats Exploitants Agriculteurs (FNSEA, literally, the National Federation of Farmers' Unions. It is the main national farmers’ union in France). But countermovements are more organized and visible than in the U.S., especially Confédération Paysanne, which represents about 20% of French farmers and favors a more sustainable, small scale approach to agriculture. And French consumers seem more willing to pay a premium for high quality (fresh, organic, sustainable) food than Americans.

On the food policy side, France appears to be more proactive than the U.S. about intervening on behalf of children’s nutrition, but not necessarily more effective in doing so.

They have a national apparatus for making education policy (the Ministry of Education), so devising national level policy and disseminating it to all schools is far easier than in the U.S. (more on American policy in a moment). Thus deciding to remove soft drink and junk food vending machines from public schools was readily accomplished in France once a consensus about combating the obesity epidemic there emerged. Ditto with the educational campaigns described above that aim at getting young people to eat more vegetables and get more exercise, and the ability to compose well-balanced school meals. But removing advertising for high calorie, low nutrient sodas, drinks and treats aimed at children was not so easy; the law that aimed to do so morphed into a gentle warning that must be added to such commercials, directing watchers (children!) to the Manger Bouger website, with small penalties for failing to add the pro-nutrition message.

Obesity and overweight rates have increased markedly since the 1980s in the United States.¹⁸ Although obesity and overweight rates among Americans are among the highest in the world, the public health discourse about the obesity epidemic is quite different than that in France. Many scholars have documented the fact that advertisers spend huge amounts on television and other kinds of advertisements for foods and drinks that are aimed at children (\$1.6 billion to promote products to children age 17 and younger in 2006, FTC, 2008a). Children are exposed to some 40,000 advertisements per year, and 72% of them “are for candy, cereal, and fast food” (Mello et al., 2006, 2601). Describing how advertisers appeal to children, Harris et al. write

Snacking at nonmeal times appears in 58% of food ads during children’s programming, and only 11% of food ads are set in a kitchen, dining room, or restaurant. In addition to good taste, the most common product benefits

communicated include fun, happiness, and being “cool.” Even during preschool programming on sponsor-supported networks, fast-food advertisers predominate, and their promotional spots associate fast food with fun and happiness. Child marketing makes clear that it is exciting, fun, and cool to eat great-tasting, high-calorie food almost any time or anywhere, and there are no negative consequences for doing so (citations omitted, Harris et al., 2009, 213).

Regulating such advertising has been next to impossible. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) initiated an effort to make rules governing children’s advertising in 1978. When it appeared that it might succeed in banning all food advertising aimed at children under age 8 as well as advertisements for sugary foods aimed at children between ages 8 and 11, the food industry pressured Congress, arguing that the rule would violate their First Amendment rights. Congress responded by removing the FTC’s authority to make rules directed at protecting children (Harris et al., 2009, 220; Mello et al., 2006, 2605). Now the FTC’s role is one of watchdog, writing occasional reports on how well the food and advertising industries comply with voluntary efforts to police advertising aimed at children (FTC, 2008b; FTC, 2012). The most recent of these reports documents efforts under the Children’s Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative, which was launched by the Council of Better Business Bureaus in 2006 (FTC, 2012, ES-1). The most recent FTC report finds little change in advertising behaviors from 2006:

In 2009, the 48 reporting companies spent \$1.79 billion on youth marketing, a 19.5% drop in inflation-adjusted expenditures compared to 2006. Of the \$1.79 billion, \$1 billion was directed to children ages 2-11, and \$1 billion was directed to teens ages 12-17, with \$263 million overlapping the two age groups. For those food

and beverage products promoted to children or teens, the overall expenditures for promotional activities directed to *all* audiences, including additional adult-oriented marketing, was \$9.65 billion, slightly less than the \$9.69 billion spent in 2006.

Therefore, the expenditures directed to those between the ages of 2 and 17 represented 18.5% of all consumer-directed marketing expenditures for those products, down from 21.6% in 2006 (FTC 2012, ES-2).

There is more ambivalence about intervening in individual decisions about what to eat in the U.S. than in France and other European countries, on the grounds that interfering with the free flow of information is paternalistic (Harris et al., 2009, 218). On the other hand, children are vulnerable to advertising, and their eating habits tend to persist throughout their lives, so many think that restricting advertising is appropriate (Mello et al., 2006, 2602). Reviewing cross national efforts to regulate advertising aimed at children, Corinna Hawkes writes in the *American Journal of Public Health* that it is more common to see self-regulation by industry than laws passed by national governments prohibiting or regulating such advertising (Hawkes, 2007, Fig 1, 1964).

Because the United States has a federal system where educational policy issues are mostly handled at the state and school district level, decisions about eliminating soft drink and snack machines from public schools are more piecemeal than in France. Mello et al. report that about 60% of American middle schools and high schools sell soft drinks from vending machines on campus, and the practice is abetted by the fact that the soft drink companies pay the school districts for their “pouring rights” (Mello et al., 2006, 2603; Nestle, 2007. Note however that school districts across the country are debating whether

to retain soft drink machines, and that many have decided to remove them, Hawkes, 2007, 1966-7).

The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) administers the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP), both of which provide meals to students whose families fall below a set income threshold. About 32 million children eat free or subsidized lunches under the NSLP, which cost approximately \$11 billion in 2012. The nutrition standards set by the USDA for subsidized school lunches was revised in 2012 in response to pressure from first lady Michelle Obama, the first such revision since 1997. The “Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act” was the name of the law that revised the NSLP. It doubles the amount of fruits and vegetables in meals, requires that all grains that are served must be whole grains, that cafeterias serve only low fat milk, and that there be substantial reductions in trans fats, calories, and salt. It is estimated that these changes in the NSLP and SBP will add \$3.2 billion to the cost of these two programs (raising it from \$11 to \$14.2 billion, Nixon, 2012).

Agriculture policy makes it profitable to grow vast quantities of corn because of price guarantees passed back in the 1970s under USDA Secretary Earl Butz. This kind of agricultural support has had an important but different impact on food production compared to France: whereas French and EU-wide CAP agricultural subsidies have kept farm size inequality relatively stable since 1970, American subsidies to grain farmers during the same period have pushed the process of consolidation toward fewer and much larger farms, and have provided incentives to grow corn rather than varied crops (like vegetables). What this means is that there are more small French farms producing a more varied set of crops (and receiving government support for doing so) than in the U.S., which

produces vast quantities of corn that is used to manufacture a variety of foods and to feed livestock. The downstream consequences of these patterns of subsidizing farmers are rather striking: Americans eat a lot of meat, especially beef (though beef consumption has fallen in both the U.S. and France since the late 1970s), and consume a lot of prepared food and soft drinks, compared to French people, who eat roughly the same proportions of vegetables to meats they have for the last fifty years (Laisney, 2012, 10, graph 4). A *New England Journal of Medicine* article focused on policies to address the obesity epidemic in the U.S. ends by noting that rising obesity rates are related to subsidies for corn:

We have focused on affirmative measures that the government could take to curb obesity, but the removal of existing policy incentives that operate to the detriment of this goal may also be effective. A large body of literature discusses the role that agricultural subsidies play in shaping the nation's food supply and the prices of foods with high sugar content relative to more healthful foods. Removing these subsidies is politically problematic, but doing so could alter the food environment considerably (Mello et al., 2006, 2607-8).

In sum, both France and the U.S. strongly support farmers, though they do so in different ways, and with different consequences. Both countries have addressed the public health problems related to increasing rates of overweight and obesity, and have used similar tools to do so, trying to reduce and regulate advertising directed at children and to introduce healthier foods through school lunch programs. France has been more proactive about eliminating soft drink and snack food machines from schools, and has been more directive with its nutrition education programs in the schools than the U.S., and its law regulating advertising aimed at children goes further than the efforts taken by the FTC in

the U.S. to encourage voluntary self-regulation by the advertising industry. I conclude by connecting the policy environment back to the issue of food cultures, and setting out some researchable questions that remain to be answered.

Conclusion

Many are inclined to think that food tastes are fundamentally cultural and beyond the influence of policy interventions, and there is something to that position. National cuisines are cultural artifacts that evolve slowly and that in many countries guide people's tastebuds. But food cultures are more than cuisines: they tell us about implicit norms about sitting down to meals, how meals are served, eating together or alone, snacking between meals, how to introduce babies to new foods, and much more. Although they are cultural artifacts, these cultures are susceptible to influence based on the availability and price of particular foods, advertising that aims to interest consumers in eating, and in consuming particular foods or drinks or patronizing particular restaurants, as well as shifting lifestyles (working mothers, families running in several directions at once). Somehow, France's food culture has been much more steady, in the sense that it has not changed much, and in the sense that it has a steadying influence, than the U.S.'s, which provides comparatively few cues about healthy ways to approach food and eating, and to embrace cost, convenience and choice. In part this is probably due to the individualism and independence that Americans embrace as part of our national identity: the idea that policies or laws could limit our access to particular foods, or make them more expensive through taxes, or even that we ought to limit commercial messages aimed at young children, strikes many as offensive and paternalistic.

But policy choices and configurations of political power make a difference here too: the vested interests in American agriculture and food policy that favor cheap corn are very powerful, as are the interests in advertising and marketing meat and foods that contain HFCS and other corn products. The structure of national, state and local government institutions that can regulate and pass food-related laws in the interest of protecting the public health are also crucial to understanding what kinds of measures the U.S. could take to address mounting obesity rates. Comparing these to the powerful interests at stake in France (where farmers are also influential), and the national ministries, agencies, and research institutions there which can influence food and agriculture policy (and the European Union level ones), is potentially quite useful for gaining perspective on the policy and political approaches available in different national contexts. I conclude by proposing three comparative questions that I think would be especially useful to research.

Frist, what are the biggest food problems as experts and the lay public see them? How urgent are these problems, and what evidence is there to support taking them seriously? (I think the obesity epidemic is the 300 pound gorilla in the room, but obviously there are issues related to food safety, GMOs, humane treatment of animals, etc.)

Second, what policies are being or have been devised and implemented to address these problems? What government agencies, at what levels, are responsible for these policies, and how competent are they of drafting and implementing effective laws or regulations, in terms of financial and administrative resources, and in terms of the power of relevant stakeholders? (I would particularly like to explore the per capita expenditures on television and other media advertising for food, especially junk food, in France and the U.S., to probe the connection between advertising and consumption patterns.)

How (in)tractable are the food and eating issues and problems identified above? What can be done to address changing people's tastes, or to regulate the advertising that creates (or at least influences) needs and tastes? (This invites us to consider issues of paternalism and laissez faire markets, and whether to think of food choices as individual or socially constructed: as Tony Blair, former prime minister of the UK, put it, "Our public health problems are not, strictly speaking, public health problems at all. They are questions of individual lifestyle—obesity, smoking, alcohol abuse, diabetes, sexually transmitted disease . . . —they are the result of millions of individual decisions, at millions of points in time" (quoted in Harris et al., 2009, 218).)

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Endnotes

¹ The measured overweight rate in 2010 among children was 30% in the U.S., and half that (15%) for children in France. The US has the fifth highest rate of childhood obesity among forty nations reported in the OECD study cited here, while France is the sixth lowest in the same ranking, OECD 2013a.

² France's obesity rate was 12.9% in 2011, putting it in twelfth place out of forty countries, while the rate in the U.S. was 36.5%, making it the country with the highest percentage of obese adults, OECD 2013b.

³ Paul Rozin, a cultural psychologist who has written extensively about French and American eating habits, reports that mortality rates from cardiovascular disease are significantly lower in France than the United States for men ages 35-64, even though the French men had somewhat higher cholesterol levels. But Rozin also notes that the French were thinner: in 2002-3, 68% of American men and 51% of women had BMIs over 25, vs. 49% of French men and 35% of women (Rozin, 2005, S109). The theme of the "French paradox" appears regularly in articles and books that try to explain why mortality rates from heart disease and cancer are lower in France even though people eat a relatively rich diet.

⁴ However there have been fruitful comparisons of the U.S. and France (and other countries) with respect to childcare (Morgan, 2005) and work-family policies (Boling, forthcoming), which is one of the reasons that I think such a comparison in the realm of food and farm policies would be useful.

⁵ Pamela Druckerman describes sitting in on the bimonthly meeting where menus for Paris crèches are decided, and it's clear that the committee that decides this considers variety, exposing children to new foods, finding new and appealing ways to introduce foods that children didn't like the first time around and so on (Druckerman, 2012, 206).

⁶ I don't know enough about Australia, New Zealand, or Ireland to speak to their food traditions, but Canada, the U.K., and the U.S. all have developed widespread interest in and liking for ethnic cuisines of differing kinds.

⁷ Although the traditional food culture of the US is amorphous, there are a variety of traditions and approaches to cooking, e.g., *Sunset* magazine-style cooking that revolves around fresh ingredients, vegetables, grilling, salads, lighter foods and borrowing heavily from western and southwestern cuisines like Asian and Mexican foods; the *Southern Living* approach, centered around heavier fried foods, biscuits, savory renditions of meat and chicken, vegetables that cook for hours with a chunk of bacon or other fat; New England style food (fish, meat and potatoes, baked beans, clam chowders); urban northeast strands (Jewish food, bagels, delis, eastern European fare, hoagies, cheese steak sandwiches, Italian foods of every ilk, delight in experimenting with varied ethnic cuisines). I'm harder pressed to identify an identifiable Midwestern approach to food and ladies' magazines that expound it, although mainstream magazines like *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Redbook*, and *Woman's Day* represent a generic national food culture that embraces easy, quick, nutritious meals that will appeal to one's children and husband. One could go on, and certainly there are immigrant and ethnic enclaves that continue to buy and prepare foods from their own traditions (the Mexican and Asian grocery stores and the active business they do in the small Midwestern town where I live attest to this).

⁸ To the extent that "American food" is recognized globally, it is hamburgers, fries and Coke, the quintessential industrial fast food meal. Thinking in terms of gastronomic traditions, I would identify Thanksgiving day foods as the "core" of American cuisine: heavy roasted meats and rich gravies, starchy side dishes like potatoes, sweet potatoes, macaroni and cheese, condiments like cranberry sauce, cooked green vegetables, and an array of traditional pies (pumpkin, apple, pecan, mincemeat), everything done to excess. But this is simply another incarnation of the bland meat and potatoes traditional cuisine mentioned above.

⁹ A startling bit of data is the average amount of time that French people spend eating a meal at McDonalds in Paris vs. Americans eating at a McDonalds in Philadelphia: 22.2 minutes vs. 14.4 minutes (Rozin et al., 2003, 453).

¹⁰ Laisney shows that the French average was 119 meals eaten outside the home per year in 2008, below the EU average for 2008 of 133, and well below the American average of 250 meals a year (Laisney, 2012, 11; UPI, 2011).

¹¹ One could begin even earlier, and compare feeding infants on demand to establishing regular feedings every four hours, something Pamela Druckerman draws attention to in *Bringing Up Bébé*, 2007. Druckerman, an American living in Paris, was struck on trips back to the U.S. to see that parents unfailingly carry little ziplock bags of cheerios and crackers around just in case their babies start to fuss and need to eat on the spot. French parents would consider it normal to expect the child to wait until time for a meal, and would think it OK for the child to experience feeling hungry without necessarily offering something to eat immediately.

¹² Note that Stearns' 1997 book, *Fat history: bodies and beauty in the modern West*, compares French and American approaches to losing weight and obsession with thin bodies.

¹³ One of the most striking examples of the tendency to supersize serving sizes is the existence of "Den Pops" in West Lafayette, Indiana. These are large size plastic cups of soda sold at the Discount Den; a recent special was a 32 oz drink for \$0.40 (the Discount Den Facebook page, accessed on April 4, 2014 at <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Discount-Den/146583332063237>). Obviously there are many examples in the U.S. of selling larger sized drinks or servings for a small increase in price in order to appeal to buyers' notion of a good deal.

¹⁴ Harris' larger point is that people find ways to justify purely practical decisions about what to eat, for example, declaring pork to be off limits for Muslims and Jews in a part of the world where pigs were impractical to raise because there were few shady wallows and lots of sunshine (Harris, 1985).

¹⁵ Legifrance. LOI n° 2004-806 du 9 août 2004 relative à la politique de santé publique (1): NOR: SANX0300055L.

2004. Available at: <http://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/WAspad/UnTexteDeJorf?numjo=SANX0300055L>. Accessed April 8, 2014.

¹⁶ Imagine that Michelle Obama had the government resources to create a smart, cute website and bureaucracy devoted to educating kids about eating well and getting more exercise: this would be it.

¹⁷ After a long controversy, France adopted the EU law on GMOs in 2007. EU-wide regulations of GMOs, which are stringent and require thorough review and vetting before any food stuff or animal feed containing GMOs can be imported or any GMO seed can be used. Further, EU regulations mandate that all food

or feed which contains greater than 0.9% of approved GMOs must be labelled. Recently, in a decision announced on March 18, 2014, France's Minister of Agriculture declared that farmers would not be permitted to plant GMO corn in an attempt to reverse France's ratification of the EU policy on MON 810.

¹⁸ For a stunning visual of this increase, see the interactive map that shows the state-by-state percentage of adults with BMIs over 30 change between 1985 and 2010, at Center for Disease Control, 2010.