

July blog

Fabio Gomes

Post-industrial societies are obsessed with what's new, or supposed to be new. This attitude permeates our ways of life, and also our underlying concepts of what's right and what's real. In this column I start by reflecting on what's 'in fashion' and what's 'old-fashioned'. Let's not assume that what's new is good because it's new.

Fruits. Memory

Songs to starfruit



We are often urged not to be old-fashioned. So here I am in the backyard of my second home in Maricá in the state of Rio de Janeiro, wearing a t-shirt that says: 'Don't be old fashioned...' (*Não seja ultrapassado...*). We are always being urged to be 'up to date' and not to hark back to 'the old days'. But why? What's so wrong about being 'old-fashioned' or even antiquated? I think that sometimes we do need to remember and revive the 'old days'.

What I am doing, is picking *carambolas* (starfruit) from a loaded tree. *Carambola* is one of the fruits originally from India that has adapted very well to Brazil. But at least in Brazil it has never become a big crop. Nowadays some can be found in supermarkets, but during my pre-supermarket childhood I never saw a *carambola* being sold in street markets. For this reason it feels weird to me to see them being sold as products. For me *carambolas* remain in nature, 'made' to be collected straight from the *caramboleiro* (*carambola* tree). Finding this tree now at this time in my life, which reminds me of my life and times as a child, nourishes my soul. Also *carambolas* ripe from the branch are much more delicious than those from shops.



It is not by chance that Murilo Mendes, one of our *mineiro* poets (originally from the city of Juiz de Fora in the state of Minas Gerais), is reminded of *carambola* as he wrote his lament, 'Song of the exile' in 1930:

I am dying, suffocated in a foreign land.

This month's commentary
World Nutrition



Urban Jonsson

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June commentary
Harriet Kuhnlein



(*Eu morro sufocado em terra estrangeira.*)

Our flowers are more beautiful, our fruits are more delicious...

(*Nossas flores são mais bonitas, nossas frutas mais gostosas...*)

Oh how I wish I could suck a real carambola

(*Ai quem me dera chupar uma carambola de verdade*)

and hear a song-thrush with a Brazilian birth certificate!

(*e ouvir um Sabiá com certidão de idade!*)

Following this call to reflection, I now go back in time, to 1988.

Right to good food

Now it is law - in Brazil

In 1988, after two decades of dictatorship, Brazilian legislators promulgated the current Constitution of the democratic Federal Republic of Brazil (1). Its preamble stresses the fundamental value of human rights: 'Representatives of the Brazilian people, meeting in the National Constituent Assembly to establish a democratic state' it began, and then 'To ensure the exercise of social rights and individual freedom, safety, welfare, development, equality and justice as supreme values of a fraternal, pluralistic and unprejudiced society, founded on social and committed harmony, in the domestic and international order'.

As I have said already in this column, some issues are so obvious and basic that they often are overlooked. However, health was not forgotten in the 1988 Constitution, which registers as a law that 'health' is a social right, among other inherent human rights, such as education, work, and leisure. These were all included in the Second Chapter of the Brazilian Constitution. As time went on, leaders in Brazilian society began to notice some missing pieces that have been added to our Constitution. Thus as from 4 February this year, 2010, the sixth article of Chapter 2 of the Constitution includes as social rights:

'Art. 6o A educação, a saúde, a alimentação, o trabalho, a moradia, o lazer, a segurança, a previdência social, a proteção à maternidade e à infância, a assistência aos desamparados (1).

'Article 6th Education, health, nourishment, work, housing, leisure, safety, social security, protection of motherhood and childhood, assistance to the destitute'.

With advice from English-speaking colleagues, I have not translated *alimentação* as 'food', because this is not actually what the word means. The words for 'food' include *comida* and also *alimento*, but the literal translation of *alimentação* is 'alimentation', a word now – and significantly – rarely used in English. It means the whole process by which food nourishes us and protects our health – hence 'alimentary tract'. In the Brazilian culture and thus in our language, food is not merely a fuel, a source of energy; it is nourishment, and not only in the biological sense. Our language retains the sense that good food satisfies the soul. But in any case, *alimentação* obviously includes drink as well as solid food, and among drink what is most basic – water.

You will remember that last month I quoted the Nestlé chief executive officer Peter Brabeck-Letmathe on water privatisation, a topic incendiary enough to have led to the election of Evo Morales as the current president of Bolivia. Justifying his position that water is a commodity like any other, Mr Brabeck-Letmathe said: 'One opinion, which I think is extreme, is represented by the non-government organisations who bang on about declaring water a public right. That means that as a human being you should have a right to water. That's an extreme solution' (2). Well, as from this year he will need to refer to the Brazilian Constitution, when saying who stands by the access to clean and safe water as a human right. At least in Brazil that opinion is not held only by non-government organisations.

References

1. *Presidência da República. Casa Civil. Subchefia para Assuntos Jurídicos. Constituição da República Federativa do Brasil de 1988. Obtainable at http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/constituicao/constituini%C3%A7ao.htm*
2. <http://www.we-feed-the-world.at/en>

Food activism



Here is the good news

[Access Harriet Kuhnlein's June commentary here](#)

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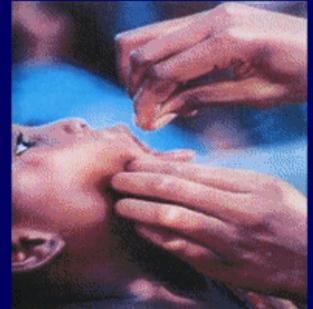
Young guns

News of the Young PHN Network

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May commentary
Michael Latham

The great vitamin A fiasco



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[Access the associated May editorial here](#)

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Retire Ronald!

The time for food activism has come! We can learn many inspiring lessons from the successful public health fight against tobacco, which has led to warning labels, prohibition of smoking in public places, marketing restrictions, smoke cessation services, the use of agricultural land for other purposes, and the general shift from thinking that smoking is fun, sociable and life-enhancing, to realising that it is disgusting, dangerous to others, and lethal.

So let's plan for social mobilisation with food. Getting more people spreading the word against foods that harm our populations and our common living and physical world will help us to save our children from obesity and early death, our water from becoming poisoned, and national economies from dependence on private corporations, and will also create new societies in which people see eating – or as we say in Brazil *alimentação* – as a political act and not merely as refuelling.

Relentless commercial pressures have made whole societies believe in non-existent 'lifestyle' benefits of cigarettes (1), and more recently of sugary soft drinks. A cultural revolution has inserted in our societies in-existent 'benefits' of harmful 'lifestyle' products such as cigarettes (1), and products we did not recognise as food such as sugary drinks. Now we need a new cultural revolution, that will get everyone involved in the cause against harmful foods and drinks which we and our children are being indoctrinated into seeing as part of the 'good life'



Food is not tobacco, but yes, as Kelly Brownell of Yale University and colleagues show (2,3) there are many parallels between the marketing of cigarettes before this was regulated and restricted, and the marketing of soft drinks and fast, snack, and other convenience foods. Analogies with tobacco are inescapable. Seducing young people with glamorous and fun images? Older readers in the USA will remember Joe Camel, seen in rebel-without-a-cause style above. Buying the loyalty of scientists? It happened time and again with tobacco. Using pressure to stall or prevent needed policy change? Few industries have been more effective than tobacco.



Now the fight for proper regulation of the activities of the manufacturers of food and drink products is getting from guidance from the tobacco control campaigns – and one weapon is humour. Take the example of the 'Retire Ronald' movement, and the whole work led by Corporate Accountability International, (4) which has started with tobacco control and now is challenging global food corporations as well.

The strategy of choosing a specific character, the Ronald Clown, and the respective foods he sells, no doubt will get the response from industry that Ronald McDonald and McDonald's fast-foods are not the cause of obesity, that obesity is a complex problem that involves many factors, and there is no single cause of obesity (5) We can agree, and say we are biting one part of the problem at a time. Focusing on

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specific and emblematic symbols of unhealthy foods is strategically important to concentrate strength and increase power of change. Retire Ronald! Let's go for it!

<http://www.retireronald.org>

References

1. Goodman, JE. *Tobacco in History: the Cultures of Dependence*. New York: Routledge, 1993.
2. Brownell KD, Warner KE. The perils of ignoring history: big tobacco played dirty and millions died. How similar is big food? *Milbank Quarterly* 2009; **87**(1): 259-294. Obtainable at <http://www.yaleruddcenter.org/resources/upload/docs/what/industry/FoodTobacco.pdf>
3. Advocacy Institute. *Smoke & Mirrors: How the Tobacco Industry Buys & Lies Its Way to Power & Profits*. Washington DC: Advocacy Institute, 1998.
4. <http://www.stopcorporateabuse.org>
5. Gomes F. UN agencies are sleeping with the enemy. [Letter] *World Nutrition*, June 2010, **1**, 2: 116-119. Obtainable at www.wphna.org.

Joke of the month

A lot to laugh about



And now for my joke of the month. It is not, unfortunately, a funny ha-ha joke. Here we have Indra Nooyi, the chief executive officer of PepsiCo, the biggest food and drink company in the Americas (1). Commercially she has a lot to laugh about. In a recent interview with *Fortune* magazine (2), she talked about her company's global 'game-plan'. It sounds like what this means, is deciding what the Americas and the world will eat, thus replacing tradition, culture, established food systems and supplies, rural economies, family meals, and much else, by snacks.

As people from the food and drink manufacturing industries tend to do, in the interview she seemed to be blaming people for being obese. She said: 'If all consumers exercised, did what they had to do, the problem of obesity wouldn't exist.' (1)

Besides, according to Indra Nooyi, PepsiCo can't be blamed for manufacturing and marketing obesogenic foods and drinks, because they don't produce such stuff. What they produce, she explained, is 'fun-for-you-foods', such as Pepsi Cola®, Doritos®, Lays®, and Mountain Dew® (2). Plus PepsiCo is also now producing 'better-for-you' products such as Diet Pepsi®, PepsiMax®, Baked Lays®, Sobi LifeWater® and Propel®, and 'good-for-you' products such as those manufactured by Quaker® and Tropicana®, and Naked Juice® and Gatorade®. 'Our overall goal is to increase the number of great tasting, "better-for-you" products and "good-for-you" products, while making sure our "fun-for-you" products still have a place in consumers' lives.'

Think about this for a moment. 'Making sure' that Pepsi Cola, Lays, and Mountain Dew still have a 'place in consumers' lives'? This seems to be saying that PepsiCo will make sure that consumers are given every opportunity to get and stay fat snacking and chugging Pepsi products. Or does she plan to give away skipping ropes and pedometers in return for 50 empty packets of Doritos? Stop! I didn't say this! We know that my column is read by transnational food and drink executives. Will they at this point think 'good idea'?

And what does Indra Nooyi mean by consumers doing what they have to do?

Picking up a flyer in a *padaria* (breads, buns and cakes shop) just now, I thought I had a clue. This gives advice for what World Cup fans and their friends and family can do while they are lounging around at home on sofas, rooting for Brazil. First, a sausage sandwich and Del Valle® sugared fruit juice, or a pizza and cola, or a hot dog with Sprite®, or a deep-fried salty snack with Fanta® grape-flavour juice; and then for afters, popcorn with *guaraná*-flavoured Kuat®, or chocolate confectionery or cakes. But then I took another look and realised my mistake. This is a flyer issued by Coca-Cola, the chief commercial sponsor of the World Cup. Not Pepsi-Co. Whoops!

References

1. http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/fortune500/2009/snapsbots/321.html?source=story_f500_link
2. http://money.cnn.com/2010/04/27/news/companies/indra_nooyi_pepsico.fortune/index.htm

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fabiodasilvagomes@gmail.com

July blog: Fabio Gomes

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