

## “What Is Food?”

By Mark Bittman, *New York Times* Opinionator, June 6, 2012

*The issue of government regulation is a hot-button topic—what exactly is government’s obligation to protect the public and how do we balance that with the public’s right to do as it pleases and with the interests of business to encourage us in behaviors that make them a profit, even at the expense of our health and financial solvency? Here Mark Bittman of the New York Times argues that the answer to how government should regulate food hinges on what, exactly, constitutes a food in the first place.*

If you believe government has no role in helping people—including encouraging us to act in our own best interests by doing things like not smoking, wearing seat belts and getting exercise—you’re probably no fan of New York’s mayor, Michael R. Bloomberg. The mayor, who has already banned smoking in bars and trans fats from restaurant food, has created more bike lanes in his administration than all other administrations combined and forced the posting of calorie counts in fast food restaurants, added to his sins by proposing to ban the sale of sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs) over one pint (16 ounces) in a variety of venues.

The arguments against this ban mostly come from the “right.” (There actually is no right and left here, only right and wrong.) We’re told, as we almost always are when a progressive public health measure is passed, that this is “nanny-statism.” (The American Beverage Association also argues that the move is counterproductive, but the cigarette companies used to market their product as healthful, so as long as you remember

that, you know what to do with the A.B.A.’s statements.) On a more personal level, we hear things like, “if people want to be obese, that’s their prerogative.”

Certainly. And if people want to ride motorcycles without helmets or smoke cigarettes that’s their prerogative, too. But it’s the nanny-state’s prerogative to protect the rest of us from their idiotic behavior. Sugar-sweetened beverages account for a full 7 percent of our calorie intake, and those calories are not just “empty,” as is often said, but harmful: obesity-related health care costs are at \$147 billion and climbing.

To (loosely) paraphrase Oliver Wendell Holmes, your right to harm yourself stops when I have to pay for it. And just as we all pay for the ravages of smoking, we all pay for the harmful effects of Coke, Snapple and Gatorade.

Let’s be clear: Sugar-sweetened beverages are nothing more than sugar delivery systems, and sugar is probably the most dangerous part of our current diet. People will argue forever about whether sugar-sweetened beverages lead directly to obesity, but Bloomberg’s ban should be framed first and foremost as an effort to reduce sugar consumption. Good.

Some have criticized the mayor’s step as weak. But his public health staff, led by the estimable health commissioner, Thomas A. Farley, has already tried to pass a tax on soda (unquestionably the most effective tool in our box to reduce the consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages) but were rebuffed by Albany. They’ve also tried to prohibit the use of food stamps through

the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, to buy soda, and been rebuffed—lame!—by the Department of Agriculture’s secretary, Tom Vilsack. (Food stamps are currently used to purchase \$4 billion worth of soda a year, a nice subsidy for soda and commodity corn producers, as well as for makers of insulin.)

Was this the mayor’s optimal move? I asked Farley that question. His response: “This is the best way to go to have a substantial influence on portion size right now, and people still have the freedom to continue to buy sugar-sweetened beverages,” thereby throwing a bone to those who evidently believe that it’s impossible to sit through a ballgame or a movie without at least a quart of Mountain Dew.

If the mayor were to ban 32-ounce mugs of beer at Yankee Stadium after a number of D.U.I. arrests—and, indeed, there are limits to drinking at ballparks—we would not be hearing his nanny tendencies. (And certainly most non-smokers, at least, are ecstatic that smoking in public places—including Central Park—is increasingly forbidden.) No one questions the prohibition on the use of SNAP for tobacco and alcohol. And that’s because we accept that these things are not food.

So perhaps we ask: What, exactly, is food? My dictionary calls it “any nutritious substance that people or animals eat or drink, or that plants absorb, in order to maintain life and growth.” That doesn’t help so much unless you define nutritious. Nutritious food, it says here, “provides those substances necessary for growth, health, and good condition.”

Sugar-sweetened beverages don’t meet this description any more than do beer and tobacco and, for that matter, heroin, and they have more in common with these things than they do with carrots. They promote growth all right—in precisely the wrong way—and they do the opposite of promoting health and good condition. They are not food.

Added sugar, as will be obvious when we look back in 20 or 50 years, is the tobacco of the 21st century. (The time frame will depend on how many decent public health officials we manage to put in office, and how hard we’re willing to fight Big Food.) And if you believe that limiting our “right” to purchase soda is a slippery slope, one that will lead to defining which foods are nutritious and which aren’t—and which ones government funds should be used to subsidize and which they shouldn’t—you’re right. It’s the beginning of better public health policy, policy that is good for the health of our citizenry.

We should be encouraging people to eat real food and discouraging the consumption of non-food. Pretending there’s no difference is siding with the merchants of death who would have us eat junk at the expense of food and spend half our lives earning enough money to deal with the health consequences.

Right now a tall 5-year-old with a dollar can approach a machine and buy a fizzy beverage equivalent to a cup of coffee with nine teaspoons of sugar in it. And that’s a mere 12 ounces. Holding the line at that seems to make some sense. Unless you somehow define harmful, non-food substances as something other than “bad.”

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**Consider the source and the audience:** Mark Bittman writes a column and a blog on food for the *New York Times*, a newspaper whose editorial pages are known to tilt in a liberal direction. Here he is writing about the actions of a Republican mayor who made his fortune in business. Does that support his claim that there is “no right and left here, only right and wrong”? How will an educated, more urban audience (the people who read the *Times*) be likely to receive this argument?

**Lay out the argument, the values, and the assumptions:** Bittman argues that if we do harmful things to ourselves it is our business, but only up to the point where the rest of us have to pay the costs. Is that a more compelling reason to regulate individual behavior than to “save us from ourselves”? He also implies that government should not regulate our food choices, but that banning sugary drinks is okay because they are “not food.” What if they were food—could we regulate them then? What about the trans fats, chain restaurant fare, and other unhealthy foods that Bloomberg has tried to regulate?

**Uncover the evidence:** Bittman uses a dictionary to support his case that sugary drinks are not food. Is that sufficient? Is it more persuasive than if a governmental agency studied it and issued a ruling? He also supplies a lot of data to show the costs of regulated sugary-drink consumption that are borne by all of us. How persuasive is that?

**Evaluate the conclusion:** Bittman says, “We should be encouraging people to eat real food and discouraging the consumption of non-food.” Who is “we” here—is it government’s job to do that? Does his argument about the fact that “we” pay the costs as well change your view? What does it mean to “encourage” people to eat a certain way?

**Sort out the political significance:** Encouraging people to eat real food means asking politicians of both parties to antagonize some of their key supporters who are in the business of producing nonfood. Sugary drinks are sweetened with high fructose corn syrup, for instance, which has given a major boost to the corn growers of America. As Bittman points out, they are already heavily subsidized by taxpayers. Should their businesses prosper even if it means the quality of life of the soda drinkers worsens and the public policy and health care costs rise for all of us?



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