

From Brussels to Mussels



A comparative perspective
on food and public policy

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About Roosevelt Academy

Roosevelt Academy (RA) is a small Liberal Arts & Sciences university college, offering courses in Arts & Humanities, Social Sciences, and Science. Located conveniently in the center of Middelburg, the capital city of the Province of Zeeland, RA is home to 600 students of whom approximately 400 are Dutch or Flemish, while the remaining student body covers a wide range of nationalities.

Founded jointly by Utrecht University and the Hogeschool Zeeland, RA is one of Utrecht University's international honors colleges. Roosevelt Academy students are registered officially in Utrecht and receive their honors degree from this highly-acclaimed institution, one of the oldest in the Netherlands.

Our educational system is aimed at giving students all the attention they need by providing each of them with a personal tutor who advises them in their choice of studies or courses, who helps them with any question or problem they might encounter and who basically serves as their personal coach throughout their stay at RA. This kind of personal attention also extends to the classroom, where classes are never larger than 25 (in contrast to regular universities where classes sometimes exceed more than 100) and the method of instruction is highly interactive and intensive.

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About this volume

This book collects the research papers that were written in the context of the 300-level course Public policy analysis which was taught in the spring semester of 2009. Reproduction and distribution of this material is allowed provided the source is acknowledged in the following way.

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Contents

<u>Introduction</u>	Introduction <i>Herman Lelieveldt</i>	2
<u>Chapter 1</u>	Precaution or Protection of Interests? The implementation difficulties of GMO legislation discussed. <i>Kim Kleine</i>	9
<u>Chapter 2</u>	The Effectiveness of the Legal Framework on Nutritional Health Claims in the Netherlands. A case study of Optimel Control <i>Cris Boonen</i>	40
<u>Chapter 3</u>	From Brussels to Mussels. An investigation into the role of the precautionary principle in the case C-249/07 of the European Commission versus the Kingdom of the Netherlands <i>Hannah Jongsma</i>	76
<u>Chapter 4</u>	The Fair Trade Purchase as a Political Act. Fair trade consumption and attitudes of Roosevelt students relate to: student's characteristics, fair-trade knowledge and political behavior? <i>Nienke Keen</i>	96
<u>Chapter 5</u>	Zeeland's Bread and Butter: Positions of semi-public organizations towards local and organic food. <i>Matthias Ploeg</i>	117
<u>Chapter 6</u>	How Effective have the U.S. National School Meal Programs Been to Address Childhood Obesity? U.S. school food environment, chief players, and implementations. <i>Yajing Zhu</i>	140
<u>Chapter 7</u>	The Quest for the Origin of Rabbit Meat Processing. <i>Theresa Kayser</i>	158

Introduction

Herman Lelieveldt

Introduction

On 09-09-09 - Dutch sustainability day - the prime time news broadcast of the *NOS journal* devoted one of its items to the annual climate report of the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency. The item's editors had decided to spice this rather dull and abstract theme by focusing on the environmental impact of meat consumption. After all, one of the chapters in the report had been devoted to the consequences of consuming animal proteins (meat and fish). The chapter made very clear that the environmental impact of eating meat is considerable and that reducing meat consumption would be one of the ways to reduce the ecological footprint.

The producers of the item framed their story around the feasibility of a so-called meat tax to get people to eat less meat. The director of the agency was prompted on this option but he only reluctantly acknowledged that this might be a possibility – the report itself did not mention this as an option. The tax was strongly supported however by a spokeswoman from *Natuur en Milieu*, an environmental action group who fiercely argued in favour of raising the price of meat with a few euros a kilo to account for environmental costs. Opposition to the tax was voiced first by a butcher around the corner who denounced these plans a ‘just another way the government tries to generate more revenues’. His worries seemed unfounded however, as in the next shot the minister of agriculture fiercely denounced this policy option; ‘This government will not introduce a meat-tax’. The final shot of the item accordingly witnessed the butcher happily chopping the report in pieces on his meat board.



Figure 1: A happy butcher chopping the report of the environmental assessment agency (Source; NOS Journaal, 09-09-09: <http://player.omroep.nl/?afIID=10075411>)

The above news story in a nutshell shows us why food and politics increasingly provide interesting and relevant material for public policy studies. While for decades environmentalists and activists have tried to move issues of sustainability on the public and political agenda, it is only in the last few years that things seem to be in flux. This little news item captures a lot of these dynamics.

First, the fact that an official governmental agency devotes a chapter to the environmental impact of animal protein consumption, shows that some actors within the government are trying to get the issue of the environmental impact of food on the public and governmental agenda. Secondly, the willingness of news programs to devote attention to these issues reflects a growing awareness of the relevance of these issues for public policy. Finally, the way the journalists present the story shows that the issues are highly contested. An official agency of the government hints at incorporating externalities into the price of foodproducts, but the government itself in the person of the minister of agriculture strongly opposes these ideas. The item's final shot witnesses a remarkable explicit stand on the part of the journalists, adding to the contentiousness of the issue: to drive the story home they let the butcher kill the report – to signify the lost cause of the agency's mission.

There is therefore ample reason to devote attention to food and politics and that is why the public policy course at Roosevelt Academy examines the relation between these two through an intensive problem focused undergraduate research course in which students try to generate some form of original research. While last year's course took the problem of obesity

and overweight as the angle to study the dynamics of public policy making, this year's edition focused on a somewhat broader theme: the Western way of consuming and producing food. Moving to the larger issue of food is a simple result of the rapidly increasing attention being paid to anything that has to do with public policy and food in today's society. Hence, there is added value in getting students started on a much broader theme instead of immediately jumping upon the somewhat narrower topic of overweight and obesity, which in fact is located at the interface of food and health politics.

We obviously started the course by reading Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, as this is the most influential analysis of what is wrong with the Western way of dealing with food (Pollan 2006). Pollan is precisely so interesting because his work has sparked considerable controversy. Authors disapprove of Pollan's personal journey in searching and assessing different types of meals, up to the point where some of his American colleagues by now profess to be fed up with Pollan and all the other food writers. One of the criticisms concerns the somewhat depoliticized purport of the what to eat message: vote with your fork, buy local and organic (Guthman 2007). Buy now this criticism seems to be a bit outdated as Pollan wrote an open letter to the *Next Farmer in Chief* in which he clearly politicized the issue and presented a range of policy proposals to deal with them (Pollan 2008).

Other scholars consider his proposals to be unfounded and unrealistic. Agronomist Louise Fresco calls him a sympathetic but misleading guru, because his plans for a solar based agriculture will not make it possible to feed the 6 billion people living on this planet (Fresco 2009). But even if we discount Pollan's unrealistic vistas of a completely solar-based agriculture, we can not discount his very acute observations on the environmentally destructive way we produce food and feed ourselves.

The problem is exemplified in the documentary *King Corn*, where two East coast university graduates decide to grow an acre of corn and find out that they can only make a profit growing corn due to the massive subsidies. They also discover that most of the corn is in fact inedible and meant as animal feed or used to manufacture corn syrup, which in the US constitutes the most important sweetener of soft drinks.

Students introduced chapters of the Pollan book (and Nestle's *Food Politics*) book by seeking examples of practices in other contexts. We endeavoured in a blind tasting of local, organic and mass-produced food and found out how difficult it is to taste the differences. We traveled to Brussels to talk with key players involved in the novel foods regulation (and concluded the excursion with trusted old food in the form of Belgian beer and fries). Later on

we surveyed shoppers in Middelburg to monitor their knowledge of health labels (it is a disaster). RA students were interviewed on their shopping decisions and knowledge of fair trade. While working on their projects students presented intermediary results and solicited feedback from fellow students. Hence the project constituted a collaborative effort resulting in a mixed bag of papers, datasets and literature reviews.

This volume

This volume collects by way of example seven of the papers which were written within the framework of the course. This is just a selection of what has been produced in the course. Note that they have been thought out, conceived, researched and written within the framework of a 15 week course by students who never had connected food to politics when they entered the class room in week 1. Still, each and every of the papers in this volume is interesting and informative and might eventually be revised and find their way to a professional or scholarly journal. Collecting and documenting them already now enables a sneak preview of the results and also provides future students with information on which they can build as well.

In Chapter 1 Kim Kleine examines the position of EU member states regarding the marketing of GM crops in the European Union. The case of GMOs crops is interesting because it provides one of the rare instances where member states positions seem to reflect public opinion on the issue in the respective country. Kleine updates and extends an earlier analysis of Kurzer and Cooper (2007) by including 10 new member states of the EU and also looking at the impact of organic farming, farm size and dependence on trade of a member state. Her results confirm that member states are more favorable to GMOs, the more the public supports GMOs. In addition, support is also related to the openness of the economy, with member states with larger trade imports and exports more supportive of GMOs than others.

In Chapter 2 Cris Boonen provides an in-depth analysis of the way the Dutch dairy giant Campina markets its *Optimel* drink. *Optimel* is one of the many recent examples of a functional food, in this case a dairy drink containing additives that have beneficial health effects in the form of suppressing appetite. Boonen shows that Campina very skillfully stays within the bounds of the legally permissible claims, by only claiming that the product reduces appetite, but not asserting that it actually leads to weight loss – something which is legally off limits. However, when taking a more comprehensive look at the product marketing, commercials and web discussions it is very clear that it uses every opportunity to suggest the link between eating less and losing weight. Boonen furthermore shows that the scientific

evidence for the appetite depressing effect is very weak and based on only a few studies conducted by the same research institution.

In Chapter 3 Hannah Jongsma examines the conflict between the environment and the market in a case where the Dutch government refused to allow the use of Irish mussel seed in Dutch coastal waters. The European Commission brought the case to the European Court of Justice arguing that it constituted an impermissible import restriction given the single market principle of the EU Treaties. The Dutch government argued that the measure was necessary to protect native species in the Oosterschelde, and to avoid the introduction of exotic species. But the ECJ finds the arguments of the Dutch government weak as it did not conduct a solid scientific review of these potential risks. The ruling is remarkable because the EU has often been blamed for abusing the so-called precautionary principle to justify environmental protection measures without a solid risk assessment to weigh costs and benefits. This case shows however that the ECJ is not willing to accept vague reference to the protection of nature as a valid excuse to close the market for products from other areas.

In chapter 4 Nienke Keen examines Pollan's claim that eating is a political act by examining student awareness of Fair Trade products and their shopping behaviour. Students turn out to be reasonably informed of the meaning of these products and occasionally buy them. This is especially the case for those who are more politically active in general and those who believe in the effectiveness of different forms of political participation. The results confirm earlier insights on political consumerism (Stolle, Hooghe and Micheletti 2005) and point out that such expressions are increasingly finding their way in the supermarket as well.

In chapter 5 Matthias Ploeg examines the difficult transition of residential institutions in providing organic food to their clients. Using Azjen and Fishbein's theory of planned behavior he examines the positions of those responsible for the meal provisions. While most of them strongly subscribe to the idea of providing organic and/or local food, there are strong logistical and financial hurdles that make it difficult to implement these ideas. Costs and the problem of ensuring a steady supply of these foods make it difficult for these institutions to transfer to a more organic and local food supply.

In chapter 6 Yaying Zhu reviews the effects of food provisions in a completely different institutional context, that of US schools. It turns out that the US Federal government has insufficiently been able to make school meals healthier by not setting strict enough standards on their nutritional content. Furthermore, in many schools these meals have to compete with the availability of competitive foods in vending machines, that further decrease the nutritional health of children's food consumption at schools. All in all Zhu's analysis

confirms many of the insights offered in Marion Nestle's seminal study on the impact of the food industry on policymaking in the US (2007).

In the seventh and final chapter of this volume Theresa Kayser reports on her participatory research in a German rabbit processing plant. For a full week she immersed herself in the production process of products like rabbit *pate* and *Rouladen*. She discovers that almost every step in the production process is taking place within a tight regulatory framework in order to meet all kinds of safety and health requirements, mandated by European and German law.

All in all these chapters give us a kaleidoscopic overview of the very rich and multifaceted world of food politics. In many respect the papers reflect the current state of knowledge regarding many of the issues that are at play when it comes to examining the public policy dimension of food. For a far too long time policy scientists have ignored these topics and failed to address many of the issues that should command our attention as a better understanding of these will advance our theoretical and practical knowledge in this area. This volume serves as a very small but hopefully relevant step to fill this gap. It also makes clear that these topics provide an excellent vehicle for a problem based organization of upper level undergraduate courses where students are challenged to carry out small research projects themselves and hence get the opportunity to actively produce knowledge instead of only processing the wisdom of others.

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