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America's Nutritional Inequality

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Just a week ago, I was in a van for roughly thirteen hours, driving from New York to South Carolina. My job entailed helping with navigation via Google Maps. Although we stayed mainly on highways and freeways, I couldn't help but look at the rural, seemingly poor towns we passed. As I zoomed in closer on the map, I noticed the recurring presence of McDonald's, Burger King, Hardee's (once we reached Virginia), and other fast-food establishments. I thought about Whole Foods and a local health food store

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back home called Down to Earth, and the variety of fruits, vegetables, and health products one can choose from. Whole Foods and Down to Earth would be anomalies in most rural areas, where fast-food establishments dominate. Often we find ourselves so invested in the outcomes of major domestic and international events that we fail to think about issues like nutritional inequality, an issue that even one road trip can raise.

Fast-food establishments dominate smaller rural towns, because the price of land in the countryside is usually less than its price in bustling cities and their immediate suburbs. In San Francisco, a studio apartment could easily be listed at over a million dollars, while a plot of land in the country with exponentially greater square footage could sell for well under half a million. In addition, residents of wealthier cities have the means to financially support stores like Whole Foods, perhaps three of them within a five-mile radius. Thus, the socioeconomic divide between wealthier cities and

poorer small towns can translate into nutritional inequality. Residents of metropolitan areas, including myself, often take the availability of these luxuries for granted. But the simple fact that customers in small towns are less able to buy frequently enough at such stores to keep them profitable is a

big reason why you don't see the occasional Whole Foods when you drive through the countryside. Sometimes I will crave fries from McDonald's or Burger King. The very next day, I'll go to my local health store, Down to Earth, and try out the

new almond milk yogurt they have stocked. There are so many choices of foods where I live that I'll get to the point of seeking out fast food as something different. But the reality for a child living in a poor small town may be just five different options, of fast food chains, to eat at. How is this fair? It isn't, but we continue to perpetuate this unfairness by not considering problems like nutritional inequity, which may seem small in comparison with greater national issues.

The way to solve nutritional inequity, however, is not by donating money to build a Whole Foods in a poor town. This solves the surface problem in that town, but does not get beneath the surface by taking the time to ask questions like: "How can we educate more people about nutrition?" or "What kinds of programs and initiatives can be put together to alleviate the reliance on fast food?" Asking these types of questions may not solve the problem immediately, but it will surely provide a stronger foundation to build on.

Theresa May and the Aftermath of Brexit

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On June 23, 2016 Britain voted to leave the European Union. This set off a populist wave across the Western world that resulted in, or encouraged, the election of Donald Trump and the success of a variety of right-wing and far-right European parties. After the vote, Britain embarked on a long process of negotiation that was supposed to end by March 29 of this year. Although that allowed Prime Minister Theresa May nearly three years to work with the EU on the terms of a deal, it proved to be not enough time to settle their differences.

The Brexit compromise which the two sides had reached was put to a vote in the House of Commons and

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was defeated, and not merely by a small margin. As the *New York Times* reported, the 432-202 vote to reject May's proposal was "the biggest defeat in the House of Commons in recent British history." Once that attempt failed, there were three options going forward: a Brexit with no deal, a new referendum that might reverse the 2016 decision to leave, or a return to negotiations.

Neither of the more extreme positions, leaving without a deal and reversing Brexit, would seem to be politically viable. But in a recent poll asking Britons to decide between staying in the EU and leaving without a deal, voters preferred staying by a seventeen-point margin (45 percent for "remain," 28 percent for exiting with no deal). Remaining in the EU was clearly more

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popular than either May's deal or no deal when all three were compared side-by-side, but most people who favored departure from the EU would understandably view this renegeing on Brexit as a total betrayal of the democratic process. The 2016 referendum was supposed to commit Parliament to leave the EU regardless of what deal the government could manage to obtain, and May did campaign on the promise to respect that decision. The United Kingdom and the European Union have now agreed to postpone the date of departure, granting May several more months to construct a new exit bill palatable to both sides.

The new deadline will be October

31. As the time frame gets pushed further and further away from the public's vote of three years ago, however, the chance that Parliament will follow through on the decision to leave diminishes. According to Roger Cohen in the *New York Times*, Brexit "may still happen, but the odds of it happening are not better than even." To committed Brexiteers, the British government's inability to follow through on separation from the European Union is frustrating. Still, May does have several complicated questions to resolve before any workable agreement with the EU becomes possible.

One is the issue of the "Irish backstop." The establishment of a "hard border"--a

more strongly enforced customs border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland--would automatically force Britain to keep following the EU's trade rules in regard to the Irish republic. No one wants that to happen. The lack of confidence among Britons that this problem will be solved complicates the negotiations over Brexit and its ultimate fate. Over the next six months, we will discover whether this issue, and the many others which Britain and the European Union must still agree on if Parliament is to ratify an accord, will come to a conclusion or the Brexit vote will eventually be in effect reversed by the politicians and European bureaucrats.

Hate Speech, Political Gain, and the First Amendment

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In 1789, when the newly created House of Representatives debated the proposed First Amendment to the Bill of Rights, two sentiments were predominant in regard to its clauses on religion: the necessity of impartiality on the part of government, and the protection of the individual. James Madison initially supported a version of the First Amendment that protected "equal rights of conscience," understood as a right applying to both religion and moral beliefs. But the House concluded that the Establishment Clause and protection of the individual's exercise of religious freedom were sufficient. When these are viewed along with their sister clauses guaranteeing freedom of speech, press, assembly, and petitioning, it is clear that all of the amendment's principles are related to freedom of expression, freedom for any act that involves imbibing or distributing ideas.

Thus, the First Amendment and its

core principles are inextricably linked to the idea that all information should be unrestricted, that dialogue should be openly fostered, and that no mere statement should be considered taboo enough to be banned. The Supreme Court has, however, repeatedly

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recognized that the Framers intended to permit small exceptions which allowed freedom of expression to be curtailed.

Chaplinsky v. New Hampshire resulted in a judicial understanding that "fighting words"--meaning words that tend to incite violence or breach of the peace or that are, by their

nature, an injury to the person they are spoken to--are not protected under the free-speech guarantee. In addition, several landmark decisions have upheld restrictions on lewd and obscene speech, although occasionally questionably. By and large, freedom of nearly all expression is a universally acknowledged principle of American jurisprudence.

Culturally, however, Americans are increasingly challenging that principle.

Today, some opinions that others strongly disagree with are denounced as hate speech worthy of social, academic, and even legal punishment. But alleged hate speech is not cited as an exception in the Bill of Rights, and the Supreme Court has repeatedly refused to allow the banning of any such speech that was not directly connected with fighting words. Although we should acknowledge the existence of real hate speech, and agree that it does not reflect well upon Americans who use it, it is nonetheless true that the advocacy of some policies and ideas is too often labeled as hate speech by their opponents in order to build more opposition to them. This is a familiar and effective strategy--since who, other than a few extremists, would want to support something considered racist?

It is clear to me that the trend toward frequently labeling ideas as hate speech for political gain is a volatile and dangerous one, and an affront to the beliefs of the Founding Fathers. It is startling to see how often accusations of hate speech can endanger free speech and thought. After all, to control what individuals express is to control, to some extent, what they think. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn brilliantly reflected upon this in his work, in direct reaction to the totalitarian Soviet state under which he suffered. The poignant and even terrifying reality is that a polity that does not desire widespread individual rights to the expression of joy and discontent, agreement and dissent, and that does not encourage differing viewpoints, is a polity that is no longer free. I ask you: do you want to remain free?

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CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

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#NutritionalInequalityUS

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