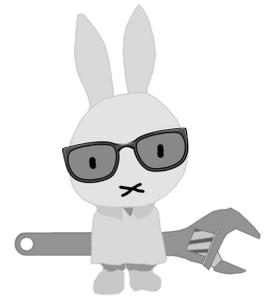


“*Lockdown and Liberation*”: A Study in Lifestyles and Systemic Resilience

I love the lockdown! *There, I've said it!* Little has changed for me, except that the rest of the world has stopped interrupting ‘real’ life.

Paul Mobbs, *The ‘Meta-Blog’*, issue no.4, 16th April 2020



Some of the greatest literature has been inspired by times of great, uncontrollable social strife. From Defoe’s, [‘A Journal of the Plague Year’](#), to Mann’s [‘Death in Venice’](#). More specifically viral illness has been the inspiration for a swathe of science fiction that, growing up, I loved – from John Christopher’s [‘The Death of Grass’](#) to, at a tangential extreme, the Strugatsky’s [‘Roadside Picnic’](#) (later turned into the haunting film [‘Stalker’](#) by Tarkovsky).

Everyone’s moaning about the lockdown being “an end” to everything – be that lives, jobs, or civil liberties. I certainly do not feel that. I think it’s a chance for a review of ‘where we’re at’... *if people will willingly seize that opportunity.*

My partner turns to me and says, “*you’re so happy, aren’t you?*”. I can’t deny it. The last three weeks have been absolutely brilliant. Normally my life involves chasing after other people’s problems; visited upon me daily as a constant stream of email, phone calls and social media messages. Since the lockdown, almost nothing! – Nada! Niente! Dim Byd!

For the last few weeks I’ve heard so many people in the media saying that things “[can’t go back](#)” to how they were before. Seriously though, does anyone believe that? *Truly?* (because if you don’t truly believe that, it certainly won’t happen!).

The fact is that we have less control over our own government these days than the government itself has over the corona-virus. How will things change?

[That report](#) about Russian interference in the 2017 election; *where is it?* Will it ever be published?

As recently outlined in the US documentary [‘After Truth’](#), the occupancy of the present government in their offices may be on the back of manipulated public opinion – now amplified by the pandemic.

Very quickly after the lockdown, as the distractions died away, what I was left with was the underlying work I routinely do for myself over time – which was now able to proceed without anyone detracting my attention from its natural course.

One of the first things I did, as I had no reason to be there, was give up following social media. Now I find every day packed with a progressive exploration of the work that’s been at the back of my mind for the last year, given free reign by the lack of people diverting me into other things.

...And that work is? *Why we need to think about changing how we live, work, and look after ourselves.*

The synchronicity with current events, and their liberating effect to allow me to progress the work I really want to be doing, has not escaped me.

‘The problem is frozen oven-ready chips’

The core of my recent work is writing about ecological change and our common futures, but doing so from a very personal, very emotive basis – *food*.

For the last year I’ve been trying to write a cookbook, *without recipes*: It’s “*An Anarchist’s Cookbook*”, and recipes are a representation of hierarchical authority from which we must liberate ourselves!

The argument at the core of modernity is, “you’ve never had it so good”. The assumption is that the system works in everyone’s interests so why would you possibly want to mess about with it?

A key part of making people ‘believe’ in that system is getting them to accept that alternatives are impossible – or that any problems we have today just need more “technological innovation” to solve.

...well, *except for pandemics, which we demonstrably can’t handle.*

The [economics of ‘fast’ food](#) are not based upon the ingredients, or just the take-away market, but upon the business model of mass marketing via superstores. Creating a different way to live means confronting the absurdities of that system.

Food is an essential part of people's daily life, whether they choose to acknowledge that or not. More importantly though, getting a secure food supply isn't just about avoiding starvation. It has significant biochemical and neurological effects on the daily choices we make – some of which work at [an unconscious level](#), evading our deliberate will.

It's the cheap and ubiquitous nature of food in Western society that is at the heart of modernity's “unique selling proposition”. That same food system, however, is also [at the heart of](#) both the exploitative and ecologically damaging nature of technological progress, and [the damage](#) that it does to those who must live within it.

“So let's do without it!”, is what some say.

Let's find an alternative to the supermarkets and their damaging supply chains, and look for something more local and benign. From the Soil Association, to Transition Towns, to permaculture, for the last 40 years that's been the mainstream middle class' response to the ‘problem’ of food; and the ways that message has been enacted through the [mainstream market](#) has arguably made the situation worse – and has not allowed an appreciable number of people to ‘escape’ that exploitative system.

The reason these ideas don't catch-on at the larger scale is often reduced, most notably by their critics, to one relatively simple factor: *price*.

Put simply, the middle classes [dietary alternatives](#) to modernity's market system cost more, and thus are [beyond the ability](#) of most people to acquire.

In contrast to the arguments made [against ‘green consumerism’](#), the economics of oven ready chips are far more complex – and revealing – than, “*they're cheaper*”; and embodies the characteristics of the general domination of society by [concentrated financial and technological interests](#).

The deeper reality though is more psychological and biochemical – again, the result of how that system of food production, technological processing, and branding, functions. To examine this contradiction I believe there is one iconic product we can hold-up as a totemic example: *oven-ready chips*.

Supermarkets: [‘The Pushers’](#)

Instant chips are arguably sold at a loss so that when people come into the superstore and buy them, they will almost certainly leave with the more expensive bags of instant vegetables and protein

located next to them in the aisle.

The technological ‘design’ of frozen chips is also significant. Modern fast food, apart from its compelling convenience, creates a demonstrably [addictive attachment](#) to consuming it by hitting the receptors – in our tongue, stomach and brain – with four key compounds: *fat*, *salt*, *sugar*, and *protein*.

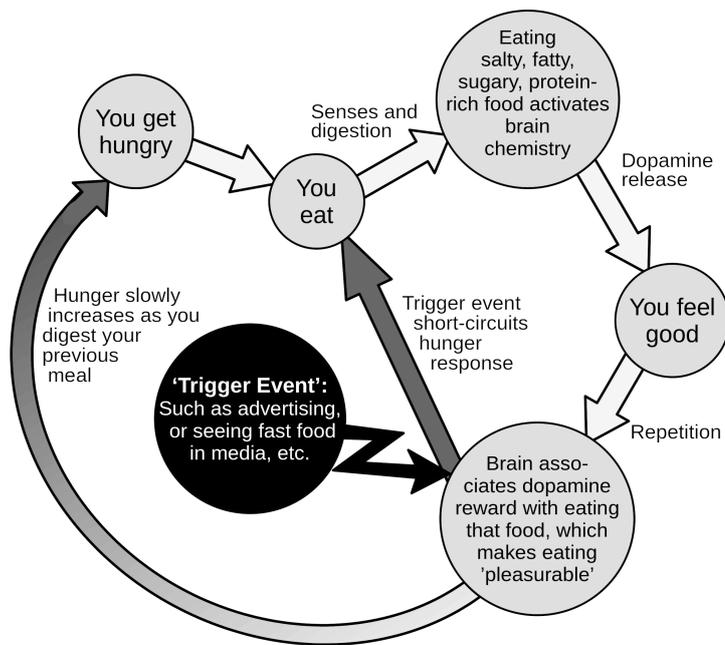
Nearly all brands of instant chip use some form of coating on the outside. This doesn't just aid quick preparation. It also creates an intense flavour or biochemical hit which is what ultimately [ensures people keep coming back](#) for more. The research and manufacture of coatings for fast food is a valuable industry, not only because it affects the [quality or longevity](#) of foods, but because it can have major consequences on people's eating habits.

The coatings are based around [various chemical compounds](#). Many use sodium caseinate (aka. ‘E469’), which mimics the [protein casein](#) that is found in large quantities in milk and cheese. As a cheap ‘waste’ product, manufacturers of lower quality chips may use whey powder from cheese processing industry. Likewise cheap and sweet [dextrose powder](#) from corn processing. These have implications for the food's nutritional quality, which is why ‘upmarket’ manufacturers prefer to use the more expensive, pure chemical alternatives.

The effect of this sweet, protein-rich coating is to turn-on the [brain's chemical receptors](#), and as a result – just like other forms of addictive behavioural responses – this leads to a release of [dopamine](#) in the brain which makes you feel [warm and happy](#).

This design trend has become so widespread in relation to processed foods that, in 2008, psychologists at Yale University were able to compile a [“Food Addiction Scale”](#). This relates certain food products to their propensity to create dependency, and the problems – such as binge eating – which people experience when [they are put under stress](#). Not least, the stress of trying to [manage their addiction](#) to unhealthy highly-processed foods.

Compounds with a similar effect are fats and sugars. E.g. a raw potato is bland or floury. That's starch. Roast or deep fry a potato and the starch's chemical structure changes, becoming sugar-like and sweeter – and so more appetising. Some brands of oven-ready chip are not made from whole potatoes at all. Instead they use potato processing spoil/waste [that's moulded](#) into chips, shaped fries, or waffles... *You think Pringles are really potato?*



Put simply, it's not that frozen oven-ready chips are addictive; the critical factor is the context in which they are sold:

It is making fast food low cost and easily accessible; as well as bashing out the general noise of advertising and branding; which triggers people to crave more; that creates the [money-spinning industry](#) which pays for 'loss-leading' products like oven-ready chips.

The practical solution: *A Little Bit of D.I.Y*

For thirty years I've been researching how to live more simply – by living those ideas. A key part of that is bulk-buying ingredients, and using “own-made” alternatives to avoid the higher costs of ready meals and processed foods.

In all that time though there has been one product that has eluded my efforts at significantly cheaper replication: *those totemic bags of oven-ready chips*.

Yes, I can make something similar (see box on the next page), but I usually make “shop like” products for a half to a quarter of their ready-meal/frozen equivalents. For oven chips, I can barely do it at a lower price than a bag from the shop.

The main issue is the cost of the spuds: Loose or large bags of spuds range from 50p (Morrisons) to £1.16 (Waitrose) per kilo; oven ready chips by comparison are 83p (M.) to £1.34 (W.) per kilo; and by comparison the cost from the local chip shop is £7.50/kilo, and McDonalds 'medium' fries £10/kilo!

It used to be easy to buy 25 kilo bags of spuds from shops, for perhaps as little as 20p per kilo – but that's getting difficult to do as greengrocers have been put out of business by the large chains.

If I had access to land, no problem, but the small house in where I live does not have a large plot of land attached to grow food. The average cost of an allotment is around £40/year, [if you can get one](#). And despite their [recent resurgence](#) in popularity, local authorities and public bodies are still [selling off](#) allotments to [raise cash](#).

For me, this is why over-ready chips are totemic: They are emblematic of how agribusiness controls our diet, with unhealthy products which create dependency; and, despite the evidence of how the exploitation of biochemistry underpins it, no government seems to be willing to take the industry on.

Either way, another factor is that processing removes dietary fibre and breaks down the complex carbohydrates – by taking away the skin, or degrading the structure of the food with heat or mechanical processing. This creates “baby food for adults”; it digests far faster, increasing the ‘hit’ of carbs and fats.

E.g., to make a loaf of spongy white bread in an hour the [‘Chorleywood Process’](#) uses a large amount of mechanical energy – to beat the dough before the yeast is added – which means the yeast break-down the carbohydrates and raise the dough in a few tens of minutes rather than hours.

In the same way as the Chorleywood Process works for yeast, [‘hyperprocessed food’](#) also makes the compounds which turn-on the lights in your brain more easily digestible, and thus more quickly available in your bloodstream. The result is rather like the coating on the chips – it [enhances the hit](#) your brain takes when you eat the food. For that reason though [hyperprocessed food](#) also messes-up your body's blood sugar, fat, and insulin balance; promoting [weight gain](#) and [diabetes](#).

This is why practically it is not the food alone which makes the ‘product’ so compelling – and keeps people coming back for more (see diagram above). The biochemical effect food creates can easily become habituated. What is more critical though is the role of environmental cues which create a ‘trigger event’; making your brain crave the dopamine response, and as a result making the foods which generate that response addictive.

OK, what have oven chips got to do with what comes after the lockdown?

I hear people commenting on the need for change "after the lockdown". What I hear them talking about is jobs, wealth, social mobility, or political representation. Economically some see a [managed change](#), while others see a [complete collapse](#). We might be sheltering the old today, but many see the current, [wealthiest-ever](#) generation as a target for [clawing-back](#) some of that wealth after the crisis.

What I [don't hear](#) them talking about is 'food', and our ability to sustain ourselves without today's massive, resource-intensive food supply infrastructure. Thing is, when the crisis kicked off, what was the one thing (other than toilet roll) that people were immediately worried about?: *Food!*

About 90% of the bread in this country comes from around 20 large industrial bakeries, and in-store supermarket bake operations. In contrast,

The 'Own-Made' Oven Chip

Messing with your own brain chemistry cheaply at home? *What's not to like?* To make your own root veg coating (this works just as well on parsnips and turnips as it does spuds) is very cheap and simple:

- ◆ Take a good quality oil stable at high temperature – such as sunflower, rapeseed or olive – and put a small amount in a large bowl or saucepan, a few millimetres/a tenth in an inch deep;
- ◆ Add some seasoning to the taste that suits you – that could just be some salt and pepper, but you could use herbs, or spices, or whisk in some vinegar for something more tangy;
- ◆ If you want something more crispy, add a little gram flour (nutritionally far better for you) or cornflour and mix thoroughly to thicken the oil slightly;
- ◆ Prepare your veg – whether you take off the skin is up to you and the quality of veg you have available – and you can leave them whole or slice them into thin strips or carve funny shapes;
- ◆ Drop the veg into the seasoned oil and stir until every thing's evenly coated;
- ◆ Take the veg out a handful at a time, draining any excess oil, and place on a baking tray – theoretically you could then freeze this and then remove from the tray and bag for later use;
- ◆ Cook until soft & brown – cooking longer on a cooler temperature, such as 170°C/gas mark 4 or 190°C/gas mark 5 will sweeten the starches compared to cooking quickly on a high heat. Cooking over 205°C/gas mark 6 will burn the oil, leaving a bitter taste.

only 4% of the flour consumed in Britain was bought 'as flour' by those consuming it.

It's not simply that "we don't have the time to cook" any more – due to the economic pressures of daily life. In a crisis, people's dependence upon ready-to-eat food represents a '[double-bind](#)': Firstly they have to use supermarkets, not only due to price, but because they have little time and so need convenience; secondly, the convenience of modern-day living means that people lose the practical skills to live simply using basic 'raw' inputs.

When (often more affluent) people implore the public not to use supermarkets, or to eat better food, what they are fighting is not people's ignorance or poor choices. What they are fighting is the impossibility of escaping that economic and technological 'double-bind' while still having the security of a place to live, or a job, and food.

If we can't escape that '[technology trap](#)', which will only become worse over the next decade or so as automation hollows-out the employment market in the West, then it's because that trap is innately tied to the values of the system we live within.

Food is 'foundational'; it is the basis of everything else in society. As I've said in my talks, if you have enough food you can sit under a blanket in the dark with friends and sing songs; if you don't you get grumpy and start hitting people.

To fix the problems of society, therefore, is about addressing the security and quality of our food supply, and how we interact with that. It's not about consumerism, and it's definitely not about technology since that is what is driving current instability.

More importantly though, today's food system, from the farmer's gate to the plate, represents a system of economics which is predatory – making any alternative option more difficult to sustain.

As our access to land diminishes, and with it the ability to produce food ourselves, the economics of 'staple' products such as chips show how the food system – despite its homely advertising – is fundamentally an exploitative economic process. If the crisis teaches us anything, I hope it is that life is based within food, and today food is a very tenuous commodity. Real change will only happen when we change how we source and consume the food that we eat every day.