Is ChooseMyPlate a Good Choice?

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How Private Industry Drives the U.S. Government to Mediate a Nutritionally Poor Diet

Food is fundamental for human existence, and what we eat and drink largely determines our individual levels of physical health, which then influence matters of public health such as obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and cancer. These health issues then create economic difficulties on virtually every level of society: personal, community, state, and national—difficulties that cost us time, money, and other valuable resources. Our nation “spends $147 billion a year on obesity-related illness” and this doesn’t even account for other nutrition-related diseases (Wallinga 408). Most people have heard the saying, “If you don’t have your health, you have nothing.” According to a leading disease prevention expert, optimal health begins with what we eat:

Diets low in animal protein and saturated fat and high in complex carbohydrates, fiber, and micronutrients improve glucose tolerance, postprandial glucose, and overall glycemic control, as well as decrease insulin resistance. The high nutrient density (HND) diet emphasizes micronutrients (phytochemicals and antioxidants) from greens, fruits, nuts/seeds and beans/legumes, the latter containing high amounts of viscous fiber and resistant starches (Fuhrman 364).

So if disease costs so much, why would our government not provide citizens with the most scientifically sound information about food, nutrition, health, and disease prevention? The answer, in short, is Agribusiness, or “Big Ag”: profit motivated private industries associated with large-scale farming that exercise financial influence on our federal legislation process—and what
gets written into that legislation. Along with Big Ag, the fishing industry, the dairy industry, the pharmaceutical industry, the medical industry, the food and beverage industry, junk food manufacturers, and numerous other private companies all exert enormous pressure on members of the Congress to craft legislation in their favor, and on various, often fractured, factions of government like the U.S Department of Agriculture (“USDA”) to market their products (Agribusiness). These massive entities hold virtually unlimited amounts of money to spend on government lobbyists, political campaign contributions, and other influential persons in both the public and the private sectors of our national economy. This is nothing new. The industrial era belched its way into our nation in the mid-1800s, relying on a combination of public and private capital to ensure progress. Further, since the decision of the U.S. Supreme Court in Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission in 2010, corporations now possess free speech entitlements of the First Amendment, and therefore their election campaign contribution amounts come from bottomless coffers. On top of this disgraceful distortion of Democracy, our nation is replete with people “looking for a quick, effortless way to lose weight without having to curtail their dangerous love affair with rich, unhealthful foods…an illicit affair [that] can lead to tragic consequences” (Fuhrman 92). When food is consumed in the same way as an addict consumes heroin, “junk scientists,” opportunistic diet book authors, and weight-loss hucksters with substantial financial support, marketing expertise—and a celebrity spokesperson—have a distinct advantage over science-based nutrition materials. In the end, savvy convenience food and beverage marketers and large industries wield a colossal edge over smaller, often not-for-profit organizations that fight for the genuine health interests of people. As it is frequently said, “There’s no profit in cure.”

In exploring the argument, it is crucial first to describe the government’s ChooseMyPlate logo. This will allow for an interpretation of the graphic. Then, I will compare the government’s current nutritional guidance program, ChooseMyPlate, with scientifically superior data about food and nutrition, creating a baseline for nutritional excellence and optimal individual and public health. Along with relevant findings by medical professionals, I introduce evidence by
and experience from peer-reviewed scholars that serve to bolster the argument. Related criticism will reinforce this paper’s position as well, coming from respected authors and experts in advertising and other fields to assist in discrediting ChooseMyPlate as a sincere effort at nutritional excellence.

This paper sets forth the argument that ChooseMyPlate appears to take a step in the right direction—it modifies nutritional guidelines compared to its predecessor, the Food Pyramid, and promotes a slightly more healthful diet than what the average U.S. American eats—but it does not go far enough in leading citizens to nutritional excellence and optimal disease prevention.

Moreover, the graphical content in the ChooseMyPlate logo is in many ways severely regressive to the Food Pyramid. ChooseMyplate, as we will come to see, is part of an endless feedback loop centered on public policy that sets the oppressive stage for problems in health, the economy, and the ecosystem. An attorney at a Washington, D.C. public interest environmental law firm describes the effects of one particular related public policy statute at the heart of the issue:

The statute drives public health policy in the United States and is a predominant reason that our nation suffers from record levels of obesity, heart disease, diabetes, and asthma. At the same time, this statute implements policies that result in severe malnutrition and hunger both domestically and abroad. Additionally, this legislation encourages overproduction, trade distortion, and depression of world market prices, which directly and immediately drives immigration towards the United States from the developing world. Lastly, this statute strips rural communities of their senses of identity, cultural values, and traditional heritage. Most people will be surprised to learn that the statute referenced above is the United States Farm Bill (Eubanks 214-15).

According the Center for Responsive Politics, “individuals and political action committees associated with the agribusiness sector contributed $65 million at the federal level during the 2008 election cycle and leaned Republican -- giving the GOP 62 percent of its
contributions” (Agribusiness). In the 2013-14 cycle, American Crystal Sugar and Altria (formerly the tobacco company Philip Morris) contributed $1.2 million to candidates at the federal level, two-thirds of whom were Republican, although more Democrats are receiving contributions from this sector than in previous cycles (Agribusiness). “In addition to campaign contributions to elected officials and candidates, companies, labor unions, and other organizations spend billions of dollars each year to lobby Congress and federal agencies” (Lobbying Database). And “Big Ag” is not alone in these practices: the Food & Beverage industry spent almost $60 million on lobbying in 2009. Beverage titans Coca-Cola Company and PepsiCo Incorporated spent nearly $18 million combine, and spending just slightly more is the American Beverage industry—which of course does not include dairy beverages; there is an entirely different category for the dairy industry (Lobbying Database). Experts do not necessarily have to be Marxist critics to agree:

The complex, messy, obesogenic U.S. food environment has been decades in the making. Changing it will not be easy, because the “set point” or defaults are woven so tightly and broadly into the fabric of our food system and its policies (Wallinga 408).

As we explore ChooseMyPlate as the official “insignia” of our government’s initiative to guide public nutrition, it should be expected that the vast complexity of systems—including public institutions, individual lifestyles, advertising experts and their private industry clients—will reveal far more than the façade of a colorful, cartoonish graphic embedded on a website or imprinted on a public school cafeteria poster. This critical analysis begins by framing and textualizing the ChooseMyPlate artifact in a detailed description.

Description of the Text

The official USDA website, ChooseMyPlate.gov, features a slideshow as the main graphical content on the home page. There are seven slides (six in English and one in Spanish), each depicting an aspect of the ChooseMyPlate program, with the branding logo in the upper right corner. The ChooseMyPlate logo is available in seven styles for English versions and four
styles for Spanish version, as shown on the Graphic Resources page (ChooseMyPlate.gov). The English color version ChooseMyPlate is a square “placemat” with rounded corners, available in solid yellow, blue, magenta, white (mixed color and gray scale fork), and neon lime green (the color featured most frequently on the website). The English non-color version is available in gray scale and black-and-white; both have white background with thin black outline. The Spanish version, MiPlato, is available with four solid background colors: blue, green, magenta, and white (although these files would not open in the web browser). The standard color plate is round, white, and via standard graphic design effects (i.e., bordering, shading, and drop-shadow), appears slightly concave. On the plate are four pie-shaped slices in two slightly different sizes, adding up to “a full pie” that is divided vertically down the center to show the white plate beneath. The two horizontal divisions appear offset to accommodate the different slice sizes on each side of the plate, and show the white plate underneath. Each slice has a monochromatic color scheme, shaded to appear curved to match the shape of the plate, with flat white lettering in a bold quasi-serifed typeface. Slices each have a dark color outside border and a lighter shade of the same color as an inside border. In the color version, the slice on the top left is red, of the smaller size, and labeled Fruits. To its right, the slice labeled Grains is cadmium orange in color and of the slightly larger size. Beneath it is a smaller size purple slice labeled Protein. The final slice, on the bottom left, is green and labeled Vegetables. To the left of the plate is a four-tined white fork. A round white-edged “cup” overlaps the upper right edge of the plate. The cup has a similar concave effect as the plate, including the drop shadow, but is approximately one-fifth the size. A solid medium-blue inner circle occupies the center of the cup, with a dark outer border and lighter inner border, labeled Dairy. The phrase “ChooseMyPlate.gov” in sans-serif typeface spans the bottom of the soft-squared background. The word “Choose” is white and in demi-weight, as is the ending “.gov.” The phrase “MyPlate” is black and in ultra-bold-weight. In the mixed color-and-black-and-white version, the plate and cup remain in color, the fork is light gray, and the white sections of the bottom phrase are light gray. In the entirely gray scale version, the plate, slices, cup, fork, background, and text remain as white, black, gray, or in
shades of gray. In the black-and-white version, the background is white, the plate and matching cup are both white with a black border, slices and inner cup are black with white lettering, and the “ChooseMyPlate.gov” phrase is in black. Typefaces remain as in the other versions.

The graphics are simple, easy on the eye, and communicate the USDA’s ominously imprecise message about what constitutes the model meal for U.S. Americans. Further exploring the ChooseMyPlate.gov website reveals thought-provoking facts about food and nutrition. For example, the “Tip of the Day” on October 13, 2013 read “Tip of the Day – Top casseroles, soups, stews, or vegetables with shredded low-fat cheese” (ChooseMyPlate). How does this prompt square with nutritional excellence and disease prevention? In the face of scientific research and those scholars and journalists who fearlessly seek higher, deeper knowledge on nutrition, those “facts” begin to lose their intended influence.

With the ChooseMyPlate visual still in mind, we can begin to dissect the food and beverage recommendations on ChooseMyPlate. First, let us explore the next most recent rhetorical history of nutritional guidance in the U.S., the Food Pyramid. After that, perhaps the most important questions to ask are “What do I see in the ChooseMyPlate artifact, and what do experts say about such graphical content?” Then I can ask, “Who is behind what is depicted on ChooseMyPlate, and what are experts discussing in this arena?” When answers begin to emerge, the next question is “Why does it matter?” Finally, after a thorough interpretation and analysis in conjunction with expert facts and opinions about the core and surrounding issues, my paper concludes with a well-reasoned judgment.

Interpretation of the Text

In looking at a graphic like ChooseMyPlate, one might think, “What’s to analyze? This is just a simple, colorful way to display a bunch of food groups that most people already eat. The logo is actually pretty, in a cartoonish way—a cute plate and cup.” But theorists and experts in relative fields think very differently. In her article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” media critic Laura Mulvey states bluntly, “It is said that analyzing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it. That is the intention of this article. The satisfaction and reinforcement of the ego that represent
the high point of [the medium] must be attacked” (Mulvey 8). How might we confront ChooseMyPlate? We could look to the insights of Stuart Hall. His work as a critic concerns the process of mass communications as a “complex structure in dominance” made of “sign-vehicles organized…through the operation of codes within the syntagmatic chain of a discourse,” essentially saying that the intent of mass mediation is to “encode” a message to ensure the “preferred” interpretation by the intended audience, and result in consumption of either the product or the message, or both (Hall 166-167). In general, Mulvey, Hall, and other media critics want to deconstruct the simple, analyze the geometry, interpret the color scheme, psychologize the pretty, and scrutinize the cartoon—to altogether destroy the cuteness of the plate and cup. Why? Because they want to find out what possible harmful, misleading, or unhelpful messages may be lurking behind the veil of the appealing visual image. They want to go on record as facilitating the average viewer’s decryption of subtle, distracting, and frequently destructive signifiers as \textit{decidedly not equivalent} to the signified. They are trying to raise consciousness and lead people to making better decisions in their personal lives. As I consult the works of those who have gone before me, my goal in writing this paper is no less principled.

Confession, Part One: My first glimpse of the ChooseMyPlate campaign and its logo was already under the auspice of criticism, having read a brief article about it on the Huffington Post shortly after its release in 2011. Confession, Part Two: I have dealt with food issues since the age of 11, when I traded eating white bread for whole grain varieties, realized that I don’t appreciate the taste of beef or the accompanying digestion problems, and subsequently stopped eating school cafeteria food. These changes occurred after reading my first issue of Ms. Magazine, although I do not base my criticism of ChooseMyPlate on explicitly feminist frameworks. Confession, Part Three: After many years of eating an erratically unhealthy diet, I now practice a plant-based nutrarian strategy, which includes only infrequent consumption of animal-product and highly processed food in miniscule portions.

After extensive research, I conclude that the ChooseMyPlate graphic is a patterned and repetitive yet historically transmogrified code based on historical models of government
intervention with regard to agricultural necessity toward better public health and nutrition. This leads me to incorporate notions of Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding theory, Marxist theories of false consciousness resulting from communication structured in dominance, and Saussure’s condensed idea that, in mediation, the signifier does not always equal the signified. Hence, in all of its simplicity, the ChooseMyPlate logo is more complex than a popular television series, more psychologically detrimental than a typical Vogue-style fashion advertisement, more degrading than a hip-hop or rock music video, and even more physically dangerous than cable shows that glamorize cosmetic surgery. I arrived at this conclusion because, unlike these of forms of visual mediation, the ChooseMyPlate graphic has no visual human element to it, and thus requires delving into how it came into being in the first place: who created it, what was the time frame in which it was created, and both why and for whom it was created. Most, if not all, scholarly media criticism eventually addresses this solitary point: who or what does the mediated event serve? To play off Freud, if sometimes a cigar is just a cigar, is a logo ever just a logo? Was there some sort of initial collusion between dominant forces that intended to lead to the cutely deceptive ChooseMyPlate image, or is the logo a functional response to decades of multi-industry technological development, technical process, and refined technique? Due to the unique intricacies woven into the ChooseMyPlate artifact, I focus on specific elements of several theoretical frameworks and areas of expertise to argue my point, but frame my analysis more broadly using Stuart Hall’s notion of encoding and decoding, Ferdinand de Saussure’s theory of signifier/signified, and, overall, Marxist criticism. In doing so, I will compare and contrast the ChooseMyPlate logo with the Food Pyramid, along with what may be the most powerful modern branding image on the planet: the Apple logo. First, I want to interpret the ChooseMyPlate logo elements individually.

Let’s look at what is depicted on ChooseMyPlate, starting with the red upper left quadrant, labeled “Fruits.” There is absolutely no indication of the types of fruits: should we choose fresh, canned, or frozen fruits, or would products like fruit juice or Fruit Roll-ups be suitable? The operative word here is “choose,” for, with so many options, many would choose
the most convenient, tastiest, and rot-resistant alternative, Fruit Roll-ups. On its website, manufacturer General Mills lists the first four ingredients in Fruit Roll-ups as “Pears from Concentrate, Corn Syrup, Dried Corn Syrup, Sugar”—all processed sugars (General). Disease prevention expert Dr. Joel Fuhrman says, “Refined sugars cause us to be malnourished in direct proportion to how much we consume them [and they are] partially to blame for the high cancer and heart attack rates we see in America” (Fuhrman 34). Why do so many foods contain refined sugars? Because Big Ag continues to lobby our government to reinstate the Farm Bill, which started “as a limited safety net for working farmers [that] has swollen into a far-flung infrastructure of entitlements for the largest farmers and processors” according to a 2009 study (Eubanks 227). In fact, manufacturers of corn syrup products buy corn from farmers who “receive more than $4 billion annually from government subsidies, making corn the largest crop in terms of subsidies” (Eubanks 227).

Instead of processed fruits and fruit juices, Dr. Fuhrman recommends eating at least three or four fresh fruits daily: “Fresh fruits…contain an assortment of protective nutrients and phytochemicals, so stick with the real thing” (Fuhrman 36). If the pretty red slice on MyPlate bore the label “Fresh Fruits,” viewers of the graphic would have little if no difficulty in assimilating the prompt. But its label is a perfect example of what Saussure described as occurring when the signifier, that is, real unprocessed fresh fruits grown in nature, does not equal the signified label “Fruits” as depicted on MyPlate. The sign or code (real fruit) is re-coded or packaged with a new meaning (Skiles). Viewers of the newly bundled meaning can interpret the word “Fruits” to include any food-like substance that resembles fruit, or that contains fruit, fruit juice, fruit concentrate, fruit sugars, or natural or artificial fruit flavors. It is irrelevant that General Mills provides a disclaimer on the package that “[Fruit Roll-ups] are not intended to replace fruit in the diet”: the company’s use of the word “Fruit” has already been encoded to mean something other than real fruit. This meaning replacement process or naturalization “leads us to think that the visual sign for ‘cow’ actually is (rather than represents) the animal, cow” (Hall 170). In this case, we are talking about making the visual word “Fruit” seem to naturally
include a manufactured corn syrup product that is artificially flavored “Strawberry,” for example.

Moving clockwise on MyPlate, the next quadrant is cadmium orange in color and labeled “Grains.” This category includes two more of the five largest taxpayer subsidized Big Ag commodities, wheat and rice (Eubanks 227). While some people may find this category to mean “whole grains,” which are supposedly more healthful than the common alternative, “refined grains,” experts disagree. “Many whole-grain cold cereals are so processed that they do not have a significant fiber per serving ratio and have lost most of their nutritional value” (Fuhrman 37).

Interestingly, the “Grains” category appears connected to the “Dairy” category, implying a link between a common U.S. American breakfast choice: “Cereal” and “Milk.” This positioning seems too obvious to me to be random in the ChooseMyPlate graphic. All one need do is walk down the cereal aisle of the typical U.S. American grocery store to witness the vast array of cold cereals touting the supposed “heart benefits of whole grains,” which is a doubly-empty promise given the amount of sugar and corn syrup manufactured into the products. Also, pound for pound, cold cereals are very costly. Cheaper and more nutrient-rich alternatives are “oatmeal (not instant), Roman Meal, and Steel Cut Oats” (Fuhrman 37). Individuals concerned with fiber intake can look to foods other than either refined or whole grains: beans and legumes, nuts, fresh and steamed vegetables, and whole fruits (Fuhrman 34). In addition, Marxist critics would concur that the problem of the commodification of nutritionally depleted foods and beverages stems from hegemony, “the powers that be,” and their “at any cost” manner of doing business. It’s all in a day’s work for Big Ag companies to “alienate people from the real life joy of producing and consuming”—and even having access to accurate nutrition information about—their own food (Skiles). “Another fact that shocks the conscience is how [Big Ag] continues to receive billions of tax dollars despite record profits at megafarms” [italics added] (Eubanks 227). But Big Ag does not work alone. According to Stagnito Media, dollar sales for “Ready-to-Eat Cereals” in the year ending on April 14, 2012 totaled more than $5.5 billion—and this amount only includes U.S. non-supercenter food stores with at least $2 million in sales (Furore). This exemplifies commodity fetishism in its most basic forms, at all stages from blind taste testing to
production to advertising and finally, to consumption. Berger explains Marxist understanding:

Advertising is an essential institution in advanced capitalist societies because it is necessary to motivate people to work hard so that they can accumulate money, which they can then use to buy things. But in addition, people must be driven to consume, must be made crazy to consume, for it is consumption that maintains the economic system. Thus the alienation generated by a capitalist system is functional, for the anxieties and miseries generated by such a system tend to be assuaged by impulsive consumption (Berger 57).

Big Ag places more value on profit than on growing nutritionally excellent foods; manufacturers, sellers, and advertisers value profit over making and marketing truly healthful foods; and consumers have learned to place more value on the taste of Kellogg's® Frosted Mini-Wheats® Strawberry cereal than on the health benefits of non-trademark registered real strawberries.

Perhaps the most perplexing of all the MyPlate segments is that one labeled “Protein.” This statement by a disease prevention expert keys in to the mystery: “Protein is a macronutrient, not a food group” (Fuhrman USDA). Why would the USDA choose the word “protein” instead of listing options that include both animal and plant food? As a person who eats a 95% plant-based diet, I can attest to the fact that protein is a grand food issue for people. When others find out that I prefer not to eat animal products, the first question they ask is “Where do you get your protein?” When I tell them that beans and legumes, nuts and seeds, and even many vegetables contain all the protein that my body needs, they dismiss the concept and point out that several portions of dairy, meat, and poultry are necessary in their daily diets. They have internalized or naturalized the concept that protein=meat. For Hall, this is the encoded message:

Naturalized codes demonstrate the degree of habituation produced when there is a fundamental alignment and reciprocity – and achieved equivalence – between the encoding and decoding sides of an exchange of meanings (Hall 170).
Most of these people have severe health problems, such as heart disease, cancer, chronic digestion problems, and diabetes, and must take prescription medications that do not cure these diseases but temporarily fend off the worst symptoms—just so they can continue eating animal products. The author of *The China Study* scientifically links consumption of animal products with cancer. In a recent interview, the doctor said about his well-researched, detailed study, “We learned that we can actually turn on cancer development by simply increasing the amount of animal protein that people eat…and we can turn it off by simply taking [animal protein] away” (Campbell). But not all doctors tell their patients to eschew consumption of animal products, or at least minimize their intake, because, as the author said on *Real Time with Bill Maher*, “Pills make money” (Campbell). I contend that the USDA chose the word “Protein” for that quadrant because the majority of U.S. Americans have naturalized the code: they see the word “protein” immediately to signify “meat.” This naturalization equates to profit for industrialized concentrated animal feeding operations (“CAFOs”) that raise cows, chickens and turkeys, pigs, sheep, and other creatures primarily for human consumption. Once again, Big Ag dictates legislation and the USDA sanctions it on a purple quadrant of our government’s food recommendation logo. Another interesting note about language regarding consumption of animal products is that no one says they are going to the market to buy “cow,” they go to buy “beef.” While the U.S. is certainly not the first nation to employ this semiotic shifting (the French use “boeuf”), there is a clear distinction between the concepts of “eating cow” and “eating beef” that I believe works in the favor of CAFOs and other Big Ag animal operations. We can see this kind of linguistic transference of meaning through the Marxist criticism lens as a handy tool that separates people from the production of living animals solely for human consumption and the processed animal flesh that we find in the meat department of a grocery store, or listed on the restaurant menu. Indeed, historically, “the meat was called *boef* (ox) (Modern French) *boeuf* by the French nobles—who did not often deal with the live animal—when it was served to them” (Beef). As Berger states when explaining Saussure’s concept, “the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary”—actual cow meat is understood via a re-conceptualization of a food
product that ostensibly tastes good and even offers consumers their choice of price range, cooking method, texture, temperature, and serving style for the food (Berger 4). U.S. Americans in general have come to equate “protein” with “meat,” regardless of the fact that they would receive adequate amounts of the macronutrient protein by consuming a whole-food plant-based diet. Even athletes can maximize their health and performance this way: “A properly designed vegan (or nearly vegan) diet can meet the nutritional demands of a speed and agility athlete, such as tennis, skiing, basketball, track, and soccer,” and in fact, “supplemental protein is an option but not needed for most athletes who carefully construct their diet, paying attention to the higher-protein plant foods” (Fuhrman 238).

The “Vegetables” quadrant poses a visual challenge that is unique to the logo. The darker green part of the quadrant fades to lighter green as the eye moves inward, toward the center of the plate. At that particular ninety-degree angle, the color of the quadrant matches the color of the green placemat behind the plate, creating the optical illusion that the word “Vegetables” is faint, and disappearing into the background. This label is unambiguously not as visually powerful as the other labels. However, in the real scientific world of food, vegetables provide massive amounts of nutrients and phytochemicals (and protein, too!) when consumed as the largest portion of a human diet, because of their nutrient density. Additionally, “in a review of 206 human-population studies, raw vegetable consumption showed the strongest protective effect against cancer of any beneficial food” (Fuhrman 61). The mystery of the disappearing ChooseMyPlate “Vegetables” seems to be an intentional design technique, in which case Marxist critics might decipher that the USDA and its Big Ag buddies are literally attempting to erase real vegetables as a food group, and Hall might interpret that the USDA is re-encoding real vegetables as “a thing of the past.”

Finally, the “Dairy” image is round, like the plate. Its label is highly visible, even though all of the labels are in the same size type. The round “cup” seems to jump off the image: in fact, the cup edge sits partially over the plate. Because the shape is round, visualizing a portion size of dairy seems elusive compared to the already troublesome quadrants. Dairy as most people
understand it represents another facet of Big Ag that eludes science. The question we should be asking is “Aside from humans, what mammal continues to drink its mother’s milk after the age of approximately six months, let alone drink another mammal’s milk as a replacement?” The answer, of course, is that humans are alone in this practice, yet science tells us that we should consume dairy minimally or altogether remove it from the diet. Why?

There is a strong association between dairy lactose and ischemic heart disease, and between dairy products and cancer. Dairy fat is also…the primary source of our nation’s high exposure to dioxin, a highly toxic chemical compound that even the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency admits is a prominent cause of many types of cancer (Fuhrman 88-89).

But our government, at the behest of Big Ag, endorses dairy consumption in every meal. In 2012, the dairy industry contributed—just to election campaigns—nearly $7.3 million. Only those people willing to question “who is behind ChooseMyPlate” find the chilling facts about the big plastic jugs of cow’s milk, convenient individually-wrapped processed cheese slices, grab-and-go cups of yogurt, and big bricks of salted butter going into our grocery carts, refrigerators, and into our bodies.

Upon taking apart the puzzle and looking at the individual ChooseMyPlate pieces, this grouping of “mysterious” faceless shapes, labels, and colors obscures the industrial behemoths that stand behind potentially unintended political processes and public health problems. But the puzzle takes on another level of meaning when we listen to experts who design graphical images, especially corporate logos. One of these experts is Alex Lacerda, an art director and designer who has worked for clients such as Nokia, Red Bull, Adidas, Apple, HP, Samsung Mobile US, and Disney. Lacerda was not previously aware of the ChooseMyPlate graphic, and initially thought that it was an “app” icon because of its shape and colorful simplicity. The official website does not offer a downloadable app, but the image certainly appears to “fit in” with current technology. Here we can see clearly through Saussure’s window that the signifier, ChooseMyPlate logo, has been arbitrarily—albeit possibly intentionally—assigned a new
signified concept: app icon. Lacerda acknowledged that an issue with the ChooseMyPlate graphic revolved around portion size, saying “[if the USDA really wanted people to eat a healthy diet] the graphic needs some more detail, like actual illustrations of the food groups or even putting some perspective on the plate and showing the pie chart more in a 3D view so people can compare the servings.” Indeed, the predecessor to ChooseMyPlate was the Food Pyramid, which contained all of the same five groups of food, but showed clearly discernible images of the foods (USDA). For example, in the “Fruits” category, viewers saw an apple, an orange, grapes, and a banana. Next to it, in the “Vegetables” group, there is a tomato, a stalk of broccoli, a carrot, a potato, and a leafy green vegetable like lettuce or cabbage. Even the former “Protein” group was labeled “Meat, Poultry, Fish, Dry Beans, Eggs & Nuts” and depicted a whole “cooked” turkey, a fish, and large portions of beans and nuts. The Food Pyramid, unlike ChooseMyPlate, listed ideal servings from each group. If a viewer of the ChooseMyPlate graphic cared enough to find out about serving sizes, he or she would have to have access to a computer and the Internet, then know to visit the official website for additional information. So was the design intended to be so simple that portion size becomes irrelevant? Jacob Cass, internationally renowned graphic design specialist, lists on his website “5 Principles of Effective Logo Design” as “simple, memorable, timeless, versatile, and appropriate” (Cass). In the “simple” category, he quotes Jeffrey Fisher, another brand identity designer:

Simple logos are often easily recognized, incredibly memorable and the most effective in conveying the requirements of the client. A refined and distilled identity will also catch the attention of a viewer zipping by signage at 70 miles per hour, on packaging on the crowded shelves of a store, or in any other vehicle used for advertising, marketing and promotion.
The Media Literacy Project, in its attempt to educate young people about media tricks, says simplicity is a key technique used by advertisers.

Life is complicated. People are complex. Problems often have many causes, and they’re not easy to solve. These realities create anxiety for many of us. Persuaders offer relief by ignoring complexity and proposing a Simple solution (Intro 10).

Lacerda said further, “The good point is that the graphic is clean,” and when I asked him if a “clean” graphic generally leads to ease of viewing and assimilation of the overall image and its message, he concurred, acknowledging that in the world of advertising and marketing “the design being clean is something that we always shoot for” (Lacerda). He distinguishes Apple Corporation as the prime example of a company that employs the European school of design in its logo, which emphasizes a clean and minimalist philosophy, “not only on their web design, but with package design, advertising, and product design.” In fact, the colorful striped Apple logo that was in use from 1977 to 1998 was created by Rob Janoff, who said this about designing a logo: “The main thing is to make it simple… and having it very readable is also important” (Janoff). Lacerda claims that Apple “decided to make the first iPods white to make them look “pure,”” and he extrapolates that the ChooseMyPlate graphic “is on the cleaner side… not a lot of gradients and shadows and textures.” His professional comments harmonize with those of Abe Sauer, author for BrandChannel, which claims to be “the world’s only online exchange about branding” (Disclaimer).

Apple's change to the shiny metallic logo coincided with a style shift in US culture. The quality products of good living, the new yuppie lifestyle, took on the look of brushed stainless steel. Silvered luxury cars from Audi filled the roads. The shiny metals of Viking were the new must have kitchen appliances.

Today, Apple commonly uses a simple white logo, both in its minimalist
stores and glowing on the back of MacBooks everywhere. The clean, sterile white perfectly matches an Apple brand that is crisp, nearly clinical about quality and perfection (Sauer).

His opening sentence hints at Marxist ideas about class conflict: “One of the approaches the ruling class uses is to convince people that there are no classes in a given society or that class is somehow incidental and irrelevant” (Berger 53). Hence, corporations create products for the “huge mass of workers who are exploited by this ruling class and whose condition becomes increasingly more desperate” (Berger 52). By changing the style of everyday products, including branding, the ruling class establishes a new set of goods to market to the masses, in this case, the simple-sleek-metallic design style traditionally reserved for ruling class elites. So why are ease of viewing and assimilation and “purity” important with regard to the ChooseMyPlate logo? The answers lie in intentional and functional morphing of messages over time within the dominant forces of hegemony, whether local, national, or global, and so it is not surprising that Lacerda’s knowledge of and practice in the European school of design beg the leading questions. Interestingly, the simple-sleek-metallic style mirrors Marxist criticism’s concept of alienation.

It is imperative to draw back from encoded messages, commodified realities, and current references of things, people, and ideas, and to deconstruct them in the selected frameworks. Marxist media critics might lean toward an historically intentional movement by Big Ag from Food Pyramid renderings of foods and recommended daily servings to the simple, clean remake in ChooseMyPlate. Another quote on Cass’s Smashing Magazine website comes from Paul Rand, art director and graphic designer best known for his corporate logo designs, including the logos for IBM, UPS, Enron, Westinghouse, ABC, and Jobs’ NeXT (Paul). He might actually be doing the work for intentionalist Marxist critics when he claims “It is foolhardy to believe that a logo will do its job immediately, before an audience has been properly conditioned” (Cass). This prescient statement could be construed as an understanding that dominant hegemonic forces such as Big Ag are in charge, that they consciously, actively dehumanize existence in return for profit, power, and prestige by knowingly alienating people from the joy of producing and consuming
their own goods. In this view, ChooseMyPlate is an intentionally destructive graphic based on previous, somewhat less destructive models established on people’s understanding of real food that they or their parents produced with their own hands and tools in gardens and on farms. Paul may be opening the door for semioticians like Saussure to shine light on the work of corporations and their branding specialists: “Semiotics is of great interest to marketers, who use it in an effort to understand the way consumers think and what goes on in their minds when they contemplate purchasing a product or service” (Berger 12). So there are signs that the signs—and their makers and their clients and their customers—are clearly in collusion, even if “everybody knows” that advertisements and commercials exist to sell things. We have been “properly conditioned” into consumerism, whether we’re buying Abercrombie & Fitch or Target clothes, Mercedes Benz or Ford cars, Guerlain or Mary Kay makeup, Led Zeppelin or Lady Gaga music, or “choosing a protein” to eat. But wealth or taste largely pre-determines these simplistic day-to-day decisions that critics like Hall say are encoded or “pre-ferred” (inferred in advance for us) within the visual messages by institutional structures (or in Marxist language, dominant hegemonic forces).

Analyzing messages is the other side of “choosing” based on ability to pay, or on personal taste: “Analytic distinctions must not be confused with distinctions in the real world” (Hall 171). Here, he is talking about “decoding” the messages: “It is at the connotative level of the sign that situational ideologies alter and transform signification” (Hall 171). This is where the powerless, “properly conditioned,” oppressed masses reclaim their power: seeing “more clearly the active intervention of ideologies…the class struggle of language” (Hall 171). Then, in looking to ChooseMyPlate, “Protein” loses its Big Ag ideology of profit-over-all-else, the viewer opens the door to discover that protein is actually a nutrient, not a food group, and researches more nutritionally excellent options for consuming an appropriate, ideally plant-based whole food that contains protein. Again, the debate may still be open for many critics, and I want to introduce what another advertising expert says. Steven Heller has a long list of credentials in the graphic design field, including popular culture, graphic design history, and political art, and his piece on the introduction of Advertising Arts magazine in the U.S. during the Great Depression, when
The economy was at its nadir and desperation was at its zenith. Unless advertising and public relations men…could help resuscitate the economy, the nation would plummet further into the abyss—and with it the advertising industry. *Advertising Arts* was developed as a vehicle to encourage innovative work and celebrate the determination of advertising designers to manipulate popular perception using pseudoscience. It was indeed a magazine with a mission. So rather than publish the usual diet of gossip, trade talk, and technical notices, [the magazine’s editors] tapped the movers and shakers of what was then called “art for industry” to flag the new progressivism . . . Imbuing art with commercial value was a massive public relations effort that required the most articulate practitioners (Heller).

Heller goes on to say that *Advertising Arts* “served as a blueprint for how to market modernity as both an ethos and a style—in print, on packages, and as industrial wares.” And so, with the advent of modern advertising—backed by the powerful forces that pushed its efficacy—our nation transitioned rapidly from eating food grown on family farms, to food grown by slightly bigger farms for selling at farmers markets, to food produced in CAFOs and other massive-scale agricultural operations for commerce with other businesses such as large grocery stores and “big box” stores like Wal-Mart.

In this analysis, the simplicity of ChooseMyPlate is at best an obfuscation of the powerful forces at work in impeding access to well-defined educational information on nutritional excellence, and at worst represents a complete derailment of individual and public health, whether intentional or functional. Viewers of the USDA ChooseMyPlate graphic who fall prey to its simplicity incorrectly assume, in an example of Saussure’s concept of the signifier not equaling the signified, that rich food that *tastes* good actually *is* good for them. Hall would conclude that they have internalized the naturalized concept that *any food is good food*. These viewers position themselves either in the dominant hegemonic code, fully internalizing the
encoded message as intended by its producers, or in the negotiated code, a standpoint which “acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to make the grand significations… while it makes its own ground rules – it operates with exceptions to the rule” (Hall 175). The ChooseMyPlate graphic visually excludes the human element, to exist in the visual world as simplistic logo. Marxist critics would say this ultimately alienates citizens from the concept of real people eating real food, indoctrinating them from an early age, a mental but not necessarily chronological age, when the rounded cartoon-cuteness of the image makes perfect sense. In a fascinating contrast, producers of most other forms of media include people, depicting in static or moving images that they enjoy eating the harmful foods. Either way, the estranging message is sent, and perhaps it is only widely varying production costs that separate television commercials and full-page 4-color magazine advertisements from logos—especially if the logos come with Big Ag’s promise of cozy friends, campaign financing, and called-in favors.

ChooseMyPlate, in the end, reaffirms the status quo of an economy controlled by citizens making poor nutrition decisions based not on science but on the deeply encoded mass mediated expedience of highly processed luxury foods and beverages. This economic relationship benefits only our nation’s ruling elites: legislators and those shareholders and top-level employees in industries that grow or manufacture, market and sell the unhealthful food and beverage products that so many people mindlessly consume.

Evaluation

So what is this all for? Why do we bother analyzing one of the arguably “cutest” graphics to come out of U.S. Government? The ChooseMyPlate logo emulates the color and roundness of cartoons and the simplicity of the wildly popular, globally recognized Apple logo. One could even argue that the graphic includes food words that signify wholesomeness (in spite of the processed, corn syrup laden apple products it permits). One graphic design analyst suggests that graphic design and consumer capital have a harmonious, reciprocal, and reinforcing relationship because they manage to speak to the masses, to address them in ways that allow both to flourish: that is, the surfaces of
graphic design make the same requests of the masses that the market makes (Ommen 87).

At this point, Marxist critics are all nodding their heads, pointing to ChooseMyPlate logo, and echoing Berger: “Capitalism is not only an economic system but also something that affects attitudes, values, personality types, and culture in general” (Berger 48). It’s more than economic, and we ought not concern ourselves solely with the economic disconnect between food and nutrition or people and profit as we have already approached herein. Why? There is a broad host of social and cultural problems associated with ChooseMyPlate.

From the moment the technologies of visual production made visual reproduction a fact of visual culture, thereby invoking the masses as active in the experience of graphic design, the function has always been social (Ommen 101).

This is important because the collusion between dominant hegemonic forces creates, recreates, and carries down the line the previous “pre-ferred” messages that brought their collective power into being. I think time plays an important role as well in, as Hall might say, conditioning audiences to decode mass mediated messages like ChooseMyPlate as closely as possible to the intended encoded message. Additionally, Marxist critics would be all over Ommen’s reference to technology, castigating the unfettered force-feeding of technology onto the market to wield as a tool for social, economic, and psychological alienation. Further, consumption of food and beverages endorsed on ChooseMyPlate brings “healthy” quarterly profits to corporations and to the coffers of Congressional representatives, but is likely to bring only drawn-out misery and suffering to consumers in all aspects of life. Certainly for these consumers, Saussure would say the signifier ChooseMyPlate logo does not equate the signified “health.”

Other markers point to social problems related to a ChooseMyPlate mentality. First, our public education system not only excludes some of the most valuable study topics which might lead to better health, adulthood preparedness, and decision making, it reinforces the status quo created by corporate, profit-driven behemoths by posting ChooseMyPlate posters in lunchrooms
across the nation. Placing ChooseMyPlate visuals in preschools, elementary schools, and junior and senior high schools is a blatant hegemonic approach to “educate” (read: indoctrinate) students who would most likely be categorized in Hall’s dominant hegemonic position. With young people placed conveniently en masse in this psychological situation, the USDA and Big Ag produce “the ideal-typical case of ‘perfectly transparent communication’ – or as close as [they] are likely to come to it ‘for all practical purposes’” (Hall 174). Even most nutrition books advocate for “moderation” in the diet, which is much like Hall’s negotiated code: consuming animal products and processed foods is considered acceptable, as long as the student exercises, doesn’t overeat, or eats some fruit and vegetables (already questionable on ChooseMyPlate) each day. As I have already established, this really amounts to feebly justifying eating a nutritionally poor, disease-promoting diet that economically strengthens the food and beverage commodity fetishism created by Big Ag and other industry profiteers. Further, the very role models whom our young people look to, our teachers, are silently endorsing dangerous diets, and cafeteria servers dish out the dangerous foodstuffs; their individual and collective inaction as well as actions tow the dominant hegemonic line. Schools are serving the very dangerous foods that the ChooseMyPlate graphic cutely disguises, making them virtually disappear: out of sight, out of mind. Many schools sign up for corporate profit-motivated incentive programs that seem downright wicked. For example, marketers push

- the sale and advertisement of brand-name foods on school property,
- including curricula, food containers, vending machines, sports gear, and venues; the sale of branded items, such as Sonic’s Limeades for Learning or General Mills’ Box Tops for Education, at fundraisers; incentive programs, such as Pizza Hut BOOK IT!, which rewards reading with pizza; and direct advertising on bus radio, in-school TV, and school websites (Schwartz 9-10).

In addition, these statements (from the Institute of Medicine, the Federal Trade Commission, and authors published in *Preventive Medicine*, respectively) are astounding:
Schools, where children are a captive audience, are replete with food advertising. In 2009, the food industry spent $149 million to promote products in schools. A national survey found that two out of three schools have on-site advertising for at least one company marketing calorie-rich, nutrient-poor foods, reaching up to 30 million students every day (Schwartz 5).

The collusion of the USDA, with its ChooseMyPlate graphic, Big Ag, and food and beverage marketing and advertising companies as their harmful products and practices become embedded in our schools has created serious health consequences for children. “Thus, it is not surprising that child-targeted advertising is highly effective at influencing young people’s food choices, which ultimately contributes to the obesity crisis” (Schwartz 5). Conservative politicians and pundits shout “personal responsibility!” from the big industry playbook, with nary a mention of the ubiquity of dangerous food advertisements, especially in schools—including the “cute” ChooseMyPlate graphic. The profit-motivated practices, the producers and production of unhealthful foods, and the resulting health consequences and psychological manipulation together both represent and implement all that is wrong with our corporate money driven political system. Meanwhile, Big Ag hegemonically hijacks our political process and drives it off a steep cliff as U.S. citizens pat themselves on the back for being exceptional: “We’re the best.” But are we? What makes us “the best?”

Certainly, we are the best animal product consumers: in 2012, U.S. Americans consumed 25.8 billion pounds of beef, which doesn’t take into consideration consumption of the flesh of other animals (USDA ERS). We are also exceptionally good at influencing people in developing countries to raise and consume greater quantities of animal products. According to the Journal of Nutrition,

A joint International Food Policy and Research Institute/Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations/International Livestock Research Institute study suggested that global production and
consumption of meat will continue to rise, from 233 million metric tons (Mt) in the year 2000 to 300 million Mt in 2020, as will that of milk, from 568 to 700 million Mt over the same period. Egg production will also increase further by 30% (Speedy 4049).

Consuming these animal products creates many serious, debilitating health problems, and U.S. Americans have become the best prescription drug users to try to counter these diseases. The CDC found recently that more than one-fifth of persons in our nation were taking three or more prescription drugs in the month before data collection (Office). During just physician office visits in 2010, doctors ordered or provided 2.6 billion drugs, 75.1% of visits involved drug therapy, and the most frequently prescribed were analgesics for severe pain, antihyperlipidemic agents for cholesterol problems, and antidepressants (Office). This does not even account for hospital emergency room visits! The numbers show astoundingly that our nation is failing to achieve and maintain good physical (and mental) health. Further exploring the website brings us to the National Health and Nutrition Survey (“NHANES”), which lists current documents on specific health issues that are clearly related to the quality of our land, air, and water. Here is a sampling:

- Tuberculosis; Environmental Pesticides; Environmental Phenols and Parabens; Urinary Phthalates and Plasticizers Metabolites; Sleep Disorders; Hypertension; Obesity; and numerous substances [found in the] urine, such as Copper, Selenium, Zinc, Iodine, Mercury, Arsenic, and Heavy Metals (Office).

The frighteningly significant concentrations of these chemicals, compounds, and metals found in our bodies are largely the result of commodified production of animals for meat and dairy products. Marxist critics like Berger would certainly point first to the alienation created by removing the small farmer from the field to rely heavily on corporate-produced foods, with all of their nutrient poor qualities and land ravaging processes. Second, as Berger writes, this is where “the mass media play a crucial role. They provide momentary gratifications for the alienated
spirit…and, with the institution of advertising, they stimulate desire, leading people to work harder and harder” (Berger 56). ChooseMyPlate nestles right in as well, offering preposterously oversimplified solutions to an extremely complex, well-oiled machine churning away behind its cute logo. We work harder and harder, for wildly decreasing food quality, while Big Ag replaces nutrient-dense soil with too much nitrogen and bioengineered pesticides, and its CAFOs release massive amounts of methane, a known greenhouse gas, into our skies. In fact,

Industrial agriculture – particularly industrial livestock activity – emits significant (and growing) amounts not only of carbon dioxide, but also of more pernicious greenhouse gases, including nitrous oxide (N2O) and methane (CH2). In fact, greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture far exceed those from transportation [italics added]. Yet, for reasons both cultural and political, agriculture remains almost unregulated (Cassuto 1).

Raising beef cattle in CAFOs is not the only issue creating environmental and health problems.

Pig waste…tends to contain both pathogens and antibiotics. Yet waste from pigs does not go to sewage treatment facilities; it tends to go straight onto the ground, where it eventually makes its way into the groundwater and rivers and into the air, causing respiratory problems, antibiotic resistance, and more. Habitat loss and degradation, erosion, water depletion, pollution and salinization, agrochemical contamination, the above-mentioned animal waste and air pollution are also serious and growing CAFO-related problems (Cassuto 7-8).

These myriad problems grow exponentially as more citizens and other societies around the world adopt the destructive hegemonic U.S. American business model when it comes to food and nutrition. Marxist critics, scientists, doctors, environmentalists, and other concerned individuals and groups warned—and continue to warn—us about all of these tragic results. Often, I feel embarrassed that our society and its many sub-cultures have adopted into their regular lifestyles eating McDonald’s food and hotdogs, consuming whole milk and other dairy
products several times a day, and gorging daily on highly processed decadent sweets. Some people nihilistically embrace the catastrophic conditions as the natural progression of an inevitable Armageddon, urging the end of the world to come faster and faster. Perhaps even more shocking is the capitulating comment by a 50-year-old man I know who recently suffered a heart attack: “Pretty much everybody is going to experience a heart attack. It’s not that bad. I lived through it.” He has stents and takes several organ-leaching prescription pills every day so that he can continue consuming the very products that compromised his body’s nutritional health, setting the stage for the first heart attack and potential future health problems.

In the end, ChooseMyPlate is a slick logo that distorts, obfuscates, oversimplifies, and virtually erases the life affirming, scientifically proven nutritional needs of the human body. ChooseMyPlate lies about the “health benefits” from dairy, it pushes the vile corporate agenda of addictive, highly processed, non-nutritious salt- and sugar-filled fruit and vegetable based food products. ChooseMyPlate brazenly tows the line of junk food manufacturers, and it furthers the sick and sickening notion that “protein=meat.” ChooseMyPlate tells us that we can’t afford the real food anyway, so we won’t demand that our farms grow it—and if they do, that delicious nutritious apple will always cost us more than the same serving size of detrimental, sugary Apple Jacks cereal. ChooseMyPlate opens the door to Pandora’s box, praising a cornucopia of dangerous foodstuffs so vastly technologically removed from their natural states that the body depletes itself of nutrients and organ vigor trying to process them. ChooseMyPlate snuggles up with “profit above all” advertisers and marketers of rich, unhealthful foods and beverages, while delivering smothering hugs to innocent children, and kisses of death to people who are poor, uneducated, indigent, marginalized, and otherwise disenfranchised. I find that the very presence of ChooseMyPlate in society represents the dumbing down of our citizens. Graphic designers unabashedly tell us: it’s all about simplicity. So I’ll heed this simple advice: eat a whole-food plant-based diet, and stay wise to the wily ways of the wickedly rich, dominant hegemonic powers that control all they can—with force. ChooseMyPlate? It’s not a good choice for me. What about you?
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