

THE RIGHT TO MAKE MISTAKES: CHALLENGING FOOD PATERNALISM





The Right to Make Mistakes: Challenging Food Paternalism

Pietro Paganini - President of Competere.eu - delivered a lecture on May 14, 2026 at the *"Enrico Morbelli" School of Liberalism* on the relationship between food, public health, and individual freedom. In a context where debates on prevention, individual

responsibility, the role of science, and public intervention are increasingly intense, Paganini raised a key question: who should ultimately decide what is "right" to eat, drink, or consume?

The lecture also examined the thin line between information and paternalism, asking how far public policy should go in promoting awareness without turning into a constraint on individual freedom.

Paternalism or Responsibility? — Policy Highlights

In the contemporary debate on food, public health, and lifestyles, the boundary between information, prevention, and paternalism is becoming increasingly blurred. Through an interdisciplinary approach grounded in critical thinking, Pietro Paganini proposes a liberal reflection on the relationship between the individual, science, and institutions, placing personal freedom and individual responsibility at the center.

- Food freedom concerns not only food choices, but the broader relationship between individuals, science, and public authority.
- Liberalism does not prescribe a single “correct” lifestyle: it protects the coexistence of diverse personal choices.
- Science is a critical, evidence-based, and fallible method, not a moral authority or belief system.
- Paternalistic policies risk turning prevention and information into forms of behavioral or social conditioning.
- Complex public health issues such as obesity and non-communicable diseases cannot be explained by a single nutrient or food.
- Factors such as physical inactivity, digital attention overload, sleep quality, and overall lifestyle patterns are often underweighted compared to a narrow focus on diet alone.
- Tools like sugar taxes may have limited effectiveness and can generate unintended consequences, often disproportionately affecting more vulnerable groups.
- A free society does not aim to eliminate risk or error, but to enable individuals to understand, manage, and live with them responsibly.

1. Are We Free to Eat, Drink, and Make Mistakes?

Starting from a seemingly simple question, Pietro Paganini asks whether we are truly free to choose what we eat, drink, and consume. He explores how moral judgments, simplified scientific narratives, and “one-size-fits-all” policy approaches are increasingly turning food into a tool for cultural and social guidance rather than individual choice.

Drawing on thinkers such as John Stuart Mill, Friedrich Hayek, Karl Popper, and Thomas Kuhn, Paganini supports the idea of an open society. He challenges political and scientific determinism and emphasizes the importance of doubt, individual responsibility, and freedom of choice – including the freedom to make mistakes.

Special attention is given to the limitations of contemporary paternalistic policies, such as sugar taxes and simplified labeling systems, and to their unintended consequences, which are often overlooked in public debate.

2. Do we really choose?

The most immediate answer is: yes, of course. Never before have we had so many options. If freedom is a choice, then we should feel freer than ever. Supermarkets are full, global cuisines are accessible everywhere, delivery apps are ubiquitous, and products exist for every need, lifestyle, belief, or identity.

2.2 Is it really like that? Or is choice only formally free, while social, moral, and political judgment increasingly shapes and directs it?

- Are we truly free if every food choice is accompanied by moral judgment? And what happens when those judgments constantly change over time?
- If we eat meat, we are labeled irresponsible. Yet protein is beneficial and has been essential to human evolution.
- If we drink a sugary beverage, we are seen as victims of the food industry. Yet the real issue is not sugar itself, but quantity, frequency, context, and overall lifestyle.
- If we choose processed or packaged food, we are said to be harming our health. Yet food processing increases safety, extends shelf life, improves accessibility, and reduces waste.
- If we drink wine or beer, we are told we are ignoring health risks. Yet both are deeply embedded in the history, culture, and economies of many regions.
- If we consume milk, we are treated as if we are choosing a problematic product because of lactose. Yet milk has been part of human diets for thousands of years.
- If we do not follow the latest diet trend, we are considered uninformed. Yet everyone ultimately seeks to live better and longer lives.

2.3 Who constructs the meaning of food?

The issue is not only what we eat. The deeper question is who defines the moral, health-related, and political meaning of what we eat..

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2.4 Are we free to choose what to eat, drink, or consume, or are we increasingly being pushed toward choices that someone else has already defined as “correct” for us?

This is a deeply liberal question. Liberalism, before being an economic or political theory, is a method for limiting the power of those who claim to know better than individuals how they should live. It is a framework for balancing different forms of freedom: the freedom to make one’s own choices and the freedom from impositions, intrusions, and consequences generated by the choices of others.

It does not only ask: what is the best choice? It asks: who has the right to impose their idea of the “best” choice on everyone else?

In nutrition, health, and lifestyles, this question becomes particularly powerful. Food is not only nutrition — and therefore health. It is also about pleasure, culture, identity, territory, memory, relationships, economy, evolution, and freedom.

When food is reduced to risk scores, warning labels, taxes, or moral blame, we are not simply changing diets. We are changing the relationship between the individual, science, and public authority.

3. From Judgment to Public Policy

Judgment never remains just judgment. First it becomes language. Then it becomes a consensus. Then it becomes public policy.

This is how an individual choice begins to be reframed as a collective problem. Not because real health risks do not exist — they do. Not because obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, or alcohol abuse are not serious issues — they are. But precisely because they are serious issues, they require more science and less simplification, more responsibility and fewer moral shortcuts.

4. Prevention or Prescription?

The risk lies in confusing prevention with prescription. Prevention means providing tools, knowledge, context, and critical capacity. Prescription means telling people what they must do, what they must avoid, what they should desire, and even what they should feel ashamed of.

This is where contemporary food paternalism enters: “one-size-fits-all” policies, the nanny state, and the idea that there exists a single correct choice that can be designed for everyone. It rarely appears in the explicit form of prohibition. It does not say “you cannot.” It says something more subtle: “you can, but this is the wrong choice.” “You can, but it is risky.” “You can, but here is a warning label.” “You can, but there is a tax.” “You can, but we will nudge you toward the correct option.”

This is “soft paternalism”: it guides without appearing coercive, and it influences without fully acknowledging the responsibility of imposition. For this reason, it can be more insidious than explicit bans.

And it works because it does not only address reason. It appeals to fear, guilt, disgust, and the need for belonging. Different political and cultural movements have learned to use these emotional levers effectively: they activate our most ancient cognitive responses, polarize language, and transform complex choices into moral symbols.

As a result, food is no longer just food. It becomes identity, accusation, virtue, and guilt. And when public policy is built on this emotional grammar, the risk is that it stops educating and starts manipulating.

Here, liberalism must ask its most uncomfortable question: when does information become conditioning? When does education become social engineering? When does public health stop helping people choose and start choosing for them?

5. Mill, Hayek, and the Limits of Power

John Stuart Mill remains relevant today. The key issue is not preventing harm to others. The problem arises when public power seeks to protect individuals from themselves – treating adults not as responsible citizens, but as fragile subjects to be guided, corrected, and directed.

Friedrich Hayek adds a crucial insight: no central authority possesses all the knowledge required to fully organize individual choices from above. Knowledge is dispersed, contextual, and practical. It exists in people’s lived experiences, circumstances, preferences, environments, habits, family histories, bodies, and needs. This applies to economics – and it also applies to food and health.

For this reason, imposing a universal dietary model risks being not only illiberal but also unscientific. Human beings are not identical. They do not live in the same conditions, and they do not share the same metabolism, culture, income, time availability, family structure, or relationship with exercise, sleep, work, and stress.

6. Open Society vs Fixed Ideas

Here the contrast is not only between freedom and paternalism. It is between two ways of understanding the world.

On one side, there is a Platonic, Hegelian, and deterministic temptation: the idea that there exists a higher order, a “correct” form of society, a historical or scientific rationality capable of telling us where we must go. In this view, individuals become material to be educated, corrected, and guided. Concrete freedom is sacrificed in the name of an abstract model of the good.

On the other side is the open society: imperfect, experimental, conflictual, and anti-deterministic. A society that does not claim to know the best outcome in advance, but instead makes space for error, criticism, correction, and discovery.

Karl Popper understood this clearly: the enemy of open society is not only political tyranny. It is the attempt to turn fixed ideas into collective destiny. When someone says “science has decided, ” “history is moving in this direction, ” or “society must be organized in this way, ”

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the liberal risk is always the same: the individual disappears inside a grand design.

Contemporary science itself encourages caution toward any form of determinism. Modern physics—from quantum theory to the study of complex systems — has shown that reality is not always reducible to linear, predictable, and controllable mechanisms. In complex systems, probabilities, interactions, uncertainty, initial conditions, and context all matter. And if this is true for matter, it is even more true for human beings.

7. Science is Not a Religion

A deeper misunderstanding arises here: the idea that “following science” means obeying a fixed, already settled truth. But science does not exist to create dogmas. It exists to challenge and replace them. Science is not a religion, and scientists should not become priests. When scientific language is used to close debate rather than open it, it stops being a method and becomes an authority structure.

Karl Popper described this clearly: science advances through conjectures and refutations. A theory is scientific not because it is unquestionable, but because it can be tested, criticized, and potentially falsified. The core of science is not certainty — it is organized doubt.

From a liberal perspective, this is essential. Science is not a tool for telling people how to live. It is a tool for reducing error, correcting assumptions, and improving decisions. It does not produce commands. It produces provisional knowledge, always open to revision and criticism.

Thomas Kuhn adds another important dimension. Science does not operate in a vacuum. It is embedded in scientific communities, dominant paradigms, shared languages, professional incentives, journals, careers, and reputations. This structure is necessary to organize knowledge. But it also creates a risk: paradigms can become resistant to challenges that threaten them.

When a scientific community defends its paradigm for too long, consensus can turn into conformity. Dissent may be treated not as a source of testing, but as a threat. Scientific caution can blur into institutional self-preservation. Even scientific communities can become systems of power and conformity.

At that point, the scientist stops being an explorer and becomes a guardian of the temple. Yet the most important role of science is not to protect a community, but to disrupt it when facts, anomalies, and new evidence require it. The authentic scientist does not defend a paradigm out of loyalty; they test it out of responsibility.

This is highly relevant in food and public health.

For years, we have searched for single culprits: fat, then sugar, then salt, then red meat, then ultra-processed foods. Each time, part of reality was turned into a total explanation. Each time, a useful category became a moral category. Each time, complexity was reduced to a slogan.

But obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and lifestyle-related conditions cannot be explained by a single nutrient, a single food, or a single label. They are biological, social, economic, cultural, technological, and behavioral phenomena. This is why science and liberalism are needed together. Science reminds us to look for evidence, not slogans. Liberalism reminds us

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that no evidence — especially when partial — should easily become coercion. Good science opens questions. Bad politics uses science to close them.

8. From Plate to Screen: the Hidden Blind Spot

If the issue is health, we need to broaden our perspective. It is much easier to blame a soft drink than to question the broader organization of everyday life. It is simpler to tax sugar than to ask why people walk less, sleep worse, sit more, and live increasingly connected to platforms designed to capture attention.

If obesity depended only on food intake, the solution would be relatively straightforward. But it is not. The human body is not a nutrition table — it is a biological, social, and behavioral system. This raises an uncomfortable question: if we place warning labels on food products, why do we not also place warning labels on infinite scrolling?

If we tax sugary drinks because they contribute to weight gain, why do we not also address digital environments that reduce movement, sleep quality, concentration, and time spent outdoors? And if this sounds excessive, we might ask why intervening on food feels so natural in comparison.

The point of this provocation is not to propose new taxes or restrictions. It is to expose an inconsistency. Policy often targets what is easiest to see, measure, and communicate. A plate of food is easy to photograph. A screen is harder to blame — especially when it is something everyone uses.

Yet a society that constantly talks about public health should also be willing to look there: at sedentary lifestyles, attention capture, reduced spontaneous movement, declining free play, digital isolation, and the difficulty of building balanced routines.

The problem is not only what enters the body. It is also what disappears from life: movement, time, sleep, relationships, and attention.

9. Freedom Means the Right to Be Wrong

A free society cannot promise perfect citizens. It can provide knowledge, tools, transparency, education, and opportunities. But it must also accept that individuals will sometimes choose differently.

Even poorly. Even excessively. Even against medical advice, common sense, or public recommendations.

If an informed adult chooses to drink, smoke, overeat, exercise too little, or live an unbalanced lifestyle, that choice may be criticized, risky, or even self-harming. But it remains a free choice.

Freedom is not only meaningful when it produces approved behaviors. It is especially important when it protects behaviors that others do not approve of.

Of course, there is a limit: harm to others. Second-hand smoke, drunk driving, violence, or neglect of those who depend on us are not purely “private choices.” In these cases, one

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person's freedom directly interferes with the freedom of others.

But outside this boundary, the state must act with caution. It can inform. It can educate. It can make better choices easier. It should not turn every personal risk into a public moral fault to be corrected.

Because a society that does not accept error is not a healthier society. It is a less free one.

10. Unintended Consequences

The issue is that paternalistic policies often promise a lot but deliver relatively little.

Sugar taxes, fat taxes, simplified labels, advertising restrictions, and moralizing classifications are presented as decisive tools. In practice, however, their effects are often modest, uneven, and full of unintended consequences.

Here, liberal thinking offers an important lesson. Friedrich Hayek emphasized that complex societies do not function like controlled laboratories. When public authorities intervene in an attempt to correct complex human behavior, they often generate unexpected effects, distortions, and new problems that were not anticipated.

This reflects the limits of rationalist presumption: the belief that a central authority can understand social complexity well enough to redesign individual behavior without side effects.

Food policy is a clear example. Some consumption patterns may decrease marginally, but overall lifestyles rarely change significantly. Problems are shifted from one product to another. One category is replaced by another. Cosmetic reformulations are incentivized rather than genuinely healthier foods. Lower-income groups are disproportionately affected. Supply chains and local producers may be penalized. Consumers are exposed to overly simplified messages that fail to reflect complex realities.

Robert K. Merton described this phenomenon as well: social actions often produce unintended consequences, especially when interventions target complex systems under the assumption of full control.

Above all, a dangerous illusion emerges: that taxation, labeling, or fear-based messaging alone can solve obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and broader lifestyle-related health issues.

The sugar tax is a clear example. It is introduced with the stated goal of improving public health, but its real-world outcomes are often more ambiguous.

It is regressive, as it tends to impact lower-income groups more heavily. It may reduce the consumption of certain sugary drinks, but it does not necessarily improve overall health outcomes. Consumption may shift toward other products that are equally caloric or nutritionally questionable. It encourages industrial reformulations designed primarily to avoid taxation rather than to improve nutritional quality. It can penalize families, small businesses, distributors, and entire supply chains. And above all, it reinforces the illusion that a complex issue like obesity can be addressed by targeting a single ingredient. The point is not to defend excessive sugar consumption.

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The point is to avoid treating a symbolically effective but substantively weak policy as if it were a scientific solution.

Complex problems do not disappear simply because they are reduced to a label. The paradox is clear: freedom is restricted without the problem being meaningfully solved.

11. The Liberal Response Is Not Indifference, but Responsibility

The liberal answer is not: “everyone can simply do whatever they want. ” It is something more demanding: building a society in which people have more knowledge, more tools, more critical capacity, and more responsibility.

Not obedient citizens, but capable citizens. Not frightened consumers, but informed individuals. Not policies that replace choice, but policies that improve the quality of choice.

Because a free society does not eliminate risk. It learns to live with it. It does not eliminate errors. It reduces it, but accepts it as part of freedom. And above all, it does not turn health into obedience.

Health matters. Prevention matters. Science matters. But precisely because they matter, they must not become instruments of conformity.

The real challenge is not to build perfect citizens. It is to form free, responsible individuals capable of making choices even when those choices are difficult.

Free to eat. Free to drink. Free to live better. And, within the limits of respecting others, also free to be wrong.

Conclusion

Public health is fundamental. But the real question is not only how to protect health — it is how to define the balance between science, politics, collective well-being, and individual freedom.

The issue should not be to definitively decide what is “correct” to eat, drink, or desire. The issue is to choose the kind of society we want to build: one that trusts people to make choices, learn from their mistakes, and take responsibility for them, or one that continuously shapes behavior through incentives, restrictions, fear, and simplified moral judgments.

Public health is one of the greatest achievements of modern societies. However, it risks losing credibility when it turns into a form of permanent moral education or into an absolute standard for judging lifestyles, cultures, and personal preferences.

An open society recognizes the complexity of reality, accepts the limits of both politics and science, and defends an essential space: human freedom — even when it is imperfect.