

Charlotte Biltekoff: Eating right in America—the cultural politics of food and health

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In an article about Mayor Bloomberg’s court-challenged soda size limit—popularly known as the soda ban—on the food politics blog *Civil Eats*, Maureen Beach (2013) of the American Beverage Association posted the following comment: “Government regulation is the wrong approach to the obesity challenge. Education is the only effective tool. Education about balancing calories with physical activity will do more for fighting obesity than a new law that restricts consumer choice and hurts small businesses.” Here, “education” is invoked as a neutral and apolitical activity; in *Eating Right in America: The Cultural Politics of Food and Health*, Charlotte Biltekoff shows that nutrition education is, and always has been, anything but.

In this book, Biltekoff presents four distinct nutrition education movements in the United States’ past and present: the “modern dietary reform” movement of the late 19th century, when the science of nutrition made it possible to quantitatively measure nutrients and empirically define a “good diet”; the nutrition education component of World War II home front mobilization, which tied eating well to wartime patriotism; the “alternative food” movement and its focus on repudiating the industrial food chain and eating locally and organically; and the current campaign against obesity and the association between thinness and health.

Biltekoff’s main argument is that an era’s particular ideas for eating right are not only an empirical set of rules for nutrition and health, but also a framework for good citizenship, and a way in which the middle class asserts its identity by contrasting its healthful behavior against that of an “unhealthy other.” Each nutrition education paradigm is given its own chapter; the movements are described in their

historical context and the author shows how nutrition education reflects ideas of good citizenship and draws the boundaries of middle class identity. By examining the dietary reform movements with this template, Biltekoff highlights historical antecedents for the ways we think about and promote food and nutrition today. The final two chapters deal with present-day nutrition paradigms and *Eating Right in America* draws out the historical continuity between them and older styles of food education. Though the alternative food movement attempts to set itself apart by emphasizing both the pleasures of “good” food and the ethics of food choices, rather than focusing on calories and nutrients, Biltekoff notes that the rules provided for what to eat are “no less normalizing” (p 107) than the movements that came before. The chapter on the antiobesity movement illustrates the launch of the “war on obesity” in parallel to America’s war on terror after September 11, 2001. By drawing out the ways that being thin and fit were coded as a patriotic duty, the current moment in food instruction, in turn, mirrors the WWII-era National Nutrition Program.

Although this book is successful in making the clear and well-argued point that nutrition education is a reflection of broader cultural anxieties around citizenship and class dynamics, it feels as though it is missing a chapter. Though presented as a history of nutrition education movements in America, it leaps rather quickly from the WWII-era National Nutrition Program to the late 20th and early 21st century concerns with alternative food and the antiobesity crusade. Though *Eating Right in America* includes a few paragraphs describing what the alternative food movement is actually an alternative *to*, the reader is left wondering about the role of nutrition education and dietary reformers during the massive changes in agriculture, food retail, and food industry product development from the 1950s to the 1990s. What food and health paradigms underscored the

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mass movement of women into the workplace and the growing availability of processed food? What about the diet-and-aerobics craze of the 1980s? Curiously absent is also any mention of the nutritional requirements of school meals and what they tell us about food, health, and good citizenship in this country, or of the way that food corporations have involved themselves in nutrition education (see Cook 2013).

Eating Right in America is a welcome addition to the field of food studies. It directs a critical—but not wholly unkind—eye to the various ways that dietary reformers in America have encouraged eating “right,” and it very clearly makes its argument that discourses on food and nutrition reflect understandings of good citizenship and class membership, not simply the most up-to-date science of diet and health. The chapter on alternative food will be welcome on a course reading list that includes works by Michael Pollan or other advocates of ethical eating—students who are apt to be inspired by “eat food, mostly plants, not too much” will benefit from the class analysis Biltekoff provides. Similarly, the final section, on the responses to the “obesity epidemic,” is a much-needed scrutiny of the work that anti-obesity panic does in the context of 21st century neoliberalism. It provides a clear and well-organized outline of the cacophonous discourse around fat bodies, and pays special attention to the intersection of environment, willpower, class, race, body size,

and stigma, and will do much to contribute to classroom discussion.

Biltekoff ends the book with a call to “awareness and accountability”—those who find pleasure in eating “good” (that is, ethical and healthy) food ought to be cognizant of the ways in which their food habits are a form of unexamined privilege. In this light, it becomes clear why comments that call for increased nutrition “education” are so insidious: a push for personal responsibility serves to actually obscure the forces of politics, culture, and capitalism in the food environment. As *Eating Right in America* shows, nutrition education is never simple.

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