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

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BOOK REVIEW

Eating right in America: the cultural politics of food and health, by Charlotte Biltekoff, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2013, 224 pp., \$22.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-8223-5559-5

Food is one of the few material objects that commentators can agree is so commonplace yet extraordinary, so traditional yet imaginative, so enjoyable yet morally fraught and so fundamentally necessary for life yet potentially damaging to one's well-being that teaching and learning how to consume it has become utterly unrivalled in complexity. Structuralists like Mary Douglas have often asserted that it is through overcoming such ambiguities that the construction of "a proper meal" is made possible; a task that has transformed humans "from hunter and gatherer to market-conscious consumer" (in Meister 2001, 170). In today's increasingly scientized and medicalized marketplace where consumers are faced with constant reminders that poor or improper food choices will make us fat, sick and unhappy, Charlotte Biltekoff's book, *Eating Right in America: The Cultural Politics of Food and Health* (2013) embarks on a conceptual journey from a place where we think we know exactly what good dietary advice and eating right are in terms of calories, recommended daily allowances (RDAs), vitamins and fats to a place of sheer disorientation about what these constructs mean in terms of the big "us" of society. Quite simply, this book seeks to encourage a sociocultural rethinking of what we know about consuming food "properly."

Authors such as Meiselman (2006) have, for a long time now, attested that a large proportion of consumer researchers working in the food and health arena are strictly trained in the laboratory tradition, and for these individuals "contextual influences are a nuisance, because they complicate the simplification process that is so successful in scientific analysis" (179). In *Eating Right in America*, Biltekoff builds a convincing case that dietary health has meaning and content that exists outside of what is discovered in the lab, that the messiness of context is absolutely imperative, and that only by comprehending and working in tandem with the social, historical and cultural factors that surround behavior can we assure that research has a beneficial impact. In doing so, *Eating Right in America* adds to an emerging body of work that treats nutrition and dietary health as cultural constructs (Cronin et al. forthcoming; Nestle 2013; Lupton 2012). The book argues that despite the seeming objectivity of norms of good health based on domestic science and medicine, dietary advice has historically served an important ideological and political role dependent on context. Specifically, the book questions dietary health as an individual responsibility by outlining how the entire history of dietary reform in the USA has consistently interacted and reflected the structural, administrative and environmental stresses and concerns of the day.

Eating Right in America takes the reader on a journey through different stages of dietary advice in America by constructing a chronological historic narrative from the late nineteenth-century emergence of nutritional science and mid-century wartime nutrition programs through the contemporary alternative food movement and campaign against obesity. In chronicling these various food- and health-related gears of change,

Biltekoff analyzes the discourses of dietary transformation, including the writings of reformers, as well as the materials and the tools they used to promote their messages to the public. Importantly, while the book is grounded in efforts to improve health, is marketed with “Eating Right” in the title and is described early on as having originated during the author’s time as a chef at a San Franciscan vegetarian restaurant, it is immediate from the opening chapter that Biltekoff’s aim is clearly not to criticize, convert or change people’s eating habits. The tone of the book is kept at all times reassuringly free from the high spirited evangelism or pious guidance we have come to sometimes expect from the torrents of media released in recent years in reaction to the ongoing obesity epidemic. Without discounting the pleasures of food or the value of wellness, Biltekoff effectively adopts the perspective of a neutral observer to advocate a critical reappraisal of our obsession with diet as a proxy for health and social harmony and how this has been catalyzed through different people and times. Biltekoff opens with this frank appraisal of her aims:

The story I tell here is about dietary ideals and the people who have dedicated themselves to “eating right” as a biological and social good. While it’s designed to help us understand the social role of ideas about “good diets”, this story also illuminates several larger issues, including the cultural politics of health, the historical dynamics of class, and the process of social normalization. (4)

With this framing set in place from the beginning, the text sets its mark on the academic venture to encourage those in nutrition, public health and medicine to ponder not only the empirical, but also the ethical and moral rules wrapped up in dietary advice. As Biltekoff suggests: “my arguments in this book don’t add up to a revolutionary new way to eat right or to change people’s eating habits, but they do suggest a new way of thinking about what dietary health is and means” (150–151). In an approach comparable to recent trends in Transformative Consumer Research (Mick et al. 2012), the book seeks to illuminate the cultural politics of a well-being problem so we can define opportunities for well-being, talk about behaving better (in this case, eating right) and, perhaps then (once all things have been considered) begin to think about novel ways to improve other people’s well-being.

The book’s chronological journey is effectively organized into six substantial chapters which navigate a roughly 130-year-long effort to persuade Americans to think about eating as an extension of good citizenship. Bookended by a useful Introduction and departing Discussion, the project details four separate reform movements over this timeline and discusses how each shaped and *was* shaped by social concerns which culminated in dietary advice that reflected norms of moral personhood, class stratification, national pride and the collective good.

The first reform focuses on the advances in domestic sciences during the Progressive Era. It is during the development of the “calorie” and the first isolation of food’s specific physiological functions (carbohydrates, fats, proteins and mineral matter) that the promotion of “scientific cookery” among the urban poor (and later the “intelligent classes”) built on existing moral precepts of the time. New scientific discoveries and ways of thinking about the relationship between “a proper meal” and health marked a watershed moment in American eating, which Biltekoff labels a “modern dietary reform” (9), in which “the moral and the quantitative” (14) became permanently and irrevocably married. Nutrition provided a means of determining good eaters and numerically assessing and comparing the morality of individuals. The call of the day

was to replace tradition, intemperance and ignorance in American kitchens with rational, scientific practice consistent with the emerging industrial order. With this, the chapter outlines how “eating right” in the Progressive Era served to help acclimatize the public to the massive social changes and beckoning of domesticity and consumerism at the turn of the twentieth century.

The second reform Biltekoff addresses is the rectification of nutrition as a defense problem during the American mobilization for the World War II. This chapter explores how federal administrators at the time saw nutrition as vital to the strength, health and security of the USA and so the promotion of eating right became a means of stirring home-front morale, of delineating wartime ideals of good citizenship but also, through campaigns like “The Kitchen Kommando” (75), a way of managing class and gender disruptions brought about by the social flux of war.

Thirdly, Biltekoff addresses the mainstream cooptation of the alternative food movement during the 1980s where a shift from the empirical to the ethical took place meaning “dietary health would no longer be seen as a strictly nutritional calculus, but would take into account the connections between farmers and producers . . . between toxic wastes and the opportunity to produce safe affordable food” (81). The departure from the objectivity of the domestic sciences and into the subjectivity of critical thought marks the promotion of social ideals consistent with good citizenship that emerged as part of late twentieth-century process of neoliberalization.

The fourth and final reform Biltekoff addresses is the contemporary objective to reverse the locomotive trend toward obesity and chronic illness in the USA. It is here she analyzes the links between thinness and health, self-control and good citizenship in a nation facing challenging new uncertainties and insecurities. Federal antiobesity literature circulated during the years following the September 11 attacks promoted the importance of self-control that expressed fundamental American beliefs in autonomy and personal responsibility which helped adapt citizens to the exigencies of the War on Terror “home front.” Unlike the other three dietary reform movements, however, Biltekoff outlines how the campaign against obesity has so far generated much resistance in the form of fat-acceptance activists and fat-studies scholars who furiously challenge and critique the potentially negative social effects of antiobesity discourse.

Across the various reforms, Biltekoff argues that while the primary aim may be to improve health, the process of teaching people to “eat right” in the USA inevitably involves shaping certain kinds of subjects and citizens. What makes this analysis significant, however, is how Biltekoff maneuvers the four dietary reform movements into conversation with one another, revealing how even though the dietary advice communicated and the sociocultural context that drives it may change, the underlying message remains constant. For Biltekoff, dietary reform is always predictable about commodification of the individual and the guarantee of social stability. Importantly, this theoretical premise of *Eating Right in America* appears to borrow quite a bit from classical Foucauldian thoughts on governmentality, though this is rarely if ever explicitly addressed. This connection to classical perspectives of power will be a clear drawing point for sociologists, political scientists and consumer culture theorists, but it is important to state clearly that the book is never so heavily weighted with theory that it could alienate more casual readers.

All this considered, a minor concern readers should bear in mind is that the focus is, for the most part, restricted to the chosen four eras of reform (the Progressive Era, the World War II years, the 1980s and the mid-1990s to present). These periods are isolated

as the units of analysis and consequently are effectively sectioned off from other potentially important decades over the twentieth century – the most noticeable absence being a dedicated treatment of the 1950s and 1960s. While these years may not qualify for conceptualization as a political stage in American dietary reform, they do harbor important market changes that have coalesced to play a major role in later reforms, such as the emergence of the fast food industry, the rise of car culture and the drive-in and the increasing prevalence of the supermarket. These market developments are not ignored in *Eating Right in America* though a little more depth and breadth dedicated to their socio-historic origins would have made a welcome addition to an otherwise very comprehensive book.

This minor critique noted, Biltekoff has presented us with a much needed text that encourages and inspires readers to think critically about the evolution of what it means to eat right in America, the implications of dietary reform efforts and the underlying intentions of the policy-makers who promote them. This well-written, well-organized and well-researched book will be of interest not only to academics working in the area of critical food studies, but to any reader interested in the social, political and historical dimensions of food and eating practices.

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