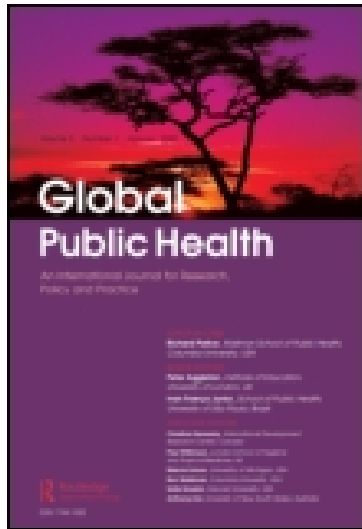


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Eating right in America: The cultural politics of food and health

Melissa Fuster^a

^a Department of Nutrition, Food Studies and Public Health, New York University, NY, USA

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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., US\$22.95 (paperback), ISBN 9780822355595

In *Eating Right in America*, Charlotte Biltekoff aims to ‘illuminate the cultural politics of dietary health in America [to] better understand what happens when we define good diets, talk about eating right, or try to improve other people’s eating habits’ (p. 3). The book brings together food studies with the new field of fat studies in a critical historical account and analysis of dietary advice in the USA.

The journey starts in the nineteenth century. In the early 1800s, scientists discovered that food was made of different components (proteins, fats, carbohydrates and mineral matter), but it was not until later in the century that these ideas were applied to improve diets with the development of the calorie as a tool for diet assessment and nutrition education. Discussions on diet and the emphasis on eating well came at a time when there was widespread concern about the spread of industrialisation and fear of modern society. Early reformers started targeting lower socio-economic classes, but later moved to focus on the middle class, creating a moral distinction between the ‘incorrigible poor’ and the ‘intelligent classes’ (p. 35). This was at a time of anxiety over the blurring of social lines, as economic and occupational class distinctions were dissolving.

The book takes us to the Second World War which placed nutrition at the centre of national defence, and eating right became a civic duty. Biltekoff discusses the nutrition propaganda of the time (which equated eating unhealthily with aiding the enemy) and the parallel growing concern over the totalitarian tone of this discourse. New science from the discovery of vitamins led to concerns over an ‘invisible epidemic’ (p. 46) caused by vitamin deficiencies, and, at the same time, an optimism about the positive applications of vitamins to improve health and longevity. Scientists developed the first Recommended Dietary Allowances (RDAs) used to inform the first dietary guidelines – the ‘Basic 7’ food guide – which were used as a tool for the nutrition education efforts of the time.

The emphasis on the ‘micro’ seen in the times discussed earlier started to be replaced with a move to the ‘macro’ in the 1980s. This new nutrition discourse asked the consumer to take into account food producers, environmental policies and the importance of toxin-free food, giving way to the ‘alternative food movement’ influencing us nowadays. Food is now more than calories and nutrients; it is a means for social action. Biltekoff discusses the emergence of public figures affecting our current dietary discourse today, particularly Alice Waters and Michael Pollan, as well as criticisms of this new movement and their propositions. This movement focuses on the pleasure of eating that is attached to food being responsibly sourced. Dietary choices not only affect individual health but also local communities and the global society. At the same time, she presents the concurrent rise of ‘healthism’, where the ‘prevention of illness [becomes] a pervasive standard against which an expanding number of behaviours and phenomenon [are] judged’ (p. 90). As Biltekoff points out, the class differences through the nutrition discourse are still prevalent with a distinction between the ‘healthy middle class and the

cheap, fast other' (p. 99), where eating right is now defined as 'eating slow, natural, authentic, fresh, local food' (p. 105), the moral opposite of 'fast food'.

After reviewing the historical trajectory of the dietary discourse in the USA, the book discusses the politics of obesity as a convergence between the empirical and moral approaches to defining good diets. The author discusses the social stigma attached to obesity in light of her argument that 'all forms of dietary discourse [are] social constructions [that] have the potential to do violence to "bad eaters"' (p. 112). This chapter reviews the main points of the fat acceptance movement, including criticism of the 'obesity epidemic' and the associated shifts in health strategies from individual- to population-level results. The author underscores the link between the obesity discourse and nationalism, discussing the war on obesity's timing with the war on terror and the notion of losing weight as a civic duty.

The book concludes with a short wrap-up chapter connecting the dots between the historical account, the current state of dietary discourse and possibilities for moving ahead. Biltekoff argues for using history to illuminate the ethical and empirical implications of dietary advice and interventions. She makes the case for pondering the moral implications of 'eating right' discourses and for engaging in more research to give voice to the 'unhealthy other' (p. 153). Moving forward, the book proposes a change in emphasis, from teaching how to eat right to teaching how to think more critically about nutrition messages. This new approach entails the promotion of 'dietary literacy', requiring people 'to think about the ethical conveyed in the empirical, to decipher the social norms, moral implications, and class dynamics embedded in all messages about what is good to eat' (p. 155), which might be a tall order when translated to a community-level intervention.

The book presents an important, timely reflection on the dietary discourse in the USA, contributing to the fields of food studies, nutrition, public health and the emerging fat studies. While the book is enjoyable and informative, the reader might be left wanting more practical applications for the lessons learned, a more clear research direction and a more critical look at the emerging fat acceptance movement and its implications. Food and fat studies can bring a new outlook to the current problems affecting health and nutrition and the parallel preoccupations with the state of the global food system. However, apart from continuing to shed light from different angles on the problems, more emphasis is needed on how to best tackle the complexity at hand.

Melissa Fuster

Department of Nutrition, Food Studies and Public Health

New York University, NY, USA

mf124@nyu.edu

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