



# Eating Right in America, Part 1 of 3

Jessica Hardin

April, 2015

Our special review section on [\*Eating Right in America\*](#) features posts from three fantastic reviewers working together to each emphasise a different theme from the book. [Jessica Hardin](#), a medical anthropologist researching the emergence of ‘the obesity epidemic’ in the Pacific, kicks things off by looking at “scientific moralization” and the relationship between dietary reform and national anxieties. Isabel Fletcher, a research fellow whose work focuses on interactions between nutrition research and public policy, pays close attention to contemporary and WWII nutrition campaigns. [Lauren Renée Moore](#), a doctoral student specialising in food and eating in the US, rounds off the symposium by concentrating on the themes of social class and the implicit drive to shape citizen-subjects underlying dietary reform movements.

---

*Eating Right in America*, about the cultural politics of dietary reform in the United States, is designed to examine how claims about ‘good food’ and ‘good diet’ embrace larger cultural claims about what it means to be a good eater, a good person, and a good citizen. Written explicitly to explore the historical trajectory of American dietary reform, Charlotte Biltekoff examines the American cultural thread that connects the emergence of nutritional science to the alternative food movement to anti-obesity campaigns. Situated between food studies and fat studies, the book successfully demonstrates “the interplay of the moral and the quantitative that is at the core of modern ideals of dietary health” (p.14). Through the exploration of archival and contemporary media, Biltekoff draws conceptual attention to “scientific moralization”; the mirroring of social anxiety, civic ideology, and dietary reform; and the ways notions of ‘the unhealthy other’ are created and sustained through dietary politics.



*Biltekoff develops the notion of “scientific moralization” (p.13) to examine the “on-going relationship between nutritional facts and moral precepts” (p.14).*

One example that highlights this process begins with the work of Wilbur Atwater, whose research contributed to the creation of the calorie. The calorie was highly influential in popularising the financial economisation of diet, based on the caloric idea that all food is nutritionally equal. According to this idea one should purchase foods responsibly, privileging cost over pleasure. The consequences for such an ideology, however, were to create notions of ‘good food’ that linked class with the moral imperative to eat within one’s means. Here, Biltekoff also expands on the broader context of the nineteenth century when “scientific and religious values were seen as complementary” (p.19). From “intemperance to prostitution”, quantitative logics drawn from scientific inquiry bolstered social movements. Although contemporary food discourses distinguish between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ calories, I was reminded of the students in my anthropology of food course. They often expressed an economizing rhetoric where ‘poor’ people were excused for ‘bad’ food choices because of the presumed expense of ‘good, healthy’ food.

*The second strength of Eating Right in America is the consistent demonstration of the relationship between dietary reform and national anxieties around myriad issues from productivity to war-time victory.*

For example, during World War II food habits were actively linked to notions of moral citizenship. Specifically, exploring the National Nutrition Program, a dietary reform movement focused on nutrition education, Biltekoff argues that through providing rules about what to eat, the program presented guidelines for self-making. For example, the guideline diagram centrally features a white, nuclear family along with the motto: “U.S. Needs Us Strong: Eat the Basic 7 Everyday Day” (p.59). Here good diets are linked to a national sense of “unity of purpose” (p.59). During this period, measuring oneself against the nutritional norms of the Recommended Dietary Allowances proliferated and Biltekoff describes the proliferation of “scorecards, checklists and other devices for self-



assessment” (p.61).



Photo by .waldec (flickr, CC BY 2.0)

Finally, from the exploration of public kitchens established during the Progressive Era to ways neoliberal logics underlie contemporary alternative food movements, race, gender and class separate ‘good eaters’ from ‘bad eaters’. Drawing from Robert Crawford’s notions of healthism (2006, 1980), Bitlekoff argues that dietary reform is often focused on the creation of an “unhealthy other” positioned as outside, stigmatised, and dangerous (p.36). *Eating Right in America* shows how during the Progressive era, domestic scientists were instrumental in forging a middle class identity through nutrition discourses. This middle class identity, however, was dependent on the discursive constructions of an urban, often migrant, poor as deficient in diet and health. Focusing on the work of Michael Pollan and Alice Water, the alternative food movement also depicts unhealthy others: those who do not *choose* to spend money and time on food. Finally, Bilekoff explores the differences between earlier dietary reform and contemporary anti-obesity campaigns: the locus of intervention shifted from eating habits to bodies. Here she illuminates how a variety of theories (from environmental to female body ideals) aimed at explaining “minority obesity” often attempt to shift blame away from individuals but in turn shift blame onto entire social groups (p.141). Analyzing media, including *The Nutty Professor* and the *National Body Challenge*, Bilekoff shows the intersection of race, class, and body size bias in creating fat stigma.

Overall, each chapter reveals particular moments in history to foreground the overarching claim of the book: contemporary discourses focused on good food, good diet, and fat, may appear to reflect rising rates of diet-related diseases, but have actually developed as an expansion of “the social significance of dietary health and the moral valance of being a ‘good eater’” beginning at the end of the nineteenth century (p.5). *Eating Right in America* is an engaging, in-depth yet



concise book, which will be a valuable resource for scholars, activists, and practitioners interested in dietary reform, fat, and obesity. The book would work well in undergraduate food studies courses, especially if paired with ethnographic accounts addressing experiential dimensions of dietary reform, fat, and obesity.

## **References**

Crawford, Robert. 1980. Healthism and the Medicalization of Everyday Life. *International Journal of Health Services* 10(3): 365-388.

Crawford, Robert. 2006. Health as Meaningful Social Practice. *Health* 10(4): 401-20.

**Biltekoff, Charlotte. 2013. [\*Eating Right in America: The Cultural Politics of Food and Health\*](#). Durham: Duke University Press. 224 pp. Pb: £14.99. ISBN: 9780822355595.**