



Eating Right in America, Part 2 of 3

Isabel Fletcher

April, 2015

This post represents the second installment in our Special Review Section on [*Eating Right in America: The Cultural Politics of Food and Health*](#). Check out the first one [here](#).

Nutrition researchers and their allies - home economists, health promotion agencies, wholefood advocates and anti-obesity campaigners - have been trying to persuade us, the general public, to improve our diets for more than a hundred years. Dietary reform has become a normal, if contested, aspect of contemporary life. The great strength of Charlotte Biltekoff's *Eating Right in America* is that it undermines this normality. Biltekoff analyses four episodes of US dietary reform: early 20th century home economists; nutrition education campaigns in the WW2 home-front; the alternative food movement of the 1960s and 1970s; and the contemporary campaign against obesity. Using an approach that combines archival research, cultural studies and food studies, she tells the story of 'dietary ideals and the people who have dedicated themselves to promoting "eating right" as a biological and social good' (p.4). As well as promoting health, she argues that such activities also produce certain kinds of subjects, and reinforce particular identities and social boundaries, especially those of the American middle class (*ibid*).

Biltekoff is particularly good in explaining the fit between the 1960s and 1970s food reform movement - what Belasco (1989) has labelled the 'countercuisine' - and neo-liberal discourses of individual responsibility.

In Chapter 4, she outlines very clearly how a movement that began as part of a



critique of industrial food production came to focus largely on individual behaviour as the solution to problems in the food system. Of all the four reform movements, the alternative food movement had the least contact with orthodox nutrition research, and, partly because of that, initially had the least policy traction. It became influential - taken up by Michelle Obama, for example - only after it merged with the campaign against obesity. The alternative food movement ideal of 'eating right' involved 'refusing the cheap convenience of mass-produced foods and spending more money on ingredients and more time preparing and enjoying them' (p.100). As Biltekoff points out, alternative food movement supporters rarely acknowledge how much their ideal of 'responsible eating' relies on class-based privilege (p.105-7).

She also argues that the merging of the alternative food movement and the public health campaign against the obesity epidemic has created a vastly expanded discourse of responsible eating (p.10). This new model seeks to solve a much greater number of contemporary problems through the processes of dietary reform. In light of this expansion it is interesting to consider her very brief point that after WW2 nutrition researchers were worried about their discipline and that it 'was rescued by obesity' (p.115). In my own doctoral research, I traced the evolution of the framing of obesity as an epidemic in post-War British nutrition research. I was, and remain, puzzled by an apparent switch in research focus from under-nutrition - which was prominent in British research until the early 1960s - to over-nutrition, which from the 1970s onwards rapidly became a major research focus. As others have shown, this was less than 20 years after the food shortages of WW2, and in the absence of large-scale studies to demonstrate that obesity was a population, rather than an individual, problem (Oddy et al., 2009). Obviously the wider growth of research into chronic disease is part of this shift, but I have yet to read an acknowledgement of it. Biltekoff's citation may provide the starting point for an answer.

The involvement of dietary reformers in government policy is an aspect that might have been given more attention. There are important differences between the four different episodes in how acceptable their reforms were to



government.



Photo by Mathers Museum of World
Cultures (flickr, CC BY-NC 2.0)

As it is closely related to levels of wages and welfare benefits, nutrition advice is politically contentious. Wilbur Atwater was one of the first to make use of scientific evidence in this context, when in the 1880s he tried to assess the adequacy of working class diets and thus rebut union arguments for wage increases (Aronson, 1982). This was a politically unthreatening use of nutrition research, and Biltekoff describes how early 20th century home economists 'reiterated Atwater's principles of nutritional efficiency and taught women how to provide good diets at...various income levels' (p.38). Poor housewives were supposed to learn how to feed their families on a limited income and not to waste money on expensive 'luxuries'. Debates about the nutritional adequacy of poor people's diets have recurred regularly since then, particularly during periods of economic stagnation. A prominent element of these debates has usually been to assign the blame for their inadequate diets onto poor people themselves. In 1933, E.P. Cathcart, a member of the UK government Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition, stated that 'bad cooking, bad marketing [shopping], bad household economy plays a bigger part than shortage of cash in the majority of cases of malnutrition' (cited in Mayhew, 1988: 450). The persistence of these discourses is, at least partly, due to their political palatability unlike the more radical demands of the early alternative food movement.

As a former vegetarian chef and food activist turned scholar, Biltekoff seems particularly well-placed to tell this story and she does it very well. Although *Eating Right* is a relatively short book, it is engaging and intellectually nutrient-rich. It contains a substantial amount of archival research, and its central arguments make new and fruitful links between the four different periods. Given



the close links between British and American researchers and policy-makers throughout the period, much of Biltekoff's analysis is also relevant to understanding the ideas of British dietary reformers. I recommend it to food studies scholars, health sociologists, and historians of food and nutrition.

References

- Aronson, Naomi. 1982. Nutrition as a social problem: A case study of entrepreneurial strategy in science. *Social Problems* 29(5): 474-87.
- Belasco, Warren J. 1989. *Appetite for Change: How the Counterculture took on the Food Industry, 1966-1988*. Pantheon Books.
- Mayhew, Madeleine. 1988. The 1930s nutrition controversy. *Journal of Contemporary History* 23(3): 445-64.
- Oddy, Derek J, Atkins, Peter J and Amilien, Virginie. (eds.) 2009. *The Rise of Obesity in Europe: A Twentieth Century Food History*. Farnham: Ashgate.

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