



Eating Right in America, Part 3 of 3

Lauren Renée Moore
April, 2015



This post marks the third part of our special review section on [*Eating Right in America: The Cultural Politics of Food and Health*](#). Check out the first part [here](#) and the second part [here](#).

In 2013, a town in Texas unfurled an advertising campaign to attract food stamp recipients to local farmers markets. The brightly colored posters featured fruits



and vegetables creatively arranged to resemble an ice cream cone, a fast food hamburger, french fries, and a bag of Skittles ([Reitz 2013](#)).

Appearing the same year as Charlotte Biltekoff's new book [Eating Right in America: The Cultural Politics of Food and Health](#), these ads seem tailor-made examples of her critique of modern dietary reform.

Biltekoff's book gives readers the tools to see these ads not as clever marketing, but as the product of a century of dietary reform that has maintained social class boundaries through portrayals of the "unhealthy other" - the poor person who chooses fast food because of sheer unwillingness to "eat right," or who must be tricked through visual gimmicks to desire fresh foods.

The posters reinforce popular linkages between poverty and preference for unhealthy foods, and subtly reinforce a neoliberal model of citizenship that reifies personal choice and responsibility in health.



Photo by Chris Orbz (flickr, CC BY-



NC-SA 2.0)

Eating Right in America analyses these contemporary messages as they appear in four distinct dietary reform movements from American history: the domestic science movement at the end of the 19th century, the WWII-era national nutrition program and, more recently, anti-obesity campaigns and the alternative food movement. For each movement, Biltekoff examines underlying messages that teach Americans how to “eat right”, taking as her premise that “despite seemingly scientific origins, dietary ideals are cultural, subjective, political” (p. 4). The book focuses on reformers’ messages and the discourse of dietary guidance – readers should note that Biltekoff does not examine how American eaters responded to reformers’ lessons. The notable exception is her discussion of contemporary anti-obesity campaigns, for which she relies on robust evidence that Americans harbor significant anti-fat attitudes. Here, studies showing that survey respondents would rather shorten their lives or lose a limb than be fat suggest how deeply dietary reform messages can permeate popular consciousness. Ethnographic studies showing how individuals negotiate dietary reform discourse would be an excellent complement to Biltekoff’s discursive focus in this work.

One of the strengths of Eating Right is how Biltekoff deftly weaves together common threads from distinct reform movements in American history.

Often, food scholars hone in on the construction of one movement: early home economics, anti-obesity, or local and organic. On the surface these movements appear quite different: anti-obesity campaigns, for example, might emphasise low fat foods while alternative food advocates celebrate “real” fats like butter or lard. Despite the movements’ differences, Biltekoff’s work demonstrates clear consistency in their message and aims. In particular, this review will highlight how she does this with two key themes: first, how dietary reforms naturalise social class boundaries and are a tool of middle class self-making; and second, how they shape citizen-subjects through historically contingent notions of appropriate citizenship.

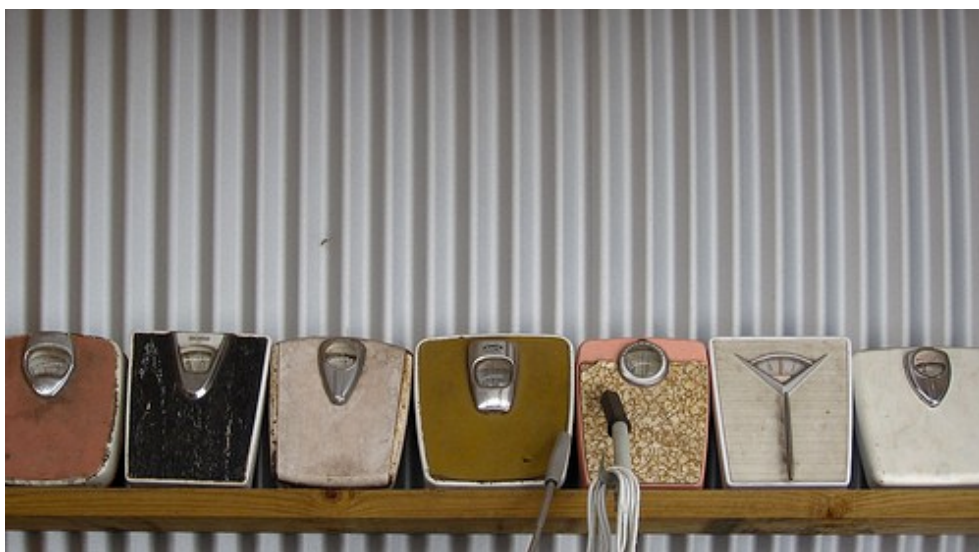


Social Class

Biltekoff argues that dietary reform has been part of “middle class self-making through the ongoing production of an ‘unhealthy other’” for more than a century (p. 65). Beginning with early reformers in the 1890s, she shows how dietary guidance was a tool to maintain class boundaries for those unsettled by blurring class boundaries of industrial society. To do this, reformers emphasised biological differences between the social classes and insisted that “eating right” was a matter of eating according to one’s income and, importantly, occupation.

Food suitable for a middle-class person was a moral failing in the kitchen of a poor worker - it was a sign that one was ignoring their class-linked biological needs and failing to economise appropriately.

The home economics movement of the 1890s further naturalised class boundaries by focusing on “dietary reform among the middle class in the name of race betterment” (p. 28). The upper and middle classes were validated as biologically and morally superior when dietary guidance pitted the “incorrigible poor” against the fundamentally different “intelligent classes.”



Heavy Line (Photo by Arti Sandhu, flickr, CC BY-NC 2.0)



Biltekoff argues that contemporary reformers a century later ignore structural constraints on food choice and continue to teach that “poor” eating is a sign of poor moral character. Popular figures in the contemporary alternative foods movement, such as Alice Waters or Michael Pollan, draw distinctions between “slow food eaters [who were] connecting with a noble past and making thoughtful, conscious choices that enhanced both personal fulfillment and social well-being” and fast food eaters, who “were portrayed as just the opposite: unthinking dupes, whose lack of ‘consciousness’ kept them trapped in irresponsible habits and drawn to immoral pleasures” (p. 105). Like reformers a century earlier, these distinctions solidify middle class identity through contrast with its perceived opposite - and because alternative food reformers pay only lip service to structural constraints on the lower classes, middle class Americans are able to view their class positions as merited and natural.

Creating Citizen-Subjects

Biltekoff demonstrates how, in each historical period, dietary advice teaches eaters how to be good citizens. For example, when early reformers taught middle-class housewives that they needed to rely on scientific guidance to eat well, they were teaching more than a way of eating: dietary reform was part of a larger project to teach Americans to cede liberty to governmental management. World War II-era nutritional interventions were even more explicitly nationalist, with diet posters asking, “Worker: Are you helping Hitler?” and “Worker: Are you helping Uncle Sam?” (p. 71-2). More recently, Alice Waters has declared “Cooking is good citizenship,” and contrasted slow food (achieved through cooking) with fast food, saying, “when you buy fast food, you get fast food values” (p. 104).

The anti-obesity movement also offers lessons in good citizenship, and inscribes fitness for citizenship onto visible markers of physical fitness. Because anti-obesity campaigns believe in “an irrefutable equivalence between thinness and self-control” and self-control is concept “fundamental to the western system of values” (p. 125), fatness is a sign one is a bad American.



While Biltekoff's analysis of citizen-shaping is insightful, readers may note the absence of critical bodies of literature that have tread the same ground: for example, studies of expertise and the professionalisation of medicine, or a large governmentality literature examining how citizens are shaped. Biltekoff instead provides an empirically rich argument that other scholars may fruitfully link to larger studies of governance and subject-making.

Conclusion

We see in *Eating Right* how dietary reform has long been used as a tool of discrimination. The various "others" created through dietary beliefs - the poor, or the obese - are used as negative examples for good eaters to avoid.

The poor and obese (categories that often overlap) are unfit - for citizenship, for middle class lives, or for sympathy and respect.

Such determinations of unfitness are made possible by the importance Americans ascribe to diet and shifting notions of "eating right."

Biltekoff prompts readers to go beyond questions of how to get 'good' food to the unhealthy other, to ask: *whose* definition of 'good' are we privileging while foisting 'good' food on others, whilst insisting that the pleasure derived from that food is morally superior to the pleasure derived from 'inappropriate' foods? Biltekoff does not deny her audience the choice to engage in alternative foods values - as a long-time chef for the vegetarian restaurant *Greens* in San Francisco, she is also immersed in that world. What she calls for instead is that scholars, dietary reformers, or eaters, "be reflexive about the cultural content of the ideals they promote, cautious about the moral implications of their discourse, and strategic about the values their lessons in eating right express" (p. 151).

Biltekoff has written a well-argued and thoroughly enjoyable book that should be on the reading lists of dietary reformers and food scholars alike. The work would be a strong addition to middle or upper-level undergraduate classes



examining cultural politics of food and health in the United States, as it challenges readers to think deeply about what we mean when we talk about good food.

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

References

Scott Reitz (2013). [*Artful Posters Aim at Getting SNAP Participants to Spend Their Benefits on Vegetables*](#). *Dallas Observer*, May 6, 2013, accessed January 19, 2015.