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Title: Review of “Nutritionism: The Science and Politics of Dietary Advice” by Gyorgy Scrinis

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BOOK REVIEW | GURPINDER LALLI

***Everyone Eats: Understanding Food and Culture, Second Edition*
E.N. Anderson.**

New York: New York University Press. 2014. 362 pp.

Everyone Eats provides insight into the biocultural reasons for food choices. Most studies of world food problems tend to place focus on production while taking consumption for granted. The rise of nutritional anthropology and food history has recently shifted toward emphasizing the newly common phrase, “it’s not what we eat, it’s how we eat.” *Everyone Eats* draws on a nutritional context to explain the social and cultural reasons for why humans eat what they do. Anderson argues that consumption determines production by creating effective demand (4). The act of buying and acquiring food sparks particular interests. Therefore, emerging literature should focus on the entire food system, specifically looking at production, distribution, and consumption as part of a single process. The author points out that nutritional anthropology is, by definition, biocultural and biosocial. One cannot separate biology and genetics from cultural and social studies.

The book is organized into thirteen chapters, all of which explore the biocultural issues of food choices from the aesthetics of eating and various sensory perceptions between cultures. Overall, the key topics covered include human evolution, foodways, religion and ethnicity, food as pleasure, and food and medicine. Chapter 7, “Food as Pleasure,” details Anderson’s personal views of food as pleasure in an autoethnographic piece of research. The data collected are based on the author’s past experiences in China, Papua New Guinea, Istanbul, Mexico, and the Mediterranean countries and include powerful images, which are part of the ethnography. Anderson’s personal presence is clear throughout this book in his vivid reflections and literature. Anderson also utilizes poetry from an early medieval era and the mid-eighteenth century to illustrate desires for and consumption of alcohol.

Chapter 9 also draws on an autobiographical account from the author, with a discussion about food as a means of communication. It is most clearly a tool of communication in the process of a person defining his individuality and his place in society (171). Food communicates social class, ethnicity, and lifestyle. Such social distinction can be seen in social messages surrounding Chinese feast behavior. This section also advocates further exploration of food and social matters, and it argues that food study requires a phenomenological approach.

Chapter 13, an account of world food problems, places focus on the importance of understanding foodways. While ample food is available throughout the world, over a billion people are still undernourished, and starvation is one of the most common causes of death (250). These facts together demonstrate the importance of food as a universal phenomenon. The need for social justice is a real problem in the politics of food and science, where too often agricultural research funds are ploughed into luxury crops for the wealthy rather than to staples for the poor. Anderson discusses the political aspects of food distribution and critiques those who claim that the whole world can be fed based on the food available, which he claims is an idealistic vision in which all governments are able to overcome any mishaps, miscalculations, wars, and corruption. This chapter is situated well as the book’s final word on the politics of food.

The final chapter of the book recognizes unsung food creators who have never been previously identified. For Anderson, nutritional anthropology has a responsibility to ensure that the accomplishments of these individuals are recognized, which is one of the reasons for his emphasis of historical factors and food choices.

This book offers a snapshot of the recent drive towards exploring the sociocultural processes of food choices and is a particularly inviting text for undergraduates entering the field of food studies. The author’s emphasis of his own personal experiences of foods makes for an interesting account on perceptions. He offers a reflective view of how foods have impacted his life experiences. *Everyone Eats* is a relevant text for researchers exploring the relationship between food and society. Furthermore, it is a provocative text for future course design and policy making, as it provides a diverse account of the complexities involved in exploring the importance of food choices in today’s societies.

BOOK REVIEW | ANETT KALVIN-TOTH

***Nutritionism: The Science and Politics of Dietary Advice*
Gyorgy Scrinis**

New York: Columbia University Press. 2013. 352 pp.

We currently live in the age of “functional nutritionism.” We are surrounded by cereals enhanced with calcium, soft drinks fortified with vitamins, butters and yogurts low in fat, and breads low in carbohydrates. These products all

claim to make us healthier and skinnier by optimizing our consumption of beneficial nutrients and minimizing our consumption of harmful ones. As Gyorgy Scrinis shows in his book *Nutritionism*, though, these foods do not always have the effects we expect. He argues that by focusing on the nutrient composition of foods, the presence of “good” nutrients, and the absence of “bad” nutrients, we draw our attention away from more important issues, such as the production and processing quality of our supposedly healthy food. Scrinis refers to this reductive focus as “nutritionism” and illustrates how the concept shaped the practices of the food industry, nutritional science, dietary guidelines, and the public understanding of food in the past 150 years.

Drawing on scientific, sociological, historical, and contemporary popular accounts and debates on nutrition, Scrinis claims to have a strong critique of nutrition science. He argues that other critics of nutrition science, such as Marion Nestle or Michael Pollan, have focused only on how scientific knowledge is mistranslated into dietary advice and thus overlook the larger problems of nutrition science. Scrinis questions the conventional paradigms of nutritional science, which he argues fail to offer a solid and trustworthy dietary guidance for the public. Scrinis powerfully illustrates the contested history of nutrition science through his nutritionism concept and offers a comprehensive critique of how nutritionism has been applied, utilized, and exploited in dietary guidelines, nutrition labeling, food engineering, and food marketing. Yet the book falls short by failing to present a real alternative paradigm to nutritionism or to give directions in today’s confusing nutritional landscape.

One of the best sections of this book is an analysis of the evolution of scientific knowledge from the perspective of his nutritionism concept. Nutritionism has taken different forms throughout the history of nutrition science. Scrinis identifies three main paradigms: “quantifying nutritionism,” “good-and-bad nutritionism,” and “functional nutritionism.” These paradigms frame the production, interpretation, and application of nutritional knowledge from the 1800s to the present (45).

The era of quantifying nutritionism ranges from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries and is characterized by the scientific discoveries of carbohydrates, protein, fats, vitamins, and calories. These nutrients deconstruct and decontextualize food, thereby turning it into a measurable, comparable, and quantifiable object. They also constitute the nutritional message of this era, which advocated people “eat more” of these essentially “good” and protective nutrients to meet their recommended

calorie intake. Beginning in the 1960s, scientists started to distinguish between these nutrients and identified “bad” nutrients that can lead to chronic diseases. This is the era of good-and-bad nutritionism, and the dominant paradigm was to “eat less” of “harmful” nutrients and foods, such as fat and butter. Finally, the era of functional nutritionism began in the 1990s and continues today. It perpetuates the notion of a single causal relationship between nutrients and bodily health but emphasizes the positive, health-enhancing role of special nutrients and foods. Functional nutritionism suggests optimizing the consumption of functional nutrients to “eat smarter” (162).

The “trans-fats fiasco” or the history of margarine described in Chapter 6 illuminates the practices of nutritional reductionism and illustrates the shifting paradigms identified by Scrinis. Before the 1960s, margarine had been mainly a cheap substitute for butter, consumed by the poorer segment of the population. But when scientists in the early 1960s found evidence of the relationship between saturated fats and heart diseases, margarine, which is made from polyunsaturated fats, was cast as a healthier, more desirable alternative to butter. Scrinis in this chapter shows how nutritional experts promoted margarine over butter in the era of good-and-bad nutritionism based on then-premier nutritional research, which claimed that saturated, “bad” fats increase the risk of heart disease. He also illustrates how the food industry took advantage of the reductive focus on nutrients in the era of functional nutritionism by claiming margarine reduces blood cholesterol levels. This history shows how the reductive focus on a single nutrient—in this case the presence or absence of “good” and “bad” fats—can distract attention from the highly processed and chemical components of the product itself by removing a nutrient from its broader dietary context, exaggerating the health benefits of a single nutrient and simplifying the relationship between saturated fats and the risk of heart disease.

In the final chapters of the book, Scrinis presents an alternative paradigm to nutritionism, the “food quality paradigm,” a more nuanced and complex framework meant to understand healthy and nutritious food without eliminating the findings of nutritional science. This paradigm focuses on the quality of production and the level of processing when evaluating food, distinguishing between whole, refined-processed, and processed-reconstituted foods (218–19). While refined-processed foods only contain additives, refined, and extracted ingredients, processed-reconstituted foods are constructed entirely from these ingredients. This frame emphasizes the importance of

cultural-traditional knowledge about food and health as well as the sensual-practical experiences of growing and preparing food to identify healthy and wholesome food and diets (236).

Despite the complexity of the food quality paradigm, Scrinis's alternative seems to agree with the "weak criticism" he earlier disparages: Eat less processed food. While his nutritionism concept is powerful in its critical presentation of the history of nutrition science, the several other concepts he introduces within his "Nutritionism and Food Quality Lexicon," such as the "nutritional gaze" or the "nutricentric person," are rather confusing for our understanding of nutrition science and do not help Scrinis to further his critique.

Overall, Scrinis's expertise is the history and philosophy of science and social theory, which makes *Nutritionism* a unique theory of nutrition science. He uses social theory to extensively critique nutritional science as a practice, a paradigm, and an ideology. His ideas range from the epistemic practices of the scientific field to the strategies of big food corporations in exploiting this knowledge. His historical approach offers a detailed background that supports and illustrates his arguments and renders visible the working mechanisms of this nutritional ideology. Even though the neologisms and complex theoretical framework are confusing at times, the book is still worthy of the attention of nutrition and social scientists as well as of the lay audience.

BOOK REVIEW | EMILY CONTOIS

A Cultural History of Food in the Modern Age Amy Bentley (editor)

New York: Bloomsbury. 2012. 272 pp.

Featuring eleven essays penned by a veritable *Who's Who* of food studies scholars, *A Cultural History of Food in the Modern Age* concludes the six-volume set edited by Fabio Parasecoli and Peter Scholliers that encompasses the cultural history of food from antiquity to the very near present. Focusing primarily on the West, *Food in the Modern Age* takes up the years from 1920 onward. Both broad in scope and specific in detail, the text reinforces what E. Melanie DuPuis argues in *Nature's Perfect Food: How Milk Became America's Drink* (2002): There are no perfect stories about food, eating, eaters, or food systems. The making

of the modern food system is a story best told not with a linear narrative arc of either ascension and progress or decline and degeneration. Rather, the story of food in the modern age must accommodate, balance, and negotiate contradictions and paradoxes.

Laying volumes of context in less than twenty-five pages, editor Amy Bentley's introduction sketches the political events, technological developments, economic changes, and social transformations that shaped the modern history of food. In this story, processed food emerges as a central character, full of ambivalent meanings and compounding consequences. Pre-war advancements began the industrialization of the food supply, yielding diets that boasted new variety and improved nutritional adequacy for many eaters. Bentley demonstrates, however, that World War II "changed, accelerated, and altered the production, manufacturing, and advertising of industrialized food, setting the stage for the remainder of the century" (5). The policies, products, and technologies of the war made a uniquely American mark on foodscapes of every size and locality: farm fields shaped by the Green Revolution; supermarkets full of processed items; dinner tables at which families consumed canned, bottled, and boxed foods; fast food restaurants serving quick, cheap fare.

Food systems became not only more industrialized during the modern age but also more globally connected and dependent. While globalization has shaped food since the Columbian Exchange, in the first chapter on food production, Jeffrey Pilcher effectively and succinctly argues that modern food has been characterized by "greater concentration, standardization, and globalization" (44). Such actions have yielded exceptional, but ultimately unsustainable, levels of production. Despite this, Peter Atkins asserts in the text's third chapter, "A history of the twentieth century is a history of hunger" (69). To support his nearly polemic statement, he organizes his chapter on food security, safety, and crises around the common tropes of famine, which took more lives in the twentieth century than ever before. Maya Joseph and Marion Nestle reveal why this is so in their chapter dedicated to food politics. They argue that despite the potential desire and ability of the global food system to produce safe, nutritious, abundant, accessible, and affordable food, political debates inundate every stage and sector of the food system because of intense social stakes and economic implications (88). In his chapter on food systems, Daniel Block also demonstrates the limits of global food production, citing not only recent attention to food deserts but also the salience of "the Eggo story." Block uses this brief 2009 shortage of Kellogg's