

Book Review: Food politics: how the food industry influences nutrition and health

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mouths caught in mid-shout, the sense of incidents caught in snapshot. The feeling of proximity to interaction and altercation sits appropriately with the policeman's view from the street. Yet, if in method Sullivan is a latter-day Mayhew combining the skills of ethnographer, historian and sketch-artist – his profession rendering him less of an outsider than the *flâneur* – his perspective is necessarily partial. While we might expect realist imagery to include domestic interiors, his is the vantage point of the beat – plenty of public house brawls, but no homely scenes in private parlours. This only emphasizes the maleness of his gaze, where 'women appear as prostitutes or wives or girlfriends or waitresses' (p. 17). Elsewhere, the very absence from his *oeuvre* of key contemporary concerns such as 'race mixing' indicate a wilful, imaginary resolution (à la Macheray) of real social conflict. His storytelling rescues vanishing traces of memory, but selectively rather than collectively.

Following Barthes, Jordan recounts the mixed emotional response conjured up by photographs that evoke both recognition and loss. He celebrates a positive memorializing of the way it was, while lamenting its erasure by 'a "concrete jungle" of council houses, maisonettes and tower blocks' (p. 12). Similarly, the final image in *Tramp Steamers* shows seamen on shore leave gazing at high-rise flats. The title of Sullivan's painting is 'Where's Tiger Bay Gone, Shipmates?', and the last lines of Harry Cooke's accompanying poem: 'Nostalgia grows as night follows day,/for the vanished mystique that was old Tiger Bay.' The spectre of painters, poets and cultural theorists stepping into the heritage trap must haunt those living and working in today's mean streets, although the message (should it be heard) is that they have much to learn, if less to gain, from the past. Unlike studies of urban communities in transition, some of which employ photographs extensively (Foster, 1999), Jordan embraces the impulse of both Hardy and Sullivan to give people back their history. Yet he is right to stress the difficulty of getting at where that history might lie, beyond the vivid but fictional appeal of realism. To paraphrase, Raymond Williams, a Welshman with a lively interest in these matters, the problem of knowable communities is to a degree that of language; and Butetown is dense with dialects: Arabic, Somali, West African, West Indian, Greek, Welsh, English, Marxist, humanist, post-structuralist and polyvocal.

Reference

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Marion Nestle, *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002. xii + 457 pp. ISBN 0-520-22465-5 (hbk) \$29.95; ISBN 0-520-24067-7 (pbk) \$15.95

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The French gourmand Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin claimed in 1825 that 'the destiny of nations depends on how they nourish themselves'. Nearly two centuries later, the question one might ask is: what will be the destiny of a nation that fails to 'nourish' itself at all? What happens to a people who overwhelmingly ingest foods of minimal nutritious value? What is to be the fate of a nation that thinks nothing of nourishing its young by providing access to a steady stream of carbonated beverages? What happens in a nation where huge food conglomerates control the very definition of 'nourish' and 'health'?

These are the questions at the heart of Marion Nestle's chilling study of American food culture, *Food Politics*, recently released in paperback. Nestle, an American food industry 'insider' (having worked for 25 years as a nutrition educator and employee of the Public Health Service) exposes the ways 'in which food companies use the political processes – entirely conventional and always legal – to obtain government and professional support for the sales of their products' (p. 1). Nestle demonstrates that these products and the companies that produce, market and distribute them play a key role in promoting a diet that leads to an increasingly overfed and yet poorly nourished American public. What will be the destiny of the American 'Fast Food Nation' where stockholders' profits trump public health concerns?

Nestle's book offers a richly detailed glimpse at the contemporary American political scene where US companies and major food lobbying groups, such as the National Cattlemen's Association, oppose even the most innocuous recommendations on diet. This is because dietary advice could affect sales. Historically, the American food industry has suffered from oversupply. The cost of food is low. Profits depend upon stimulating demand – getting people to eat more – in a nation where there are more than enough calories for the population. Quantity is one way to stimulate profits; creating 'quality' techno-foods (whose benefits are highly suspect) that command high prices from health-conscious Americans is another. Anyone with even a superficial exposure to American culture can attest to the ubiquitous presence of massive quantities of foods and beverages with little nutritional value and the plethora of techno-foods – low-fat cookies, zinc-fortified cereals, vitamin-supplemented candy – making claims to improve health. Nestle reveals that this state of affairs is by design.

Food Politics chronicles a number of techniques used by the food industry to promote an 'eat more' culture. One obvious example of this promotion is the ballooning of package and restaurant serving sizes. One 'large' soft



drink in a US cinema, for example, can contain up to 800 calories if not diluted with ice (just a few hundred calories short of the *total* recommended calorie intake by an adult female). This large portion commands a slightly higher price from consumers who are attracted to the idea that they are getting a 'better buy'. The gargantuan 'super size' costs the industry very little while the increased price is pure profit. As Americans eat more ready-to-serve food and meals outside of the home, these serving sizes have had a dramatic effect on the American waistline.

The 'eat more' tactics that Nestle chronicles are often subtle, designed to divert criticism and convince consumers that the food industry's products are healthy or, at worst, harmless. One disturbing example of the 'eat more' tactic involves the saturation of American public schools with soft-drink vending machines under the guise of providing students with real-world choices and sharing profits with schools. Cash-strapped state schools sign exclusive 'pouring rights' contracts with large soft drink providers in exchange for funds to purchase much-needed equipment (although the preference for purchasing athletic scoreboards brings into question the 'needs' of state schools). Politicians and corporate chief executives tout these contracts as signs of successful cooperation between the private and public sectors in modern America. The financial benefits to state schools, as Nestle demonstrates, are questionable; the financial benefits to the food industry are beyond doubt. Corporate America gains from these contracts not only profit but also an exclusive opportunity to expand its base of consumers by targeting young people. Promoting soft drinks in schools as well as other foods of poor nutritional quality erodes children's health and corrupts the American educational process. Yet, as other chapters in Nestle's book reveal, food companies do not have to wait until children reach state schools to begin target marketing. Nestle demonstrates that the food industry can reach even younger children in developed countries through television and infants in developing countries through public relations campaigns that promote formula feeding as preferable over breast milk.

Nestle argues that the nutrition advice from corporate America promotes an 'eat more' approach and labels all foods – no matter how laden with sugar, salt and fat – as part of a 'healthy diet'. She also shows how scientists and nutrition experts not on the corporate payroll have proven that some foods *are* better for health than others and that eating less in modern America is necessary. Despite the current mantra of deregulation and consumer 'choice', governments, she argues, do have an interest in how their people are fed. However, the problem for American consumers is that federal agencies and officials, not to mention American nutrition experts, have become so co-opted by commercial interests that US consumers can no longer rely on them to provide objective nutritional guidelines. Elected officials prove themselves more willing to subsidize than regulate the food industry. And Americans pay the price.