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Note critique

The era of corporate nutritionism? A review essay

A review of Marion Nestle, *Food Politics. How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health*, Berkeley, University California Press, 2013 (1st edition: 2002); Gyorgy Scrinis, *Nutritionism. The Science and Politics of Dietary Advice*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2013.

Despite the abundance of social science studies examining the growing problem of obesity in many countries (Bossy, 2010; Gard and Wright, 2005; Guthman, 2011; Saguy, 2013), few of them concern food companies, which have, nevertheless, been strongly implicated in the public space. The recent publication of Gyorgy Scrinis' book *Nutritionism. The Science and Politics of Dietary Advice*, and the re-publication of Marion Nestle's *Food Politics. How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health*, invite us to question the role of these firms in shaping eating habits and how to study this. Both books insist upon the fact that the marketing and lobbying practices of food industry firms strongly influence our relationship with food. They draw on many empirical elements to substantiate this argument. However, the demonstration of the authors is weakened by certain methodological flaws, which we shall examine after presenting both books.

A trained biologist, Marion Nestle turned to public health in the mid 1980s. In the preface of the new edition of her book, she explains that her discussion of the food firms arose after attending a conference in the early 1990s on the marketing practices of the tobacco industry. She writes that she left the conference convinced that public health nutritionists (of which she was one) should "pay more attention to the effects of food marketing on personal dietary behaviour" (p. xiii). Her work gave rise to this book, first published in 2002 and re-edited for the second time in 2013. The premise of the book has remained unchanged: the food industry has greatly contributed to the rise in food-related diseases in the United States. The problem of obesity, in particular, is not merely the consequence of poor dietary choices for which individuals are solely responsible. More fundamentally, it stems from the fact that the food industry helps create "an environment so conducive to overeating and poor nutritional practices and so confusing about basic principles of diet and health" (p. xvii). Nestle's study begins by comparing

the food and tobacco industries, and this point reoccurs several times in the book. She defends the idea that these two industrial sectors have similar marketing and lobbying practices, and that these practices have very serious effects on public health. She also demonstrates how, like the tobacco industry, the food industry is constantly lobbying the authorities, health professionals and scientists, trying to influence the types of research carried out as well as public policies. She documents this using two main examples: the drafting of government dietary guidelines from the late 1970s (mainly the “Dietary Guidelines for Americans” and the “Food Pyramid”) and the battles over health claims, officially authorised in 1994. Firms’ marketing practices can be seen in the strategies deployed by soft drink manufacturers to attract and retain consumers from a very early age, and the emergence of so-called “functional” foods from the mid 1990s onwards.

Overall, Nestle’s book contributes to the debate in three ways. Firstly, it shows that certain food companies deploy very sophisticated marketing and lobbying strategies requiring substantial financial resources to conquer new consumers and sell greater quantities of their products, often despite their very poor nutritional quality. From this point of view, the example of the large soft drink manufacturers is particularly eloquent. Nestle describes in great detail these firms’ patient efforts to ensure that drink and snack vending machines are authorised in schools to maximise their sales (in particular by obtaining exclusive distribution contracts or “pouring rights” from local authorities and paying licence fees calculated according to sales volumes).

In second place, Nestle demonstrates that food manufacturers try as hard as possible to promote the nutritional value of their products even when these products are, problematic from this point of view. The use of nutritional claims (highlighting the presence of such and such a nutrient on food packaging) has developed since the interwar years, with firms sometimes adding certain nutrients to their products (vitamins and minerals) to improve their nutritional image. However, since the 1906 *Food and Drug Act*, claims of health benefits (explicitly claiming that a certain nutrient or component of a food has a specific health benefit) were prohibited. Nestle describes the long battle waged by the food supplement industry (vitamins, minerals etc.) from the 1970s, and backed by initiatives from some large corporations (such as Kellogg’s) from the 1980s onwards, for authorisation to make health claims—which they obtained in 1994. This led to some firms commercialising products “created just so that they can be marketed using health claims” (p. 316) – functional foods. However, according to Nestle, making health and nutrition claims does not necessarily translate as an improvement in the nutritional quality of the food supply. In fact, very often, emphasising a certain nutrient masks products’ other, less flattering, nutritional characteristics. Consumers are thus encouraged to consume products that are less healthy than they may seem.

Lastly, Nestle shows that food companies constantly strive to oppose any measure that might tarnish the nutritional image of their products. She mentions the particularly eloquent example of the successful lobbying by representatives of livestock farmers, who, in 1977, managed to obtain the modification of official dietary guidelines in order to avoid a reduction in meat consumption (the message “Reduce consumption of meat” became “Choose meats, poultry and fish which will reduce saturated fat intake”). Similarly, Nestle describes how livestock and dairy farmers’ representatives campaigned—less successfully, this time—to oppose a “Food Pyramid” project organised by the department responsible for human nutrition at the Ministry for Agriculture in the 1980s and 90s. The pyramid, a graphic representation prioritising the different food groups according to their importance as part of a nutritionally healthy diet and destined to be widely disseminated, was inconvenient in that it put meat and dairy products right next to fats and sugars (unlike starches, fruit and vegetables), which, in the eyes of livestock and dairy farmers’ representatives, risked discouraging consumption.

Overall, Nestle’s book is a harsh indictment of the food industry. In the postface of the third edition, mentioning the successful lobbying by the American Beverage Association and Coca Cola and PepsiCo companies to oppose the project to tax soft drinks proposed by certain local representatives, she claims that food manufacturers are powerful stakeholders, essentially because of their considerable financial resources; by denouncing a State attempting to interfere excessively in the private sphere by trying to influence individuals’ food choices, they managed to ensure that programmes to combat obesity and food-related diseases essentially safeguarded their interests.

Also using the example of the United States, the book by Gyorgy Scrinis, a sociologist at the University of Melbourne, goes even further than Nestle’s book, claiming that food companies now largely determine the content of the “nutritional agenda”, i.e. the nutritional issues tackled by scientists, public authorities and the media. Furthermore, most of the nutritional messages disseminated to the public are done so by companies through their advertising and products. In short, the United States, according to Scrinis, has entered the age of “corporate nutritionism” (p. 211).

The merit of Scrinis’ book lies in the fact that this analysis is presented in a wider perspective aiming to reconstitute the history of the paradigm of “nutritionism” in the United States. Borrowing the concept from the essayist Michael Pollan (2008), Scrinis defines it as follows: “Nutritionism—or nutritional reductionism—is characterized by a reductive *focus* on the nutrient composition of foods as the means for understanding their healthfulness, as well as by a reductive *interpretation* of the role of these nutrients in bodily health” (p. 2, author’s italics). The book consists of a systematic analysis of the components of this paradigm and its successive transformations, and tries to offer an alternative, less reductive, paradigm (“the food quality paradigm”),

taking into account other dimensions of the quality of foods, in particular by examining the way in which agricultural raw materials have been produced and the types of transformations they have undergone. Scrinis writes that the nutritionist paradigm has been through three distinct forms:

1° “Quantifying nutritionism” (1850-1950), which consisted above all of identifying and quantifying the nutrients required by the human body. Although, during this period, some nutrients were promoted more than others (e.g. proteins, vitamins and minerals), none was disqualified as such by nutritional science specialists. The consumption of foods containing these nutrients in large quantities (described as “protective foods”) was encouraged in the aim of preventing diseases linked to dietary deficiencies (rickets, beriberi, goitre, etc.).

2° “Good-and-bad nutritionism” (1960-1990), marked by the development of approaches in terms of risk factors applied to food and by studies showing that certain nutrients increase the risk of contracting certain diseases such as cardiovascular diseases. This led the authorities to recommend a diet less rich in saturated fats, sugar and salt from the late 1970s onwards.

3° “Functional nutritionism” (from the mid 1990s), marked by highlighting the benefits of certain nutrients in preventing certain diseases (such as Omega 3 fatty acids for cardiovascular diseases).

Far from being mutually exclusive, these approaches coexist today in what Scrinis calls the “nutriscape”, i.e. the “nutritional landscape”, which “refers to prevailing scientific knowledge, debates, technologies, institutions, industries, ideologies and identities associated with nutrition in a particular place and time” (p. 259). Each of these approaches leads to various forms of nutritional reductionism, consisting of considering the relation of a given food to health exclusively from the angle of a certain nutritional characteristic (e.g. its energetic value expressed in calories, its fat content, its calcium content or its glycaemic index), irrespective of its other attributes.

Scrinis defends the idea that since the end of the 19th century, and even more markedly from the end of the 1970s, food companies have greatly contributed to the consolidation and dissemination of the nutritionist paradigm insofar as they have increasingly sought to promote their products to consumers by emphasising some of their nutritional qualities. They thus strive to construct around their products a “nutritional façade” (p. 203) with a dual aim: on the one hand to draw consumers’ attention to a particular, valued characteristic of their food, and on the other hand, to divert attention away from other characteristics that risk debasing the product (types of ingredients used, the presence of additives or residues of crop protection agents, etc.). Depending on the prevailing nutritional paradigm of the time, firms resort to different nutritional promotion strategies for their products. As part of “quantifying nutritionism”, some of them commercialised products

presented as good for one's health because of their high content of certain nutrients, such as baby-food, dairy products or foods fortified with vitamins and minerals, sometimes as part of public-funded programmes. Then, in the era of "good-and-bad nutritionism", many firms commercialised low-fat foods – or, less frequently, foods with reduced sugar or salt—accompanied by claims promoting them in this respect (e.g. "low in fat"). Finally, from the mid 1990s, food companies tried to take advantage of the changes in regulations, which now authorise the use of health claims for foods (cf. *supra*), in order to develop functional foods with high added value.

According to Scrinis, the accumulation of these practices means that today, "the marketing of foods with nutrient claims has become the primary means through which the public now encounters nutritional information" (p. 211). It is in this sense that he declares that the era of "functional nutritionism" is also that of "corporate nutritionism", with companies having become both the main promoters of nutritional reductionism and its main beneficiaries. Not only do these strategies to present foods contribute to masking their less flattering characteristics, but also they encourage the commercialising of highly processed foods that generate large profit margins. Through the intermediary of their products and their advertisements, food manufacturers thus contribute to producing, to the same extent as the authorities, the medical profession and the media, "nutricentric persons" (p. 13), i.e. individuals more attentive to foods' nutritional characteristics and less sensitive to their other attributes.

Nestle's and Scrinis' books both deserve credit for insisting on the role of food companies in the "nutritionalisation" (Poulain, 2009) of our relationship with food—in other words, in the tendency to place greater emphasis on foods' nutritional characteristics—and on their marketing and lobbying strategies to increase sales of their products and avoid their being compromised by reform movements, supported by the authorities, to encourage a healthier diet. Drawing on several primary and secondary sources, they provide the reader with a wealth of empirical material backed up, in the case of Scrinis' book, by a very stimulating conceptual study. However, both books present major limitations. On one hand, they suffer from insufficient consideration of the food industry's internal differentiation and the diverse strategies firms use to promote their products. Firms do not all position themselves in the same way with regard to nutritional issues. Some use nutritional arguments to promote their products, and others do not. For some firms, current debates on the nutritional quality of the food supply provide opportunities that they seize to stand out from their competitors, while others consider that they hamper other modes of promotion or that they risk generating extra costs and reducing already narrow profit margins (Déplaudé, 2013). In other words, food companies have unequal interests in the nutritionalisation of our relationship with food: some may have an interest in nutrition becoming an important aspect in promoting food products since their products are relatively compliant with prevailing guidelines (as is the case for certain dairy

products, for example), while others do not (e.g. soft drink or cooked meat manufacturers). Contrary to what Scrinis declares, for many firms, nutritional quality does not constitute a promotional priority for their products, and when this is the case, it is very often a secondary promotional priority compared with other values such as taste, pleasure, convenience or tradition. And contrary to what Nestle suggests, the food industry probably does not form a united front against the public authorities on nutritional issues.

On the other hand, *Food Politics* and *Nutritionism* both credit the food industry with huge power—considered by Nestle as comparable to or even greater than that of the tobacco industry. This power, they claim, is firstly exercised on consumers through marketing and advertising. It is also based on firms' capacity to finance numerous academic studies, and therefore to influence nutritional science research. Lastly, the authors claim that the industry's power lies in its capacity to influence public authorities and oppose measures that risk damaging its interests. In any event, money is presented as being the crux of the matter. Nestle, in particular, insists on the fact that the sums the public authorities have to mount their health education campaigns are insignificant compared with the money invested in advertising and lobbying by food manufacturers. She mentions, for example, that at the end of the 2000s, companies such as Cola Cola and PepsiCo spent tens of millions of dollars opposing projects to tax soft drinks.

Although there is no doubt that some large companies and employers' unions have very large amounts of money to ensure the promotion of their products and finance lobbying actions, Nestle and Scrinis may well be leaping to conclusions. Firstly, reception studies (Le Grignou, 2003) have underlined the media's ambivalent effects on the opinions and practices of their addressees. With regard to nutritional marketing, there is nothing, in principle, to suggest that it strongly influences consumer practices since they are not all—or not only—"nutricentric"; even when they grant a certain importance to food's nutritional value, they also grant it other values such as its nourishing quality or capacity to give pleasure. Their eating habits are not, therefore, determined exclusively by nutritional preoccupations, but by the way in which they combine these diverse registers of appreciating foods (Cardon, 2007).

Secondly, it would be worth analysing more precisely the relationship between the food industry and certain academic communities, as, for example, the historian Robert N. Proctor (2011) has done with the American tobacco industry. He shows that companies' influence on scientists is exercised more on defining their research priorities than the way in which they conduct their research. Taken individually, the studies funded by industrialists are rarely biased; however, these studies *as a whole* may be so, since the funding granted encourages scientists to investigate certain subjects and neglect others that are, in principle, more problematical for the firms.

Lastly, the empirical material presented by Nestle and Scrinis does not allow us to reach as decisive conclusions as those of the authors with regard to the food industry's political influence on nutrition. Nestle states, for example, that "dietary guidelines are political compromises between what science tells us about nutrition and health and what is good for the food industry" (p. 30). She notes that, with the exception of the Dietary Goals of 1977, positive guidelines (of the "eat more" type) always refer to foods, whereas negative guidelines ("eat less") always refer to nutrients in order to avoid certain foods being stigmatised. Likewise, she shows that between the late 1970s and early 1990s, official dietary guidelines took on an increasingly positive tone. Turns of phrases such as "eat less (fat, sugar, or salt)" were replaced by phrases such as "avoid too much (fat, sugar, or salt)" or "choose a diet low in (fat, sugar, or salt)". Although, undeniably, these changes can only satisfy manufacturers producing foods that are nutritionally seen in a bad light, should we nevertheless believe that it is mainly the result of their lobbying the public authorities? Nestle clearly demonstrates that companies and their representatives try to influence the content of the Dietary Guidelines. However, the authorities' prudence and their concern not to stigmatise certain categories of foods can doubtlessly *also* largely be explained by the fact that food constitutes a particularly sensitive issue insofar as it is a major medium for individual or collective identities, and in that it reflects multiple cultural practices in every social milieu (Régner, Lhuissier and Gojard, 2009). Consequently, we can probably support the claim – as Virginia Berridge has done concerning the British governments' attitude to tobacco in the 1950s (Berridge, 2007) – that the public authorities see it as politically risky or even counterproductive to try and modify eating habits too drastically. This point of view can also be found among many nutritional science specialists, convinced that scaremongering tactics should not be used, and defending the idea that the population should be encouraged to have a varied diet rather than stigmatising certain foods – all the more so because the health risks or benefits of certain nutrients are still subject to ongoing debate (Garrety, 1998; Hilgartner, 2000).

Despite these limitations, Nestle's and Scrinis' books open up important research perspectives. They call for more defined empirical studies on food companies, their use of nutritional science and the efforts they make for their products to be promoted nutritionally – or at least not stigmatised from this point of view. For a long time, these questions were only researched by a handful of historians (Apple, 1990; Finlay, 1995; Den Hartog, 2000; Horrocks, 1997). However, several recent studies, mainly from the field of science and technology studies, have taken an interest in the issue, especially with regard to functional foods (Fitzsimmons, 2012; Lehenkari, 2003; Penders and Nelis, 2011) and trans fats (Schleifer, 2011 and 2012). Let's hope that more research will soon develop and expand on these promising studies.

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