

Book review

Good Nutrition? fact & fashion in dietary advice. Patricia Crotty. St Leonards, NSW, Australia: Allen & Unwin. 1995. £9.99 ISBN 1 86373 730 8

This book should spark debate about the rights and wrongs of nutrition policy. Patricia Crotty objects strongly to community dietary reform. Her objections run the gamut, from the moral, evangelic and sexist nature of present and past reform, to the 'medical colonisation of the lifeworld', to the cultural as opposed to the scientific forces which lie behind exhortations against overconsumption. She makes some good points and it is a thought-provoking polemic.

The tirade against dietary reform begins in the last century with a denigration of Wilbur O. Atwater's attempt to improve the lot of working-class America. His reform was based on his recent estimates of protein and energy requirements, and centred on advocating cheaper cuts of meat and less fruit and vegetables for the poor. Poverty would thus be combated, while meeting protein and energy requirements. Crotty asserts that Atwater (and other reforming nutritionists) apply knowledge in a class-stratified way. Food for the poor is reduced to grams of protein, energy and fat. In the case of Atwater's poor, if they had followed his advice, which they didn't, their diet would have been deficient in vitamins and minerals. This historical starting point serves as a paradigm. The paradigm encompasses rudimentary, and thus often flawed, science, the imposition of middle-class values about food and nutrition unto the working class, and an abnegation of food's sybaritic and social roles. To boot, the nutritionist invokes dietary reform for entrepreneurial motives.

Crotty's criticism of contemporary nutrition policy focuses on dietary guidelines for coronary heart disease. These take a rap as being impractical and unattainable (the sugar-fat seesaw), and the debate as to whether a change in national fat intake will lead to a change in health outcome

is retried. Further assault is from a feminist perspective. Dietary guidelines to reduce the risk of heart disease have been derived from studies of men, and women's health has been ignored. The notion of the 'good' woman who is responsible for family health has become entrenched into programs of dietary reform. Women are expected to change their own dietary behaviour as well as their men's, which is tantamount to social control based on sexist ideology – 'those who would change women's behaviour can exercise a potent form of social control by implying that they are responsible for both causing and preventing their husband's heart attacks'.

The other major issue which Crotty addresses is the failing of scientists and bureaucrats to understand everyday life when making policy. She calls for lay representation in policy decisions and to look to social science methods to evaluate policy. For too long medical experts as well as corporate interests have used knowledge-based facts in an authoritative fashion to influence food consumption with little regard for the disruption of domestic life which may ensue.

So far, so good. The issues raised are worth airing, but the critique is also rather one-sided. This diatribe against dietary reform ignores the successes of such reform. The book lambastes US and Australian wartime nutrition policy for its cultural motives; but did the policy work? In Britain, at least, it did – gung-ho political motives or not, protein, vitamin and mineral intakes increased, infant mortality fell and general health was good at the end of the war in 1945. Similarly, in Victorian Britain campaigns for pure and unadulterated food had, doubtless, many of the faults which Crotty describes, but their effects were salutary. Surely, critics of policy-making ignore such effects at their peril.

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