The scientific study of food in the modern West

M.A. Option HMEDG017

Soup for the Poor, to serve 40 people
Alexis Soyer, A Shilling Cookery for the People (1855)
2 oz dripping
4 oz meat cut into 1 inch dice
4 oz onions, thinly sliced
4 oz turnips, cut into small dice
2 oz leeks, thinly sliced
3 oz celery
12 oz wholemeal flour
8 oz pearl barley
3 oz salt
¼ oz brown sugar
All boiled together in 18 pints of water

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Course description

Food is of central relevance to our lives, but as inhabitants of the so-called “developed” world, we are lucky enough to live in a society in which we rarely have to worry about getting enough to eat. At the same time our lives are permeated with advice about eating from all sides, coming from people we know personally, especially family members, friends and doctors, or from authoritative but impersonal sources such as the media or the government. This course studies the development of nutrition and dietary sciences after 1800 into one of the most powerful kinds of scientific and medical authority: not only directed at treating diseased bodies, nutrition science has an immediate relationship with our daily lives, in attempting to prescribe what and how we eat. We will explore how scientific approaches to nutrition came to be central to the medical management of modern Western populations by becoming allied with government. What counted as a “scientific” or “medical” approach to nutrition and diet has varied in the past, in keeping with changing standards of bodily shape, morality and public order; we will investigate the interrelations between these and the perceived political consequences of altering diets. We will also explore how apparently timeless nutritional categories and concerns including vitamins and anorexia came into existence. Finally, we will consider the status of expert nutritional advice in responding to, or even fashioning, current food issues such as the fast food crisis and the “obesity epidemic”.

Course requirements

10 x 2 hour seminars, weekly
2 x essays (min. 3000 words; max. 5000 words)

Essay deadlines

Essay 1: due by midnight on [date]
Essay 2: due by midnight on [date]

[details here—format for delivery—turn it in? cover sheet? biblio]

Essays will be marked and second marked as quickly as possible and returned to students with comments and marks. However, it is not a perfect world and delays do sometimes occur… Feel free to ask for updates.
Week 1: Introduction: The history of food: how and why?

We will explore some different approaches to writing the history of food and related issues which have developed in recent years, and reflect on some of the problems and possibilities that arise from bringing the history of food and the history of medicine together.

An excellent general sourcebook for methodological texts on the subject is:

For an essay collection which covers many areas of the course, consult:

Approaches to the history of food and diet:
Sociological

Anthropological

Biological

Background reading:
Material culture

Expertise
Week 2: Additives or adulteration?

From the 1820s onwards, the technology of chemical analysis began to be widely utilised in the detection of food adulteration. This lecture considers how the practices of food analysis served to redefine the meaning of alimentary purity, and how food chemists used analysis as an instrument to involve themselves in the regulation of the food industry, culminating in the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906.

**Primary**

**Methodological model**

**General**

**Britain**

**France**

**America**
Week 3: Hunger and the political management of new publics

Soon after 1800, European governments seemed to have resolved the problem of the food crises which regularly afflicted early modern cultures. The political conquest of hunger depended upon new scientific strategies for quantifying food supplies and calibrating minimum dietary requirements, the basis for modern nutrition science.

Primary

General

Rumford and the poor soup movement

The industrial body

Hunger historiography
Week 4: The invention of food groups
A necessary accompaniment to the entry of alimentary experts to positions of public authority in the nineteenth century was a new set of techniques for describing, analysing and classifying foods and for predicting their effects on the human body.

Primary

General

France

Germany
Week 5: Science and technology in the food industry
Food analysts also occupied themselves with the production of new substances from existing plant and animal materials which already served as foods or drugs. They were central to the rise of the great food and pharmaceutical companies, particularly from the 1880s onwards. This lecture will look at how claims to be able break down foods into their component parts and to create new foods and flavours through scientific and technological expertise gave nutrition specialists a place within the innovative marketing practices of the food industry.

Primary

General

Britain

France

The Netherlands

**NB: Week 6: Reading week**
Week 7: Vitamins
The “accessory food factors” were invented in a Cambridge physiology laboratory and reinvented by the public and the pharmaceutical and food industries to become “vitamins”. The reality of these entities was then affirmed by epidemiological studies beginning with the Great War, leading to a teleological history of vitamin deficiency. Yet all along the scope and coherence of the class of vitamins was under attack.

Primary

Methodology/General

Vitamin B

Vitamin C

Vitamin D

…and Vitamin O
Christopher Wanjek, Bad Medicine, Hoboken, N.J. : J. Wiley, c2003
Week 8: Too much, or not enough?
Ironically, the rise of plenty in the industrialised world has been accompanied by new, diet-related health problems. On the one hand, physicians defined new medical conditions relating to eating, such as anorexia nervosa or bulimia, beginning in the late nineteenth century. On the other hand, there are currently widespread claims about the effects of excessive eating, sometimes termed an “obesity epidemic”. In this two-part lecture, we will look firstly at how changing standards of body shape advanced within the scientific and medical community have fuelled recommendations about dieting. Then we will look at the significance of defining certain sorts of consumption behaviours as pathological, and examine how earlier explanations of similar behaviours tended to empower, rather than disempower, the eater.

**Primary**

**Methodological**

**Obesity**

**Anorexia**
Week 9: Food faddism and social renewal
From the second half of the nineteenth century onwards, interest in “alternative” diets became increasingly widespread, having previously been restricted to radical groups. We look at several of the prominent food reform movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries which were tied to particular programmes for restoring individuals to nature, and explore the models of “nature” which underlay these programmes, also how they were marketed and practised in different national settings.

Primary

Background

Returning to nature
Sabine Merta, “‘Keep Fit and Slim!’ Alternative Ways of Nutrition as Aspects of the German Health Movement, 1880-1930”, and:
L. M. Barnett, “‘Every Man his Own Physician’: Dietetic Fads, 1890-1914”, in Kamminga and Cunningham, *The Science and Culture of Nutrition*.

Fletcherism

Extracts from *The Road to Wellville* (1994).
Week 9: War, science and the invention of a ‘national’ diet
Elizabeth David’s celebrated indictment of the British bread industry was part of a reaction against processed and refined foods in the 1970s. But the scientific processes underlying bread manufacture were invented in wartime as nutrition scientists were called in by the British state to aid in creating the illusion of plenty in a time of shortage.

Primary
The really enthusiastic will find four boxes of rationing ephemera in the Wellcome Library, with the classmark Med. ephemera EPH37 to EPH40.

General
Derek J. Oddy, From Plain Fare to Fusion Food: British Diet from the 1890s to the 1990s. Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2003.

Rationing

Bread
**Week 10: Fast and slow food**

Fast food highlights the fragility of scientific and government authority over nutrition. The history of fast foods shows that their success was a consequence of broader transformations in consumption in Western societies by industrialisation, urbanisation, and changes in transportation and technology. But ironically, the slow food movement depends on similar transformations. The seminar will make use of materials on and about McDonalds to show the stakes involved (sorry) in creating a nutritional fact.

**Primary**


Anti-McDonald’s Campaign, *What’s Wrong With McDonald’s?* Nottingham: Anti-McDonald’s Campaign, 2004.


**General**


**U.S.A.**


**Britain**


Week 11: Food and globalisation

Many aspects of today’s food industry originate thanks to changes in scientific and medical knowledge. In some cases, foods whose development actively relied on chemical advances have now gone global: their use and their brand identity are now distributed worldwide. We will look at different ways in which this transformation has been interpreted by historians, particularly in relation to the cases of Coca-Cola and formula milk for infants.

**Primary**


**General**


**Methodology**


**Coca-Cola**


**Formula**


