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. 4000 words)

For details of essay style, submission requirements, and how to avoid plagiarism, please consult your M.A. Handbook.

A note on the readings
Asterisked items in the reading list are the week’s essential readings. (Virtually) all should be available online, either as scanned texts on Moodle (log in using your UCL username and password) or via the UCL Athens database of periodical publications. Some are freely available on the Internet. If you have any problems, please contact me a.s.a.p.

I’ve appended some questions for you to think about while preparing the reading for each seminar.
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.

General

Approaches to the history of food and diet:
Sociological

Anthropological

Biological

Historical

Material culture

Expertise
Discussion questions

What are the advantages and disadvantages of the different methodologies that have been used to write the history of food?

How does a focus on scientific and medical knowledge alter the kinds of histories we might write about food—what might be included or excluded?

Is a biological explanation sufficient to account for food use in the past? If not, why not?
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


General


Britain


France


America

Discussion questions

What difference did the rise of analysis make to the credibility of food science?

Why is the notion of ‘adulteration’ historiographically problematic?

Can knowledge and commerce be disentangled in looking at the history of the food industry?
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
Discussion questions

How did claims about hunger and an adequate diet manifest particular models of society in the past?

What power did quantification confer upon food experts?

Discuss the shortfalls and strengths of existing historical approaches to hunger.
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.


Discussion questions

How crucial was Liebig to the emergence of modern nutrition science?

Discuss the relationship between knowledge and commerce in Liebig’s claims about food.

Explain how new nineteenth-century theories of digestion can be labelled ‘industrial’.
Week 5: Industrial nutrition
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 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
J. Goody, *Cooking, Cuisine and Class*, Chapter 5.

Britain

France and the Netherlands

Additives

**NB: Week 6: Reading week**
Discussion questions

Identify some of the main problems with a linear history of food preservation.

Why has food technology had such a troubled past?

Have scientists historically conspired with or policed the food industry?

“Food additives are bad for your health.” Discuss. OR:
What’s involved in proving the health risks of a given food additive?
Week 7: Vitamins
The “accessory food factors” were invented in a Cambridge physiology laboratory and reinvented, in part by the public and the pharmaceutical and food industries, to become “vitamins”.

Primary

Methodology/General

Vitamin B

Vitamin C

Vitamin D
Discussion questions

Which was more important in the making of a culture of vitamin consumption: science or commerce?

What different historical factors contributed to making vitamins a key element of modern understandings of an adequate diet?

Are vitamins foods or medicines? Defend your answer.

How did a vitamin become a fact?
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”.

Primary

Methodological

Obesity

Anorexia
Discussion questions

Why is it so hard to prove the link between obesity and ill health from a purely scientific perspective?

Can we equate female fasting in the past with anorexia today?

Why haven’t eating habits and choices been left up to the individual?
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, and view extracts from the 1994 film *The Road to Wellville*.

**Primary**


**Background**


**Returning to nature**

*J. Tanner, “Food, Fibres and Health”, in A. Fenton, ed., *Order and Disorder*. East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2000, 240-252. (See also the paper by Merta in ibid.)


**Fletcherism**


Discussion questions

Explain why food fads took the form they did between 1880 and 1930.

Is it meaningful to call Fletcherism a political enterprise?

“Food fads do not have to be taken seriously—only nutrition science should be taken account of.” Do you agree or disagree?
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. A typical Western diet, including a proportionately high level of meat and fat, is often taken as a marker of the spread of industrial society. But ironically, the slow food movement is equally dependent on industrialisation.

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

General
Revisit Stearns, Fat History and compare the discussions of the US and France.

U.S.A.

Britain

France
Discussion questions

How should we understand the claims of the slow food movement to represent a healthier way of using (growing, cooking as well as eating) food?

Compare the ways in which the food industry and nutrition experts construct a nutritional fact.

Why has McDonalds come to be synonymous with imperialism? How have health claims been enrolled to serve or refute that argument?
Week 11: Food and globalisation

In this final seminar, we will focus on some foods which have widely been taken to exemplify the positive and negative aspects of multinational food production, marketing and consumption, and consider the place of scientific and medical advice in mediating these claims. The foods chosen, Coca-Cola and infant formula, both originated for the purposes of maintaining health—yet they have come to synonymise ill health and dubious trading practices.

Primary

General

Methodology

Coca-Cola

Formula
Discussion questions

In what sense is Coca-Cola global?

For the case of EITHER colas or formula milk, what changes accompanied the shift from a specialised medicinal product to a mass everyday food?

What is at stake in the replacement of breast milk with formula?
Essay questions

Essay 1

*PLEASE CHECK M.A. HANDBOOK FOR SUBMISSION DEADLINES AND OTHER FORMAL COURSE REQUIREMENTS. THIS IS VERY IMPORTANT, AS FAILURE TO ADHERE TO THEM MAY RESULT IN PENALISATION OF YOUR HARD WORK*

1. Explain how nineteenth-century chemists came to be public experts in analysing food.

2. Why is hunger a problematic category for historians?

3. “The need for nutrition is biologically determined through the whole of human history.” How does a history of eating affect our understanding of such a claim?

4. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of a biographical approach to Justus von Liebig’s work for explaining his role in the history of nutrition science.

5. What’s interesting for historians about food adulteration?
Essay questions

Essay 2

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1. What can the case of Vitamin C teach us about how nutritional facts are constructed?

2. Account for the rise of ‘food fads’ at the end of the nineteenth century.

3. “Fat has become a moral evil of modern society”. Discuss, from a historical perspective.

4. What history lay behind José Bové’s attempt to bulldoze his local McDonald’s?

5. What is at stake in debates (past and present) over global diets?