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Alimentary Uncertainties: From Contested Evidence to Policy -- A special issue of BioSocieties

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By Aaron Seaman



The June 2015 issue of [BioSocieties](#) is a special issue guest edited by Emilia Sanabria and Emily Yates-Doerr, entitled “[Alimentary uncertainties: From contested evidence to policy](#).” The issue comprises, in addition to the introduction, seven articles and two responding commentaries (links and titles/abstracts below). As Sanabria and Yates-Doerr write in their eponymous [introduction](#)

This special issue examines specific uncertainties raised by the feedbacks between the production of evidence and the making of policy in the domain of the alimentary sciences. We employ the term ‘aliment’ – that which nourishes the body – to reinvigorate a valuable but underutilized concept, enriching the vocabulary with which to address the recent proliferation of scientific examinations of the relation between food and health. Much of the existing literature is focused on the United States, showing how popular American discourses of nutrition have produced ‘hegemonic nutrition’ – a form of nutrition that deploys a language of science to standardize food/body relationships, disregarding the cultural contexts in which food is eaten (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy, 2013). This collection departs from academic critique of the moral injunctions around food and health. Disease is doubtlessly produced when intimate acts of eating become the object of normative discourses, but the seven articles collected here suggest that if nutrition has hegemonic force, it is also a fractured,

contingent field fraught with ambiguity and instability. If 'modern nutrition' has been quintessentially American in its ideals (cf. Guthman, 2014), we illustrate how scientific interest in the relation between food and health takes shape in Guatemala, South Africa, India, Hong Kong, the United Kingdom and France. We point to the paradigmatic uncertainty of the 'sciences' of the aliment and suggest that the aim of better nourishment shifts what science can claim to do and know.

Articles

[Sensorial pedagogies, hungry fat cells and the limits of nutritional health education](#) (*open access*)

Emilia Sanabria

This article examines the way the category of 'the sensorial' is mobilised across obesity research and care practices for overweight persons in France. The 'natural' body is understood to have developed mechanisms that motivate eaters to seek out energy-dense foods, a hardwiring that is maladaptive in today's plethoric food environment. The article analyses the feedback models mobilised in scientific literature on the neuroendocrine processes regulating appetite. The analysis of how 'the sensorial' is studied and used to treat patients provides a vantage point onto the ways foods and bodies transform each other. Recent findings show that fat cells influence metabolism by secreting hormones, revealing that eaters are affected by the materiality of the foods they ingest. 'The sensorial' functions as a regulator in the feedback mechanisms where social norms regulating foodscapes become enfolded in the molecular processes that control appetite regulation. The article traces the work that the category of 'the sensorial' does as it flows through the loops and feedbacks between scientific evidence, policy and care. It examines the way pleasure and the sensations of eaters are increasingly foregrounded in French nutritional health promotion strategies in a context where informing eaters is increasingly deemed ineffective.

[HIV and the remaking of hunger and nutrition in South Africa: Biopolitical specification after apartheid](#)

Thomas Cousins

The article seeks to develop an account of the transformation of hunger and the structural violence of Apartheid into biopolitical concerns in South Africa from 1994 to 2010. I argue that the

post-Apartheid politics of hunger and nutrition make no sense in South Africa outside of the politics of HIV, and that those histories of hunger and malnutrition have been radically transformed during this period such that it is now not possible to think about nutrition beyond or apart from biomedicalised knowledge of nutrition, immune system functioning and the gut. I show that the gastrointestinal tract has emerged as a central object of concern for the making of credible scientific advances, and at the same time for articulating the symbolic importance of the belly in the development of a biopolitical concern with food, nutrition and HIV. By focusing on one locale in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, in which hunger, diet, nutrition and food are conjoined with immune system functioning, treatment regimes and bodily capacity, the article parses out the matters of concern that have produced nutrition, the immune system and the gut as specific nodes of action and enquiry within the particularities of post-Apartheid, 'epidemic' South Africa.

[Feeding sentinels: Logics of care and biosecurity in farms and labs](#)

Frédéric Keck

This article compares the treatment of living beings (unvaccinated chickens and infected cells) considered as sentinel devices in a farm and in a lab in Hong Kong. Sentinel devices are defined as living beings posted on a boundary from which they send signals of invisible threats. The ethnography looks at how they transform differences between ordinary lives and lives exposed, between good death and bad death, through the practices of those who feed them. In farms and labs exposed to Avian Influenza viruses, the logic of biosecurity intersects with a logic of care, blurring the distinction between self and other, friend and enemy through aesthetic judgments concerning what is a 'good death'. Metabolism and immunity are redefined when sentinels are fed to produce clear signals of the mutations of viruses.

[Unreliable eating: Patterns of food adulteration in urban India](#)

Harris Solomon

This article is about food safety and food adulteration in urban India. Situated at the relational interface of foods and their contaminants, it considers ways of thinking and acting at the porous boundaries between bodies and environments. The article details how people attempt to detect where food and its adulteration begins and ends, through ethnographic reflection on

several events of adulteration in Mumbai and a context of changing food safety policies in India. The article develops the concept of reliability as a lens onto food politics different than one delimited strictly in terms of consumerism. Reliability refracts the politics of difference at work in times of toxic food environments, in contemporary India and elsewhere, wherein tensions between poison and nourishment take on renewed charges. This framework recasts a choice-focused approach to thinking about food safety by centralizing how living with harm – rather than ridding the world of it, element by element – is what is at stake.

[Materiality matters: Blurred boundaries and the domestication of functional foods](#) (*open access*)

Kate Weiner and Catherine Will

Previous scholarship on novel foods, including functional foods, has suggested that they are difficult to categorise for both regulators and users. It is argued that they blur the boundary between ‘food’ and ‘drug’ and that uncertainties about the products create ‘experimental’ or ‘restless’ approaches to consumption. We investigate these uncertainties drawing on data about the use of functional foods containing phytosterols, which are licensed for sale in the EU for people wishing to reduce their cholesterol. We start from an interest in the products as material objects and their incorporation into everyday practices. We consider the scripts encoded in the physical form of the products through their regulation, production and packaging and find that these scripts shape but do not determine their use. The domestication of phytosterols involves bundling the products together with other objects (pills, supplements, foodstuffs). Considering their incorporation into different systems of objects offers new understandings of the products as foods or drugs. In their accounts of their practices, consumers appear to be relatively untroubled by uncertainties about the character of the products. We conclude that attending to materials and practices offers a productive way to open up and interrogate the idea of categorical uncertainties surrounding new food products.

[With the benefit of Foresight: Obesity, complexity and joined-up government](#)

Stanley Ulijaszek

Over a hundred factors are associated with obesity, and relationships among most of them were formalised in the Foresight

Obesity Systems Map (FOSM) in 2007. This was a characterisation of population obesity in the United Kingdom at that time. The Foresight programme of different projects aimed to harness scientific evidence to the making of policy in a range of areas, obesity among them. An objective of this particular Foresight project was to 'de-silo' obesity policy by bringing together very diverse stakeholders, and to develop directives that recruited 'joined-up' government to the cause of obesity control. The Foresight process more generally was used to offer science-based solutions to complex problems. Obesity entered the sphere of complex problems that defied resolution that the Labour administration sought to deal with, along with inequality and climate change among others. The take-home message of the Foresight Obesity project was that the causes of obesity are embedded in an extremely complex biological system, set within an equally complex societal framework. While different forms of complexity have been argued for, the type of complexity favoured by Foresight was the one most commonly embraced, romantic, or upward-looking complexity that can be ordered at a more macro-level. This article describes the development of the FOSM and the process through which obesity policy and obesity research were reframed as complex problems.

[Intervals of confidence: Uncertain accounts of global hunger](#)

Emily Yates-Doerr

Global health policy experts tend to organize hunger through scales of 'the individual', 'the community' and 'the global'. This organization configures hunger as a discrete, measurable object to be scaled up or down with mathematical certainty. This article offers a counter to this approach, using ethnographic cases to illustrate how the calculated referent of 'hunger' does not hold stable. In the highlands of Guatemala, where obesity has become a matter of concern, many people treated hunger as a sensation connected to family and history. For doctors working in the region, hunger was determined through body mass indices and global risk statistics. For global health experts it was different still, operating as an indicator derived from agricultural and population data. I draw these different, yet connected, versions of hunger together to explore dilemmas of scaling an object that is not solid but is made and unmade variously. This allows me to illustrate that global hunger is not a summation of hunger in the world, but its own version of hunger. I further suggest that 'multi-object ethnography', which allows for the persistence of uncertainty, can help to develop policy responses to hunger(s) that will, in some

cases, be more appropriate and effective than scale-based evaluation.

Commentaries

[Food is love: And so, what then?](#)

Elizabeth F.S. Roberts

So what do we, as in progressive social scientists mostly based in the still relatively well-provisioned North, want? What is our sense of the good? My sense is that even as we espouse the virtues of entangled uncertainty as an analytic mode, we want uncertainty and entanglement to remain voluntary analytics not a constantly lived experience. For instance, while we are pretty certain getting the lead out of catalytic convertors was for the good, there is now uncertainty about one of the crowning public health achievements of the twentieth century, fluoridating the water supply in many industrialized nations. Now bodies might have too much. We want stable resources to be allocated to find out how much is actually too much, which will allow us to “cut complexities down to manageable size” (Sanabria and Yates-Doerr, this issue). We want the certainty and the separations that resources make possible, that allow for jurisdiction and responsibility towards specialized realms. The stability that black boxes provide can be very relaxing. They let us get things done. We would like public health officials who have the resources to do their jobs, who can call out NAFTA, and who don’t have to work for NGOs or Microsoft on the side. We want resources for clean water to be in place through recognizable, certain and stable means. We want bio-power. We want food to be made of both love and calories, not only love.

[Being and eating: Losing grip on the equation](#)

Hannah Landecker

[A]s these essays show, there is the uncomfortable sense in our reflexively biopolitical times that not only has the equation between eating and being ceased to function, it itself had a role in producing contemporary ills (Collier and Lakoff, 2015). The nutritional chemistry of the nineteenth century and the commodified rationalities of the twentieth have certainly contributed to making contemporary bodies what they are, but many aspects of that contribution were unexpected and unwanted. Hunger and obesity are complex and devastating diachronic legacies of intercalating

starvation and abundance: the history of nutrition and therefore nutrition science are enfolded in the very bodies that science and policy are attempting to control, as Ulijaszek and Yates-Doerr point toward in this issue. In trying to figure out what went wrong, the nice equivalencies of you are what you eat begin to sound off, as it becomes harder to reckon both sides of the equation – ‘you’ and ‘what you eat’ are difficult to define, if you contain both generations and multitudes, and what you eat turns out to not be easily equivalent at all to how hungry or sick you are or are not, and to itself contain worlds of industry and production.

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