When ideology can be hard to stomach

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Published: August 3, 2013 - 11:59PM

FOOD

NUTRITIONISM: THE SCIENCE AND POLITICS OF DIETARY ADVICE
By Gyorgy Scrinis
Allen & Unwin, $35

Since the 19th century, scientific understandings have transformed our relationships with food. Once a superfood, meat became a heart attack on a plate, then a weight-loss champion, and is now carcinogenic. Until the 1960s, margarine was butter's cheap imitation, then was it healthier, but is now risky. When low-fat advice was dished up in the 1980s and '90s, we gorged on carbs (and expanded our collective waistlines), but now fats are back on the menu. At least, the "good" ones are. Once offering absolutes, now nutrition experts offer caveats. High-GI (glycaemic index) bread, when spread with butter, may become low-GI. Food cholesterol may not translate to blood cholesterol. Things have even gotten hairy for the kilojoule: a carrot's kilojoule (calorie) value was once fixed; now it varies upon whether it's cooked, what it's eaten with, and how our unique biochemistry breaks it down.

Even as understandings have become more complex, the value of food continues to be reduced to a sum of its nutrient parts - fruit is promoted for its vitamin C, fructose and fibre; meat for its protein and iron. In Nutritionism: The Science and Politics of Dietary Advice, Australian sociologist Gyorgy Scrinis unpicks the ways this "nutritionism" ideology continues to lead public health policy, promote cultural anxieties and grease the wheels of processed food, weight-loss and vitamin industries. Scrinis identifies the nutrition paradigms that "determine what counts as good science and common sense".

Those who read Michael Pollan's best-selling The Omnivore's Dilemma - which bounced off Scrinis' early essays in Meanjin and elsewhere - might recognise Scrinis' "nutritionism" concept. Pollan's own version of nutritionism emerged in his subsequent In Defence of Food, in which he proselytised against "edible food-like substances" (translation: highly processed foods).

To Pollan, a figure leading the movement against industrialised food production, the nutritionism ideology obscured other health-promoting understandings of food - cultural, sensual, social, traditional, productive, political, practical. But for all his success popularising the concept, Pollan's understanding of nutritionism "is somewhat limited and misconstrued", Scrinis writes. Pollan "often repeats and reinforces … the nutritionism paradigm". Indeed, the first half of In Defence of Food railed against the simplistic reductionism of nutrition science, while its second half extolled the virtues of omega-3.

Scrinis, who teaches food politics at Melbourne University, is not against nutrition science tout court (this book is endorsed by prominent nutritionists). Instead, he contends that nutrition science is bogged in assumptions that lead to oversimplification, generalisation and exaggeration of the role of individual nutrients, rather than understanding the interaction of the whole "food matrix".

Nutrients have "been interpreted outside the contexts of the foods, dietary patterns, and broader social contexts in which they are embedded". They have been promoted in simplistic ways that make "nutritionally engineered foods" easily marketable. There is thus "a deep complicity between nutritionism and the commercial interests of food manufacturers". For example, the trend of "functional" foods "distracts the attention of consumers from the ingredients, additives and processing techniques employed in the production of food".

A reductive and medicalised approach to nutrition licenses such products as breakfast cereals and fortified juices that are "extracted, refined, concentrated, reconstituted or further degraded through various processing techniques"
to be marketed as good sources of nourishment. The nutritionism ideology has seen policymakers fortify common foods such as bread with synthesised nutrient additives in a uniform quick-fix imposed on all, rather than addressing the social and dietary patterns of poorly nourished individuals. It has encouraged industry-led "nutritional techno-fixes" from genetic modification to nanofoods.

Documenting the histories and politics of official dietary guidelines, butter-margarine wars, cholesterol debates, weight-loss wars and functional foods, Scrinis shows how decontextualising nutrients from the food matrix discourages other forms of food literacy that are better placed to put healthy eating within people's grasp. His alternative: the Food Quality Paradigm, which reacquaints us with other understandings through "a cultural and cuisine-based framework for incorporating dietary advice". This places "food production and processing quality at the centre of our understanding of food and health".

*Nutritionism: The Science and Politics of Dietary Advice* is released concurrently with Australia's packaged-food star-rating system - a system that may well mask the ways degraded foods can be marketed as "healthy". But Scrinis' framework shifts our focus from understanding food in terms of its abstracted parts, and offers ways to rethink it as an integrated whole.