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## Book Review

**The Industrial Diet: The degradation of food and the struggle for healthy eating**

Anthony Winson

UBC Press, 2013: 352 pages

Review by Julie Pilson (Carleton University)

Anthony Winson, a professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Guelph, has written or co-authored several books that explore agriculture, food and the food system in both North and Central America. These books include: *Coffee and Democracy in Modern Costa Rica* (1989), *The Intimate Commodity* (1993), and *Contingent Work, Disrupted Lives: Labour and Community in the New Rural Economy* (2002, with Belinda Leach). His most recent book builds on his previous analysis of the food industry by exploring the political, social, economic and technological factors that shape and influence the human diet—and have led to the proliferation of a nutritionally compromised human diet at a global scale. *The Industrial Diet: The degradation of food and the struggle for healthy eating* is a book best suited to an educated—though not necessarily academic—audience. Anybody with an interest in the current food industry, human health, diet and nutrition, or in the fascinating history of the food system, will find something of interest.

Winson's research and subsequent book are partially in response to the apparent crisis in human health referred to as the overweight and obesity epidemic. Winson seeks to expose the main causes of the degradation of our food supply and link these changes to human health and disease. He also examines the potential for action and the available solutions that could change our current food system. He identifies changes that could promote a food system that sustains the health of the population instead of simply the financial health of the food industry.

In order to provide readers with the necessary background information, the book begins with a history of human diets and “dietary regimes”, including a discussion of the factors that have influenced dietary changes from Paleolithic times into the present day. The author explores the environmental, political, social, economic and technological conditions and innovations that have influenced the food supply throughout human history. Winson then explores more recent changes in food production that have resulted in the ongoing decline in nutritional health of our food supply, and the resultant health implications for the human population. To highlight the

changing nature of the food supply and the impact of technology and social innovations—like mass marketing—on our food, Winson presents a historical examination of a number of different industries and their processes, including flour milling, meat-packing, and canning. The book also delivers well-researched information about current food production practices—such as confined animal feeding operations or the reduction in agricultural varieties—that have negatively impacted the nutritional quality of our food in the interests of capital accumulation and profit generation.

Winson asserts that many of the world’s largest and most powerful food producers and distributors are American and they have played a pivotal role in the global proliferation of the “American Diet”. As a result, the book focuses primarily on the United States and its significant influence in the area of food and dietary transformations during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Chapter 9 however, describes the spatial colonization of pseudo foods—foods high in sugar, fat and salt and low in nutritional value—in Canadian grocery stores. This chapter is based on research conducted by the author and several research assistants in 2001–2002 in Ontario, and clearly shows the extent to which pseudo foods have infiltrated the grocery industry. Many of the foods available in our grocery stores, convenience stores and restaurants are created by the food industry through a variety of industrial processes using a mix of chemical and natural ingredients. Throughout the book, the author refers to these processed foods, snack foods and menu items as “edible commodities”. The use of this particular terminology says something not only about the nature of the food, but also about the influence of a capitalist economy on an item that should more accurately be defined as a human need rather than as a market commodity.

The final section of the book provides a brief look at some of the ways in which individuals, organizations and governments try to create new food systems that acknowledge the importance of things such as human health, animal welfare, environmental health and social justice—as opposed to corporate profits. Chapter 13 is devoted to case studies of *Marin Organic*, an organization in California that seeks to link up local, organic farms with area schools for the purpose of procurement; and *FoodShare*, an organization in Toronto that operates a vast number of programs focusing on community food security and social justice. These two organizations have been instrumental in creating access to healthy food in schools and in creating healthier food environments. The book also discusses the potential role of health practitioners and government policy makers in the development of a more health-based food system.

One of the best and most powerful aspects of this book is the broad range of social, political, environmental and economic factors that the author has included in his analysis of the current situation. The book deals with a very complex system, occasionally making the presentation of clear timelines a challenge, but for the most part the author presents the material in a very well researched and accessible manner. While the many and complex influences on the human food supply can lead to dense language and revisited subjects, Winson has presented a very complicated system in a fairly manageable and understandable way. Overall, I found this book to be both engaging and informative, and I highly recommend it to anyone who eats!

*Julie Pilson is an MA Candidate in the Department of Geography and Environmental Studies at Carleton University in Ottawa. Her thesis research involves a case study of the Good Food Markets in Ottawa – community-run, volunteer-driven, pop-up markets that offer affordable fruits, vegetables and dried goods in lower-income areas of the city. Julie is also a Research Assistant with the Eastern Ontario Node of the Nourishing Communities: Sustainable Local Food Systems Research Group.*