



## Book Review

### Slow cooked: An unexpected life in food politics

By Marion Nestle

University of California Press, 2022. 278 pages

Reviewed by Jennifer Sumner\*

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Marion Nestle single-handedly invented the interdiscipline of food studies. Against siloed odds, she pulled together the foundations of what has become one of the most exciting fields in academia and kept it politically acute. For this reason, I was looking forward to reading her recent autobiography.

The book went well beyond my expectations. Overall, it is a first-person look at a life lived at the interface of academia, the market and the state. The stories of her early years in academia during the 1960s and 1970s are gut-wrenching. Gender discrimination was systemic – she was constantly ridiculed, harassed, overlooked, dismissed, ignored and penalized. Frequently in tears and worn down, she nevertheless persisted.

A stint working for the federal government in the mid-1980s gave Nestle two advantages: it introduced her to the effects of corporate lobby groups on

government policy and it gave her the credentials to move into the kind of academic employment that created the space for her to develop food studies.

In 1988, she secured a tenured position as a full professor at New York University (NYU) as Chair of the Department of Home Economics and Nutrition. She inherited a dysfunctional department with run-down facilities and a hostile faculty. While rearranging the courses and degree programs, she was asked to let go of an out-of-date but lucrative program in hotel management. Under pressure from the Dean, Nestle asked what she would get in return. When the Dean asked her what she wanted, she had a flash of inspiration: food studies. As she explained to the Dean, food studies was the academic study of food in history, culture and society. And she wanted a fully-fledged program: undergraduate, masters and doctoral degree programs, with a full-time, tenure-track faculty member

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and a state-of-the-art professional teaching facility. The Dean got her everything she asked for and food studies was born, backed by an advisory committee of leading food producers, restaurateurs, chefs, food writers and editors, and culinary professionals. The committee advised her that “they wanted their employees and colleagues to know not only what foods are, how they taste, where they come from and how to prepare them, but also their history and role in culture” (p. 146). Food studies was on its way.

In the beginning, the program was not without its detractors, in spite of support from people like Julia Child. Some sceptics included Alice Waters, chef and owner of Chez Panisse, who lamented the lack of emphasis on the agricultural side of food, and Joan Dye Gussow, one of the leaders of the organic movement, who worried about job opportunities. But after an article in the *New York Times* about the new program, prospective students appeared saying “I’ve waited all my life for this program. Sign me up” (p. 147). The program began in the fall of 1996 with 15 Masters students and two prospective doctoral students.

Although another detractor opined that interdisciplinarity was a buzzword and graduates of interdisciplinary programs were trained to do nothing, Nestle championed the interdisciplinarity of food studies. She had degrees in molecular biology and public health, and the growing faculty of the food studies program had degrees in history, literature, political science, sociology, agricultural science and economics. That said, she worried about the academic job prospects for the earliest graduates, given that no other food studies programs existed at the time. But she had no need to worry. Food studies programs began opening up at other institutions and traditional humanities and social-science departments also hired NYU’s food studies graduates. As Nestle notes: “We knew we were breaking new ground with food studies,

but we had no idea we would be starting a movement” (p. 155). Food studies spread across the United States and into other countries, including Canada. Our own Canadian Association for Food Studies is a leading example of the strength of this movement.

Nestle reports that she still gets asked what food studies is. As she sees it:

food studies promotes the rigorous examination of major societal problems through the lens of food. In prioritizing healthy and sustainable diets, this field of study is engaged in an overt critique of the industrial food system. Defenders of the status quo cannot be expected to be enthusiastic supporters of food system change. If food studies elicits this kind of criticism, it must be doing something right (pp. 155-56).

Nestle went on to write her seminal book, *Food politics: How the food industry influences nutrition and health* and continued to lead the food studies program until 2003. Since that time, she has written or edited 12 more books. She also runs a blog – FoodPolitics.com – an education all in itself.

*Slow Cooked* is an engaging and even fascinating read for those involved in food studies. The first half of the book deals with her early life and her attempts to find her place in academia, juggling family and work in the face of gender discrimination and society’s limited expectations for women. The second half of the book deals with the watershed moment of being hired at NYU, the formation of the food studies program and her prodigious writing career. Writing is her passion and this is evident in her brisk and engaging style, her deep knowledge of the field and her ability to bring to life what could be understood as the tedium of academia. Try as I might, I could not find anything to criticize about this book. It is an autobiography, not an academic treatise, and provides crucial background to our understanding of the field and its future.

The interdiscipline of food studies owes a great deal to Marion Nestle. One way to repay that debt is to continue to build the field that she envisioned close to thirty years ago.

Jennifer Sumner is the co-editor of *Critical perspectives in food studies* (with Mustafa Koç and Anthony Winson).