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Book Review

The gluten lie: And other myths about what you eat

Alan Levinovitz

Regan Arts, 2015: 263 pages

Review by Jennifer Brady (Queen's University)

What nutrition buzzword is on the tip of more tongues than gluten? Today's popular obsession with gluten, or gluten avoidance more precisely, has spurred a bevy of gluten-free products and cookbooks with recipes for items such as cauliflower pizza crust. The Canadian market for gluten free products grew 26% between 2008 and 2012, and the sales for gluten-free foods in Canada has been estimated at upwards of $460 million despite the relatively low numbers of Canadians who require gluten free foods due to a diagnosis of Celiac disease (1%) or non-celiac gluten sensitivity (6%) (Agriculture and Agri-foods Canada, 2014). The most common reasons to avoid gluten given by those without a medical need to do so include "digestive health," "nutritional concerns," and "weight loss" (Agriculture and Agri-foods Canada, 2014). Calling Alan Levinovitz's book, *The Gluten Lie: And Other Myths About What You Eat* timely is an understatement. Levinovitz calls attention to the seemingly gratuitous explosion in gluten free eating with the basic premise that diet fads tell you more about a particular socio-cultural context from which fads arise, than what is supported by science. Rather than using science to debunk the gluten free trend, he looks to history and contends that underlying the longstanding succession of food and diet fads is a widely shared, common sense belief in "the myth of paradise past" (pg. 13). The myth of paradise past, like a religious parable, is a heuristic device and describes a fairy-tale time and place where humans ate only natural, unadulterated foods that

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were supplied by nature and thus perfectly tailored to their dietary needs. According to this myth, the "one true diet" of days gone by meant that past populations were untouched by the moral (i.e. greed, lust, sinful pleasure) and physical (i.e. obesity, chronic disease) ills brought by modernity and the consequent modern diet and food system. By exposing the underlying myth, Levinovitz shows how modern diet fads have little to do with any actual health benefits or scientific evidence to support them. Yet, Levinovitz's goal is not to reveal a truer "Truth" of healthy eating, but to alleviate our modern anxieties about food and to restore pleasure and good judgment to eating and a more broadly defined idea of health.

Levinovitz is a religious studies scholar specializing in classical Chinese thought at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia. Given his background in religious studies, Levinovitz offers a unique perspective on the almost tyrannical clutch of contemporary of food fads on modern foodways. Of course, there is a considerable pool of scholarly literature on religion and food, however, there are far fewer sources that deal with modern food culture from this perspective, and even fewer that discuss the specific diet fads that Levinovitz addresses.

In addition to the introduction, the first section of his book comprises six chapters. The first chapter outlines the premise of the book with an illustrative example of ancient China's Daoist monks that eschewed all grain-based foods as a rejection of mainstream Chinese culture. The following four chapters elucidate four modern diet fads that eliminate an ingredient or food component from one's diet—gluten, fat, sugar, and salt—and show how each is inspired by the myth of paradise past. In the sixth chapter, "Nutrition Myth Detox," he takes on other common dietary myths and offers a nutrition "technique" that he calls "eating in the fourth dimension" (pg. 161). This technique, or perhaps diet by another name, urges people to focus on and increase the time devoted exclusively to preparing and eating meals—an unacknowledged luxury for many people—rather than foods to eat or avoid. The other rule of eating in the fourth dimension is to "eliminate all reading about nutrition or health" (pg. 162, emphasis in original). While I am skeptical of the unquestioned privilege that comes with having the time and money to eat in the fourth dimension, relegating food and nutrition articles to the "sometimes" category is diet advice I can get behind. In the second section of *The Gluten Lie*, Levinovitz outlines "The UNpacked Diet" which is described as "a scientifically proven revolution in healthy eating" that reveals the evils of food packaging for our health (pg. 165). However, the UNpacked Diet is quickly unpacked and revealed as a tongue-in-cheek play on the typical diet fad. Levinovitz goes on to indicate, with a series of annotations on the text, how the UNpacked diet makes inflated claims that are rooted in the same widely held "common sense" myths as the other diet fads he dissects, but few scientifically founded realities.

Overall, the book is entertaining, well researched, and accomplishes its main goal: to expose the social and cultural foundation of diet fads and disavow any ideas about their scientific origin. The book is well suited to an intellectual generalist audience, particularly those interested in critical perspectives of food, nutrition, and dieting. Given Levinovitz's perspective as a religious studies scholar, the book may also be of interest to scholars interested in sociological

perspectives of food and foodways, nutrition, and dieting. However, academic readers may want to look to additional sources for a more theoretically grounded and critical take on this topic.

While Levinovitz offers interesting insights into the socio-cultural origin of diet fads, he does not consider how diet fads serve as a purposeful means of social stratification. Moreover, he does not discuss the wider context within which these food fads have arisen. For example, he doesn't answer questions such as, "Why have these food fads arisen primarily in Western societies?"; "How does "the myth of paradise past" compare cross-culturally?"; or "What does it mean that these food fads all focus on eliminating an item from the diet?". However, the most significant critique of this book rests with how uncritically Levinovitz treats the ills of anti-obesity panic and the "obesity epidemic," which several scholars before him have shown to be rooted—like diet fads—in moralistic rather than scientific evidence (Biltekoff, 2013; Campos, 2004; Saguy, 2014). He challenges single ingredient diet fads, but does not question the practice of dieting, particularly for weight loss. Rather he affirms eating less and moving more to lose weight (i.e. a diet) as a worthwhile, and attainable, goal. That said, *The Gluten Lie* is an enjoyable book that—like any treatise—has its failings and can illuminate only slice of a complex phenomenon.

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