“THE TIP OF THE DAY”: FIELD THEORY AND ALTERNATIVE NUTRITION IN THE US

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ABSTRACT

Field theory is waxing in the sociology of science, and Pierre Bourdieu’s work is especially influential: his characterization of field structure and dynamics has been especially valuable in drawing attention to hierarchical and center-periphery relations in science and technology, and to the stability and reproduction of science and technology practices. What field theory does less well, however, is to capture the existence of multiple (including marginal) logics around a given sociotechnical object. Nor does it capture the dynamics of a specific logic of neoliberal capitalism in the US: the cultural and economic value of entrepreneurship that emphasizes the continual reconfiguration of social relations, which has its roots in a longer US history of progress-through-reinvention, and is abetted by new technologies designed to continually “update” and remix. Much better at capturing these qualities, we argue, is an institutionalist theory in which dynamism, not stasis, is foregrounded, and there is room for multiple, contradictory, and non-cognitive logics to co-exist. Using the expansion of “alternative nutrition” in the US, we show that its...
formation took place via the conjunction of parallel streams of social action that encompassed diverse logics and encouraged creativity and hybridity. More generally, variability in field stability and qualities, not static fields, deserve analytic attention.

Dr. Andrew Weil is one of many contemporary purveyors of the promise of unbounded health and vitality via the endless application of scientific ideas about nutrition (Weil, 1995, 1997, 2000, 2007). Weil and his peers, such as Dr. Mehmet Oz and Dr. Loren Cordain (author of The Paleo Diet), follow in the footsteps of US nonscientists who have used scientific claims to advocate dietary change as a means to physical, and often spiritual, health and well-being or forms of self-improvement. Sylvester Graham, the advocate of vegetarianism, alcohol abstinence, and frequent bathing was one of the earliest health advocates; another well-known proponent, Francis Moore Lappé, author of Diet for Small Planet (1971) helped place vegetarianism back into mainstream American culture by illuminating its relationship to environmental sustainability. For much of American history, these advocates were frequently denounced as quacks. In any given decade, only a few attracted many devotees through the sale of books and cookbooks, public presentations, and by word of mouth. Yet today, there are thousands of these purveyors of alternative diets, catering both to very specific and quite broad audiences: there are diets for the vegan athlete, for new mothers who want to “get their body back,” and the Daniel Diet for Christians who want to lose weight. No longer spread just through relatively static and slow forms like books, most of these diets are continually “updated” via email messages, smartphone applications, new web content, recipes, and “tips of the day.” Moreover, their interlocutors draw on diverse sources of authority, blurring the boundaries of the logics of economics, spirituality, and science. Taken together, their claims and practices are an unstable web of constantly changing and hybrid logics organized around eating for health. Indeed, incorporated into the messaging of these interlocutors is that instability is a normal social state.

There is no “center of gravity” among alternative nutritionists; although some, like Dr. Weil, become popular and wealthy, every day more purveyors offer new combinations of science and promises of “wellness.” The “field of alternative nutrition,” if it could be characterized that way, would look more like an ever-changing web, than like a well-defined battlefield. The low barriers to entry — one needs a web site and a book, both cheap to
produce — encourage creativity and hybridity. The evolution of alternative nutrition over the past forty years (as we show below, it became much more visible in the 1970s) is not a story of “shocks” and big battles through crafty strategic action by actors with clear preferences and the capacity to see a field in nearly objective terms, as some have emphasized (McAdam & Fligstein, 2012; Venkatesh, 2013). Nor is it a story of the role of rules and laws shaping a field (Albert & Kleinman, 2003), nor of the power of a dominant logic overtaking all others. Its proliferation, we argue, is the result of the co-emergence of neoliberal entrepreneurialism in culture and economy, and political and cultural attention to spiritual and physical health.

The collective character of alternative nutrition, too, is distinct from the tight and circumscribed field that Bourdieu’s (1993) analysis of fields implied. In alternative nutrition, producers are producing for consumers, and in the contemporary US, consumers are always in-the-making, that is, one of the ways that profit is generated is through the continual co-configuration of consumer identities and products. Such reshuffling and shifting makes the array of alternative nutrition possibilities look something like a constantly moving kaleidoscope to which new color shades are always being added. Scientific ideas, bodies, spiritual and political logics and advice, and economic logics are mixed together as packages for consumers, and reflected in the ways that producers market themselves, as well.

We come to this discussion as skeptics about the value of field studies as compared to institutionalist approaches. Our goal is to take up some of the unresolved questions about field-based studies of technoscience, and to draw on institutionalist theories and other theories to attempt to fill those gaps. In particular, we emphasize institutionalism’s attention to the co-existence of multiple logics, its concern with social change and creativity, the existence of multiple motivations among actors (over and above “winning,” which Bourdieu and his followers have emphasized), and field formation rather than field dynamics. These are critical elements in the study of science and technology in contemporary life, especially in a neoliberal era, in which dynamism and change are socially and politically valued.

FIELDS AS SITES OF FIGHTS AND SOCIAL REPRODUCTION

The sociological and STS turn toward studying fields is in part a reaction against the study of social institutions, and the Foucauldian emphasis on
diffuse power relations with few possibilities for change. In the former case, field analysts are jettisoning the early functionalist underpinnings of old- and new-institutionalism that presumed stability, shared norms, and until recently, provided few mechanisms for understanding change via contention (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Friedland & Alford, 1991; Lounsbury & Ventresca, 2002). In the second case, analysts drawing on Foucault’s work have been attentive to power-as-outcome, but with little attention to the causal role of law and material relations, or to social movements in making meaningful change (Binkley & Capetillo, 2009). Pierre Bourdieu’s conceptualization of fields (1993), which starts with analyst-defined objective field positions and the subjective meanings that actors ascribe to possibilities for action within the field, is the most influential in US sociology, and increasingly, in the sociology of science (Albert & Kleinman, 2011), so that is the version we engage here. Analyzing fields through this lens offers possibilities for understanding struggles over power, and the resulting reproduction of domination. Although Bourdieu argued that fields took different forms in different times and places, his interest was neither in overlaps among field logics nor in democratization processes, but rather in understanding what Norbert Elias would call “states” of social life, or the means by which social life is reproduced (Elias, 1969). Because of their value in illuminating inequality, fields are now waxing as conceptual tools, able to capture the topography of poles in an arena of struggle over material and symbolic power through which inequalities are constituted and made durable (Emirbayer, 1997; Go, 2008; Martin, 2003).

Analysts of scientific fields have demonstrated that scientific fields are reproduced through the effects of rules (Kleinman, 2003; Moore, Kleinman, Hess, & Frickel, 2011), ideologies (Hess, 2014), habitus (Albert, Laberge, Hodges, Regehr, & Lingard, 2008), and institutional location (Hess, 2011). Contemporary field analysis depends heavily on a priori definitions of fields; indeed, in Bourdieu’s original formulation, he advocated that analysts begin with objective arrangements, and thus, avoid using actors’ categories. Thus, analysts have identified the global political field (Go, 2008), the scientific field (Bourdieu, 1975), and the fitness field (Maguire, 2008), for example. These ontologies can be especially valuable for seeing the center and the periphery cross-sectionally, and for observing the effects of relatively fast-paced or singular causes of change, such as changes in laws or a change in a political regime. Thus, by firmly bounding the subject, the effects of “inputs” can be easily observed.

Yet there is reason to suspect that attention to objective conditions might not capture all field dynamics. Some analysts, for example, have shown that
formal rules are sometimes decoupled from practical actions in the scientific field (Whittington & Smith-Doerr, 2008). Panofsky (2011) helpfully takes apart the presumed homogeneity in scientific fields, showing that forms of capital from one part of the scientific field do not always lead to capital accumulation in other parts of the field. Similarly, Hess (2012) raises questions about the extent to which the structural hierarchy that Bourdieu presumed is the most useful way to study fields, an issue that Savage and Silva (2013) also raise. As Savage and Silva (2013) argue, the not-centers of fields (they are not “boundaries,” nor are they “edges”) are also sites of invention, even if those inventions do not immediately make it to the center of a field. Attending only to the center, they demonstrate, would force us to avoid scrutinizing heterogeneity and sources of novelty that may not be highly rewarded in the short run (see also Moore & Hala, 2002).

It is critical to investigate when and why something else becomes possible, or even thinkable, even though it may not become part of the mainstream, or may be dormant for long periods (Moore, 2008).

Moreover, although Bourdieu called for analysts to attend to the variability of fields, what he did not anticipate, nor emphasize, was that under particular conditions, the very notion of the stable field might be less useful. Bourdieusian field theory is predicated on the idea that habitus sets out what is possible and that domination of the cultural, political and economic terrain is a key aim. Actors know what they can and cannot do, and what sorts of consequences might happen as a result of certain kinds of actions that they undertake to maximize their position relative to others in a field. Yet this assumption leaves out multiple motivations, and the kinds of actions that feminists, institutionalists, critical race theorists, and scholars of social movements have identified: those that can leave actors worse off, materially and professionally, as they pursue goals that might have collective, long-term or other values, but which do not immediately maximize their own position. Scientists who act to promote social justice at a cost to their career, in Bourdieu’s logic, would have to be forced into a Procrustean bed in which they were merely attempting to advance their position in a field of scientists. To be sure, analysts of scientific fields attend to contenders who lose (Frickel, Campanella, & Vincent, 2009, for example), but even this sort of analysis is more concerned with “structural” dynamics of winning and losing than the content of claims, or with theorizing action as derived from multiple motivations.

Again, David J. Hess is an exception: in his long-term project on alternative pathways, he makes clear that there are multiple reasons for action within a scientific field, which include something other than dominance over
other producers (see, e.g., Hess, 2007). For our purposes, it is critical to reject the assumption that field domination is what motivates actors. It may indeed be what motivates some, but it hardly exhausts the range of possible motivations actors might have, including those that promote greater social goods at a cost to individual actors. Moreover, we want to draw attention to the fact that actors might discover motivations through action, and may or may not be clear about what the range of possibilities for action might be. Social movements can play a role in shifting fields, because at these moments — what Zolberg (1972) called “moments of madness” — relations of power are more visible, and actors begin to articulate new possibilities, with varied and sometimes surprising results.

Finally, although embodiment was a key element of Bourdieu’s analysis of systems of domination (1984), most studies of science and technology fields have little to say about embodiment as a target of actors nor about embodiment as a means of knowing. Bodies were critical sites of Bourdieu’s analysis of habitus, and are, in the contemporary moment, key sites of technopolitical action. Analysts of neoliberalism have had much more to say about how embodiment becomes a target of political action (Guthman, 2011; Harvey, 1998), and the very vehicle through which actors constitute themselves politically (Bernstein, 2007).

We offer a neoliberal institutionalist view that allows for states ranging between contention and harmony, multiple logics of action, uncertainty, path dependence, and in which centers are only one of the sites of meaningful social action. We turn next to an examination of this framework, and then move to our analysis of the emergence and dynamics of alternative nutrition to illustrate its value.

INSTITUTIONALISM MEETS NEOLIBERALISM

Alternative nutrition providers draw on diverse logics, which we define, following Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury (2012) as “frames of reference that condition actors’ sensemaking choices, the vocabulary that they use to motivate action, and their sense of self and identity” (p. 2). Thornton et al. argue that any given object might be subject to multiple logics, some of which might compete with and some of which might sit awkwardly against each other. Moreover, they decouple logics from institutions, allowing logics to travel through law, through networks (including professional networks), markets, families, and other social relations. In doing so, Thorton
et al. break with old and new institutionalisms that tightly coupled logics and institutions. In doing so, they allow for structures of meaning and action, such as race or gender, to shape action, even if they are not specific to a particular field or institution, and indeed, cross-cut them in various ways. They also challenge Bourdiesian field theory, which treats fields as constituted by defining and narrow logics that limit possibilities for action, and which are given a priori, rather than configured through action.

As a general theory, Thorton et al.’s “institutional logics” perspective is useful for identifying variability in logics as one of many possibilities in studying action around an object or topic (and they leave open the option that some forms of social action might be more homogenous than others). But their framework has a major shortcoming: it is an ahistorical framework. Different geographical and sociopolitical contexts will produce logic mixes — and different cultural values that might shape when and how such mixes could be deployed and how they shape action. The US form of neoliberalism, we argue, encourages the mixing of varied logics, particularly in the marketplace, such that even formerly competing institutional logics have become multiple, intertwined, reinforcing, and complementary. Christianity and sex, for example, used to be counterposed; but today, one can find organizations, manuals, discussion groups, and elaborated languages that advocate that Christians not only have sex, but enjoy it in particular ways.

As a historically and geographically bounded set of cultural ideas and practices, neoliberalism takes many forms and practices (Connell & Dados, 2014; Fourcade-Gourinchas & Babb, 2002; Harvey, 2005). The US form enhances possibilities for hybridization of field logics, not only by infusing economic logics into other fields, but more generally by rewarding innovation, creativity, and opportunity seeking. Thus, it is not simply that everything is turned into a product; it is that entrepreneurship and its purported outcome, innovation, are increasingly rewarded and viewed as the nation’s economic “engine.” This is not a brand new development in the US, for here, the “new” has always been linked to notions of nationhood and progress. But certainly, the speed with which it is taking place is remarkable, and citizenship itself is increasingly framed in entrepreneurial terms as well as citizens are called upon to be savvy “consumers” of formerly public and non-economic goods such as health care and education, and pushed to choose the best investments for the greatest returns to retirement, volunteerism (as human capital), education (including “continuing education”), and religious practices (e.g., Jesus as a “life coach”).

Not only are citizens asked to take on new risks in this system, they are also called upon continually to seek new information and to use it to
managing and revising existing self-investments (Rose, 2007). In terms of human.
nutrition and health, “investments” are supposed to lead to a long and
healthy life. Becoming ill is a failure of individuals, encouraging not only
more knowledge-seeking but opening up opportunities for the differentia-
tion of products (Metzl & Kirkland, 2010). What is striking about how
alternative nutrition purveyors sell their wares is that they do so by linking
claims not to sober scientific facts and dire warnings about what will hap-
pen if their advice is ignored: instead, they connect to consumers’ bodies
via emotion, thus using strategies of engagement far from the distance and
sobriety with which scientists normally present their work.

A second historically and geographically specific change, and deeply
related to US neoliberal entrepreneurialism, is the rise of Internet technolo-
gies. They have, first of all, lowered barriers to entry to information-related
practices such as alternative nutrition. Like other technological disruptions,
moreover, the Internet promotes innovation (Baron & Shane, 2008) by
changing the speed of knowledge circulation, and permitting new knowl-
edges to be circulated in multiple forms (e.g., videos, writing, still images,
sound). To return to the kaleidoscope metaphor, it permits the mixing of
more kinds of representations, combined with the rapid changeover of any
given representation (e.g., one’s computer “updates” without being asked).

Contemporary technologies and neoliberal logics of entrepreneurialism
mutually reinforce each other, such that the Internet increases the speed of
the circulation of ideas as well as goods and allows for formerly distinctive
media (film, print, still imagery) to be combined in new ways for new audi-
cences and consumers. These media also offer more possibilities for circulat-
ing alternative views from those that dominated former institutional logics,
with relatively low costs. Alternative nutrition, which is heavily dependent
on the Internet for growth, relies on this kind of mixing, made possible in
part by these technologies.

In addition to illuminating the value of an institutionalist approach that
takes neoliberal capitalism seriously, our other goal is to make an empirical
case about the changing nature of science in public life. After a period of
the dissipation of scientists’ monopoly on truth about the natural world in
the 1970s, science has become more “modernized” with new actors making
scientific claims (Hess, 2007; Moore et al., 2011). Making claims in the
name of science is no longer nearly monopolized by scientists, yet there is a
popularization of scientific knowledge through its linkage to common sense
realism (i.e., knowledge is true if it works or makes sense to an individual
through practical experience). Alternative nutrition makes individuals’
bodies the arbiters of the truthfulness of scientific claims, with significant
consequences for the power of science, and scientists. Alternative nutrition purveyors rely heavily on metascientific analysis of extant research, depicting themselves as charismatics who have special abilities to sort through pools of knowledge, and come up with the correct interpretations. They also rely on personal experience, as well, using their own bodies as signifiers of truth, a move that is distinctly different than the traditional efforts of scientists to keep their own bodies outside processes of truth-making, unless they were disciplined through machinery such as microscopes.

Because most alternative nutrition purveyors have web sites that are continually updated, they, too, contribute to the sense that scientific knowledge is unstable and that an entrepreneurial attitude — looking for ever more knowledge to fine tune one’s health, a job that is never done — is the key to good health. The embodiment of the practice — literally consuming things that are new or labeled new — deeply instantiates neoliberal ideology and contributes to the destabilization of ideas about nutrition. Thus, although the alternative nutrition purveyors rely on science, they undermine some key elements of its authority, namely, its relatively slow pace, the sobriety and disinterestedness of its practitioners, and its emphasis on law-like (i.e., stable) ideas. The unsettledness of information delivery — everyday updates, new recipes — not only signifies a more porous field but constitutes the instability of scientific knowledge as a durable object and makes it much closer to a commodity whose value is its ability to personally affect us.

We turn, next, to analysis of how and why alternative nutrition emerged as an expansive set of social relations, rather than as an occasional thesis put forth by a charismatic figure. We show that its rise was related to the conjunction of social movements and neoliberal capitalism in the US. We then turn to an examination of the character of two exemplary claimants — Dr. Andrew Weil, of Dr. Weil.com, and Kim Barnounian, one of the authors of the vegan *Skinny Bitch* diet series.

**SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND THE EMERGENCE OF ALTERNATIVE NUTRITION**

Before we embark on our analysis of this “field,” we want to be reflexive in our treatment of the concept. Identifying a field (or a population, an institution, or a network) can come from extant theory or empirical studies, but it can also be created by investigators to bound an object of analysis. We could call the nutrition interlocutors that interest us part of a field of
“self-help,” or of a field of “biomedicine,” or any number of other fields, but that fact supports one of our key ideas, which is that it is important to attend to the contemporary situation in which some fields, particularly those dominated by professions such as science, are made more porous and malleable. We examine the way that “alternative nutrition” came to be an arena of action characterized by logics drawn from distinct social processes (federal eating policies and the spread of “counterculture” styles of living) and most recently, by a highly unstable set of logics. We illuminate the weaknesses of field theory in explaining this history, and the comparative value of institutionalist approaches.

Forming a Field?

Human nutrition developed as a scientific specialty in the late nineteenth century, beginning with the experiments of pioneering chemist Wilbur O. Atwater. Inspired by European nutrient charts, first as a student at Yale University and then as a professor at Wesleyan University, Atwater undertook the measurement of macronutrients, including fats, carbohydrates, and proteins, and micronutrients. In 1893, Congress allotted funding for studies of human nutrition deficiencies; Atwater took advantage of this funding and developed new studies of the digestibility of food and its use as human body “fuel” (Maynard, 1962).

Despite this early government funding, few of Atwater’s analyses were used by anyone other than other scientists, and this pattern continued in the 1920s when the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) became a permanent home for human nutrition research in the federal government, with food composition as its central activity (Beecher, Stewart, Holden, Harnly, & Wolf, 2009; Levenstein, 2003). The practical application of this new knowledge began in earnest in the 1930s via the USDA Home Economics Division. Led by Hazel K. Steibling, the division translated scientific knowledge into practical guidelines for food relief for the poor (Dupont, 2009). Given the USDA’s dual role in promoting agriculture and human nutrition, not surprisingly, many of the food products and food groups about which most information circulated were those overproduced by US agriculture, including wheat, meat, and dairy products (Pollan, 2009). Dieticians, food columnists in women’s magazines, schools, and women’s clubs were the major vehicles through which scientific research was disseminated. By the 1950s, human nutrition science was a well-defined (if not prestigious) scientific field, separate from chemistry, its original
home. Human nutrition programs were flourishing, particularly at Tufts University, The Johns Hopkins University, and Columbia University. This traditional arrangement of the field, with bench scientists carrying out research funded mostly by the government, and the dissemination of this knowledge via a layer of technical interlocutors, was based on the idea that the problem of nutrition was largely a problem of applying the right scientific standards to individuals.

A Field in Formation Fragments: From Nutrition to Hunger and Back Again

But in the late 1960s, human nutrition came to be a hot political topic, decentering the technical foci and introducing new actors into the field. In 1967, members of the Congress of Racial Equality and other civil rights field organizers organized an investigative trip to draw attention to the problem of hunger among the largely African-American poor southerners. The liberal Field Foundation of Chicago sponsored three members of the US Congress Subcommittee on Poverty, four physicians, and a civil rights attorney to travel through Mississippi and Alabama to document the extent to which American citizens were going hungry. The trip brought them into contact with forms of malnutrition they had only read about. In their report, the doctors wrote:

We saw children being fed communally, by neighbors who give children scraps of food because their parents have nothing to give. We saw children who were horribly diseased, with obvious signs of malnutrition, including distended bellies and hair loss, and mental lassitude and poor cognitive development. Other children had only partial vision, and many were missing teeth or whose teeth had never come in. It was hard to believe we were examining American children of the twentieth century. (quoted in Maney, 1989, p. 8)

Based on this report, the Field Foundation and a group of attorneys and poverty activists created a documentary called *Hunger in America*, which aired on CBS TV during prime time to more than 10 million viewers. It used graphic footage and doctors’ testimony rather than the cold calculus of numbers to convey its message. The next day, Congress was flooded with calls from outraged citizens who demanded that something be done about the problem. A new subcommittee, the Senate Select Subcommittee on Nutrition and Human Needs (SSCNHN), was quickly organized by Agriculture Committee members Senator George McGovern (D-SD) and Senator Robert Dole (R-KS) (Kotz, 1971; Maney, 1989).
The Field Foundation trip and the subsequent video placed food back on the nation’s political agenda for the first time since the Great Depression, and it included a role for Congress as a mediator of political and scientific claims and concerns. The Senate Subcommittee took testimony from civil rights workers, nutrition scientists, government employees, and many others (although only one poor person was ever asked to speak in the committee’s nine-year history), seeking to understand why so many people had too little to eat and why the food that they did have — sometimes via transfer programs like the USDA’s surplus food programs — was of such poor quality that it produced hunger and malnutrition. This committee’s work was instrumental in generating an extraordinary set of policies to address the problem of too little money and too little food, including increases in food stamps and the establishment of school breakfast programs. The human nutrition problem now included the problem of too little money, too little food, and too little nutritious food (Eisinger, 1998; Maney, 1989).

Like other scientists who came to participate in public political debates in the 1960s and 1970s (Moore, 2008), some nutrition scientists were especially eager to join the debate and discussion, and to seek new ways to address the nutrition needs of the poor. Joan Gussow of Columbia University, Neville Scrimshaw of Tufts University, and especially, Jean Mayer of Harvard, and later Tufts, University were particularly important. Mayer chaired the 1969 White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health that President Nixon organized after Hunger in America, and was influential in getting members of Congress to support antihunger programs.

Field theorists might treat this participation strictly in terms of competition with others in the field of human nutrition, as an effort to gain status and power over other scientist competitors. But such a view provides a rather thin conception of human motivation and has little place for anything like sympathy. While we do not have any direct evidence of the thoughts and emotions of actors like these but neither do we hold reductionist assumptions about motivations. Certainly other evidence suggests that these kinds of actions are motivated by more than professional advancement or expectations of massive field change; indeed, for scientists, participation in public political debates may be harmful to them, leaving the Bourdieusian field analyst with few tools, save perhaps that actors made an incorrect reading of the field or lacked skill (McAdam & Fligstein, 2012) to explain this kind of action. The field concept, and the notion of “habitus” may therefore be limited, given their conceptualization of how social life is ordered and how actors participate in it.
When actors undertake projects that defy standard field logics, some hope that others will follow suit, but nonetheless many still participate in these kinds of actions despite considerable professional and personal costs (Moore, 1996). Although to some degree Bourdieusian field theory can accommodate the participation of individuals in multiple fields (and the various types of capital that they acquire and convert across fields), the concepts of field-based capital and habitus may be too restrictive. Institutionalist theory permits actors to have multiple motivations (Clemens, 1997; DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Sarasvathan, Dew, & Ventresca, 2009; Thornton et al., 2012), and it enables the discovery of interests through action. The participation of high-profile nutritionists like Gussow, Mayer, and Scrimshaw opened up new possibilities for action around human nutrition, making the problem of nutrition for the poor a robust subject of study at Tufts and other universities (Maney, 1989). It did not displace bench science relating to the chemistry and biology of human nutrition generally as the engine of the field, but it did help to encourage many other nutrition scientists to participate in a variety of public political debates over nutrition. This “social movementization of professions” (Moore, 2008) was common the 1970s, offering what Hess might call an “alternative” pathway for professionals.

Neoliberalism and the Informationalization and Personalization of American Dietary Advice

This moment of attention to nutrition as a political and economic problem of poverty was short lived. By 1977, a rather extraordinary field shift had taken place: the SSCNHN speakers had little to say about the problem of too little to eat and much more to say about the health consequences of too much food and too much of particular kinds of foods for all Americans. The new assumption about the social problem of nutrition was that Americans had enough money but had deficits of information about what to eat. Moreover, the new target of eating policy was the citizen at risk of cancer and heart disease, not of malnutrition (Nestle, 1993). In January of 1977, the SSCNHN announced the release of a new set of human nutrition guidelines, Dietary Goals for the United States, the first that had been produced in the US since the Basic 4 guidelines release in 1955 (SSCNHN, 1977). For the first time, federal guidelines called upon Americans to eat less of some things, including salt, sugar, and fat, and to increase their intake of other foods. This new balancing act was distinctly different from
what was encapsulated in earlier guidelines, such as the 1956 Basic 4 or the 1943 US Needs Us Strong guidelines, which both encouraged a foundational diet with minimum servings of each kind of food. In 1979, the American Society of Clinical Nutrition produced another report, sponsored by the Surgeon General’s Office, which drew similar conclusions about the American diet, asking Americans to undertake an assortment of monitoring activities to generate health. The new guidelines were different than earlier guidelines for a second reason, too: the problems they were supposed to solve went beyond chronic illnesses and included lassitude in schools, problematic family life, dental problems, low birth weight, and a range of other ideas. In turn, the ideas were advanced by policy entrepreneurs who testified before Congress or who had influence in the USDA, whose charge it was to create the guidelines. The federal human nutrition research agenda turned quickly toward studies of nutrition for health. In 1977, a report by the US Government Accountability Office (GAO) — requested by Senator Hubert Humphrey (D-MN) and written by a diverse group of blue-ribbon scientists, health advocates, economists, and dieticians — declared that American nutrition research had done dismal job of identifying the links between eating and diseases, and recommended increased funding (GAO, 1978).

The 1977 guidelines — fully fleshed out for the public in the 1989 Nutrition and Your Health: Dietary Guidelines for Americans — are important because they are mark a critical shift in the imagined user of the guidelines. Earlier guidelines presumed that a woman was cooking for a family. But the new guidelines presumed an “average” individual in need of information, not money. Furthermore, the language of the new guidelines included new economic metaphors; for example, “consumers” were to modify what they purchased and what they ate. A new law required that the guidelines be updated every ten years, based on the latest research, a law that some critics have said “confuses” publics, because the basic ideas about what is healthy to eat are neither complex nor novel (Nestle, 2007).

Of course, these debates about nutrition cannot be understood without reference to the broader set of shifts in how disease was conceptualized and how people came to be ill. As Brandt (1997) argues, by the early 1970s an emerging critique of modern biomedicine and medical technology centered attention on the question of responsibility for disease and its prevention. According to influential economic conservatives such as John Knowles of Rockefeller Foundation, there were diminishing returns from technology and tertiary care; instead, the failure was in the prevention of disease. The goal of health and longevity, in Knowles’ view, rested firmly with
individuals, who in the previous decades had forfeited their health with an “orgy” of greed, avarice, and overeating, the “diseases of affluence.” Knowles called for a return to the Puritan values of self-discipline and moral restraint. Eager to reduce the “dole” implicit in rising health expenditures, Knowles suggested that the “idea of a ‘right’ to health should be replaced by the idea of an individual moral obligation to be preserver of one’s own health … a public duty if you will” (quoted in Brandt, 1997, p. 90). Disease, in other words, was no longer a random event but a failure to take precautions against publicly defined risks. By the 1970s, Knowles’ ideas had reached the mainstream: in 1978, Joseph Califano, Director of Health and Human Services, said, “We are killing ourselves by our own careless habits” (Brandt, 1997, p. 90). What these habits were would have to be unpacked not only by scientists, but by the critics of mainstream nutrition.

Individuation and Personalization with a Smile: Nutrition as Lifestyle

The flourishing of the counterculture in the US emerged in parallel with these events. Rising prosperity made it possible for explorations of self, aesthetics, and sexuality, normally available mainly to the bourgeoisie (i.e., “bohemians”) to be undertaken by a much wider variety of people. One of the most important features of this period was the flourishing of scientific forms of self-fulfillment, whose apotheosis was what came to be known as the Human Potential Movement (HPM) centered at the Esalen Institute in California. The secular answer to spiritual quests, it was inspired by psychologists Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, and Rollo May. The HPM saw endless potential in human beings for creativity and self-expression, after their basic needs were met, and encouraged people to use quasi-scientific principles to improve their lives (Goldman, 2012; Puttick, 2004).

The revolutionary aspect of the HPM and of the broader cultural ethos of “loosening” — ridding oneself of the strictures of convention — was the new form that the relationship between experts and citizens took (Binkley, 2007). At least, “loosening” was advice given to men; for women, “looseness” in mind and body has significant social consequences, an issue that is not taken up by most analysts of this period. At the end of a particularly technocratic era in American history, universalistic scientific advice, delivered from an Archimedean point of nowhere and everywhere, was discredited. Science remained a powerful cultural and political tool, but scientists qua scientists had been discredited as objective purveyors of scientific
information. Scientific authority and scientific claims had become unbound from each other (Moore, 2008). The new form through which scientific claims were delivered was personalistic — the speaker and the recipient were presumed to have a certain kind of intimacy (Binkley, 2007; Kripal, 2007). Thus, expertise in the HPM was delivered not in universalistic terms, but through people with personalities, gurus whose charisma and experience were the filters for the production and assessment of scientific knowledge. As scientists’ broad claims to scientific authority were eroding (Moore, 2008), there was an expansion of “experts” and expertise in culture, such that there was a widening number of scientific claims via populist projects such as retreats, special courses, and classes — even as these purveyors of knowledge were often portraying themselves as “anti-experts” (see also Lave, this volume).

In the alternative health field wellness came to dominate discourses and practices. Originally developed in the 1950s, its major proponent, James Dunn, described wellness as follows:

> [A]n integrated method of functioning which is oriented toward maximizing the potential of which the individual is capable. It requires that the individual maintain a continuum of balance and purposeful direction within the environment where he is functioning. (Dunn, 1961, pp. 4–5; quoted in Miller, 2005)

As part of this shift, exercise came to be seen as both important for mental and physical “well-being” but also as a pleasurable individual activity. Running, which grew enormously in its popularity during the 1970s, is perhaps the quintessential. The New York Marathon, for example, had 300 runners in 1972; in 1979, more than 3,000 participated in the race (Whorton, 1982, p. 180). The popularity of Kenneth Cooper’s concept of “aerobic exercise,” introduced in his 1968 book of the same name, helped to fuel this rise (Cooper, 1968).

Perhaps even more significant for understanding the conjoining of science, pleasure, and the body was the development of scientific methods of personally tracking one’s exercise. Recording distances, times, and “personal bests” became commonplace in books about sports pursued for fitness. Jim Fixx’s The Complete Book of Running (1977), for example, advocated such record keeping, and so, too, did other competing running books. Cooper’s book told readers that regular exercise was critical and specified the frequencies with which people should engage in it. All manner of books appear on other individual level sports, with instructions on how to engage in them. Colin Fletcher’s The Complete Walker (1971), for example, told readers how to outfit themselves and stay alive and well on
extended backpacking trips, formalizing and adventure into the wild with
advice on how to experience nature safely, rather than to be surprised by it.
Gyms, which used to be spaces for working-class men who boxed or were
part of the esoteric culture of bodybuilding, attracted a new, middle-class
(and at first largely male) membership, who participated in bodybuilding
using not just free weights but “weight” machines, as individualized prac-
tice that was part of an overall “fitness” regime. Gyms served as training
places for the middle classes to learn how to move their bodies to “burn
calories” and other outputs that were now expected to take up Americans’
leisure time (Maguire, 2008).

Counterculture Nutrition as Politics: The Challenge to Industrial Food

Challenges to the industrial food system from the counterculture took a
similar form. Some Americans came to believe that urban and modern life,
including food, were too corrupt and alienating, and they went “back to the
land” to raise their own food. Critiques of food as “plastic,” chemical-laden,
and non-nutritious became more commonplace. Environmentalists decried
the effects of animal grazing on land, and ethical concerns for animals cre-
ated a surge in vegetarianism. Some of these concerns were organized into
food co-ops, but these tended to be short lived (Belasco, 2006). A particular
form of feminist nutrition emerged during this time, with the publication of
Laurel’s Kitchen in 1976 by three Bay Area mothers and wives. A lifestyle
guide as well as a cookbook — it was subtitled “a handbook” — the authors
advocated vegetarianism and home cooking in a communal context. Food
was as much about style of living as it was about the proper diet to acquire
health, and women were to be the leaders of a new food movement, starting
in their kitchens (Robertson, Flinders, & Godfrey, 1976).

Between 1970 and the early 1980s, then, the science of human nutrition
in the US, long a cozy world of research scientists focused on minimums
and recommendations for citizens who were not ill, began to shift gears.
New research emphases were on nutrition for health, and new audiences
for that knowledge were set in place by the new nutrition guidelines
(which were taught in schools), and by a counterculture that viewed food
production and eating as matters of morality and politics. One of the most
prominent civil society food organizations, The Center for Science in the
Public Interest, founded in 1971, became exclusively focused on problems
of nutrition and highly visible in numerous food debates in the 1980s and
1990s. The problems of the poor had largely faded from view by the time
that Ronald Reagan was elected president in 1980, but there was a new world of attention to preventing illness and its connection to styles of living.

This set of shifts is not the result of an easily identified event, but the evolution of a field as a result of economic interests of the state and other actors, the development of a sense of civic participation among nutrition scientists and nutrition NGOs like the Center for Science in the Public Interest, and new audiences for particular kinds of lifestyle-related eating and consuming knowledge that fell outside the scientistic frameworks offered by the government. They were unquestionably shaped by a shift in ideologies away from collective problems and solutions to individual harms and solutions, a framework methodically pursued by Ronald Reagan during his Presidency, and by the socialization of some nutrition scientists, who came to look for new ways to use nutrition knowledge to address social problems. Civil society groups, and publics not organized, sought alternatives to supermarket-based industrial food unthinkingly consumed. Not surprisingly, food companies began to label their food as “healthy” and “nutritious,” carrying out their own research — but more often, drawing on other scientific work (Schleifer, 2013) — and creating a cacophony of views about the right way to eat. The “field” came to be even more complex and diffuse in the 1980s, as a result of innovations in advertising and publishing — the development of numerical “lists” on covers and very short pieces of copy.

BETWIXT AND BETWEEN: NEOLIBERALISM, SCIENCE, AND THE PLEASURE OF BODY DISCIPLINE

In the 1980s, the number of health and fitness magazines published in the US surged; in 1975, there were five of them, aside from bodybuilding magazines, dominated by the Rodale Press’ Prevention. Prevention was formerly a staid journal giving advice less to counterculturalists than to people interested in their health for religious reasons, for treating illnesses, or because it was good for the land. With low circulation before 1970, the magazine got a boost from the counterculture interest in alternative food. Yet by 1980, in Prevention (then and now the best-selling health magazine in the US and the world) stories about neoliberal investment and ownership of one’s body and health became prominent. Articles such as “Subtracting additives multiplies your health account” (January 1981, p. 174) and
“Now’s there’s an owner’s manual for the most valuable thing you own [your body]” (June 1980, p. 101) were typical. This investment practice came with a call for combinatorial and numericized nutrition: taking ideas, commodities, and foods, and uniquely interpreting them. In “The surge to self-care,” (December 1982), editor Robert Rodale wrote an extensive article on the need to seek out and apply a variety of different ideas in order to achieve optimum health.

But books and magazines and other written sources are only the tip of the self-care information iceberg. Other lay people are an important source of knowledge and support. It is important to realize that self-care, while it may sound at first like something you only do yourself, is really a very social activity. (p. 22)

Rodale urged readers to frequent self-help groups and to produce and distribute their own ideas about “self-care.”

In 1982, Prevention and nearly every other health and nutrition magazine in the US began to offer information in a new way: as numbered lists and quizzes. Numericizing ideas, as Espeland and Stevens (1998) have shown, has the effect of allowing ideas to be more easily transposable and transferrable. Redacted from sources, they are portable and fungible. Articles with titles such as “Best and worst diet ideas,” (January 1985a), “See if you need Vitamin C” (February 1985b), and “Eight reasons you might be going bald” (March 1986) proliferated in the 1980s, calling on readers continually to take bits and pieces of scientific claims via lists of various kinds and to apply them to their own bodies and lives, authoring their own bodily experiences and outcomes with the scientific commodities delivered to them. Since the 1990s, the Internet has work synergistically with this process, allowing new bits of information to be created and circulated instantly.

In the contemporary period, the major players in the field of human nutrition are the federal government, food manufacturers and those who supply their ingredients (seeds, fertilizers, commodities, etc.), nutrition scientists employed by universities, and interlocutors who carry out what we call meta-analysis of scientific research. The federal government creates standards for human nutrition that directly shape what institutionalized groups, such as children and prisoners eat, and it sets voluntary guidelines for what Americans should eat (The Food Pyramid, for example). One of its most important functions is as a gatekeeper for ingredients, limiting or allowing additives, chemically modified forms of seeds, and limiting the volume of imported foods, all strongly influenced by corporations (Bittman, 2008; Nestle, 2007; Pollan, 2007, 2009). In general the field of
nutrition has become more fragmented, in part because the problems to be solved morph quite quickly, as researchers redefine nutritional problems on a regular basis, and collaborate across widely dispersed networks (Penders, 2010).

Arguably, among the most critical features of American nutrition are industrial chemicals and processing. Increasingly convincing evidence is linking illnesses to plastic additives like Bisphenol A and other endocrine disruptors (Guthman, 2011), but these issues and the heavily industry-influenced farm bill are hardly discussed publicly, even by stalwart critics of the US food system like Marion Nestle (2007) and Michael Pollan (2007, 2009). The obfuscation of what foods are nutritious is not simply a function of actions of food manufacturers who promise endless health benefits from highly processed products at the same time they pursued chemicalized food production. The voices of individual counterweights such as Nestle, Pollan, and the New York Times-recipe-columnist-turned-critic-of-agriculture Mark Bittmann (2008), arguably the three most influential civil society critics of the US food system, tend to be lost among the noise of the many who proffer nutrition advice, because of the proliferation and rapid development of highly visible diets promising health and wellness.

All three critics recognize this problem, but blame the government and manufacturers rather than the very “field” itself has low barriers to entry, rapid knowledge distribution, an orientation toward food as a health product and nutrition as an investment, and in many cases, the offer of alternative nutrition advice through charisma rather than sobriety and rational discipline. It is difficult to see how it might be possible to occupy a center position in the field of alternative nutrition, simply because there are an enormous number of entrants, the materials they have to work with (i.e., science-as-commodity, forms of affect, the Internet, calls for endless investments in the self) are themselves destabilizing. Marion Nestle (2007) comes closest to recognizing the problem through her relentless critiques of the regular production of new federal guidelines for nutrition. Although there is an embryonic alternative food movement in this country, it is too heavily focused on the lifestyle issues of the middle class rather than the reform of the system itself or the problems of the 49 million Americans who are food insecure. Instead, their problems are frequently reduced to merely problems of “food deserts,” rather than to what they actually are: money deserts (Alkon et al., 2013).

If alternative nutrition is an objective field, as the logic of Bourdieusian field analysis would insist, it should be possible to identify the centers of power that set the rules of the game, the edges of the field, the contenders...
for power, and common strategies of action. It would be difficult to do any of that with regard to alternative nutrition in the US, save for identifying logics. Institutionalism best captures the multiple motivations and interpretations, creativity in using codes and rules, and wide variation in the stability of logics of action around particular social objects. Rather than treating the arenas of action under study as objective, already-structured, and heavily coercive, this approach presumes that in most systems of meaning and power, there are leaks, weaknesses, failures, and variations. Importantly, by avoiding attention only to the dominant logics, it can help to see patterns of variation and instability (Adams, Clemens & Orloff, 2010; Clemens, 1997; DiMaggio, 1991; DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Moore, 2008; Schneiberg, 2012).

To illuminate the value of this approach for capturing the key qualities of contemporary alternative nutrition provision and its variations, we examine commonalities and differences in two popular alternative diets: Dr. Andrew Weil, M.D., and the veganism presented by the Skinny Bitch franchise. We examine the convergence of lifestyle, science, and neoliberalism in them, and we show that “styles of living” including elements that are not normally considered in studies that assume just one field logic, are important in explaining what they offer. We also attend to the evidence from web sites, because that technology helps produce the phenomenology of self, scientific, and field instability.

Andrew Weil, M.D.: Guru, Scientist, Investor

Dr. Andrew Weil is a leading figure in the holistic health movement and a major force behind the institutionalization of integrative medicine, which promotes alternative therapies as complementary to conventional medicine. Weil earned his A.B. and M.D. at Harvard University. As an undergraduate in biology he was influenced by the work of the Harvard Psilocybin Project conducted by Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert (Lattin, 2010), and he wrote his thesis on the psychoactive properties of nutmeg. After graduating from Harvard Medical School, Weil interned at Mt. Zion Hospital in San Francisco before spending a year at the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) doing drug research. He quit the NIMH after a year, citing the political climate at the time and the subsequent resistance to his marijuana research. Frustrated with the biomedical establishment, Weil began to explore shamanistic healing and started practicing yoga, vegetarianism, and meditation. He was a fellow at the Institute of Current
World Affairs from 1971 to 1975, traveling the world exploring medicinal plants and indigenous systems of disease treatment. He did similar work while he served on the research staff of the Harvard Botanical Museum from 1971 to 1984 (Lattin, 2010).

Weil's early work, such as *The Natural Mind: An Investigation of Drugs and the Higher Consciousness* (1998[1972]), included criticisms of American drug policy and explored the effects of drugs on human consciousness. Not until the 1983 publication of *Health and Healing: Understanding Conventional and Alternative Medicine* did Weil introduce himself to the public as a health and healing guru. By this time he had already established a general medical practice and was a part-time clinical faculty member at the University of Arizona, College of Medicine. In 1994, Weil established the Center for Integrative Medicine at the university, where he is still the director, Professor of Medicine and Public Health, and the Jones-Lovell Endowed Chair in Integrative Rheumatology. Weil has also played major roles in two evidenced-based, peer-reviewed academic journals that explore holistic health practices, including *The Journal of Complementary and Alternative Medicine* and the *Quarterly Journal Integrative Medicine*.

Today, Weil has a vast media empire that includes CDs, DVDs, a complex web site, television specials, and ten national best-selling books. His most recent book is a cookbook, *True Food: Seasonal, Sustainable, Simple, Pure* (2012), with recipes based on his “anti-inflammatory diet” developed for his restaurant chain, True Food Kitchens (“globally inspired cuisine”), with six locations in Arizona, California, and Colorado. In addition, Weil has his own line of supplements and a proprietary “vitamin advising” online tool to help individual consumers choose the best combination of supplemental vitamins and oils. There is a “Weil by Dansk” line of kitchen appliances, Dr. Andrew Weil Integrative Footwear, and Weil endorsements of various products including granola bars, salmon sausage patties, skincare products, and the complete line of products from Lucina Italian Organics. Weil is also the Director of Integrative Health and Healing at Miraval Resort, a luxury retreat and spa in Arizona, which hosts the Andrew Weil, M.D. Integrative Wellness Program. The program “incorporates the principles of integrative medicine, lifestyle diagnostic tools, evidence-based methodologies and in-depth consultation to plot your optimal lifestyle and wellness path” (Miraval Resorts, n.d.).

Weil’s signature concept is *optimum health*, which takes into account the interplay of spiritual, physical, and social well-being. Weil uses words like wholeness, balance, and resilience to describe what health is. Helping people to improve nutrition is thus only one goal of his work; he also
advocates cultivating psychological states, such as those in his book titles, including “spontaneous happiness,” “spontaneous healing,” “emotional well-being.” Like some versions of the alternative food movement of the 1970s, the interplay of eating and spiritual and psychological states is important, but here the knowledge is for sale in a big way: Weil’s company, Weil Lifestyle, LLC, oversees nearly a million dollars of revenue each year and supports the non-profit Weil Foundation (Zoom Company Information, 2014). Each month, his web site delivers more than fourteen-million free email messages and receives more than eight-million page views. His books have sold more than ten million copies, and his partnerships are part of his company’s goal to distribute “distinctive natural health products and services selected and designed by Dr. Weil” (Weil, 2013a).

Dr. Weil’s major dietary focus is on minimizing inflammation because of its relationship to disease. He has his own anti-inflammatory food pyramid to provide guidance to those wanting to achieve optimum health. According to Weil:

Following an anti-inflammatory diet can help counteract the chronic inflammation that is a root cause of many serious diseases, including those that become more frequent as people age. It is a way of selecting and preparing foods based on science that can help people achieve and maintain optimum health over their lifetime. (Weil, 2013b)

Some of the diseases that Weil links to chronic inflammation include cardiovascular disease, various cancers, and neurodegenerative diseases.

Weil’s food pyramid, loosely based on the Mediterranean diet, emphasizes fresh fruits and vegetables, legumes and whole grains, and eliminating processed and refined foods. Weil’s food pyramid also differs from most food pyramid conceptualizations by including independent categories for fish and seafood, healthy fats (olive oil, nuts, seeds), whole soy foods, cooked Asian mushrooms (“unlimited amounts”), healthy herbs and spices (“unlimited amounts”), tea, supplements, red wine, and healthy sweets. He promotes eating a wide variety of foods in order to cover one’s nutritional bases and ensure that one is not getting too much of anything harmful (Weil, 2013b). Such omnivorousness, however, also helps sales among alternative nutrition followers, just as health magazines’ encouragement to “eat this, not that,” emphasizes ongoing learning and consumption of value-added products (Zinczenko & Goulding, 2012).

Weil’s claims to authority are based in part on his medical background, although he does not draw directly on his own research. Each day he answers a different question, offering his opinion using a combination of his own views and sorting through the medical research. Weil, like many
other alternative diet purveyors, uses a special kind of charisma to convey special knowledge and capacities to sort the scientific wheat from the chaff so to speak. Rarely is the information delivered on the basis of purely scientific reasoning; in many cases, he uses his personal experience to justify his answer. For example, in answer to whether black pepper is poisonous, Weil intersperses scientific evidence and his own eating habits:

I generally don’t let waiters grind their pepper mills over my food at restaurants until I taste it first. For a hot spice, I prefer red pepper, which comes from a different plant (*Capsicum spp.*), doesn’t have any natural carcinogenic activity, has a long history of medicinal use, and provides healthful carotenoids. It can help lower cholesterol and stimulate circulation, and can actually help heal the lining of the stomach. (Weil, 2006)

The relationship between himself as an entrepreneur, a guru, and a biomedical researcher is so entwined in his site’s design, the products for sale, and in the messages that are sent out daily that it is difficult to specifically identify the main source of his authority or which logics are operating at any given moment. He moves easily among entrepreneur, spiritual guru and personal guide, and biomedical scientist in ways that undermine the idea of the scientist as sober and distant from their own body and of science as slow and conservative. He does use the logics of science, but the daily web updates and email messages are akin to advertisements that are seen on practically every site on the internet, enticing us to regularly rethink our future (Zukin, 2008) by updating some aspect of our style of living. (The message-a-day is now ubiquitous; the USDA’s Food and Nutrition Information Center issues an email each day, providing diverse bits of information ranging from nutrition research, changes in law, conferences, and policies (fnic.nal.usda.gov). There is no rest for the neoliberal citizen (who has a computer or a smartphone): updating is not optional, but it can be made more palatable with spiritual direction and the right products.

Skinny, Bitchy, and Vegan

In striking contrast to Dr. Weil, whose approach combines a guru-like cheery optimism with scientific credentials and offers something for everyone, the *Skinny Bitch* franchise offers its nutritional, exercise, and lifestyle advice with a tone that is caustic, often demeaning, and vulgar. For example, founders Rory Freedman and Kim Barnouin believe that caffeine addiction is “pathetic” and taunt readers who may want to include dairy products in the diet. To them, the formula is simple: “Healthy = skinny.
Unhealthy = fat.” Not only is the desire for meat and dairy products worthy of shame, so too is being fat, regardless of diet. Using the caustic language of humiliation, they refer to being fat as “bloated fat-pig syndrome” (Freedman & Barnouin, 2005, p. 72). Courage and discipline are necessary to participate in their style of living, with high costs for those who are too weak to follow through (and the primary reason for failure to follow through is weakness). This moral call is emblematic of one broader trend in diet and health advice: the return to discipline and toughness as the basis of success. Exercise “boot camps,” humiliation programs such as The Biggest Loser that make contestants run through military-style training regimes (their web site, www.biggestloser.com, urges viewers to lose weight through a series of “personal,” “daily,” and “team” challenges), and the advice of celebrities like Gwyneth Paltrow, who exercises for two hours each day and urges her followers not to “be lazy,” use similar tropes (Dorment, n.d.). Emotional brutality is a poor motivator unless people have options (Rejali, 2009), but paired with “opportunities” for redemption and salvation, it is more powerful (Moore, 2013). By following the Skinny Bitch style of living, women can acquire sassiness, confidence, a sense of rebelliousness, and ultimately, the admiration of others but especially of other women. Like other forms of neoliberal advertising that pair economic risk taking with images of happy people, Skinny Bitch offers the prospect of being a winner in the competition for health and social admiration. And indeed, they do not offer this as a system in which everyone wins. They draw on a particular form of neoliberal economic logic: winner-take-all, and social shame for the losers (Moore, 2013).

Like Dr. Weil, Barnouin makes claims about her formal credentials. The book jacket notes that she has a “Masters of Science in Holistic Nutrition” (from the non-accredited and now-closed Clayton College of Natural Health). Freedman complements Barnouin by characterizing herself as “a self-taught know-it-all,” emphasizing her status, like Weil, as an outsider to the establishment, and placing value on personalism. Although all their scientific claims are presented with citations, the sources are typically articles that come from a news source such as the New York Times or from a vegetarian or vegan advocacy organization such as NotMilk.com. Other nutritional claims are traced back to John Robbins’ Diet for a New America (1987), Harvey and Marilyn Diamond’s Fit for Life (1985), articles produced by Andrew Weil and associates and by the Center for Science in the Public Interest. The authors are twice-removed from the scientific claims they put forth; that is, their collective scientific credentials are weak, and they rarely cite scientific research directly. Similarly, the basis of their
self-help advice draws not on citations to psychology research directly, but on the works of popularizers such as Dr. Wayne Dyer (Ed.D.) and Anthony Robbins (who lacks formal scientific credentials).

In making scientific claims, Freedman and Barnouin’s method is to emphasize the chemical properties of food, chemical additives, and chemical reactions that may occur in the body during consumption. They then link these chemicals to a litany of diseases and disorders. For example, they compile a partial list of chemicals that can be found in meat and dairy products, including benzene hexachloride (BHC), chlordane, dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT), dieldrin, dioxin, heptachlor, hexachlorobenzene (HCB), and lindane. In the next sentence they claim: “Perhaps that is why eating ‘meat’ has been linked to obesity; cancer; liver, kidney, lung, and reproductive disorders; birth defects; miscarriages; and nervous system disorders” (p. 110). Similarly, returning to the example of coffee, Freedman and Barnouin claim that human bodies produce fat cells “in order to keep the acid away from your organs.” Therefore, “coffee equals fat cells” (p. 113; here, the authors cite the research of another Clayton College of Natural Health alumni, Robert O. Young). To bolster their claims, they sometimes list the research institutions where these studies were conducted, particularly if they are Ivy League institutions.

In the tradition of Robert Owen (1771–1858) and like contemporaries Anna Lappé (Diet for a Hot Planet) and Marion Nestle, Freedman and Barnouin link changes in one’s diet to broader social critique. They dedicate a chapter, “Have No Faith: Governmental Agencies Don’t Give a Shit about Your Health,” to documenting failures of governmental agencies in regulating the food industry. The chapter uses a familiar trope among food activists: the revolving door between industry and the federal agencies that regulate them, specifically, the USDA, the FDA, and the EPA. They mix together metascientific and social justice analysis in other chapters such as “The Dead, Rotting, Decomposing Flesh Diet,” “The Dairy Disaster,” and “You Are What You Eat.” These chapters provide evidence from animal rights and advocacy groups and on the unsanitary and cruel conditions of meat and dairy production and the effects of these foods of health. They also use scientific research to support their claim that animals are “intelligent, emotional, social creatures” (p. 151). The animal victims are thus not accountable for their own state, unlike the presumably fat and unhealthy humans who eat them and their byproducts. In contrast to Weil’s approach, Freedman and Barnouin use the political logic of many social movements, which is to gain adherents by making appeals to victimhood with possibility of rebirth through action (Polletta, 2009).
The title *Skinny Bitch* targets women readers; in contrast, *Skinny Bastard: A Kick in the Ass for Real Men Who Want to Stop Being Fat and Start Being Buff* (2009) is an effort to make their diet appeal to presumed male vanity and values. The scientific and moral claims are nearly identical to the sister book, and the rhetoric similarly includes vulgar insults as motivation. In the introduction, Freedman and Barnouin draw on a gendered logic to argue that men do not want to be skinny, but they want to be “buff,” – the cheeky popular referent for a fit physique, rather than the older “muscular” or “lean.” But they emphasize that this is for “real men” and include one original chapter, titled “No Girls Allowed.” This chapter focuses heart disease, erectile dysfunction, and having “the right amount” of testosterone. If male readers are not convinced to adopt a vegan diet, the authors then appeal to men’s sports prowess with claims of a vegan diet as the ultimate diet for “athletes,” complete with a list of Olympic and professional athletes who ate vegetarian and vegan diets (p. 18). But appeals to “performance” aside, by focusing on being “buff,” they call attention to a central goal of their enterprise – making oneself worthy of others’ gaze and gaining admiration for that.

The entrepreneurial logic of this approach is evident in a chapter near the end of both *Skinny* books. These chapters are intended to help the reader get motivated and begin setting goals. It covers the “chemical additions” many have to processed foods and cheese and how to manipulate hormone levels to speed up your metabolism. The authors then list all of the vitamins and supplements that are important to consider in a diet, such as calcium, folic acid, iron, magnesium, omega-3 fatty acids, potassium, B vitamins, vitamins C, D, and E, and zinc. Followed by the chapter “Let’s Eat,” readers are provided lists of processed organic, vegan foods, organized according to meal (breakfast, lunch, dinner) and alphabetically by the manufacturer’s brand name. Many of these brands are chosen based on the authors’ testimonies of the items they liked, and are paralleled by similar endorsements peppered throughout the books, including nods to Frey Vineyards organic wine, Eddie’s Spaghetti, and Westbrae’s organic beans and whole grain pastas.

**DISCUSSION: INSTITUTIONAL NEOLIBERALISM**

A Venn diagram of the field logics on which the *Skinny* authors and Dr. Weil draw would include (moral and material) economy, biosciences,
and personal experience. That Freedman and Bartounin also draw on logics of gender to make their case, however, fits uneasily into theories of “field” logics. It is worth noting, for example, that a leading field theorists Doug McAdam and Neil Fligstein’s (2012) analysis of race is about the field of racial politics, not about how racial factors shape action in different fields. In our analysis, the sort of competitiveness (with other women and men) that Bartounin and Freedman advocate could be reduced simply to capitalist logics, yet that misses the power of its gender specificity. The “skinny bitch” is competing against other women for the admiration of other women; the skinny bastard is in competition with other men.

Institutionalist analysis, particularly when combined with critical race and feminist theory, is an easier fit for how sets of action and value such as gender (or race or disability) can be taken into account in analyses of contestation over valued goods. Clemens (1997), for example, does just this, in analysis of the simultaneous emergence of interest groups politics as a form of political action and of how American women came to exercise formal political power. She argues that the usual treatments of political innovation start with those at the center of power; in her study, that would have been those in control of US political parties in the late nineteenth century. Such a strategy would be familiar to field theorists attempting to understand a similar process.

Clemens, however, started from the “outside,” by looking at three groups (farmers, labor, women) who were all trying to break the party system in some way or another. She began by analyzing how their social identities and particular forms of organization gave them particular advantages and disadvantages in democratizing American politics. Many of the organizations that she studied, but particularly the women’s organizations, advocated greater access to political decision making for Americans other than women, not all of whom could be counted on to act as women’s allies. Reducing Clemens’ analysis to either a story of the emergence of a new political form or as a story of women’s emancipation, misses the co-constitution of these actions, and of the ways that women’s gendered interactions with each other and other political actors shaped outcomes. Moreover, Clemens’ analysis explains the puzzling fact that as they were organizing, women cared little about leading their organizations per se; when those organizations collapsed, women formed other organizations and did not, as Max Weber would have predicted, maintain the organizations in order to maintain power for its own sake (i.e., a process of goal displacement).

To return to the two diet examples, gender is certainly a strategic tool for Freedman and Barnouin, for it is used implicitly and sometimes
explicitly to gain adherents. But at the same time it is not reducible to a strategic tool used to dominate a “diet field”; it is part of the cultural logics from which they work. Barnouin and Freedman come from the highly gendered modeling industry. Gender is constitutive of the ways of seeing the world — including the body, health, animals, and the like — and shapes the capacity of actors to make claims in particular ways. Again, field analysts are likely to insist that gender, or anything else, can be fit into the framework, but without attending to the specific content of social groupings like gender; for example, competition is but one logic of action. A more robust analysis would take into account how social groupings like gender provide tendencies and logics — not fixed interests — that can be valuable in understanding not only the constitution of particular games and contests but how they play out. Because most versions of institutional theory rely on a social psychology of phenomenology rather than rational choice or interest theory, they can capture how and when gender or other logics play out even without self-conscious and deliberate efforts.

A second advantage of institutionalist theory for studying social contestations, such as which diets shall prevail (in the market and in cultural recognition), is that it emphasizes multi-level analysis of successful and failed efforts at social transformations. It also attends to experimentation and learning, deliberate and inadvertent reconstructions of interests, the flexibility of rules and regulations, geographic contexts, and processes of democratization (Adams, Clemens, & Orloff, 2009; Ansell & Vogel, 2006; Leschziner & Green, 2013; Moore, 2008; Schneiberg, 2012; Thelan, 2010). The diet models that are described here are having their heyday. It is not clear, however, whether any one of them is currently victorious or will be in the future; indeed, one can find an enormous range of criticism of all of the diet plans, and of the individuals who advocate for them. Perhaps what is most critical to understand about them is that at this moment, the form that they take draws on multiple and shifting logics, and that this can easily be captured in institutional analysis as a centrally important issue rather than a sideline of the “real” action around diet that occurs at the USDA or Congress.

These alternative diet programs are not simply businesses in which their founders happened to invest; they are representations of entrepreneurial action on the part of founders, action that is defined by mixing logics from biomedicine, American self-reform traditions, neoliberal entrepreneurialism at the level of the founders themselves and of their offerings. To place them in a particular field is of course analytically possible, and we have framed their work in terms of “alternative nutrition.” Yet if their own testimony is
to be believed, they have mixed logics that have been traditionally separated, through at least two different pathways: a successful medical career promoting alternative health, successful modeling and modeling business careers.

The cases that we investigate are exemplary of the same kinds of mixing that can be observed in the hundreds of alternative diets that are offered every year, offerings that ask users to do something other than regulate the intake of elements of the typical American diet, as traditional nutrition advice does. The sheer number of these diets that are offered at any given time, the frequent updating of the advice by virtue of web technologies, the marketing of various products associated with the diet, and the emotional emphases on diet modification are complex mixtures: on one hand, they are signs of a field that has already formed in the sense of actors who share a common orientation toward an object of action and comprehend the same set of possibilities over which they struggle, and on the other hand, they are also indicators of a weakening field. If we take neoliberal culture seriously, instability is constitutive of the field of action, such that possibilities for action include ongoing disruptions of logics and knowledge stability. That such logics come to be part of embodiment through consumption (consuming ideas and information, purchasing products, and bodily ingestion) makes them all them more powerful.

Attending to the centers of the scientific field and the battles that are waged there have proven valuable to understanding the exclusion of new logics of action, actors, and subjects of attention in science, especially when contestations are overt and explicit (Albert et al., 2008; Hess, 2014). Yet in other cases, the contestation over knowledge claims and who has the capacity to be granted the ability to speak authoritatively have less to do with contention among actors for position in a field, than the historical conjunction of particular kinds of ideologies, technologies, and actors. At a minimum, our cases, or the hundreds of others we might have chosen, represent entrepreneurial efforts to get others to be entrepreneurial, but not, it seems, purely for monetary gain or for status in a field of other purveyors of alternative diets.

It is not clear that the actors in this field are all struggling for power against each other, nor do their logics of action seem identical, despite common orientations to nutrition reform. Institutionalist theory, however, does not require that actors compete directly with each other, and instead it permits them to be uncertain, to muddle through, to find activities that fit what they know how to do whether they are winning or not, and to take seriously the idea that social movements can provide possibilities for
changing conventions and rules for action in quite indirect ways, as in the case of the food counterculture and the rise of professionals influenced by the values of social movements. Institutions are not objective things in Institutionalist theory, yet actors can be conscious of the rules and under particular circumstances can make concerted attempts to change them.

Given that science and technology have profound effects on the distribution of material and cultural goods and bads, it is not so much the exclusion of others from the easy-to-enter and loosely knit field of alternative nutrition that produces inequality. Inequalities are produced in this system by normalizing the updating of the body and emotional self, and via the translation of scientific ideas into commodities that are not expected to be lasting and satisfying, but require more purchases. Neoliberal entrepreneurialism, abetted by internet technologies that change the speed of this kind of updating, normalize the instabilities that neoliberal economic policies have instantiated, particularly through the notion of risk self-management and the opportunity and information seeking that it requires. That the field through which this kind of activity is encouraged is ill defined may be precisely its power: as analysts of social networks have long understood, being at the intersections, rather than the center, can be very powerful indeed.

Yet the consequences for science more generally are significant, precisely because the flow of knowledge-as-commodity, its rapid production and distribution and its endless “updating” destabilizes traditional forms of authority in science. As the web — if not field — of alternatives to mainstream nutrition ideas proliferate, science itself is a weaker tool for battles over political and ethical questions about what to eat. This situation is not the result of explicit battles to weaken science, nor of battles for the center; the comingling of neoliberal economic logics of the enterprising self (Binkley, 2006, 2009) with metascientific analysis via charismatic authority, and the logic of American perfectionist impulses presents us with a situation in which fieldness itself is constantly being redrawn.

REFERENCES


Bourdieu, P. (1975). The specificity of the scientific field and the social conditions of the progress of reason. *Social Science Information, 14*(6), 19–47.


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