



A Discussion of Real Food, Real Facts: Processed Food and the Politics of Knowledge by Charlotte Biltekoff

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Abstract

On November 25th 2024, the RC-40 book club held a meeting to discuss Real Food, Real Facts: Processed Food and the Politics of Knowledge by Charlotte Biltekoff.

This review is the product of our collective discussion.

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On 25 November 2024, the RC-40 book club held a meeting to discuss *Real Food, Real Facts: Processed Food and the Politics of Knowledge* by Charlotte Biltekoff. The book club has an open membership, and we invite anyone with interests in the sociology of food and agriculture to join. More information about the book club, including how to join, is included at the end of this review.

This review is the product of our collective discussion. Its unusual structure reflects the dynamics of that conversation, with the majority of the text drawn directly from participant comments grouped around key themes (see also Legun et al 2023). These comments respond to each other and reflect an unfolding conversation but also have dynamic and non-linear aspects, whereby new ideas do not necessarily move towards a singular reading or ultimate conclusive point about the text. We have chosen this structure to bring out interconnected, collaborative, and contrasting engagements with the text from the diverse perspectives of participants. We are experimenting with this format in the hopes that it can reflect how texts are read within academic communities while also providing a provocative and practically useful review. Everyone who participated in the meetings is listed here as an author, as their comments form the core body of this review. We also include participants who did not contribute significantly to the discussion, and who may not have had a direct quote included in the text, to recognise the value of multiple forms of participation, including attentive listening. In this way, we also hope to encourage those who may feel underprepared or reserved to still join our activities and have that participation recognised. We do not attribute comments to particular participants, in part because comments may have been edited for clarity, combined with other comments, or adjusted to clarify the tone or context, and in part to represent the collaborative nature of discussions.

Teaching Real Food, Real Facts

One prominent discussion theme was the potential value of this text for teaching in a range of areas, including science and technology studies (STS), science communication, nutrition, the sociology of health, and the sociology of food. Biltekoff deftly applies foundational STS scholarship to analyse the power dynamics involved in discursive struggles over defining ‘real food’ and ‘processed food’ and their associated health impacts. We appreciated how clearly the theoretical groundwork for the book was elaborated in the first chapter and then concretised through a discussion of the contested science on processed food as it appears in early school curricula in the second chapter. In Chapter 2, “Real Food and Real Facts in the Classroom,” Biltekoff illustrates how food industry actors created primary school materials that sought to dispel myths about processed foods and inform students about the science of food processing. In doing so, they clearly aimed to mobilise scientific authority to counter discourses criticising processed foods. Through this case, Biltekoff illustrates a key social dynamic of contemporary debates around good food, in which powerful actors extend the role of science, beyond informing a debate, to setting the terms of a valid argument.

The first chapter [Chapter One: “How Good Food Became Real”] was a masterful synthesis of key food studies scholarship. For me it really clearly builds on the scholarly literature that emerged around discursive battles over genetically modified foods, in which industry often worked to keep the debate in the realm of science, while public views on GM were based on much broader types of values. In some ways this book felt like an update to Marion Nestle’s Safe Food.

She so clearly laid out her field of study in this chapter. I was aware that there’d been this popular move to real food, but here she clearly explained where it emerged from, what the strands of it were, and how it was different from, say, the organic movement. But she also explained how it related to or was built off those other movements, and I appreciated that. It made the object of study concrete in a way that I needed.

The text introduces theoretical concepts around contested science and the politics of advancing facts, but it does so in ways that are very grounding and substantive. Students who struggle to understand why critical science studies matter in my classes could really benefit from reading this. Looking at the influence of scientific claims in school curricula would likely be particularly effective in helping them understand knowledge politics [referring to Chapter 2: “Real Food and Real Facts in the Classroom”].



Working in Binaries

Our discussion also touched on a persistent challenge in academic work – the reproduction of dualisms. In Biltekoff's text, this dualism, or binary, is in the title: real food versus real facts. The book builds on the conceptual grounding that these are two distinct frames that are reinforced through the analysis. We wondered, does this reinforce the idea that real facts, as science-based claims, are primarily advanced by industry, who are shaping and investing in science to frame the debate? Does this not further an idea that industry is aligned to science, in opposition to the public whose concern with real food is not science-obsessed in the same way, or may even be anti-science? In what way would this reading actually reinforce the interests of industry, who want to have exclusive claims to the legitimacy of science? Yet, towards the end of the book, Biltekoff adds some welcome nuance to this binary, recognising the true complexity and the blurriness of these boundaries.

It's always problematic when someone simplifies things to a dualism. In some ways, the strength of the book is that dualism in the title. It makes it very readable from the beginning. But on the other hand, I think the framing of the title may inadvertently reinforce industry's desired framing of the debate – that they're just trying to enlighten people on the true scientific facts of the matter.

And yet, later in the book she really complicates the real food/real facts, public interest versus industry interest binary framing previously set up. We start to see that part of the industry's challenge comes from the fact that consumers actually are really contradictory. They want natural, but they also want shelf stability. These mixed messages are confusing to industry. In the transparency chapter [Chapter Four: "The Paradoxes of Transparency"], we see industry trying to adapt to what they think consumers want – trying to acknowledge the other kinds of values that consumers are working from, but doing it in this way that continues to be really reductive of what counts as a value.

Ultimately, even though she did a really good job of critiquing both framings and then of complicating the debate, the book may still accidentally reinforce this idea that it's about real food versus real facts.

In reality, neither the public nor industry is singular, and their orientations toward science are complex and sometimes contradictory. We discussed some of the nuances we encounter in our own research, and how the book enabled our reflections on these nuances. We considered both the complexities among public viewpoints and within industry stances.

There's a lot of these farmers I work with who are very into producing good food like God wants, you know, these kinds of ideas about food. A lot of it is in reaction to the 20th century message to farmers that, "you're doing everything wrong; you've got to use chemicals." That extension pushed. That land grant universities pushed. A lot of those farmers are what people would call politically right wing. Right now we have to deal with this. In there, it is the skepticism of science, and what science can be, right? And they're very anti-corporation, right? They can't stand big corporations. They can't. They're worried about the profit motive. These folks have complicated beliefs that don't fall neatly into one category or another.

In this account different business actors all blend together to become the industry. But studying the CEO is different from studying the entrepreneur, which is different from studying the marketer, which is different from the consumer expert. All of them have very different institutional purposes and you can get very much into the question of their ethos. Institutionally, they're doing different things. Certainly, marketers are very strategic because it's their job. Like, they're hired assassins, right? They don't care what's real science or what's not real science. What they care about is what reaches the consumer and motivates them, and if that's real science, great. And if that's production of disinformation, go for it. But there are also scientists in these companies who are trained in science and believe strongly in its principles.

We would benefit from reflecting on the binaries and non-conforming dynamics with our students in teaching with the text, particularly at the graduate level, not only discussing those substantive nuances, but the process of research and writing. For the purposes of constructing a compelling academic narrative, some of these complexities have to be shelved. Biltekoff is clear from the beginning that her goal is to explore the knowledge

politics surrounding processed foods (or, in other words, “how scientific authority has been both contested by the public and leveraged by the food industry” p.6), not to weigh in on the scientific merit of the claims themselves. As a result, she only briefly mentions a major body of scholarship that examines how power and economic interest shape scientific exploration itself. In the following, we describe some of the additional lines of thought and bodies of work that could add to, and complement the text.

*She brackets off a lot of really important issues. For me, the biggest one for understanding “real facts” is the literature on what scholars have termed “agnotology” – the production of doubt. Biltekoff briefly mentions work on manipulation of science by the tobacco industry, and she cites Marion Nestle’s book *Unsavory Truth*, which explores similar dynamics in the food industry. But for the most part she places this topic outside the scope of the book. Reading the book, I kept thinking about all of the deliberate efforts to undermine people’s trust in facts by the food industry itself. On p.22, Biltekoff basically says “I’m not going to talk about that.” But to me these things are pretty inseparable. The same people who are complaining about the public’s failure to trust science are funding astroturfing organisations that are basically undermining people’s trust in science.*

Especially, and forgive me for injecting this into conversation, but in the light of the election here in the United States, we’re going to see a return to this problem that a lot of scholars are having. There is such thing as real scientific knowledge production. Scholars like Naomi Oreskes use a sociology of science definition of real science — basically organised scepticism — and there are people out there who are deliberately doing the opposite. Biltekoff, in a way, is taking on the harder task by looking at a sincere effort at defining science on both sides, and then showing how it’s actually more complicated. I think that’s great. But by only minimally acknowledging the fact that many of the same people are doing the exact opposite, I feel like she’s actually giving them too much credit. I am certain all of these industries are funding groups that are deliberately producing misinformation or they’re encouraging influencers now that it’s the new thing.

Extending the politics of real food/real facts

One thing we appreciated about the book was its illustration of contemporary anti-politics through individualist approaches to nutrition.

One thread that I find quite interesting in the book is related to the ways in which nutrition has been framed as an individual problem and constantly reframed as an individual problem, a concern for your own family, for your own health and safety. This has enabled industry to dismiss other collective approaches to nutritional health involving larger groups of people or more holistic approaches, including ecologies.

At times, however, we thought that the real facts/real food framing emphasised a politics of knowledge grounded in epistemic claims in ways that sometimes inadvertently obscured the enormous importance of economic power. One side of the debate, industry, has disproportionate access to resources in a context where public resources are being rapidly withdrawn. There are aspects of these power imbalances in the text that are used to better understand how science in food policy is constructed and advanced unequally on behalf of industry, but this dynamic is not often centred or brought out.

The discussion of food industry antipolitics could likewise be enhanced through a deeper contextualisation of the real food/processed food conflict within the history of food politics. Food movement history is discussed briefly in Chapter One, “How Good Food Became ‘Real’”, but is generally tertiary to the main arguments of the text. A greater historical contextualisation could help draw out patterns and discrepancies across time in the way that economic interests define knowledge politics around food.

I wish she had given more history to all of this stuff, and this is particularly ironic given that she herself in her first book was very historical. So, I know she knows the history behind it. ... Like if you read the debates between Food Babe and Science Babe five years ago, you would think this is a new thing. But actually, at least since the 70s and 60s, the food industry has been generating this campaign against regulations centred around this idea of “good science” and focused on what they see as an attack on modernity and scientific values, and with sugar foundation this has been going on at least since the 50s.



The other way you could complicate the real facts of this story is to be clear that the establishment message is not only pro science, but is also pro big. It's the productivist approach to science. In contrast, there is a very healthy alternative area which exists both left and right that sees this as a story of monopoly and regulatory capture. I think that's what's so interesting right now with RFK and that's also lost a bit when you focus on how big food is producing real facts. It can make the political alignments seem a little clearer than they actually are in the United States at the moment. In the present moment, science scepticism and anti-corporate sentiment co-exist very comfortably in certain circles.

We also considered how Biltekoff's framing of "real food" and "knowledge politics" opens up fertile ground for comparative reflection with regions outside the USA. In urban African contexts such as Accra, for instance, we noted that the discourse around what counts as "real" or "good" food often intersects with moral narratives about modernity, class aspiration, and cultural identity. Processed foods are not only framed through questions of health and science but also carry social meanings tied to convenience, respectability, and the performance of care within low-income households. Biltekoff's analysis of how scientific authority shapes public understandings of food resonates strongly here, where nutrition education, advertising, and donor-driven food programmes likewise mobilise "expert knowledge" to redefine everyday food choices.

Reading *Real Food, Real Facts* through this lens highlights the global circulation of ideas about purity, modernity, and scientific legitimacy in food discourse. It invites us to consider how "knowledge politics" is not merely a contest between industry and the public in the U.S., but also a transnational process through which hierarchies of taste, health, and morality are negotiated. In this way, Biltekoff's work offers valuable conceptual tools for examining how social norms around food are produced, contested, and internalised within different political-economic and cultural settings.

Extending Biltekoff's argument beyond Western contexts, scholars of African urban food environments might use her framework to interrogate how public health campaigns, religious teachings, and global nutrition discourses contribute to defining what is seen as "real" or "proper" food. Such comparative reflection underscores the importance of situating food politics within broader geographies of power, showing that the struggles over knowledge, legitimacy, and morality in food systems are profoundly global.

A valuable addition to food studies scholarship

Overall, we found this text to be a highly worthwhile read. Biltekoff compellingly captures the current public movement away from processed food and the ways in which industry is scrambling to contain this existential threat. She skilfully weaves deep empirical research into industry texts with powerful theoretical analysis. This book is crucial reading for any scholar of food movements or the food industry, and the clear and compelling prose make it an excellent text for use in either undergraduate or graduate courses in STS or food studies. While the real food/real facts framing may at times obscure the more complex ways in which industry influences scientific production in the first place, it is also part of what makes the book so highly readable.

About the book club and its format: Members select books and attend the meetings on an open and voluntary basis. Membership includes people from a range of different career stages and institutions, and this was reflected as well in participation in the meeting. Our discussions have a loose format, focusing mainly on the ways the text progresses our knowledge and conversations about issues central to the sociology of agriculture and food, as well as how the text might inform our teaching and research. We also raise questions about choices that the author made in the research and writing, and consider things that remain unanswered in the text. We record the meetings, transcribe them using AI software, and then, when possible, transform them into a book review by grouping comments, editing them, and in some cases, combining comments when multiple participants articulate different aspects of a point particularly well. Volunteers from the book club engage in this editing and writing process. If you are interested in joining the book club, please fill out the form here: <https://w2w87zw1.forms.app/bookclub>

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