Boss Marion: The Making of a Public Intellectual.

Mike Miller. *Social Policy.* Winter, 2022/23.

Review of *Slow Cooked: An Unexpected Life in Food Politics.* Marion Nestle. University of California Press. 2022.

Disclaimer

Marion Nestle is a careful scholar and public intellectual. Her focus is on nutrition and public health, and she brings to the subjects a wide range of research—both her own and that of others—a critical mind , and a passion for saving Americans from corporate designed and prepared bad food. She and I have known each other for almost 70 years, having met in 1954 at the University of California when we were both freshmen living in, respectively, Sherman and Cloyne Court coops. We have been off-again, on-again in touch over those years, and I'm an admirer of her work.

I decided to read and review her memoir with some trepidation: could I write critically if that's what I thought the book deserved? Luckily, I didn't have to cross that bridge, though I will raise what I think is a central question for public intellectuals like her, and the field of public health in general. But don't let me get ahead of myself.

A shy girl

While raised as a low-income "red-diaper baby," her childhood lacked the cultural enrichment typical of left-wing kids. Example: they lived in a house with "a large avocado tree in the back, but we had no idea—and nobody we knew did either—that the rock-hard green things that fell to the ground could be edible, let alone scrumptious. We threw them out."

Becoming

Growing up, first in Long Island and New York City then in Los Angeles, she was an outsider, with neither expectations nor hope that she might do more than get married and have a family. In new environments, she "felt shy and out of place." Applying to UC Berkeley, she was accepted. There she met a house-mate of mine, who she soon married. She taught herself to cook, and enjoyed cooking. She dropped out of school, then returned, finally realized she was smart and got a PhD. Along the road, she met people who took an interest in her and were helpful.

Gaining self-confidence took Marion a long time. Not until the early 1990s did she "start feeling better about my life." And there was more growing to take place.

She likes to give credit: one faculty person is a "champion of his students;" another "could not have been warmer or more welcoming;" an audio-visual technician gave "advice that was immensely useful;" after botching an initial community encounter , "a fieldwork supervisor gave me good advice, told me to hang in there, continue going to meetings, and try to regain the coalition's trust". She spreads credit around, naming the boosters and teachers she encounters.

She ends up teaching at Brandeis where she discovers through a friend that her wage is less than her male counterparts. She discovers "second wave feminism" and gains from it the sense of liberation that is familiar to many women who went through that period.

At Brandeis she works with minority students to overcome prejudice against them, and gains "more confidence in my ability to teach and support students who needed help." In general, she's a champion of the unrepresented.

Already interested in politics, though not focused on it, her path takes her to nutrition where she integrates interest in science and public health "with food insecurity in the developing world and its connection to…neocapitalism—the subordination of the interests of the poor to those of the rich through the massive transfer of wealth and power on a global scale." She learns "to look for the root causes of public health problem, work with communities to overcome them, and develop policies to improve health…"

Working for the Feds

A brief sojourn at the Federal Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion in the Department of Health and Human Services teaches her the restriction of working for the Feds—especially during the Reagan Administration. She learns important lessons for the future, the most important of them being she doesn't want to be an "insider" working for change— "Agencies dealing with food issues had learned to avoid Congressional interference by resorting to euphemisms…" Bottom line: "Looking back on that period, I think of it as my two years in Federal prison."

At the same time, she recognizes that such people are important and respects them: "…my new colleagues were well versed in getting things done in Washington, were smart and sympathetic, and I would have much to learn from them. I was right about that. I learned things on that job I had no idea I didn't know."

In DC, she meets Dr. C. Everett Koop, “a pediatric surgeon and fundamentalist Christian appointed by President Reagan on the basis of his strong opposition to abortion. But by the time we were drafting the nutrition report, Koop had earned widespread admiration—and my deep respect—for his moral and ethical positions on health issues, particularly AIDS.”

Later in her career at NYU the job with the Feds became a source of insider information as government employees leaked documents to her and told her things she could independently prove to reporters at the *New York Times* and *Washington Post.* She felt “like Bob Woodward talking to Deep Throat.”

New York University

Her teaching path takes her from Brandeis to University of California Medical School, UC Berkeley and ends at New York University (NYU) where she strikes gold in an offer to chair the Nutrition Department and become a tenured faculty member, with all the protection that status affords. Getting to the gold was not easy: “I was having such a hard time in my new job that I thought I needed therapy.”

At NYU she broadens her focus from nutrition to food politics. It is there that she makes her mark. *Food Politics*, now in a third edition, is a classic in the field. Its release was marked by hostile reviews, later discovered to be planted by food industry PR writers. “The publication of *Food Politics* marked a turning point in my life, if a rather late one; I was sixty-six years old when it came out.” The book brought media interviews, speaking engagements, awards and recognition. Marion was now on the global map of critics of unhealthy food and those who produced it.

The book connects bad diets, ill health, corporate food policies and government complicity. Together in a new department, these became “Food Studies.” The department developed its own research garden “right along Houston Street’s six lanes of heavy traffic;” Marion attributes it to chef “Alice Water’s intuitive understanding of the deep connection between food production and consumption—food systems—for which I now give belated thanks."

Marion built, almost from scratch, a new topic of study—recruiting faculty and students along the way and hammering out respect for the field in broader intellectual communities: “We knew we were breaking new ground with food studies, but we had no idea we were starting a movement.” Other universities, both in the US and abroad, “started food degree programs of one kind or another…Departments like anthropology, history and English Literature began to encourage their students to research food-related topics…Food studies has come a long way, and I am still thrilled every time I see an announcement for a new program.”

Boss Marion

Nestle writes directly, at times bluntly. Clear declarative sentences are her modus operandi. She's that way in person as well. It makes the reading easy, and her talks (I went to a San Francisco event for this book, and heard her at similar gatherings for earlier books) crisp and clear. But at times it caused misunderstanding.

As a Dean at NYU, she discovered she intimidated people in the department, and was called "bossy." Respondents to a performance evaluation said she was "dictatorial." I wasn't there, but I don't think so, though I can see how people could conclude that.

Obesity

The scientific matters dealt with in *Slow Cooked* are not, to say the least, an area of my expertise. I did a little digging, and found this useful report:

Obesity Rates Continue to Trend Up in U.S. Willem Roper. *Statista* <https://www.statista.com/chart/20981/obesity-rates-on-the-rise-in-us/> Feb 27, 2020. (This chart shows the percentage of Americans who are obese based on a height and weight survey. Felix Richter. Data Journalist. felix.richter@statista.com.+49 (40) 284 841 557.)

Over 4 out of every 10 American adults are obese, according to a new government study by the CDC. 1 out of every 10, the study says, is severely obese.

The findings come from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention annual health survey from 2017-2018, where over 5,000 U.S. adults measured their height and weight. For 2017-2018, the survey recorded a record 42 percent of people within the obesity threshold, with over 9 percent within the severely obese threshold. These numbers are up 2 percent and 8 percent, respectively, from the health survey of 2015-2016.

Obesity rates in the country have been steadily climbing for the past two decades (emphasis added). In 1999-2000, the same health survey found an obesity rate around 30 percent – much lower than the 42 percent recorded in 2017-2018 and easily statistically significant.

Rates of obesity have yet to be released by the CDC for kids and teens, however 2015-2016 saw an obesity rate of 18.5 percent for kids and teens and a severely obese rate of 6 percent – also pointing to an upward trend over the last two decades.

The Occupational Handicap of Public Intellectuals

A relatively small number of intellectuals in the area of nutrition and public health has documented over-and-over again the public health problems created by unhealthy food. As far as I can tell, their approach has been to seek change in public policy and "educate" Americans about good, healthy food. "The facts," unfortunately, do not speak for themselves. Intellectuals typically have the idea that they do. It's a bias of their training and occupations.

Despite talented and dedicated bureaucratic insiders, the healthy food advocates cannot win the insider game that is played at and between the U.S. Departments of Agriculture and Public Health, and their state and local counterparts. Marion quickly abandoned that approach. She hopes for a social movement around food politics, and realizes "this was hubris. I was in over my head." And she admits, "The lesson about academic hubris is one I never seem to learn."

The food advocates cannot overcome the power of consumer culture as reflected in the endless advertising for unhealthy food purchased by agribusiness and the food industry, nor the power of corporate agribusiness and food to shape public policy.

A Different Strategy

In my mind's eye, I can see a national campaign for food and nutrition health (with a better name than that!). It would be led by a campaign committee large enough to encompass religious, labor, civic, identity, interest and neighborhood groups along with those already in the battle who gather together around a minimum program of food health for the American people. Who could be against that?

I can imagine nationally known sports and entertainment figures giving it their blessing. If anyone knows anything about nutrition and food health it is athletes who achieve the top of their respective sports. If there's anyone to counter TV and other advertising appeals to young people, it is they.

But media is an important, not central, feature of such a campaign. Its basic strategy would be to mobilize civil society against food polluters. Just like a serious campaign for presidency of the United States, it would take several years getting the right people on board before a public campaign was launched. The nonviolent tradition part of me hopes it would give corporate food polluters an opportunity to repent and join the good guys because, as Marion amply demonstrates, they are the targets. It is their history of decisions that will have to be amended and reversed, and their power that must be undone.

Can Such a Campaign Happen?

Stay tuned. If it does, it won't surface for a while. You'll read about it in these pages. In the meantime, read Marion Nestle's book. You'll meet a smart , good person. and learn about her good work.

POSTSCRIPT

Much of the broader public food health discussion emphasizes food consumer education on how their choices could make a difference. Consumers "could make better food choices...but policies make a bigger difference...At food conferences about obesity...all anyone talked about was the need for education: 'How can we teach Americans to make better food choices?' or--and this one really got to me--'How can we educate mothers to feed their children better?' Great. Let's blame childhood obesity on moms. Why weren't nutritionists up in arms about the products being marketed? Why weren't my colleagues outraged by how food companies were enticing kids into pestering their parents for junk food?...I wanted nutritionists to stop blaming their clients for making poor dietary choices. I thought we should all be engaging in politics and advocating for policies that would make healthy food choices cheaper and easier for everyone."

This is the classic blame the victim versus blame the system formulation. It holds an important truth. It ignores or dismisses an equally important one. The first, well described and amplified in this book, is that the system is producing something bad. The mistake is to assume that the victims--mothers, children, clients, customers--have little-to-no choice or agency in the matter. That mistake leads to programs ("education") and advocacy (we who know speak on behalf of those who won't, don't or can't). Typically, the advocacy is "expert testimony" before legislative bodies.

Occasionally, when the advocates recognize that power as well as knowledge is involved they will "mobilize" people to march, petition, demonstrate, vote or otherwise make their numbers known. Those mobilized show up at an appropriate time and place to make their views known, then go home. Victories are sometimes won this way, but the structure of power remains in place so the larger source of the problem remains unaddressed. Sometimes an initial victory is eroded through such things as corrupt enforcement or industry making changes that don't solve the problem but appear to.

As distinct from "mobilizing," " organizing" seeks to change the relations of power so that those abusing it *are no longer able to* because a continuing people power organization can: win victories, enforce them, and move on to bigger victories that change the underlying system that contributes to the problems in the first place.

To illustrate, imagine a factory that abuses its workers in multiple ways: they are overworked and underpaid; they have no benefits and are subject to continuing arbitrary and capricious behavior by supervisory personnel; anyone who speaks up is assigned to the worst jobs or fired. OSHA or a public interest organization might cite the owners for one or more ills they visit upon their workers. But the powerlessness of the workers insures that when the public eye stops looking the evils will return.

Now imagine a good, small "d" democratic union organizes the workers so they have a permanent vehicle through which they can represent their interests. It has the capacity to slow down, sick out, work-to-rule, strike, get public support in a boycott and otherwise adversely affect the profits of the owners. It seeks "recognition" as the "sole bargaining agent" for the workers. It thus changes the relations of power in a more-or-less permanent fashion. Which isn't to say unions don't become corrupt or can't lose what they gained in the face of a sustained employer offensive against them. The 1930s to the 1980s tell such a story of reversal. But it wasn't easy, and union leadership had to be complicit in the process for previous wins to be taken back.

The vote was won by Blacks in the Deep South by means of organizing around the right-to-vote. It took many years to undo the reversal of Reconstruction. It took 50+ years to do the same to the Voting Rights Act. Because of mistakes and the power of its adversaries those who saw the right to vote also as a means to achieve broader economic and social justice lost their momentum and were replaced by more moderate Black leadership. At the same time, racist power reasserted itself.

The lesson is simple: keep your powder dry. As A. Philip Randolph, President of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters put it, “At the banquet table of nature, there are no reserved seats. You get what you can take, and you keep what you can hold. If you can't take anything, you won't get anything, and if you can't hold anything, you won't keep anything. And you can't take anything without organization.”