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Whetting Your Appetite for Food Advocacy

*Shiriki K. Kumanyika, PhD, MPH*

**Let’s Ask Marion: What You Need to Know About the Politics of Food, Nutrition, and Health (California Studies in Food and Culture, vol. 74) By Marion Nestle and Kerry Trueman** Oakland, CA: University of California Press; First edition (September 1, 2020) Hardcover: 216 pages, $16.95 eBook: $16.95 ISBN-13: 978-0520343238

The US government published the first official “Dietary Guidelines for Americans” (“the Guidelines”) in 1980 and publishes updates every five years.[1](https://ajph.aphapublications.org/reader/content/17b9f895087/10.2105/AJPH.2021.306383/format/epub/EPUB/xhtml/index.xhtml#bib1) These guidelines, which recommend decreased consumption of certain types of foods, may be disputed by affected food industry segments. Nevertheless, the Guidelines have endured as an important reference for how Americans can eat to reduce risks of morbidity and mortality from chronic diseases and support health and well-being. Similar to guidance issued by food and health authorities in other countries and international agencies, and consistent with epidemiologic evidence from 195 countries around the globe,[2](https://ajph.aphapublications.org/reader/content/17b9f895087/10.2105/AJPH.2021.306383/format/epub/EPUB/xhtml/index.xhtml#bib2) the Guidelines advise Americans to eat more plant foods (fruits, vegetables, grains); to eat fewer foods with high saturated fat, added sugars, and high salt content; and—in light of the unrelenting epidemic of obesity—to eat within appropriate caloric limits. However, nutrition-monitoring data suggest that the US population’s mean Healthy Eating Index score has hovered around 6 (on a scale of 1–10). The percentage of adults meeting recommendations for fruit and vegetable consumption is dismally low (12% and 9%, respectively) on average throughout the United States.[3](https://ajph.aphapublications.org/reader/content/17b9f895087/10.2105/AJPH.2021.306383/format/epub/EPUB/xhtml/index.xhtml#bib3) Our food system is a big part of why this is so.

Beginning with her 2002 book *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health*,[4](https://ajph.aphapublications.org/reader/content/17b9f895087/10.2105/AJPH.2021.306383/format/epub/EPUB/xhtml/index.xhtml#bib4) Marion Nestle, a persistent and articulate critic of the current US food system, has continued to address the complex questions about factors that limit adherence to dietary guidance in a series of books and other writings. The title and format of her latest book are intriguing. *Let’s Ask Marion* implies that “Marion” (no surname needed) is someone you should know about, which is true among public health nutrition and food policy experts, including those who differ with some of her views. The subtitle, *What You Need to Know About the Politics of Food, Nutrition, and Health,* is tempting—it hints at controversies about a topic you (should) want to know about.

The book aims to reach a broad audience, from the most naïve consumer to food and nutrition policy experts and policymakers. The text consists of a series of short essays presented in a conversational format, with Nestle answering questions posed by Kerry Trueman, an environmental sustainability advocate and author. The book’s sections relate to individual, community, and global food issues. The unfolding story is of a dysfunctional food system (Nestle uses “system” to encompass the totality of food production, distribution, marketing, and consumption) that poses political and policy challenges of major proportions. These challenges extend far beyond what people might view as in the public health nutrition or public health domain, because food is linked to major, existential threats to both human and planetary health: hunger, obesity, and climate change.

The first section, “The Politics of Personal Diets and Health,” answers questions that might be asked by anyone. Nestle’s answers highlight the broad scientific agreement on the basics of healthy diets. She then offers explanations for consumers who may be confused or frustrated because nutrition advice is always changing. She provides guidance for thinking critically about nutrition claims and advice in the ever-changing stream of information to which consumers are exposed. The rest of the section consists of yes or no questions about low-carb diets, addictive properties of food, meat made from plants, and dietary supplements or superfoods. Nestle acknowledges that not everyone agrees with her views and that food experiences and the tradeoffs people are willing to make can be very subjective. She reminds the reader that marketing is designed to sell products and that marketers are allowed to promote them with a fair amount of latitude.

The second section, “The Community Politics of Food Choice,” leaves no doubt about Nestle’s agenda for change. She explains that there is currently not a food system, that is, there is no set of coordinated policies and practices designed to promote adequate food and healthy dietary choices for everyone in the population at affordable prices and to ensure that this food is safe to eat. Her use of “community” comprises food system issues that affect populations at local, state, and national levels. What the elements of the current food *non*system do is either inadequate or opposite to what might be expected from a system designed to support human survival. Five of six questions relate to understanding why the food system is the way it is, with answers designed to get readers to ask why we tolerate this situation.

Nestle uses a question about why anyone should go hungry to emphasize that the current nonsystem inherently generates and perpetuates inequities. Equity is a recurring theme here and throughout the entire book. From the introduction, we learn that the book was completed before the COVID-19 pandemic began to exacerbate preexisting inequities and cause disproportionate harm to communities of color.[5](https://ajph.aphapublications.org/reader/content/17b9f895087/10.2105/AJPH.2021.306383/format/epub/EPUB/xhtml/index.xhtml#bib5) Further on, Nestle describes how various interests in the food industry have worked against health-oriented food policies in ways that might defy common sense or common decency but have been effective.

On the question of whether we need a national food policy agency, she departs from the format of previous chapters to include a table that captures the disorganization of US food and nutrition policy. The table lists 11 different types of agencies involved with food and nutrition policies, showing each agency’s mandates and oversight agency or agencies. Nestle has been one of many food and nutrition policy experts making these points about a dysfunctional or fragmented food system for some time and without much real controversy as to whether such criticism is valid. But transformative change is not occurring. The prospect of major government restructuring that would be required may be too daunting, along with the prospect of overcoming resistance from those with vested interests in the status quo.

In the third section, “The Global Politics of Diets, Health, and the Environment,” Nestle counters arguments often made by food producers that practices harmful to animals, farmworkers, and consumers are necessary to have enough food to feed the world. She questions the veracity of the idea that US food producers are feeding the world based on her reading of the evidence and criticizes exportation of industrial approaches to agriculture that may undercut the ability of populations to feed themselves. Nestle also dismisses as unrealistic the possibility that the free market, with its principle of continuous growth, will act differently or any better in global markets than they do in the United States.

Nestle comments on three proposed big picture global efforts in answering questions about what comes next. She discusses the United Nations’ sustainable development goals as a comprehensive and very ambitious agenda to address global human and planetary health threats but in which recommendations relevant to food systems may fail to yield the type of coordinated actions that are needed. She also comments on the EAT-Lancet Commission report as generally confirming the main messages of dietary guidance issued by national and global agencies about how dietary patterns need to change. Nestle promotes systems thinking throughout the book and, hence, sees promise in the multisystems approach reflected in the Lancet Commission on Obesity report.[6](https://ajph.aphapublications.org/reader/content/17b9f895087/10.2105/AJPH.2021.306383/format/epub/EPUB/xhtml/index.xhtml#bib6),[7](https://ajph.aphapublications.org/reader/content/17b9f895087/10.2105/AJPH.2021.306383/format/epub/EPUB/xhtml/index.xhtml#bib7) The commission charts a course for addressing what she refers to as the Big Three: hunger/undernutrition, obesity, and climate change. This commission defined each of these three problems as meeting the definition of a pandemic and adapted the concept of a “syndemic” to examine them as a set of complex dynamic systems with overlapping causes and interacting effects, allowing common solutions that can be mutually reinforcing double or triple wins.

This “little book” has big messages and is well worth reading even by those already active in food and nutrition advocacy. It achieves its goal of being accessible to diverse readers. Overall, it integrates topics that are discussed separately in Nestle’s previous books and that are often considered separately in public health and larger societal discourse but must ultimately be addressed by coordinated solutions. The emphasis on the importance of food systems changes for achieving societal and health equity connects to the new awareness of racial and other inequities that has come with COVID-19 and other events related to racial justice. And the conclusion calls on readers to act to solve rather than only read about these problems.

**ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

Shiriki K. Kumanyika is with the Department of Community Health and Prevention, Dornsife School of Public Health, Drexel University, Philadelphia, PA.

Correspondence should be sent to Shiriki K. Kumanyika, Drexel University Dornsife School of Public Health, 3215 Market St, Philadelphia, PA 19104 (e-mail: kumanyika@drexel.edu). Reprints can be ordered at [http://www.ajph.org](http://www.ajph.org/) by clicking the “Reprints” link.

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**CONFLICTS OF INTEREST**

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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