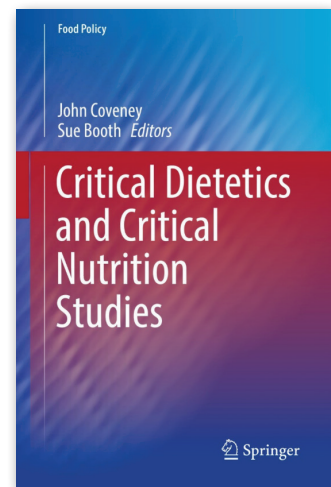


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# HOW TO TAKE OVER THE WORLD — ONE DISCIPLINE AT A TIME

## A BOOK REVIEW

**I**F I KNOW anything of substance about dietetics or the rigorous study of nutrition, I assure you, it's merely by accident. Therefore, when I was asked to read and review *Critical Dietetics and Critical Nutrition Studies*, edited by **John Coveney** and **Sue Booth**, I immediately feared I would be unqualified to review a research-level book on those topics, despite the assurances of my friend and colleague **Helen Pluckrose**. Fortunately, as I discovered in the course of reading this stunning volume, I had no reason to worry. The book—as its authors tell us their peer reviewers have noted about critical dietetics papers that precede this volume—contains not a single technical thing about dietetics and almost nothing of any relevance to the field.

It didn't take me long to figure out why I was invited to review this tangential curiosity to the field of dietetics: it's the word *critical*. To the degree I lack academic and professional competence in dietetics and nutrition, I do have useful “outsider-within” expertise in “critical” studies of other fields of study. This is because I have spent most of the last two years immersing myself in critical studies scholarship in order to understand it sufficiently well to discredit it on its glaring lack of merit. In light of that expertise, I actually find *Critical Dietetics and Critical Nutrition Studies*

to be a profoundly valuable book that I cannot recommend reading highly enough.

Don't mistake my intentions in that last sentence, of course. I give it my wholehearted recommendation for one reason: it is perhaps unsurpassed in its capacity to lay bare the ideology driving the insidious activist agenda that we might agree to call “critical studies” in general, or as my colleagues and I have called them elsewhere, “grievance studies”. *Critical Dietetics and Critical Nutrition Studies* is, insofar as I can say anything authoritative about dietetics and nutrition, a nearly perfectly worthless book for dietitians and nutritionists.

In keeping with **Rapoport**, I'll begin my earnest review of this book with what I think it gets right. I don't think that the “critical” approach is all bad, and the fifth chapter of this book gives perhaps the most sane and sober approach to the topic within healthcare in general that I've yet seen in print. Of course, so the reader is not misled, “critical” in the present context means something quite specific. As defined in the book, “*To be critical is to question the way things are so as to enhance or expand upon established epistemologies (ways of knowing) and bodies of knowledge. Often being critical is taken to be negative, but this is not a complete understanding. To be critical is to seek to transform and grow ways of thinking about any particular topic.*” Save for the term's misplaced focus upon epistemologies, the art of critical assessment to question the way things are can generally be a good thing.

My assessment is that the fifth chapter of *Critical Die-*

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Critical Theory and Grievance Studies



tetics and Critical Nutrition Studies approaches the kinds of critical questions that any professional practice should be asking and trying to answer by honest means. What the authors do not note explicitly in this definition of the term “critical” but do incorporate altogether too centrally in Chapter 5 is that to be critical in the present context is to be suspicious of—even cynical about—the role that any power dynamics may play. This, of course, is a reasonable concern in professional practice, however, and so, despite occasional awkwardness around the point, I find the question Chapter 5 raises to be mostly in line with the kinds of things I would hope a serious client- or patient-centered professional practice would be asking and attempting to address: “Does the inherent power dynamic between professional and, often worried, client or patient create a situation that might get in the way of providing optimal care or service?”

That said, the majority of the remaining chapters of the book are, to my assessment, not only inapposite to dietetics and nutritionists, they’re, as I described it on Twitter while reading the book, “an insane asylum in print.” Much in the first two chapters is dedicated to the project of casting doubt and aspersions upon the idea that scientific methodologies should be central to the study and practice of dietetics and nutrition, going so far as to stake a contrary position against what critical dietetics calls “nutritionism.” Nutritionism describes “the shifting focus toward the specific nutrients in food as providing some health benefits and the resulting emphasis by consumers to purchase food on this basis instead of other aspects such as taste, cost, or sociocultural meaning”. Put more simply, nutritionism is viewed as an ideology that nutrition and the relevant health benefits it provides depends upon nutrients. The attitude that nutritionism represents a problem is, in fact, an actively and deliberate anti-scientific attitude that, so far as I can tell, has no place in the theory or practice of dietetics or nutrition, and yet it is central to the critical dietetics mandate and the thesis of the present volume.

In place of this reliance upon scientific assessments of nutrients in food, their impacts on health, and how they can be incorporated into a functional diet that improves client and patient outcomes, critical dietetics and the critical study of nutrition recommends “other ways of knowing” like a particular type of political expedience and the sentimentality of lived experience. It could be somewhat reasonable that dietitians and nutritionists should be concerned with the ways their professional advice might cause their clients and patients to put an excessive, unrealistic or onerous emphasis on the nutritional value of their food and the impacts that might have on their health. Healthy food might be difficult to obtain, expensive, unpalatable, or unlikely to mesh with the cultural habits of those clients and patients, but acknowledging and accounting for this reasonable critical concern is hardly the request critical dietetics is making of practitioners.

To wit, nearly the whole of Chapters 6 through 8 express the need for dietitians and nutritionists to espouse a fairly radical political agenda concerning ecological sustainability, and Chapter 9 is nothing short of a naked Leninist screed—yes, in a book ultimately concerned with food distribution and rethinking nutrition—that cobbles to-

gether every sort of anti-capitalist talking point connected to food and diet that can be imagined.

Chapter 10 is an open call to place a radical Social Justice agenda squarely in the center of the dietetic and nutritionist professional scope of practice. Indeed, it bolsters this call while reinforcing its anti-scientific appeal to “other ways of knowing” by including an interview with Gloria Lucas, who bases her professional treatment on extraordinarily scientifically dubious concepts like that the dietary “traumas” of food colonialism can be transmitted epigenetically to marginalized and indigenous people through the generations. “One of my friends had a dietitian tell them that Mexican food was unhealthy. Please unlearn and dismantle all racism. Also, study historical trauma and post-traumatic slave syndrome. Food is political and it’s so tied to identity and dietitians need to honour that,” she insists.

**That said, the majority of the remaining chapters of the book are, to my assessment, not only inapposite to dietetics and nutritionists, they’re, as I described it on Twitter while reading the book, “an insane asylum in print.”**

#### Science should take a back seat to political agenda

Much of the rest of the book is concerned with dietetics education. This is par for the course in any book that takes a critical theoretic perspective on any activity, profession, or field of study. “Education is a political project,” they—not George Orwell—write. The agenda is straightforward. The educational system for dietetics and nutrition should be reorganized and remade to incorporate “other ways of knowing” than just the scientific and should instruct future professionals to become critical political activists within the context of their work. Though quoting at this length is rarely appropriate for a review of this type, this call simply must be read in the original to be believed:

*“Although we do not wholly reject the scientific method as a means of creating knowledge about the world, a critical orientation rejects the notion that it is even possible to produce knowledge that is objective, value-free, and untouched by human bias. A critical orientation similarly rejects the idea that any one way of creating knowledge about the world is superior to another or is even sufficient. In contrast to positivism, C[ritical]D[ietetics] is rooted in an interpretivist epistemology, or interpretivism. Interpretivism considers knowledge as inherently subjective and informed by the values, priorities, and worldviews of the individuals, institutions, and wider social, political, and environmental context that guided its creation. An interpretivist epistemology also sees phenomena as being open to multiple means of knowledge creation and interpretation that are equally legitimate. As such, CD draws on post-structuralism and feminist science (two other windows) that hold that there is not one truth that can be generated about any single thing, that multiple truths are possible depending on who is asking and for what purpose, and that knowledge is not apolitical even if it is considered positivist (i.e. value neutral or*

*unbiased). Because humans generate knowledge about phenomena, and humans bring their own beliefs, biases, and assumptions to their knowledge generating processes, the knowledge that humans generate is always subjective.”*

Based upon my own work in gaining demonstrated expertise in critical approaches, not least in “poststructuralism and feminist science,” I can say with great authority that what this astonishing paragraph means is that they wish to venerate believing whatever they want to believe. Don’t be misled into believing that this means that anyone can believe whatever they want, however. Part of the critical approach to “interpretivist epistemology” is that only those interpretations that accord with the correct political agenda are legitimate, as others are “problematic,” and “equally legitimate” here means that they can be asserted on equal epistemological footing to the results of careful scientific inquiry. That may sound almost acceptable until one realizes that a consideration of the political adds interpretivist epistemological weight for critical theorists, which means that “other ways of knowing” that happen to align with the political agendas of the critical theorists automatically win out over scientific methodologies for producing “knowledge” about the world. Put another way, this book is advocating for science in dietetics and nutrition to take a back seat to the political and social agendas of critical dietitians and nutritionists.

#### A full and hearty recommendation

Perhaps at this point, you have forgotten that I am giving this book my full and hearty recommendation, given how irrelevant and bad it plainly is for the related disciplines of dietetics and nutrition. That’s because thus far I have been focusing on the book’s genuine lack of merits for professionals within the realms of dietetics and nutrition. I recommend this book to everyone who is in my usual audience, which is to say anyone who wants to understand what the pernicious ideology behind “critical” approaches truly thinks and how it infects and parasitizes other fields of human endeavor. As the last sentence of the book tells us, the point of this book is to advance the agenda that *“dietitians could and should play a central role as advocates and activists in advancing social justice through social and political change.”* For any audience concerned or confused about the agenda of today’s critical theorists, much in this book is of unparalleled worth.

The reason I offer such an unreserved recommendation for my preferred audience is because *Critical Dietetics and Critical Nutrition Studies* makes the “critical” agenda more clear than any of the hundreds of journal articles and dozens of other books I have read on the subject in the past several years. Rarely can one find such clear declarations as *“Critical Dietetics is informed by a post-structural epistemology wherein truth is understood as being in constant flux and knowledge creation as requiring multiple, differently situated perspectives, approaches, and methods.”* Hardly anywhere do they openly admit that journals dedicated to the discipline refused to publish their work as “not relevant to dietetic practice” followed by an explanation that they started their own

## SHORT NOTE ON THE REVIEWER

James A. Lindsay is a world renowned scholar and writer who has invested several years of thorough examination of the postmodern Critical Theory in the Grievance Studies in order to expose the cognitive corruption and political zealotry that permeate these movements, sumptuous of complacent moral claims, yet short of profound academic justification and intellectual rigour. As an avid writer in the *Areo Magazine* (<https://areomagazine.com/>) and a frequent guest at thought-provoking talk shows such as the **Rubin Report** and **Joe Rogan Experience** (<https://bit.ly/2PPL9Ko>), James A. Lindsay has gained distinction as a torchbearer for freedom of expression, reason, the scientific method and the ideals of the Enlightenment. His claim to fame before a larger audience was established when co-authoring the (in)famous hoax: ‘the Grievance Studies Project’ [see *Dietist-aktuell*#2.19, p19 or <https://bit.ly/2zObwaX>]. James A. Lindsay has also written several books, e.g. *“Everybody Is Wrong About God”* (with **Peter Boghossian**) and *“Dot, Dot, Dot: Infinity Plus God Equals Folly.”* / **Magnus Forslin**

#### Suggested readings:

- **Are Academics Cowards?** The Grip of Grievance Studies and the Sunk Costs of Academic Pursuit [<https://bit.ly/2EkyYyd>]
- **Postmodern Religion and the Faith of Social Justice** [<https://bit.ly/2SfqgWX>]
- **Identity Politics Does Not Continue the Work of the Civil Rights Movements** [<https://bit.ly/2OnVfBF>]

academic journal, *the Journal of Critical Dietetics*, to circumvent this problem. Following our friend Bret Weinstein, my colleagues and I have called this “critical” practice “idea laundering.” This is a process by which agendas, prejudices, and mere opinions can be laundered through an academic peer-review process in a dedicated journal and come out the other side with every appearance of genuine and applicable knowledge.

**This is par for the course in any book that takes a critical theoretic perspective on any activity, profession, or field of study. “Education is a political project,” they—not George Orwell—write.**

*Critical Dietetics and Critical Nutrition Studies* is, in this sense, a great and informative read that provides an excellent foundation to the critical approach as well as to its applications to dietetics and nutrition studies. People who are interested in understanding how the critical approach functions—especially dietitians and nutritionists who now should have to expect to fight this ideological agenda in their own work—are strongly encouraged to read this striking text and take its contents extremely seriously, if not at all literally.

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