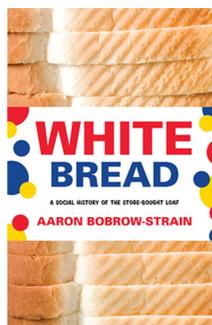


Review: White Bread

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[Bobrow-Strain, Aaron. *White Bread: A Social History of the Store-Bought Loaf*. Beacon Press, 2012. ISBN: 978-080704467-4.](#)

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Aaron Bobrow-Strain in *White Bread* follows specific dreams of “good” bread in the US’s 20th century to demonstrate how these ideals, seemingly nutritional judgements, were shaped by politics, economy and social issues. The book is organized by those ideals, rather than chronology, and presents dominant and countercultural discourses side by side. This structure, although making the stories a bit hard to follow, highlights how diverging ideas of good bread coexist and recur. For instance, contradictions around whole wheat bread come and go—and re-surge over and again. This poses an interesting thought experiment: what could have been the potential alternatives to Wonder Bread if different kinds of decisions had been made?

Chapter 1 opens the book by exploring how industrial bread production came to be preferred over small-scale bread baking in home kitchens and so-called cellar bakeries. The main problems with the cellar bakeries were dishonest practices (cutting the flour with cheap filler), disregard for hygiene, and employing immigrants, ‘polluted’ labor. The new industrial bakeries made the bread-making process transparent: people were invited to come and witness the sanitary baking in factories where machines did most of the work and the few workers were meticulously chosen for their health, habits and moral character (p. 41).

Chapter 2 explains that the resulting factory-produced white loaves, equal in size, uniform in shape, pre-sliced with precision, were the perfect example of the modernist aesthetic. These were considered far superior to home-baked bread that always varied in look and taste. No mother baking at home could match the industrial bakers’ control over ingredients, formulas and production processes. To choose to eat white bread was to participate in the process of ‘building a better nation’ (p. 64). And the whiter the bread, the better, because whiteness symbolized (racial) purity and control over disorder.

But support for white bread was not unanimous, and some even called it ‘the staff of death’ (p. 73).

Chapter 3 presents three alternatives to the white bread movement. First, there was Sylvester Graham, the charismatic spokesman praising whole wheat bread baked from freshly milled locally grown grains. Graham’s teachings were further popularized by Alfred W. McCann who combined a Graham-influenced diet with ‘relentless exercise’ and ‘heroic fasts’ (p. 91). Many decades later, Christian Vande Velde, a cyclist from Chicago, promoted giving up (gluten-containing) bread altogether (p. 73). Initially popular among other athletes, gluten-free living is now all the rage.

Chapter 4 shifts the focus from the health of the individual to the health of the nation. On the eve of World War II, malnutrition was a serious issue in the US. White bread was now the primary source of calories for Americans; the easiest way to improve the nutrition of the population was to improve white bread—synthetically. Enter enriched white bread and the golden age of Wonder Bread in the 1950s and 60s (p. 109).

Chapter 5 demonstrates the importance of white bread in US foreign policy. In the 1940s, Americans were advised to save wheat to help starving (European) populations. Offering bread to the malnourished was seen as a way of supporting the war effort, fighting communism and securing democracy. The US was to be seen as the land of plenty. The export of industrial agriculture and industrial food (‘dietary imperialism’) during the Cold War radically changed the way the world ate (p. 135). White bread diet was promoted as nutritionally and politically superior (with great luck in some countries, such as Mexico), but this did not have universal global appeal (rice remained the staple food in Japan).

Chapter 6 documents how white bread, once the aspiration of many, is now considered white trash food, the icon of poor choices and narrow lives (p. 164), while the artisanal sourdough loaf is the marker of educated and ethical consumption.

Bobrow-Strain concludes his book with a call to problematize the preconceived boundaries of good and bad (p. 194) and unhelpful dreams of purity and naturalness (p.195) that reinforce social hierarchies. He acknowledges his own prejudices in considering that artisanal loaf as superior to Wonder Bread. He is prescient in holding up fermentation as the most progressive frame for thinking about the social world and food politics through the mindset of fermentation. It is a ‘natural’ process of making sourdough bread, but not ‘pure’ and ‘controllable’, as it involves the microbiome of yeast and bacteria that we cannot really see. Fermentation requires us to live with and benefit from impurity.

White Bread’s focus enables the author to deal with a wide range of issues, ranging from foreign policy (Green Revolution in Mexico) to national politics (creating a healthy nation through bread) to immigration and feminism. There is plenty of food for thought here, but the author advances no major theoretical arguments. Instead, *White Bread* addresses complex issues through food and makes these more relatable and ‘digestible.’

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