Book Review by Sandrine Dury.  

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In this book, Aya Kimura, Associate Professor of Women’s Studies, University of Hawai’i at Manoa (USA), examines how nutrition structures the meanings of and prescriptions for the “world food problem”. She underlines the domination of technical framing of problems and solutions concerning hunger that obscure more complex political points of view and the agency of women.

The book is written in an educational way and includes many examples from a one-year field study in Indonesia in 2004 as well as a long list of references. It is divided in eight chapters. The first three concern the central thesis of the book: a complex collusion from scientists, government, donors and corporations claims that the real principal form of “hunger” is caused by micronutrient deficiency. The same pervasive and powerful network of stakeholders advocates simple technical fixes such as fortification. The voice of victims (women, children and mothers) is absent in both the definition of the hunger problem and its solution. The following four chapters provide illustrative case studies in Indonesia. She develops her arguments throughout the book, zooming from global to local ideas and policies and vice versa, moving from academic to corporate realms, and examining everything from international development funding agencies to Indonesian kitchens. Her central area of interest is the developing world, but her analysis is relevant for the rest of the planet and constitutes a useful complement to the work of other scholars such as Marion Nestle (2013) for the United States.

**Micronutrient deficiency and fortification, nutritionism’s latest avatar, fit perfectly with the neoliberal governance of development**

Kimura shows how “hidden hunger” or “micronutrient deficiency”— the lack of proper micronutrients (vitamins and minerals) — became central in the 1990s in the international food policy community to describe the “food problem” in the developing world, and why fortification (the addition of micronutrients to processed food such as noodles, wheat flour and cooking oil) and biofortification (engineering plant biology so that plants contain more micronutrients) became the most celebrated instruments to address the problem, rather than other solutions such as changes in food systems. She argues that “this micronutrient turn was driven by ‘nutritionism’ and that it ought to be understood as a manifestation of a scientized view of food insecurity in developing countries”.

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Food as a source of nutrients, food for an active, healthy life - or how rid the food question of social or political issues.

Nutritionism refers to the pervasive and reductionist view that food is primarily a vehicle for delivering nutrients. Health improvement becomes the foremost purpose of food and the act of eating. It denies the other individual (pleasure, identity), social (power, status, relations with others) and cultural meanings of food and eating. Referring to Michel Foucault, Kimura situates nutritionism as a “technique of power”, part of the long history of problematising people’s food and bodies. Nutritionism naturalises and depoliticises the food problem. It defines it as chemical and individual by calculating the poorness of particular diets as the discrepancy between an individual’s nutrient intake and scientifically-set standards. It frames the vocabulary and solutions and as a result, the proposed solutions take specific “simple” forms such as educational programmes (to correct bad habits) or the delivery of pills, fortified foods or biofortified crops, instead of offering wider solutions that would require a broader vision of nutrition problems (including access, social differentiation, etc.). The domination of experts as the only people capable of diagnosing the hidden hunger that is invisible to lay people prevents a democratic process in food politics. Kimura also explicitly refers to agrofood studies, which examine the political economy of food, the history of agriculture’s industrialisation and its geopolitical structure. Using Harriet Friedmann’s and McMichael’s studies of food regimes, she analyses the rise of hidden hunger, fortification and biofortification in an international, historicised and political context - the neo-liberal framework. This same global context explains why fortification is now chosen over supplementation (micronutrients given as pills), which used to be the favoured solution of many international organisations. Supplementation requires significant government support while fortification is deemed to cost less and can be part of efficient public-private partnerships. Again, in the current neo-liberal ideology, private partners are perceived as more efficient service deliverers than governments.

The role of the World Bank and the economics of nutrition

Kimura also shows how the World Bank (WB) became “a formidable powerhouse in pushing the fortification agenda in international development” (p 47) and a major funder of many different projects. Kimura underlines the shift in the international lending institutions towards nutrition and suggests that it is due to the effect of studies on the productivity impacts of malnutrition, following development theories emphasising “human capital” (p. 49). The fact that the World Bank became a strong advocate of fortification is interrelated with this “economized view of nutrition”, where “nutrition is seen as an investment and malnutrition as economic loss” (p 20-54). The WB has immense power in terms of funding international development, but also has significant epistemological power to impose certain policy assumptions and frameworks. In its 1994 publication, Enriching Lives (WB, 1994), it developed tools such as the “disability adjusted life years” (DALYs) to estimate numerically the “return on investment on micronutrients”. Kimura challenges this indicator, which gives lower value to the life of the very young, the elderly and the disabled. This economic view is spreading far beyond economists and the World Bank, and is preventing other approaches from being developed.
Charismatic nutrients or how to communicate with ‘magic bullets’ to retain visibility, influence and position and divert money from health to agriculture

Kimura discusses different historical examples of “charismatic nutrients”, so called in reference to Max Weber’s theory of charismatic authority. These nutrients (proteins, Vitamin A, micro-nutriments, etc.) have been touted as the key to combating Third World food problems at different historical periods. They emerged as icons, with their associated solutions, and after a while, disappeared from debates, replaced by other “magic bullets”. She underlines the contingency of pairs of problems and solutions. For instance, in the 1960s, protein deficiency was seen as the top priority to tackle hunger in the Third World and the distribution of skimmed milk was one of the main solutions. Protein-rich food products were engineered and different projects all over the developing world were funded to create and distribute them. However, these nutritional fixes all ultimately failed for various reasons, and both the description of the problem and its related consumption standards – e.g. minimum requirements per person – changed. She refers to the “nutritional isolationism” that prevailed in the late 1980s when multisectoral approaches (e.g. joint efforts in development projects with agriculture and education) were considered to have failed (p 29). At that time, charismatic nutrients helped nutritionists increase their visibility and importance in the complex world of the food science and development community, where several overlapping jurisdictions including agriculture, population and nutrition compete with each other. In chapter seven, she addresses the subject of Golden Rice, a variety of rice that has been biofortified, i.e. genetically engineered so that its endosperm contains beta-carotene. It is an example of a hypervisible product that is never actually used by the target group (poor women). Kimura states that it was an opportunity for international agricultural research to divert funding from the health sector, the international funding of which exceeded agricultural funding in the 2000s (p. 145). It was also an excellent means to give biotechnology moral virtue. “Biofortification and golden rice embody benevolent biotechnology - biotechnology that benefits people in the underdeveloped world by helping them to produce more food and more nutritious food”.

Women: the victims, the culprits and the solution

Kimura addresses the links between nutritionism, hidden hunger, fortification policies and women. She uses the framework of feminist food studies to examine the power of women in shaping food and nutrition policies. Women are usually invisible in these policies, although it is they who produce and prepare food and feed people all over the world. And if they are visible, it is because of their “bad habits” (cooking ability, food practices and breastfeeding patterns) that need to be changed. They need to be educated because they are considered the source of the problem. Kimura draws a parallel between population and food, since in both cases, women and women’s bodies are a “key site of state policing and surveillance”.

Women are often presented as victims of micronutrient deficiencies (“biological victimhood”). Kimura discusses the consequences of the situation in which women, despite officially being part of the international agenda of world food policies since the 1990s, are nevertheless considered as not reliable to apply (or to comply with) the nutritional guidelines that would prevent them and their children from suffering from micronutrient deficiency. For proponents of fortification, it is thus much easier to rely on
fortification than on any other strategies (supplementation, home gardening) that require nutrition education and the compliance of women. Kimura develops the idea that women are, therefore, at the same time the centre of interest as bodies and lists of biological parameters (height, weight, blood parameters, pregnant or not, etc.) and obfuscated as social and political persons. She advocates for food policies that consider women as social individuals who can actively contribute to the policies that target them. The “visibility of women as biologically vulnerable blinds us to the key social dimension of vulnerability” (pp 54-61).

With regard to Indonesia, she highlights the view of women as workers who must be well fed and controlled to be more productive in the various factories that support the country’s economic growth. She emphasises the opposition between women’s poor working conditions, the denial of their basic rights of association and representation, and the government’s and developers’ will to provide them with nutrients and good health (Health Without Justice) (p. 80).

**Fortification of wheat flour in a country of rice and cassava eaters and how supply can change demand/expectations**

In chapters 4 to 7, Kimura develops three Indonesian cases. Firstly, she explains how the global concern about nutrient deficiency is interwoven with local concern.

She explains how the wheat flour industry has developed under the reign of Soharto, in a country of cassava and rice eaters. She argues that the fortification of instant noodles and wheat flour was driven not only by corporate interest but also by nutritionists (p. 95). She then gives a very detailed description of the local political history of the fortification of monosodium glutamate and instant noodles and the invention of smart baby food.

She reports the findings of interviews she conducted with poor women in urban slums (p. 123-138), showing the women’s willingness to buy commercial baby food. She shows how women face conflicting nutrition recommendations from old governmental slogans, health workers and now television advertisements, and how women tend to believe that they need commercial, fortified products although they cannot buy them because of their limited budget. They begin to doubt the quality of the food they give their children, including their breastmilk. This anxiety about food and women’s role as nurturers is exacerbated by nutritionism, which imposes new doubts and stress upon women and mothers.

**References:**
