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## Commentary

# Nutritionism, Commercialization and Food

## Comment on “Buying Health: The Costs of Commercialism and an Alternative Philosophy”

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### Abstract

In “Buying Health: the Costs of Commercialization and an Alternative Philosophy”, Larry R. Churchill and Shelley C. Churchill discuss the commercialization of health and, in particular, the commercialization of nutrition. In this commentary on their article, I draw a connection between Churchill and Churchill’s account of the commercialization of nutrition and Michael Pollan’s critique of “nutritionism”. I also offer a friendly amendment to Churchill and Churchill’s account, suggesting that the commercialization of nutrition is not a monolithic experience but it is rather widely challenged.

### Keywords

Nutrition, Food Ethics, Food Studies

In “Buying Health: the Costs of Commercialization and an Alternative Philosophy”, Larry R. Churchill and Shelley C. Churchill discuss the commercialization of health—that is, “the ways commercial thinking and a commercial sense of ourselves have displaced more holistic understandings of health” (1). They consider, in particular, the commercialization of nutrition:

*“While food has been commercial for decades, what is increasingly prevalent is the commercialization of nutrition itself, with “nutritious food” as the downstream product. Success equates to getting the most money from nutrition (and its component parts of vitamins, minerals, protein, fats, carbohydrates and fiber) through the quickest means possible” (1).*

The commercialization of nutrition is contrasted with a radically different approach to nutrition, nutrition as part of holistic health. Nutrition as part of holistic health involves, for example, seeing food as “most nourishing when eaten whole” and taking into account that nutrition “works best in its natural state and organic context”. In contrast, a commercialized approach to nutrition breaks food down into “nutritional parts” that one can mix and match. For example, on the commercialized approach to nutrition, nutrients are extracted from the sources where they naturally occur and are turned into supplements, or are added to other foods that are then marketed as a “healthy” food. Whereas the commercialized approach to nutrition would advocate taking calcium supplements, seeing nutrition as part of holistic health would involve eating calcium-rich foods, such

as kale or yogurt.

One of the most pernicious aspects of the commercialization of nutrition, according to Churchill and Churchill, is that it reinforces “the displacement of ourselves as the ultimate authority of our own health”. When nutrition is a commercial product, a nutritious diet is something we buy—we buy food products because marketing has positioned them as something good to buy, and because other “experts” have reinforced that they are nutritious food products. These dubious authorities displace “the most tried and true method of becoming healthy”, which is “individual discovery and observation”. Churchill and Churchill assert that “In the end, we cannot really buy our way to good health. We have to discover it” (1).

Churchill and Churchill’s critique of the commercialization of nutrition resonates deeply with the critique of “nutritionism” found in the work of journalist and food writer Michael Pollan. I discuss this connection in the first part of this commentary. In the second part of this commentary, I offer a friendly amendment to Churchill and Churchill’s account, suggesting that the commercialization of nutrition is not a monolithic experience but it is rather widely challenged.

### Nutritionism and the commercialization of nutrition

Like Churchill and Churchill, Pollan argues that Americans’ approach to nutrition is profoundly misguided (2–4). This approach is good for the food industry but not actually good for human health. Pollan bemoans what he calls nutritionism:

*“In the case of nutritionism, the widely shared but unexamined assumption is that the key to understanding food is indeed the nutrient. From this basic premise flow several others. Since nutrients, as compared with foods, are invisible and therefore slightly mysterious, it falls to the scientists (and to the journalists through whom the scientists speak) to explain the hidden reality of foods to us. To enter a world in which you dine on unseen nutrients, you need lots of expert help” (2).*

For those who embrace nutritionism, the key to healthy eating is to optimize the nutrients contained in one’s diet—for example, to eat the right balance of macronutrients (fat, carbohydrate, and protein) and the optimal amount of micronutrients (for example, calcium). This can be achieved by eating whole foods that contain those nutrients or by eating processed foods that have those nutrients added to them. As Pollan points out, “any

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qualitative distinctions between processed foods and whole foods disappear when your focus is on quantifying the nutrients they contain (or, more precisely, the known nutrients). This is a great boon for manufacturers of processed food, and it helps explain why they have been so happy to get on with the nutritionism program” (2).

Pollan’s critique of nutritionism has several points of connection with Churchill and Churchill’s critique of the commercialization of nutrition. The nutritionist approach, like the commercial approach to nutrition, isolates “nutrition” out from whole foods and the natural context in which these foods appear. According to nutritionism and the commercial approach to nutrition, “nutrition” is found in nutrients, which can simply be added to different food products in order to render them nutritious. Nutritionism, we might say, is the quasi-scientific ideology that underlies the commercial approach to nutrition.

Taking a nutritionist approach to healthy eating—that is, trying to eat the optimal amount of nutrients—requires following the advice of scientists about what the optimal levels of nutrients are. But, Pollan argues, nutritional science has consistently gotten it wrong. So rather than trying to optimize our nutrient intake by eating food products with added nutrients, Pollan suggests that we should simply eat a variety of whole foods. Or better yet, we should adopt traditional cuisines, which are time-tested repositories of nutritional wisdom:

*“Before the modern food era—and before nutritionism— people relied for guidance about what to eat on their national or ethnic or regional cultures... Of course when it comes to food, culture is really just a fancy word for Mom, the figure who typically passes on the food ways of the group—food ways that, although they were never “designed” to optimize health (we have many reasons to eat the way we do), would not have endured if they did not keep eaters alive and well.... Eat more like the French. Or the Japanese. Or the Italians. Or the Greeks. Confounding factors aside, people who eat according to the rules of a traditional food culture are generally healthier than we are. Any traditional diet will do: if it weren’t a healthy diet, the people who follow it wouldn’t still be around... Let culture be your guide, not science” (2).*

What Pollan writes in this passage both resonates with, and departs from, Churchill and Churchill’s recommendation that individuals must discover for themselves, through trial and error, what kind of diet promotes their health. In a point of departure from Churchill and Churchill, Pollan thinks that traditional food cultures have already done this trial and error for us—traditional cuisines have been subjected to generations of trial and error. We ought to embrace these cuisines; there is no need to try and figure it out for ourselves. But the underlying agreement between Pollan and Churchill and Churchill is that our modern approach to nutrition attributes authority over what we eat to sources that do not deserve this authority—the science of nutritionism, and the food industry—and that truly healthy eating requires reclaiming other sources of knowledge.

### The commercialization of whole food

Though the primary point of this commentary on Churchill and Churchill’s paper has been to explain the fruitful connections to Pollan’s work, I will end by suggesting a friendly amendment to Churchill and Churchill’s account. Their article might be read as implying that the commercialization of nutrition is monolithic, or at least that it is monolithic within the United States. However, there is widespread and burgeoning opposition to the commercialization of nutrition, most famously expressed by Michael Pollan but also echoed in the work of other food

writers. A growing number of people are opting out of the commercialization of nutrition, at least to some extent. They are eating a diet that has less processed food and more whole foods. They are treating food not as a source of specific nutrients that will optimize health, but rather treating food as a source of pleasure and treating eating as a social experience that is integrated into a holistic approach to well-being. In other words, they are engaged in nutrition as part of holistic health.

But the manner in which some people have opted-out of the commercialization of nutrition has been critiqued. Simplistically put, the commercialization of nutrition has been replaced by the commercialization of whole food for a segment of affluent Americans. Providing consumers with whole foods and other “alternative” foods perceived as healthy is a big business. For example, as Guthman and others have noted, organic agricultural has been transformed from a counter-cultural movement motivated by sustainability and opposition to industrial agriculture into an industry that is dominated by large corporations (5,6). Organic food is referred to as “yuppie chow”—food that is only affordable to affluent consumers and is a status symbol. Organic food is a new site of commercialization—that is, a new arena in which the profit motive, rather than other values, determines what happens. Rather than individuals producing organic food out of concern for the environment or other values, corporations produce organic food in order to maximize their profits.

It is a complex and interesting question, in my opinion, whether the commercialization of alternative food is necessarily ethically problematic. Certainly, alternative food can be commercialized in ethically problematic ways—for example, when corporations show disregard for environmental concerns or mistreat their workers. But is there something intrinsically problematic about the commercialization of alternative food? Given the indissoluble connection between food and health, is there something intrinsically problematic about the commercialization of food? Will the commercialization of food necessarily entail a problematic commercialization of health? These are just some of the questions that Churchill and Churchill’s interesting article raised in mind. I hope that Churchill and Churchill might take up these questions in their future work.

### Ethical issues

Not applicable.

### Competing interests

The author declares that she has no competing interests.

### Author’s contribution

AB is the single author of the manuscript.

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