

The Career of the Calorie. Bodies, Selves and Ability in the USA, 1850-1930

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This research project traces the career of the calorie in the USA between 1850 and 1930. It asks how the calorie emerged in metabolic experiments and dietary practices and unfolded as a technology of subjectivation.

When calorie counting emerged as a white, middle-class dieting practice in the late 1910s, the calorie was still a rather new concept even in nutrition science. Since the 1880s, scientists had begun to experiment with foods values and human metabolism, establishing the term calorie as measure of the heat value of foods. The calorie's notion of a precise calculability of bodily efficiency was especially attractive in the Progressive Era. It corresponded with the contemporary "search for order", as Robert Wiebe has called it. In times of an advancing industrialism, migration and urbanization, Americans turned to scientific expertise and new methods of measuring and classifying in order to understand and improve bodies and society.

The productivity of the calorie for the biopolitical order can hardly be underestimated. By providing an allegedly objective and scientific view on food, the calorie suggested a precise comparison of the diets of different classes and "races." Caloric knowledge was productive in a range of diverse fields. It shaped the nutritional management of factories, prisons, schools, as well as armies, yielded knowledge on eating 'right,' distinct practices of bodies, the materiality of caloric tables as well as meal sizes, nutritional programs and institutions, and not least individuals that understood themselves in relation to the calorie.

By examining the knowledge, institutionalizations, and subjects that the calorie brought forth, I am asking how the calorie contributed to arranging and regulating modern societies around the ideal of an able, self-responsible self. My questions include: In how far did the "invention" and popularization of the calorie emerged from, established or contributed (to) the ideal of the self-responsible subject by providing a possibility and making it imperative to individually measuring and controlling one's food intake? What kind of bodies and abilities were connected to the new caloric knowledge and practices of measuring, counting, and dieting? How did caloric knowledge and notions of health and ability produced and how were they shaped and stabilized in laboratory work, practices of measuring, sets of (administrative) rules and policies, curricula, and a wide range of nutritional programs and measures (such as the establishment of agricultural stations, nutrition curricula in schools and colleges, food aid, the organization of hospitals, armies, prisons, etc.)? In short: My research project takes the calorie as a lens for historicizing the formation of the social via ability.