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**Susan Levine.** *School Lunch Politics: The Surprising History of America's Favorite Welfare Program.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008. x + 250 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-05088-1; $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-691-14619-5.

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In a recent article published in the *Educational Researcher*, Marcus B. Weaver-Hightower, Associate Professor of Educational Foundations and Research at the University of North Dakota, ponders the reluctance of scholars of education to study food and food practices. In his literature review, Weaver-Hightower points to contributions made by historians (including Susan Levine), sociologists, public policy scholars, and nutritionists. Historians of education, however, are absent. Listing several contributing factors, Weaver-Hightower concludes that âthe most basic hindrance to the study of school-based food–at least in the United States–is that educators often view food as utilitarian, a necessary service if schools are to keep children over the lunch hour.â In other words, food âis largely viewed as incidental.â[1] Levine, on the other hand, perhaps overstates the case for the importance of school food when one considers that children spend more time outside of school than in school. But taken together, these authors make the case for school food as a fact of social and educational policy as well as a rewarding subject for serious scholarly research. Currently, the subject of school lunch programs gets little respect. In fact, I was tempted to title this review âGiving New Meaning to âFixing Lunch.ââ But in addition to respect, the school lunch program has received little attention from historians of education. However, this new book by Levine, professor of history at the University of Illinois at Chicago and the author of *Laborâs True Woman: Carpet Weavers, Industrialization and Labor Reform in the Gilded Age* (1984) and *Degrees of Equality: The American Association of University Women and the Challenge of Twentieth-Century Feminism* (1995), may spur historians of education to scholarly action. *School Lunch Politics* is a title in the Princeton University Press series Politics and Society in Twentieth-Century America, edited by William Chafe, Gary Gerstle, Linda Gordon, and Julian Zelizer. The book is divided into eight chapters plus an introduction and epilogue. The focus of the book is the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), and Levine describes it as âone of the nationâs most popular social welfare programsâ (p. 2). In fact, Levine goes so far as to say that school food programs were instrumental in âshaping American health, welfare, and equalityâ (p. 2). At odds in this contested terrain are nutrition reformers, â[M]ainly women–who struggled mightily to translate nutrition science into public policyâ; âfarm-bloc legislators and Department of Agriculture officials who created the institutional infrastructure for a national school lunch programâ; and âpolitical leaders responding to the demands and interests of their constituents

as well as to the popular appeal of childrenâs healthâ (p. 5). In reaction to increasing immigration and urbanization, Progressive reformers concentrated not only on the incidence of physical and mental disease, but their perceived need to bring immigrants and rural migrants into an Anglo-American culture. According to Levine, food became as important as language, cleanliness, and Protestantism.

Levineâs focus is the politicization of school lunch. She traces its history from early twentieth-century science and reform of childrenâs lunches to the connection between childrenâs lunches and agricultural surpluses during the 1930s. In 1946, the NSLP was a federally funded permanent program. By the 1970s and 1980s, school meals had become âa major poverty programâ (p. 5). In chapter 1, âA Diet for Americans,â Levine discusses the Progressive Era roots of school lunch programs. Women were at the forefront of this newly emerging field that focused on the nutritional efficiency of food and the need to Americanize immigrants by changing their eating habits. Professional home economists advised volunteers on the elements of âhealthy eating,â at the same time contributing to the growth of a field that would become known as home economics (p. 6). The field of ânutrition scienceâ (an amalgamation of science and pseudo-science) was linked metaphorically to the health of the nation (p. 11). As went the citizenry, so went the country and by the 1920s, the school lunch provided the civil component of the nationâs health.

The next chapter, âWelfare for Farmers and Children,â studies the effects of the economic depression and New Deal legislation on the fledgling food reformersâ agenda. During this period, the school lunch program became a means of dispersing surplus food. When agricultural prices fell to record lows as a result of the economic depression, policymakers found a way for the government to purchase surplus food and send it to hungry and malnourished children. It seemed to be mutually beneficial. School attendance among the poor increased with the promise of a hot meal. This ushered in a new feature of school architecture: the school lunchroom. Struggling to keep up with the demands, states began to use tax money to offset the cost of milk and food. Interestingly, it seems to have bypassed local control and gone directly to state administration. The connection among surplus food, welfare policy, and the schools was forged. But surplus meant that, as every director of a food pantry could verify, there were supplies of some items and not others, which left little hope for a balanced diet. The emphasis on nutrition was forgotten, but food reformers clung to the hope that nutrition and healthy diets could be taught through the hidden curriculum of the lunch program.

Chapter 3, âNutrition Standards and Standard Diets,â follows the expansion of the federal government into school lunch programs and the development of meal guidelines. Just as the United States worried about the mental abilities of World War I recruits, they now worried about the nutrition of service personnel and civilians during a time of anticipated shortages during World War II. Levine points out the pivotal role of sociologist Margaret Mead and nutritionist Lydia Roberts in the development of Recommended Daily Allowances and associated policies. The food program began to be institutionalized when federal contracts required schools to provide free lunches for indigent families.

The book hits its stride in chapters 4 and 5, entitled âA National School Lunch Programâ and âIdeals and Realities in the Lunchroom,â respectively. The two chapters establish the political battleground over the development of the NSLP in 1946. For the first decade and a half, the NSLP was primarily an outlet for surplus commodities. Southern Democrats, although supportive, opposed the federal role in the programâs administration. At issue was eligibility–poor children and African American children were largely excluded as the result of local control. According to the author, âDuring the 1950s the NSLP reached only about one-third of Americaâs schoolchildren. What is more, the program utterly failed to provide free meals for poor children who arguably were in most need of federal nutrition assistanceâ (p. 8). Nevertheless, the program gained widespread popular support during the 1950s as a symbol of democracy during the Cold War. This would change during the 1960s, as attention was drawn to the extreme poverty that existed in some regions of the United States.

Chapter 6, âNo Free Lunch,â is particularly interesting. In this chapter, Levine explores the awakening of the national conscience to the problem of poverty in the United States. During the administration of President Kennedy, liberals found a new ally when Kennedy reestablished the Food Stamp Act. Subsequently, President Johnsonâs War on Poverty gave a boost to the anti-hunger and anti-poverty groups that began to form after the publication of Michael Harringtonâs *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (1962) and the rhetoric of the civil rights movement in the South. Unwilling to give up the jewel in its crown, the U.S. Department of Agriculture resisted efforts to associate the program with social welfare. It became a debate over protecting farmers

or feeding poor children. A milestone finally occurred in 1966 with the passage of the Child Nutrition Act that appropriated funds directly for free lunches and established a pilot School Breakfast Program for poor children. Although it was a breakthrough, the administration by state and local officials was hit-and-miss. Largely ignoring the poor and racial minorities, the program ushered in the debate over who deserved to receive the food. It would mirror prejudicial attitudes and introduce the stigma still associated with the program. The question became where to draw the poverty line and introduced the âculture of povertyâ theory whereby, according to Daniel Patrick Moynihan, poverty caused ââstructural changes in personality and behaviorââ (p. 123).

In the last chapter, âLet Them Eat Ketchup,â Levine shows readers what can happen to a good idea when competing interests compromise it. The popularity of the program–and the underfunding provided by the federal government–forced local school districts into difficult decisions. They tried to fund it by raising the cost of full-price meals, but the paying students fled the program, further stigmatizing it. By the 1970s, schools were entering into agreements with fast food providers in order to afford the program. Nutrition concerns were also compromised, most famously when President Reagan suggested that ketchup could be counted as a vegetable.

In the epilogue, Levine further explores the effect of fast food on poor children. School lunches had become big business for food service providers, who were increasingly forced to rely on them by the growing numbers of students who qualified and the shrinking public school budgets. âPrivatization, fast-food, and national brands dramatically altered the atmosphere in school lunchroomsâ (p. 186). Added to this was the power of savvy advertisers that drew paying children back to the lunchroom. Today, the âJunk Food Warsâ pit reformers against children who want to buy food and sodas from vending machines, and the school lunch is big business.

Although the author provides a sound account of the historical antecedents leading to the school lunch programs, I would argue that its origins could also be traced to the work of the Jeanes teachers. Originated by philanthropist Anna T. Jeanes, the ranks of the Jeanes supervising industrial teachers were filled largely by African American women. Beginning in 1907, the Jeanes teachers worked throughout the rural South to help poor families develop better eating habits, grow community gardens, and improve sanitation. They not only assisted teachers but also contributed to community development. This is particularly germane since Levine documents the clash between conservative and Progressive legislators over whether feeding African Americans would violate states' rights and erode local control.

As the title indicates, this book views the school lunch through the lens of U.S. politics. In so doing, it situates the school lunchroom within the larger context of school culture. Historians of education should find it to be a provocative study that questions the role of the public school in a new and interesting way. Unfortunately, several editing problems are not only annoying but also interfere with an understanding of the content. For example, âthe fiscal problems that made privatizationâ; âEven McCarthy, however, to propose a universal free lunch programâ; and âGeorgia sent no money to Tailaferro County [*sic*]â (pp. 126, 135, 178). Nevertheless, the book is sure to spur scholarly interest in school food as a serious subject.

Note

[1]. Marcus B. Weaver-Hightower, âWhy Education Researchers Should Take School Food Seriously,â *Educational Researcher* 40 (2011): 16.

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