Salt Sugar Fat: How the Food Giants Hooked Us
By Michael Moss

New York: Random House, 2013
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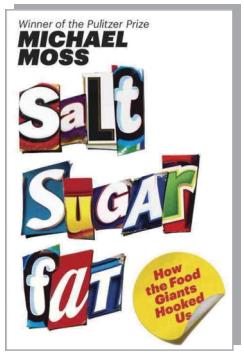

Michael Moss' *Salt, Sugar Fat* is an important book. Not only is it a fascinating read in itself but is also of particular interest to classical liberals, just because it is on the basis of issues of the kind that it documents that we are likely to see increasing calls for paternalistic government regulation. Just because of the problems that these pose—both because of their threat to liberty, and also because of the practical failings of government regulation, it is important that we understand what these issues are, and develop non-regulatory responses to them.

Moss tells the story of the development of convenience and snack foods, and of some interesting problems they pose for consumers. Although the book is subtitled 'How the Food Giants Hooked Us,' the story is not of the '*J'accuse!*' kind. Rather, it is a complex account—told with an interplay of history, well-documented scientific information, and interviews with industry insiders—of the development of a plethora of convenience and snack foods involving a great deal of testing, research on a wide range of human behaviour, physiology, and even brain scanning.

The result is a wide range of products that provide significant, and typically very cheap, enjoyment. The products, which consumers find particularly beguiling, are indeed crafted to exactly match our tastes, which are then in their turn shaped by these products. Manufacturers seek out, empirically, our 'bliss points'—the exact mix of ingredients, flavours and other factors to give us maximum satisfaction. In addition, manufacturers have discovered just how a multiplicity of sensations—together with a certain kind of blandness—can attract us while at the same time not triggering the satiation one would experience if the flavours were stronger. Manufacturers and retailers also study our shopping patterns (see Paco Underhill's *Why We Buy* (2008)) to enhance our shopping experience and enable store designers to design stores that maximise our purchases and their sales. This is intensified by a highly competitive sales ethos (such as the one between Coke and Pepsi, who have a major role in the placement and design of goods in convenience stores).

Convenience food may not be sophisticated but is most seductive and very cheap. For example, the US chain 'Popeye's,' which sells fried Louisiana-style food, is promoting a 'Cajun surf and turf combo' dish consisting of 'four butterfly shrimp [deep fried in batter], two handcrafted tenders [chicken pieces deep fried in batter], one regular side [a range of possibilities, but in their adverts, chips are pictured], a biscuit [a high-fat savoury scone-like creation], and two dipping sauces' for under $5. This creation has 1072 calories, more than half the daily recommended calories for an adult male.

Attractive taste and price combos are not good for us, unless sparingly consumed. But we are beguiled at every turn by these foods. It is difficult to eat them sparingly when they have been designed to appeal to us and make us habituated to them. This, however, is not half of the problem. Moss found 'healthful' versions of snacks specially made for him to be revolting, while attempts to make 'better' foods have proved commercially unprofitable. Kraft and Pepsi came under pressure from Wall Street when it looked like they were going towards healthier but less profitable products.

The underlying issue is that while these products have been developed to give us particular delight, no one is directly forcing us to buy them. Almost all 'convenience foods' are produced with an addictive regularity—we know what we will get. Once we get used to problematic ingredients, 'natural' products may not taste as good, while it is a hassle to prepare meals from scratch. Other options are a lot more expensive, particularly for the time and cash poor. Not eating 'convenience foods' at all is an option for the affluent (executives whom Moss interviewed typically did not eat their own products or other convenience foods).

Yet, we *do* value freedom of choice and resent coercion. Compare the hostile reaction to the recent attempt to ban 64-ounce sodas (186 grams

of sugars and 744 calories) in New York as a threat to people's freedom. The freedom to make our own decisions is important for our well being. The well-intentioned manufacturer may not cut down on problematic ingredients fearing loss of market share. It is for this reason that we may face calls for regulation. If we resist them, does this mean we are fated, behind the banner of liberty and consumer sovereignty, to waddle into a future full of obesity, diabetes, heart disease, cancer, and earlier than necessary death? While convenience food is just one part of a complex story, classical liberals need to give serious thought to non-regulatory responses.

We need to learn about nutrition (after reading *Salt Sugar Fat*, I have started paying closer attention to food labels, and have been horrified by what I have found) and educate ourselves about developments in retail management and their implications. These, however, are tasks for the intellectually inclined, who may also wish to get involved in arguments about nutrition. However, the kind of problem Moss highlights suggests that a purely intellectual response, and 'willpower,' may not be adequate. If this is the case, what alternatives are there to paternalistic, governmental regulation?

First, this is an interesting opportunity for a commercial certification service to guarantee that products (fast food, meals in restaurants, etc.) comply with guidelines, and encourage manufacturers to produce recipes for the cheap and easy production of tasty but wholesome food. It could be advertised by means of a logo (for example, someone looking like a human version of the Michelin Man, with a red cross on it) that manufacturers could use on their products. Better yet, restaurants might indicate that *all* their dishes comply, so customers are not enticed in by the promise of compliant food, only to be beguiled into choosing something else.

Second, there is room for *self-imposed* regulation by allowing the development of privately owned public spaces within which people could dine, shop or even live—and not be faced with temptations. The model of Celebration, Florida—the Disney-designed town with limited commercial advertising, in which people could choose to live under a regulatory regime as consumers rather than voters—is suggestive. (I have discussed the potential of this, in 'Living with a Marsupial Mouse' in *Policy*.)

Third, the cost of health care—public and private—should be tied to improvements people make to their health. Although not optimum, people should be free to harm themselves if they are willing to bear the costs. Currently, it is other people who are carrying the can (through enforced public support for health provision, or by way of the burdens placed on other policy-holders because of the way in which Australian private health insurance is structured). There is every reason to come up with ways in which people are forced to pay for the costs of their own choices.

All told, I would again commend Moss' book. While it deals with only one aspect of some of the problems we are facing regarding nutrition and health, it discusses important consequences of our own calls for liberty and consumer sovereignty. Reading Moss is not just entertaining and informative. It should also provoke classical liberals into some hard thought about how the kinds of issues raised might be tackled without recourse to governmental regulation and paternalism.

Reviewed by Jeremy Shearmur

Intellectuals and Race
By Thomas Sowell

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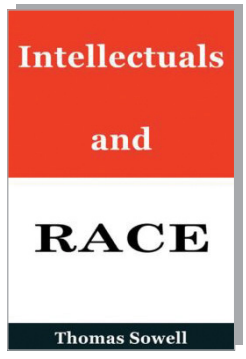

This new book by Professor Tom Sowell —the CIS' 1988 Bonython lecturer and prolific classical-liberal author—is based on some chapters of his earlier 2010 book about intellectuals (*Intellectuals and Society*). The new analysis is crisper, clearer and shorter—and an essential read for Australians concerned about multiculturalism, Aboriginal affairs, immigration and integration, apart from being a mighty good read.