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Can't Stomach It

How Michael Pollan et al. Made Me Want to Eat Cheetos

IT HAS BECOME COMMON to speak of an “epidemic of obesity.” Serious news sources routinely feature articles on obesity; some even suggest that the obesity epidemic is one of the greatest public health threats of our times, perhaps rivaling AIDS or avian flu. Obesity is commonly linked to other social problems, as well. It has been named as a cost to businesses in terms of worker productivity, a cause for poor pupil performance, a weight-load problem for the airlines due to increased fuel costs, and even a security threat in terms of military preparedness. Proposed and implemented social solutions have included snack taxes, corporate-sponsored exercise breaks, stronger food labeling laws, and, most troublingly, state-mandated student weigh-ins at public schools, with results included on report cards (as if fat kids and their parents need to be reminded).

Obesity further serves as a bonanza for social reformers who deploy the rhetoric of fat in support of their various projects, from farm-to-school programs to mixed-use housing and transportation centers; and for puritans who wish to use fatness as an example of the moral decrepitude to which we must just say no. **Finally, the obesity epidemic, and its tendency to dignify obsessions that equate thinness and beauty, is hugely profitable, contributing, by some estimates, to a one-hundred-billion-dollar-per-year weight-loss industry that distributes specialized products and services apart from the money made on bariatric and cosmetic surgery.** Television shows like *The Biggest Loser*, sponsored by purveyors of diet foods, fitness centers, and pharmaceuticals, contribute to the false idea that diets work, thereby increasing the market for such goods and services. And if the daily e-mail spam I receive for Anatrium serves as any indication, the underground market in pharmaceuticals is cashing in, too.

Taken together, the above set of observations suggests that obesity has achieved the status of an infectious disease. Although obesity has not been deemed infectious—at least yet—the criteria employed by researcher Nancy Tomes to establish the existence of a germ panic equate obesity in degree, if not kind, to the problem of tuberculosis in the

early twentieth century: a) the “disease” is deemed newsworthy; b) its incidence reflects other societal problems, giving activists and reformers an angle for addressing their specific concerns; and c) it has commercial potential to sell products or services, so that public concern is heightened by economic interests.¹ Tomes’ study also discusses the central role that popular culture, in the form of news coverage, entertainment media, and popular nonfiction, plays in contributing to the hysteria that constitutes such a panic. These

This raises an important question: why are Pollan, Goodall, and Nestle not fat? If junk food is so ubiquitous that it cannot be resisted, how is it that some people remain (or become) thin?

factors are all true of obesity. In particular, a rash of popular books has appeared on the so-called obesity epidemic. While these books take a variety of positions on the topic, virtually all claim to “expose the lies” and/or tell the “real” story about the epidemic and/or who is gaining by it. For example, J. Eric Oliver’s *Fat Politics: The Real Story Behind America’s Obesity Epidemic*, while voicing skepticism of the ways in which obesity has been framed, contributes to the frenzy through its tone.²

Lately, another group of writers has gotten in on the act. **A more refined and measured group, their books turn on the theme of “what to eat”—the specific title of Marion Nestle’s most recent volume.**³ Other books in this group include Peter Singer’s *The Way We Eat: Why Our Food*

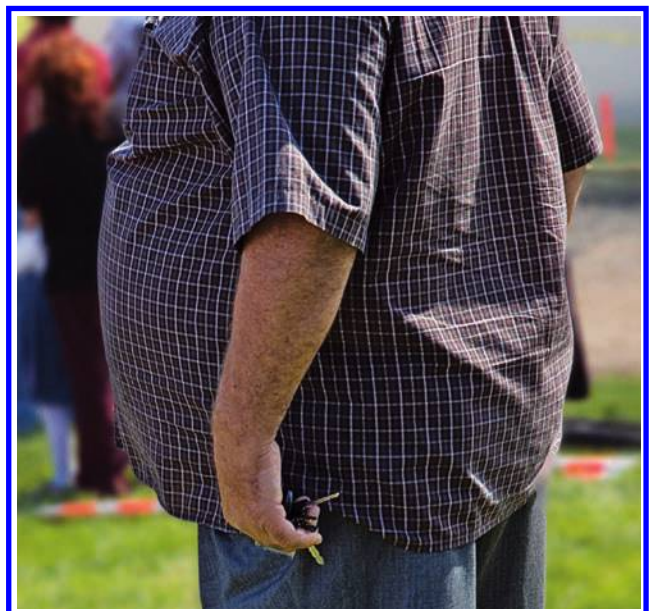
Choices Matter, Anna Lappé's *Grub: Ideas for an Urban Organic Kitchen*, and Jane Goodall's *Harvest for Hope: A Guide to Mindful Eating*.⁴ Of all these books, the sine qua non is Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*.⁵ It is like no other because not only does Pollan know his stuff, he can write his way out of a paper bag, and his book sales show it. **Virtually all of these authors extol the virtues of the organic and the local while arguing for a commonsense, ecumenical approach to diet choices (no food faddism here).** That makes them refreshing in relation to the usual weight loss books and painfully restrictive messages of latter-day health foodism. Or does it?

Many of these authors share a common rhetorical strategy. They refer to the statistics of rising obesity rates among Americans, the surfeit of calories taken in relative to those expended, and the inexorable road toward illness with concomitant rising healthcare costs (never tabulated against the healthcare costs of weight loss attempts). They then go on to discuss the ubiquity of fast, junky food (what Kelly Brownell calls the "toxic environment") in order to make their points about what constitutes "real" food.⁶ But whereas most of the popular writers on fat attribute growing obesity to a variety of culprits—television viewing, long drive-to-work times, supermarket product placement, working mothers, clothing designers (allowing baggy clothes), marketing to children, poverty, affluence, and modernity (i.e., everything under the sun)—Pollan is much more pointed in his analysis. As he puts it, "All these explanations are true, as far as they go. But it pays to go a little further, to search for the cause behind the causes. Which, very simply, is this: When food is abundant and cheap,

people will eat more of it and get fat."⁷ Pollan then points to an even more specific culprit: corn.

Pollan's excellent writing makes for a compelling story about how corn has become the foundation of the national diet. He traces this first to the transport of *Zea mays* from regions now known as central Mexico to points north, where it easily took hold in a variety of microclimatic conditions and outdid wheat in terms of its yield and ease of cultivation. But corn's strength turned to its weakness; it was prone to systematic overproduction in US agriculture, so that even historically, surpluses ended up to no good. Corn liquor, of course, was the beverage of choice (and necessity) in pre-Prohibition drinking binges. Since the 1970s, the overproduction of corn has been buttressed by a farm policy that subsidizes corn production, in part to appease the farm lobby and in part for geopolitical ends, with erstwhile Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz having first encouraged planting "from fencerow to fencerow." Pollan reminds us that corn is omnipresent in a fast-food meal: the high fructose corn syrup that sweetens the soda; the feed of the steer that goes into the hamburger beef; often the oil that fries the potatoes; and as one of the many micro-ingredients that stabilizes the bun. Corn byproducts, it turns out, are even used in the packaging and serving utensils. Processed food, Pollan argues, makes us "walking corn," and the "Alcohol Republic" has now given way to "the Republic of Fat."⁸

Pollan's critique of the cost-cutting measures of the fast-food giants, the nutritional impoverishment of processed food, and an agricultural subsidy system that encourages ecologically problematic monocropping, horrendous animal husbandry practices, and food-dumping in the name of "aid" (often at the expense of farmers in the global South) is



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spot on. In fact, I could think of no clearer path to a more ecological and socially just food system than the removal of those subsidies. **Yet, in evoking obesity, Pollan turns our gaze, perhaps inadvertently, from an ethically suspect farm policy to the fat body.** One of the questions I want to raise in this essay is whether it is necessary for fat people to bear the weight of this argument.

There is much to criticize in the public conversation about obesity. The evidentiary basis of an “epidemic” is fairly weak, as it relies on changes in average Body Mass Index (BMI), itself a contested, albeit convenient way to measure obesity. For example, as a weight to height ratio, BMI cannot differentiate between fat and lean body mass.⁹ For that matter, discussions of an epidemic provide very little specificity as to dimensions of the growth in girth. To draw out two extremes of the problem statement, it is unclear whether a relatively small number of people have become extremely fat, or whether many people have put on a few pounds. Given the way the BMI is normalized and categorized, a small average weight gain among a large population can shift enormous numbers of people from one category into the next, say from “overweight” to “obese,” and thereby deepen the impression of an epidemic.¹⁰ Moreover, the relationship between food intake, exercise, and growing obesity is poorly understood. Michael Gard and Jan Wright’s exhaustive review of obesity research shows that the mechanical notion that weight gain results from a surplus of calories in to calories out has not been borne out in the research; at best, caloric metabolism appears to explain less than half of individual variation in body size, with much of the residual remaining “black boxed.”¹¹ Finally, claims that obesity is a primary

cause of disease (or a disease itself) are filled with logical flaws, chief among them that obesity may be symptomatic of diseases of concern, such as Type II diabetes.¹² For all of these reasons, Gard and Wright argue that obesity research itself has become so entangled with moral discourses and aesthetic values that the “science of obesity” can no longer speak for itself.¹³

These popular renditions are also remarkably insensitive, and not necessarily just to those who feel themselves to be too fat.¹⁴ Rather, these authors seem unaware of how obesity messages work as admonishment. According to Paul Campos, the people most personally affected by discussions of obesity are those who want to lose ten or fifteen pounds, despite the fact that those who are “overweight” by current standards have longer life spans than those who are “thin” or “normal.”¹⁵ In a course I taught, called the Politics of Obesity, I was not particularly surprised by the number of students who wrote in their journals (a required element of the class) of their hidden “fatness” or eating disorders. However, the number of entries that stated how the course itself had produced body anxiety and intensified concern over diet and exercise was shocking, given that a good deal of the material took a critical stance toward obesity talk. The philosopher Michel Foucault might have called this the “productive” power of obesity talk—that in naming a behavior as a problem, it intensifies anxiety around that problem.¹⁶ In that way, swipes at obesity, especially coming from those who themselves have never been subject to such scrutiny or objectification, or the pain and frustration of weight loss, strikes me as naïve. Yet, entirely absent from the pages of the recent popular books is any authorial reflection on how obesity talk further stigmatizes those who



are fat, or on how this social scolding might actually work at cross-purposes to health and well being.

But there is something even more disturbing about these books and the claims they reproduce. To repeat Pollan's claim: "When food is abundant and cheap, people will eat more of it and get fat."¹⁷ People eat corn because it's there. They are dupes. Jane Goodall makes a similar leap when she writes, "There is no mechanism that turns off the desire—instantly, really—to eat food when it is available."¹⁸ Even Marion Nestle's concern with supermarket aisles suggests that people mechanically react to product placement. This raises an important question: why are Pollan, Goodall, and Nestle not fat? If junk food is so ubiquitous that it cannot be resisted, how is it that some people remain (or become) thin?

It appears, unfortunately, that these authors see themselves as morally superior to fat people in the sense that they characterize fat people as being short of subjectivity. Goodall makes the above assertion having just written of "sad," "overweight," "over-indulged" cats and dogs being "killed by kindness," seeming to equate fat people with family pets.¹⁹ In the "documentary" *SuperSize Me*, virtually all shots of fat people are headless and certainly speechless, and usually the camera captures backsides only. Some might argue that having no personal identifiers protects fat people in the camera's eye, but headlessness also invokes mindlessness. Moreover, such protection assumes that fat people are ashamed of their bodies and eating habits. Since thin people *are* consistently pictured with heads, it logically follows that they are not so ashamed. This presumption is precisely the problem that Kathleen LeBesco captures in *Revoltin' Bodies*, including her critique of the fat acceptance movement itself.²⁰ At best, fat people are seen as victims of food, bad genetic codes, or bad metabolism; at worst, they are slovenly, stupid, or without resolve. Perhaps, she argues, fat people exercise agency in their fatness. Meanwhile, she notes, many thin people can indulge in all manners of unhealthy behaviors without being called to account for their body size. What LeBesco makes clear, in other words, is that fat people are imbued with little subjectivity no matter what they do, while thin people are imbued with heightened subjectivity no matter what *they* do.

That, then, is the most pernicious aspect of the Pollan et al. analysis. If junk food is everywhere and people are all naturally drawn to it, those who resist it must have heightened powers. In the reality television show *The Biggest Loser*, where fat people compete to lose the most weight (about which much could be said), the contestants are treated paternalistically; the hard-body trainers are treated

as super-subjects who readily and regularly bestow life wisdom on their charges. So when Pollan waxes poetic about his own rarefied, distinctive eating practices, he makes a similar move. The messianic quality and self-satisfaction is not accidental. In describing his ability to overcome King Corn, to conceive, procure, prepare, and (perhaps) serve his version of the perfect meal, Pollan affirms himself as a super-subject while relegating others to objects of education, intervention, or just plain scorn.

Even if it were true that obesity is the public-health threat it is purported to be, even if it could be proven that it results from fast-food consumption in a clear and identifiable way, and even if we didn't care about the stigmatization of obesity or treating fat people as objects, is Pollan's way the way out? At the end of a book whose biggest strength is a section that lays out the environmental history and political economy of corn, his answer, albeit oblique, is to eat like he does. The meal that he helped forage and hunt and cooked all by himself, as he puts it, "gave me the opportunity, so rare in modern life, to eat in full consciousness of everything involved in feeding myself: for once, I was able to pay the full karmic price of a meal."²¹ Notwithstanding Pollan's arguably narrow understanding of a "full karmic price" (how, for example, does this rectify the exploitation of farm laborers?), my question is: To what kind of politics does this lead? Despite his early focus on corn subsidies, Pollan does not urge his readers to write to their congressional representative about the folly of such subsidies, to comment to the FDA about food additives, or even, for that matter, to sabotage fields where genetically engineered corn is grown.²²

Indeed, no suggestion is made that we ought to alter the structural features of the food system, so that all might come to eat better. Pollan betrays himself in his admiration of Joel Salatin, a beyond-organic farmer who is hard-lined in his denunciation of state regulation, seeing it as an impediment to building a viable local food chain. Unfortunately, this antiregulatory approach to food politics has really taken hold, especially in my part of the country. I have read countless undergraduate papers at my university that begin with the premise that the global food system is anomic, and that "if people only knew where their food came from," food provisioning would somehow evolve to be more ecological, humane, and just. Many of my students have strong convictions that they should and can teach people how and what to eat, as if you could "change the world one meal at a time" without attention to policy.²³

I worry that Michael Pollan reinforces this highly privileged and apolitical idea and reinforces the belief

that some people—in this case thin people—clearly must have seen the light that the rest are blind to. Pollan is a damn good writer and a smart man, which makes *The Omnivore's Dilemma* a compelling read. But I can't stomach where it leads. In a funny way, it makes me crave some corn-based Cheetos. 🍷

NOTES

1. Nancy Tomes, "The Making of a Germ Panic, Then and Now," *American Journal of Public Health* 90, no.2 (2000): 191.
2. J. Eric Oliver, *Fat Politics: The Real Story Behind America's Obesity Epidemic* (New York: Oxford University, 2006).
3. Marion Nestle, *What to Eat* (New York: North Point Press, 2006).
4. Jane Goodall, Gary McAvoy, and Gail Hudson, *Harvest for Hope: A Guide to Mindful Eating* (New York: Warner Books, 2005); Anna Lappé and Bryant Terry, *Grub: Ideas for an Urban Organic Kitchen* (New York: Tarcher, 2006); Peter Singer and Jim Mason, *The Way We Eat: Why Our Food Choices Matter* (Emmaus, PA: Rodale Press, 2006). The coauthors' names were omitted from the main text because these books are clearly being sold on the relative fame of their primary authors.
5. Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (New York: Penguin, 2006).
6. Kelly D. Brownell, *Food Fight: The Inside Story of the Food Industry, America's Obesity Crisis, and What We Can Do About It* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004).
7. Pollan, *Omnivore's Dilemma*, 102.
8. *Ibid.*, 101.
9. Glenn Gaesser, *Big Fat Lies: The Truth About Your Weight and Your Health* (New York: Burze Books, 2002), Paul Campos et al., "The Epidemiology of Overweight and Obesity: Public Health Crisis or Moral Panic?" *International Journal of Epidemiology* 35, no.1 (2006).
10. Bruce Ross, "Fat or Fiction? Weighing the Obesity Epidemic," in *The Obesity Epidemic: Science, Morality, and Ideology*, ed. Michael Gard and Jan Wright (London: Routledge, 2005).
11. Michael Gard and Jan Wright, *The Obesity Epidemic: Science, Morality, and Ideology* (London: Routledge, 2005). This point was deduced from a discussion on pp.47–50, where the authors note that some researchers have claimed that genetic factors account for 50 to 90 percent of individual variation. Gard and Wright make the point that genetic factors are acting as a "black box" to defend the calories in—calories out model.
12. Oliver, *Fat Politics*.
13. Gard and Wright, *Obesity Epidemic*.
14. I cringed when Nestle, as a keynote speaker at the Ecological Farming Conference in January 2006, stated that the problem of obesity was "simple," using the very terminology that Gard and Wright refute (calories in—calories out). Most of this audience applauded wildly, for the obesity epidemic holds much marketing promise for those who stake their living in the production of organic fresh fruits and vegetables.
15. Paul Campos, *The Obesity Myth: Why America's Obsession with Weight Is Hazardous to Your Health* (New York: Gotham Press, 2004).
16. Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, an Introduction*, vol.1 (New York: Vintage, 1985).
17. Pollan, *Omnivore's Dilemma*, 102.
18. Goodall et al, *Harvest for Hope*, 240.
19. *Ibid.*
20. Kathleen LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies? The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 2004).
21. Pollan, *Omnivore's Dilemma*, 9.
22. This is an activist strategy popular in Europe, intended presumably to incite public rancor about the unnecessary proliferation of genetic engineering, especially in light of the fact that the primary justification of such technologies is to improve productivity. In this way, such a strategy is surely germane to Pollan's point.
23. The quoted catchphrase is widely circulated in alternative-food-movement circles.