GUTHMAN, JULIE 2011 WEIGHING IN: OBESITY, FOOD JUSTICE, AND THE LIMITS OF CAPITALISM, REVIEWED BY RACHEL SLOCUM


In this daring book, Julie Guthman peels back layers of entrenched thought on “obesity” and its “epidemic” extent, showing how “problem closure” has propelled science and debate into inaccurate and harmful cul-de-sacs. Combining her groundbreaking research on aspects of alternative food with secondary material from the health sciences, she moves the book toward the concluding argument: in fatness and obesity panic, the body is an accumulation strategy. Bodies enable accumulation and resolve capitalism’s crises by absorbing and attempting to purge obesogenically-produced food (the political economy of bulimia). Over six chapters, Guthman breaks down the comfortable, simplistic, and moralistic arguments repeatedly invoked to explain weight gain in the 21st century. The daring part is her analysis of material from environmental toxicology and epidemiology. What results is a fascinating, highly readable, and brilliant analysis of what’s wrong with preferred explanations for fatness and where we should look instead. Not content to stop at critique of public health and the food movement, Guthman offers proposals for moving forward differently towards food justice.

Having received the book as I was beginning to teach an upper level class on food geographies, I asked my students to read the second chapter, “How do we know obesity is a problem?” In it, Guthman undermines what have become quantitative certainties like Body Mass Index and obesity risk factors by revealing their tautological reasoning and weak empirical basis. These measurement systems have created a phenotype defined by its visible distance from a presumed “normal” and directed attention away from disease/health. Since many of my students had rejected the idea proposed in an earlier reading that stigmatizing the overweight is cruel and ineffective, I thought Guthman’s chapter would present enough hard-nosed science to be convincing to them. Many are about to graduate with a minor in nutrition and the dangerous idea that people are fat because they are lazy, stupid, and eat too much, but with proper education and sufficient motion, could change their unfortunate state. These are precisely the people that Guthman’s book is designed to speak to, and speak it did. One student said the chapter held his attention from beginning to end making it the best reading so far in the class. Although some gravitated more toward the author’s admission that “we have become bigger,” students wanted to read Chapter 5, “Does eating (too much) make you fat?” (but unfortunately not “What’s capitalism got to do with it?”). With this experience, I can thoroughly recommend the book for undergraduate classes from the sophomore to senior levels.

As it turns out, eating too much cannot account for “abrupt and differentiated increases in obesity” (page 113), yet the commitment to “healthism” (chapter 3) allows the energy balance model to remain the only explanation. By this model, an excess of calories results in an increasing BMI, which in turn represents a deviation from homeostasis. However, the evidence shows that different income groups
do not eat more calories nor does the current generation eat more than the last. Video games, office jobs, fries, evolution, and genes are not definitive answers either. Nonetheless, there have been changes post-WWII that induce weight gain, including morbid obesity and, disturbingly, obese babies—a group that, at six months old, cannot be criticized for being couch potatoes with lousy diets. What may very well have played a role in these conditions are endocrine disrupting chemicals (EDCs) that permanently alter developmental pathways through their interaction with hormones. Potential obesogens include pest-control chemicals like lindane, dieldrine, and hexachlorobenzene, livestock growth enhancers, BPA in food and water containers, prescription drugs for diabetics, diethylstilbestrol (DES), and synthetic food processing ingredients, all of which have found their way into our lives in the post war period. Increased adiposity may be the result of interference with genetic expression as a consequence of exposure to these disruptors that is then passed on to offspring. Another possible pathway is the relationship between stress and environmental toxics that leads to low or high birth weight babies, both of which are more likely to be overweight later in life. Researchers have also discovered that in cases of extreme obesity, fat helps to produce more fat. Instead of deviation from homeostasis, fat could be adaptation by which bodies transform to deal with environmental changes. Where you live, the stresses you are exposed to, and a diet rich in foods from obesogen-intensive industrial farming and processing would have to be considered. Food activists often use the word ‘toxic’ to describe processed food, and now the science to back them up is emerging. Weighing in addresses the relationship between obesity and neighborhood, farm subsidies and health care costs showing that these are at best convenient distractions and at worst a “protective veneer for neglect or exclusion” (page 62). This focus on “healthism” makes the food movement, which purports to be progressive, complicit in the neoliberal requirement that we take personal responsibility for our bodies. Yet the best-looking body and the “healthiest” neighborhood have been imagined by and are only possible for those with race and class privilege. “Thin real estate is expensive” (page 88); adding parks, gardens, and farmers’ markets gentrifies places and fails to address how white flight, highway construction, racist subprime lending schemes, and robo-foreclosures have created different built environments. The role of neoliberalism in food production, deregulation, urban landscapes, and inequality is not acknowledged by food advocates who make the obligatory reference to industrial agribusiness and then go on to focus their reform efforts on consumption. The book has to be critical of those closest to the subject of obesity for encouraging the distraction of diet, furthering the politics of disgust, and ignoring the role of capitalism in the creation of obesogens. It must be said that there are many in both fields who do have good critiques and thoughtful actions, but this is an analysis of the destructive societal level impact of obesity panic. Public health agrees with Guthman’s analysis, yet its practitioners continue to pursue caloric reduction for everyone in the hope that “their efforts to prevent obesity will have statistical success” (page 36). It continues to graduate people into the field who have never had to engage with the arguments in this book. Many in the alternative food movement see little use for these arguments and have yet to occupy anything except the farmers’ market. Yet increasingly, for Guthman, there are more organizations “using food…to change capitalism” (page 196). With Weighing In, Julie Guthman has given us another timely and critical intervention in the politics of food that will surely be read across academic and activist communities.
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