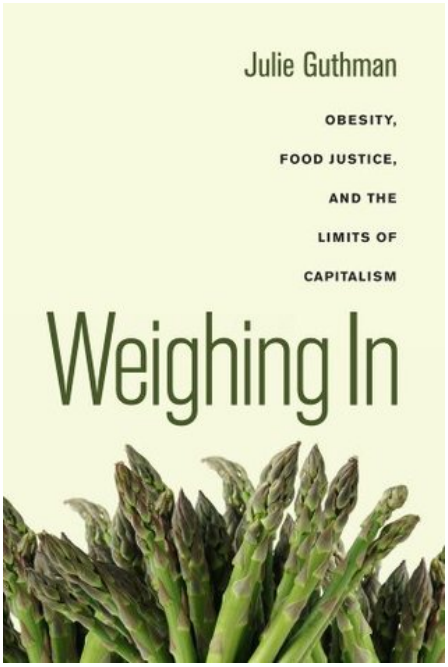

Weighing In: Obesity, Food Justice, and the Limits of Capitalism

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Weighing In takes on the "obesity epidemic," challenging many widely held assumptions about its causes and consequences. Julie Guthman examines fatness and its relationship to health outcomes to ask if our efforts to prevent "obesity" are sensible, efficacious, or ethical. She also focuses the lens of obesity on the broader food system to understand why we produce cheap, over-processed food, as well as why we eat it. Guthman takes issue with the currently touted remedy to obesity--promoting food that is local, organic, and farm fresh. While such fare may be tastier and grown in more ecologically sustainable ways, this approach can also reinforce class and race inequalities and neglect other possible explanations for the rise in obesity, including environmental toxins. Arguing that ours is a political economy of bulimia--one that promotes consumption while also insisting upon thinness--Guthman offers a complex analysis of our entire economic system.

Weighing In: Obesity, Food Justice, and the Limits of Capitalism Details

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Rachel says

Julie Guthman is fast becoming my favorite author on this food journey o'mine. I have appreciated reading several of her articles, but this book has been a new favorite for me.

At times humorous (every time she throws Michael Pollan under the bus) and at times sharp witted and critical (critiquing food justice and the food movement) Weighing In provides an overall critique of the rhetoric used within the food movement; the way bodies are used as sites of consumerism and capitalism by industries who created the problem in the first place; and the critique of authors such as Michael Pollan who write in a manner that reinforces the injustices of our food system (i.e. affordability, whiteness and thinness). One of the things I did disagree with Guthman on was her severe critique of Pollan; many people start their food journey(s) with Pollan and I don't necessarily feel this is altogether a bad thing. However, stopping with Pollan is a definite issue; there is a growing number of scholars truly critiquing the rhetoric of the food movement and the issues associated with the concepts of food justice and the way the message is produced. This is where Guthman comes in, providing a more direct and critical eye of the food system.

Guthman's greatest critique is that of capitalism and how the mechanism of capitalism works to continually sustain itself despite "the tendency for capitalism to destroy its own conditions for reproduction" (p. 180).

"And remember, food insecurity in the United States results from insufficient income, not insufficient food production" (p. 175).

If you are looking to move beyond Michael Pollan and truly look critically at the food movement, food justice and the ways in which capitalism contributes to the supposed 'obesity crisis' this book is a gem to add to your food journey library.

Kelsey says

Very interesting, thought-provoking book. It's definitely made me reassess my biasses towards folks I perceive as unhealthy, and my own privileged life.

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sdw says

Have you ever wanted to stand up and applaud in the middle of the book? Stop whatever you are doing and acquire a copy of Guthman’s book. If you care about food issues, social justice issues, the environment, or economic justice, you need to hear what Guthman has to say.

What is the root cause of the obesity epidemic? Guthman will undercut just about every answer you think you have. What we need, Guthman argues, is not will power but the will to power.

She starts by questioning the very concept of the obesity epidemic, which she describes as a medicalization

of fatness. She shows how the epidemic is in certain ways exaggerated and constructed as to understand the problem in some ways and not others. She discusses the shortcomings associated with using BMI as a proxy for body fat and questions the links between being overweight and being unhealthy. She reminds us that there are health risks with being too thin. Body weight is not directly proportional to health.

Moreover, she lays out the mindset of "healthism" that emerges from a neoliberal ideology of individual achievement through discipline and productivity. Maybe this obsession with being healthy and having longevity is itself part of a neoliberal ideology that the inevitable can be avoided and productivity sustained through individual hard work and will power.

One of Guthman's arguments here is that talking about health when talking about obesity can actually work against social justice. Why? Because to embrace obesity as primarily a "health" problem is to embrace the neoliberal ideology of healthism which understands being healthy as a primary duty of the citizen. Health is a moral value. It trumps our other concerns and we see obesity as a choice. We read obesity as a sign of certain kinds of failings in a capitalist state such as lack of self-discipline and laziness. At the heart of this is the neoliberal ideal that being a good citizen means consuming only a minimum amount of state resources. Needing additional state resources (in terms of health care, food assistance, public education) is seen as a personal failing rather than a failing of the state or economy to distribute resources in any sort of equitable manner. As Guthman rightly points out, "Why should active participation in health be the standard by which we judge citizenship?" (61). Moreover, "If health were as valued as it is purported to be, it would be unthinkable to deny coverage to fat people, much less scold them for having nonnormative bodies. Instead the way we talk about health and obesity reflects a neoliberal perspective that subjects care and well-being to economic calculation, exalts those who demonstrate their deservingness through self-care, and justifies neglect for those who don't" (63).

In her next chapter, she goes after what is clearly the sacred cow of Food Justice. Does your neighborhood make you fat? On one hand, Guthman applauds the authors of such studies for thinking systemically about the ways race and class map onto obesity. However, she concludes that it isn't that your neighborhood that makes you fat but that if you are poor you live in a neighborhood that lacks amenities that are seen as desirable because of healthism. Moving in farmers markets and Whole Foods doesn't increase poor people's access to healthy foods, Guthman argues. Rather, it gentrifies neighborhoods. It isn't the correlation that she objects to, but the question of causality. This chapter was not my favorite.

Her next chapter contained what I found to be most shocking revelation of the book. Poor people and rich people eat the same amount of calories. It is not how many calories that are eaten that matters, despite what you have been told. It is the way food is produced that causes the problem. This is the crux of her argument that what we need is not different consumer choices but stronger state regulation of food production. She argues against the energy model (calories in, calories out) and for an explanation rooted in **obesogens** . I bolded the term because it is so important to Guthman's argument. Obesogens are environmental toxins that disrupt the endocrine system. Obesogens are in the hormones given to cattle. They are used in the transportation of both meat and produce. They are used in pesticides, fungicides, and slimicides. They are in the two most common additives. As Guthman contends, "Surely, a food system perspective must include a hard look at the chemicals used in food production and distribution, alongside the calories. It must also take into account the chemistry of newer ingredients in food processing, ingredients that have been introduced precisely because they are cheap substitutes for less toxic ingredients" (111).

Chapter 6 argues against the convention logic of foodies like Michael Pollan that farm policy is making us fat. Food in the US is cheap not only because of food subsidies and overproduction, but also because neoliberal policies have contributed to the need for cheap food. Cheap food is not just about subsidized corn,

but “uneven access to land, racially segmented labor markets, and more recently through a concerted effort to lower wages and prices for those who work directly in food production” (117). Moreover, the biggest subsidies to the food industry, Guthman argues, are not the subsidies given to farmers producing corn but the overall lack of regulation of the food industry. This deregulation Guthman blames on the shared anti-statism of the New Left and the New Right. My favorite point in the whole book (if only because it dovetails with a point I’ve been screaming about for years now) is where she takes this lack of regulation to the creation of a pool of cheap labor and the terrorization of immigrants through deportations concluding that “border policy, more than anything else, has contributed to cheap food” (137).

The penultimate chapter of the book asks if local and organic food will make us thin. She differentiates the alternative food movement with its market driven solutions to support small farmers from New Left experiments with worker owned cooperatives, communes, and community gardens. I found this distinction incredibly useful. She sees the alternative food movement as focused on market-driven solutions for changing food and the New Left as changing food in the service of broader social change. She points out the way that the alternative food movement has become a form of lifestylism, where “disease prevention morphs into moral prescription as to how one should live” (147). As she points out (and I’ve also been screaming about for quite some time) the idea that we can change the world through the market and individual choice “is a huge concession to the neoliberal idolatry of the market” (148). As Guthman explains, “At its core, then, the existence of alterative food allows relatively well-off consumers to ‘opt out’ of conventionally grown food because of whatever bad characetrestics they attribute to it . . .As Andy Szasz argues in *Shopping Our Way to Safety* (2007), commodified alternatives to regulatory failure tend to accentuate class inequality rather than ameliorate it” (152). Organic food has not curtailed the use of toxic pesticides. Rather than asking for increased regulation of toxics, it allows bad practices and good practices to coexist and the wealthy to purchase relative safety. Here, Guthman argues against the very idea of an “alternative” food system which creates a two-tier system of safety and increases inequality.

It is here that Guthman returns to her discussion of the food justice movement. She offers a critique of it that I think is both on target and yet at times unnecessarily harsh on those who are doing by far the best work in the food movement. I’d take a student any day who is concerned about the lack of affordability of good food in poor communities (and can give a critique of the confluence of race and class that led to the absence of capital investment in the neighborhood) over Pollan’s claim that working class people should just give up their cell phones to shop at farmer’s markets.

I agree with Guthman that food justice can easily become a problematic civilizing mission where white activists attempts to bring fresh food to low-income people of color who they presume simply don’t know or don’t have access to what white activists perceive as morally superior food. However, I have also witnessed demands for community gardens coming from the communities of color directly. Not all food justice projects are suspect Moreover, I appreciate the willingness to be able to celebrate imperfect projects that are themselves incredibly important interventions into what Guthman calls in another article, “the unbearable whiteness of alternative food.” I do wonder if this difference emerges from my observations based in communities of color in urban and rural regions of the Northeast rather than Guthman’s field sites predominately in California. I mostly just wanted her to more directly acknowledge that’s caring about a food justice is at least some sort of step forward for alternative food even if it doesn’t go to the extent that Guthman argues (and I agree) it needs to go.

All books should end like Guthman concludes hers - with a chapter entitled “What’s Capitalism Got to Do With It?” All books should also incorporate as successfully as Guthman does a quotation from the Colbert Report (a surprise I’ll leave you to discover). She argues in this final chapter that our bodies themselves have become a growth industry in the U.S. As she brilliantly explains, “the body has become a site for a

spatial fix for capitalism's inherent growth problems – for capitalism's limits, such that the political-economic contradictions of the neoliberal era are literally embodied in ways that run up against the limits of the body" (164). Again, I'll leave you to read this section on your own, but it is as brilliant as the rest of the book.

Della S.white says

Portion sizes in eating establishments have blown out of proportion. Foods companies under the claim that they give people what they want have redefined the meaning of small, medium, and large and people have lost sense of what a portion is and eat more.

Economics weighs heavily on the food crisis. It costs more to eat well and to exercise. Modern technology made food cheaper and physical activity less needed. The food is manufactures is full of fat and sugar and causes obesity. The present economics of food is geared towards more of the same with little effort to alter the course.

To put a stop to growing obesity it is necessary to change the economics of food. Major effort is required like the campaign against smoking which resulted in a 50% drop in smokers in the US.

The food industry through its spokesmen and lobbyists claims it is committed to public health. It is granted access and testifies at government hearings. It spends many millions on campaign contributions (34 million in 2000 alone).

Guthman quotes Gandhi in the middle of the book: "First they ignore you. Then they laugh at you. Then they fight you. Then you win." Towards the end she says she thinks she's at the fighting stage. Shadow groups with names that refer to "consumer freedom" sponsored by industry money are fighting. His book like the title suggests is a response to the fight. Winning will require more passionate people.

Jaki says

If I had to describe in a few words — thought provoking, but very academic.

Thought provoking: the author unpacks healthism, flaws of mainstream alternative food movements (is that an oxymoron?), and the aesthetically-motivated anti-fatness biases that pervade American society even to the detriment of actual science. Unless you've already dived deep on these issues, you'll probably have thoughts you'd never considered before, and that's a good thing.

Very academic: the audience is not the casual reader. This is no Michael Pollan book — you will need to work (or skim) to get through it. As often is the case for academic writing, pacing and delivery are not the focus, and things can get tedious.

Emily says

In Weighing In, Guthman questions many of the widely held assumptions about obesity, some of which rocked my public health education a bit - for example, that built environment interventions are for naught due to the greater influence of socioeconomic status. It's certainly a provocative and important book that is worthy of a place in public health, nutrition, and food studies to start.

I'm presenting a paper on a panel with Guthman in June 2012 at ASFS and am glad that I read her book prior to meeting her and entering into a discourse framed by her ideas.

Mya says

This was an interesting look at food politics, the science of obesity, & the social (mis)perceptions of the health issues involved in being overweight. However, it was also clearly written as a scholarly work rather than to reach popular culture & so was a bit tedious in places.

Maggie Mayhem says

Really good read analyzing the neoliberalism of "health" among other topics. Smart and relevant, a necessary contrast to Michael Pollan and a strong indictment of the notion that raising the cost of food would be a pathway to American health.

Jill Lucht says

It took me a long while to get through this book, but not because it isn't excellent, interesting, and thought-provoking. After burning out in the land of non-profit farm policy, I became entranced by the market-based solutions of alternative food. Unfortunately, Guthman put me back on the hook for collaborative, forward-thinking policy work. Quite frankly, it is the neo-liberal market-based food economy that got us into the obesity epidemic, and market-based solutions are not going to get all of us out of this mess. It will only allow those of us who can afford to get out of the mess to escape the problem. And that leaves a whole lot of us behind, working low paying jobs, often in the food industry, and unable to buy our way into healthy, alternative food. Ugh! Time to get back to organizing around social and food justice policy, and meaningful reforms in our economy and food system...

Allison says

I read this one twice, for two different classes in grad school, and I had a different take on the book both times. The first time, I was frustrated with the seemingly fat-positive author and her criticisms of the obesity epidemic. The second time around, armed with a better understanding of healthism, neo-liberalism, and the implications of obesity in America, I found it to be a very worthwhile read.

Julia says

REQUIRED

Krista Aoki says

If you consider Michael Pollan's history of the subsidization of food in The Omnivore's Dilemma well-researched (which I did), Julie Guthman will go above and beyond for you. Their analysis of the food system and its political history complement each other, and I think it would do anyone very well to get a basic framework of the current status of the food system for Pollan.

Still, Guthman's critique of the food system seems much more concise, as she takes a firmer stand against the neoliberalist framework of our country. Whereas Pollan writes from a journalistic perspective, sometimes exploring histories but also relaying experience, Guthman's tackles the problem from an academic standpoint. She looks at how neoliberalism shapes the common stigma of personal responsibility (which she disapproves of) related to health, body size, and diet.. Guthman's heavy critique of the typical American mindset to blame a person for their eating habits instead directs the focus towards policymakers and the drivers of the industrial food system (CEOs, etc). She is not shy about her opinion of Pollan and his "privileged" audience, arguing that his analysis of the issue just doesn't cut it - there are social class-based, racial, political and environmental issues that should also be addressed.

I thought Guthman's academic analysis of food systems in relation to capitalism were well-researched, and thus compelling. However, for some reason I did not enjoy the framework of obesity which shaped her argument. Her chapters arguing against the energy balance model, farm policy, fresh/local/organic food, and capitalism could have very well stood alone and apart from the earlier chapters battling BMI and introducing obesity as a medical epidemic.

Chelsea says

Weighing In is an excellent demonstration of how political ecology can be deployed to deepen our understanding of an incredibly complicated issue. Guthman provides an accessible overview of what political ecology is, and how it contrasts with apolitical ecologies, before applying it to the problem of obesity.

While I applaud Guthman’s approach, I do not agree with all of her conclusions. I was particularly troubled by her skepticism of the value of education in tackling the problems of our industrialized food system, and by her repeated assertions that people changing their own behavior cannot truly make a difference. By the end of the book, she seems a bit conflicted about the latter point, as she acknowledges that we have seen a broad cultural shift in terms of alternative food systems. While options like CSAs and local artisanal restaurants remain problematic in terms of access and class, one cannot refute that these alternative options now exist, are widespread, and are widely considered to be desirable. This is a step in the right direction, and it came about because people are increasingly choosing to support alternative food production.

True, slow food does not address the policies that make industrialized agriculture so problematic, nor the economic and social realities that prevent people with low income from eating healthier foods. But it is important to give credit where credit is due. Alternative food systems appear to be here to stay, and they exist for reasons that Guthman largely writes off. She writes that consumer appetites do not drive the food system (8), but they do drive the alternative food system, to some extent. The market for local, sustainable, organic food exists because people have become educated about things like pesticides, environmental degradation, the carbon footprint of transporting food, and farm workers' rights. As a result, consumers began to demand alternative options that tread more lightly on the planet. Some of those same people got creative, and came up with new (or old) ways to farm, new ways to get food from farm to table, and new ways to make healthy foods sexy. Because many of these systems had to be invented from the ground up, the products cost more, but many people are willing to pay extra for the perceived nutritional benefits and the feel-good value of local food.

This contests Guthman's claim that "voting with your wallet" does not work. While supporting local food alternatives probably does not take a big enough chunk out of the agricultural economy to have a large effect on agribusiness, it does ensure the continued existence to food alternatives. And the more food alternatives exist, the more viable they become. As they become more prevalent, the people who already supported them come to depend upon them more. Their proliferation also means that more people hear about alternative food, and learn about the environmental and public health harms that can come from industrial agriculture. This may lead to increased investment in alternative food, but it can also mean increased public pressure to fix agribusiness and/or make alternative food more accessible to more people.

This is not to say that education and voting with one's wallet are complete solutions to the ailments of our food system; I only mean to suggest that they are already proving themselves to be part of the solution. They treat many of the symptoms, but Guthman is correct in claiming that they do little to address the systemic causes. Particularly striking is her discussion of epigenetics, which I wish she had set up as a parallel to wealth creation and control of the food system in the US. Earlier in the text, she gives an overview of the ways farmland was originally distributed, and how that generations-ago distribution gave power and wealth to some, while excluding non-whites. Just as farmland is inherited unequally, epigenetics suggests that the potential for obesity can also be inherited, and that it tends toward lower class populations. In both instances, the system creates and recreates problems that exacerbate racial and class divisions. Land inheritance ensures that some people will never have much control over food production, despite a lifetime of laboring in the fields. Epigenetics ensures that those who cannot afford to avoid obesogenic foods are more likely to produce children with less potential to be healthy, and their poor health further mires them in poverty and reduces their ability to make healthier food choices, which means their children will have even poorer health. Political ecology places all of these issues in dialogue, and looks for ways to break the cycle.

Kate says

This book was one of the most interesting and challenging books I've read in quite a while. The author's critique of alternative food and food justice movement rhetoric and policy solutions is timely and necessary, as well as backed by copious empirical data. It has greatly influenced and altered my own thinking about the so-called obesity epidemic and how those of us who care about food justice and public health should be addressing the problem. Further, the author's critique of economic neoliberalism is the best articulated of its kind that I've read. I think using the food system as context for a (dare I say Marxist?) critique of neoliberalism helped me to understand the argument in a way I had not been able to before. I don't think it

will be possible for me to view anything anymore except through this new lens that Guthman has so eloquently constructed. I highly recommend this book to anyone interested in the food system, food justice, agriculture, public health, and fat studies/body positivity.

Holly says

Guthman discussed a lot of things that no other food activist has really brought up yet. Some of her points are very valid. However the first half of the book seemed to take an anti-science stance, which bothered me a little.
