

“Encouraging Obesity: A Capitalist Pursuit”

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Abstract

This paper examines capitalism as it has influenced the obesity epidemic, largely by determining how fat and not-fat people respond to consumer choices offered by profit-seeking industries and service providers. After a brief address of the social meaning of size and the discrimination faced by fat people, I will describe the goods and services for purchase that both encourage and discourage fatness, all directed toward increased profits. A far more subtle social force encouraging size-related purchases is the normalization of large body size as advanced by the fat-acceptance movement and by a visible increase in the number of fat people in the US and other societies. A paradox is evident in the contradictory social messages brought on by the corporate provision of economically profitable goods and services that encourage obesity, making obesity seem socially acceptable, in contrast to the very real and enduring social barriers encountered by the people-of-size. The conclusion questions the normalization (acceptance) of fat and offers avenues by which the fat majority can influence the economic market.

The study of social aesthetics is an alternative way to consider social inequality. Social aesthetics, as I use the term, refers to the public reaction to physical appearance. This reaction shares much with other forms of social inequality, as seen in classism, racism, and sexism. Indeed, physical appearance overlaps strongly with minority statuses such that women face more stringent expectations for bodily thinness, youth, and beauty than do men and are treated more harshly by the economic and dating-marriage market for failing to live up to socially imposed beauty standards (Wann 1998; Etcoff 1999; Wolf 2002). Likewise, non-whites are compared unfavorably with whites in terms of physical attractiveness and often undergo cosmetic changes to surgically widen Asian eyes and alter the shape of the ethnic nose, whiten dark skin, and straighten hair texture (Kaw 1994; Gilman 1999, 2005; Blum 2003; Edwards et al. 2004; Herring et al. 2004; Hunter 2004). The poor face financial hurdles such as inability to afford dental care and are thus

stigmatized for their physical appearance (Hudson, et al. 2007).

Much of the social penalty paid for not being socially-deemed attractive is economic, with those who are plain or unattractive being denied employment as well as access to social networks such as the dating and marriage markets but also educational opportunities, club memberships, and the like (Berry 2007; 2008). Nowhere is this inequality made more visible than in the social treatment of people-of-size (Millman 1980; Rothblum et al. 1990; Bordo 1995; Goodman 1995; Stearns 1997; Roehling 1999; Goldberg 2000; Solovay 2000; Braziel and LeBesco 2001; Freed 2003). The present analysis attends more specifically to the economic exploitation of fat people (the preferred term of the fat-acceptance movement) by corporate profit-seekers.

The purposes of this paper are to raise awareness about a topic that most members of the public may be unaware (size-ism) and to raise questions about the functionality of normalizing obesity. As to the former, there is a growing but

still scarce academic address of the social and physical barriers faced by people-of-size such as access to equal opportunities mentioned above as well as actual physical obstacles that disallow access to buildings and modes of transportation. As to the latter, we may question whether normalization (acceptance of obesity) is a good idea, socially and personally speaking, given health concerns and the continuing social barriers faced by fat people.

AMBIGUITY ABOUT SIZE

There are two forms of ambiguity surrounding the social and economic encouragement of obesity. One form of ambiguity is public sentiment, with a large segment of the public, though fat themselves, being repulsed by fat people and fearful of becoming fat(ter). Many recognize that body size is, in large part, genetic and that weight loss is difficult. Yet, there remains the erroneous but strongly-held view that fat is not only aesthetically unappealing, but that fat represents moral weakness, poor character, sheer laziness, and gluttony (Stearns 1997).

A second form of ambiguity is that some profit-makers (such as makers of plus-size clothing) seem to be on the side of fat people while others (such as the pharmaceutical and medical industries) seem to want to reduce obesity through weight loss drugs and surgery (Grady 2000; Solovay 2000; Egan 2002; Erman 2002; Gimlin 2002; ; Kolata et al. 2002; Bellafonte 2003; Pressler 2003a, 2003b; Scheiber 2003; D'Amato 2005; Freudenheim 2005; Tommasini 2005; Revill 2006). On a superficial level, one might think that capitalism encourages size diversity or fills a market-driven need and a profit-

making desire since it provides for the sale of large-size items and services to accommodate fat people's needs. But capitalism also encourages size repression since it provides items and services that promise to reduce size and instill shame. Thus, confusingly, we are encouraged to buy fat-related products (plus-size clothing) and services (plus-size resorts), thus allowing us to feel okay about being fat, while, at the same time, we are encouraged to lose weight. Since profit is the motive, it does not matter to the industries and service providers whether weight gain is encouraged or discouraged, since money is made either way. To sum it up, capitalism profits from the sale of seatbelt extenders as well as diet pills. While this is a win-win situation for the profit-seekers (clothing and furniture manufacturers, pharmaceutical corporations, and other entities seeking profit from fat), and much of the public seems to accept such profit-seeking as a matter of economic fact, this win-win profit-seeking nonetheless reflects the ambiguity of the public's feeling about fat. As well summarized by the economist Paul Krugman (2005: 17), "fat is a fiscal issue" since the profit motive determines the size of our bodies and, simultaneously, the goods and services accommodating our increased size.

GLOBALIZED PROFITS

Major influences in globalized obesity are seen in the profits made by food industries exporting their high-fat food to poor countries with populations that are not evolutionarily capable of metabolizing such food, endangering peoples (Micronesians, Mexicans, and others) whose cultural histories cannot accommodate the excess fat in their

diets (Shell 2000). An additional influence in globalized obesity is the increase in the sedentary lifestyle, decreased physical activity (by choice and by denial of exercise opportunities such as safe streets), the abundance of high-fat fast food, and restaurant servings of large proportions (Critser 2003; Goode 2003).

At the same time that this pattern of fattening is occurring globally, we find an increase in size-tolerance movements, particularly in the US and Europe, such as the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (www.naafa.org), the more localized organizations such as SeaFATtle (www.seafatttle.org), and the International Size Acceptance Association (www.size-acceptance.org). In short, there are signs that we encourage increased body size at the same time that we profess alarm about it. At this juncture in time, it may serve the public to recognize the conflicting goals we emit about the growing acceptance and continuing rejection of fat.

THE SOCIAL MEANING OF SIZE AND SIZE-ISM

The fat are a statistical majority, with approximately one-third of the US population being obese and an additional one-third being overweight (Nagourney 2006; www.cdc.gov); yet they are a power minority. Numbers are less important than social power (as measured primarily by economic power and occupational prestige); witness the same phenomenon as applied to women who are a statistical majority while remaining a power minority with less earning power. Gaining social power requires a significant segment of the population, whether they are of the minority (women, fat, non-white, gay, disabled, and so on) category or not, adhering to the notion of equality for all;

that is, a major segment of a public must come to view the minority (statistical minority or power minority) as equal.

While the fat-acceptance movement is becoming broadly known as a grassroots force to be reckoned with, while laws are changing to prohibit discrimination against size, and while a growing awareness that fat is not as volitional as long-held, we are stuck with widespread if narrowing prejudice against the fat. The U.S. and other societies have a long history of fat prejudice, as well-documented by Bordo (1995), Stearns (1997), Wann (1998), Roehling (1999), Solovay (2000), Braziel and LeBesco (2001); and Huff (2001). And while it is true that public views on fat have run the gamut from reverence to revulsion, definitions of fat and not-fat have changed over time (per insurance charts, a growing sophistication of medical criteria, etc.) and cross-cultural views on fat vary widely, it is doubtful that the US and most of the world will revert to a time when fatness was seen in a positive light, for instance, as a sign of good health and prosperity.

THINGS TO BUY

The products made available for purchase by fat people include plus-size clothing, plus-size furniture, diet supplements, seatbelt extenders, plus-size caskets, and so on. The services provided to fat people include multiple airline seats, size-friendly resorts, plastic surgery (gastric bypasses, liposuction, and removal of loose skin), and gym memberships (Berry 2005). Food producers deserve a place of their own in the pantheon of fat-marketed products to buy and will be awarded a separate section below.

Of the plus-size clothing offerings, it

would seem a good thing that ample-size clothing is now offered for purchase and that much of this clothing is as chic as smaller-size clothing (Fratr 2005). Recent larger-sized clothes offerings are deliberately not drab and not intended to hide the body, and are presently one of the fastest growing segments in apparel (Erman 2002). Plus-size apparel sales have risen about 14 percent compared to 5.6 percent for all women's clothing sales increases (Bellafante 2003).

Bear in mind, however, that plus-size clothing is often offered at a higher cost than smaller-size clothing. Check your mail-order clothing catalogs and you will find that "women's" sizes (sizes 1x-3x) are priced as much as \$10 more per item than the identical "misses" sizes. The explanation for the increased charge is that there are more materials involved in the manufacturing of bigger clothes. If that logic were valid, petite and small-sized clothing would cost less than medium-sized clothing. Another indicator of discrimination is the fact that a lot of large-size clothing is nearly always located in separate sections of department stores and often exiled to online shopping, indicating a continuing exclusion from the mainstream shopping experience and an instilled sense of shame for the wearers of such clothes (D'Amato 2005).

We also have available larger hangers upon which to hang our bigger clothes, bigger bedding, office chairs built with heavy-gauge steel and high-tension support, automobiles with extra inches of elbow room in the interiors, and extra-large coffins that can hold up to 700 pounds (Scheiber 2003; Pressler 2003). Another entrepreneurial venture is "size-friendly" resorts. Freedom Paradise, one

such resort in Mexico, offers plus-size armless chairs, wide steps with railings in swimming pools, walk-in showers rather than bathtubs, stronger hammocks, and a staff that has been trained to be sensitive to size issues (Chakravorty 2003).

These all seem to be good things, supportive of the reality that fat people exist and have the money to buy the things they need in the sizes they need. And if these products and services cost a bit more, so what? That's economic reality. Well, there is reality and then there is usury. Take the airline industry, for example. Most airlines accommodate fat passengers as well as they can, loaning them seatbelt extenders, moving them to a place on the airplane where there are two seats together to accommodate the larger body (see Frater 2005 for a guide of fat-friendly airlines). But one, Southwest Airlines, has been especially noted for its size-ist policies. Even if a fat person can fit between the armrests, can wrap the seatbelt around the waist, and not lap over into the neighboring seat, the fat passenger may be charged for an extra seat. The decision is arbitrarily made and highly discretionary, suggesting a profit motive (Dilley 2002; British Broadcasting Company 2002; Ellin 2005).

THE FOOD INDUSTRY

A troubling global development refers to the profit motive of food industries as visited not just upon the U.S. but also other cultures. The food that we eat in the U.S. and the food that we export to other cultures is cheaply produced and high in fat content (such as Spam). Such food has caused looming health hazards on our own culture and on cultures that, physiologically, can not handle the

change in diet, notably people in transition, such as Micronesians, Native Americans, aboriginal Australians, and Polynesians. Such people are subject to dramatically altered and altering environments regarding food sources and availability, migration patterns, and economic instability (Shell 2001).

Clearly, there is a great deal of money to be made by selling fast food to Asians and importing high-sugar, high-fat food to Micronesians. Better yet, from the profit-motive point of view, we can manufacture food more cheaply by using ingredients (like high fructose corn syrup and palm oil) that are unhealthy to consume and that dangerously increase our body weight, forsaking the traditional and more-expensive-to-produce ingredients like cane sugar and vegetable oil. In the 1970s, food scientists developed a method by which to make a sweetener called high fructose corn syrup (HFCS), made from corn. Importantly, HFCS is six times sweeter than sugar and the cost of producing this HFCS is markedly less than that of ordinary sugar. Moreover, HFCS ensures a long shelf-life, allowing high-caloric junk foods (as found in vending machines) to be kept fresh-tasting for a long time with no need to replace them frequently (thus saving money). Soda companies went from a 50/50 blend of sugar and HFCS to 100 percent HFCS because it's cheaper, never mind that it is health-hazardous, skewing the metabolism toward fat storage (Critser 2003).

Likewise, palm oil, aka "tree lard," unlike vegetable oil, is chemically similar to beef tallow and is a highly saturated fat. It is also incredibly cheap to produce. Palm oil, transformed into a viable commercial fat in the 1970s, is widespread in usage today in the manufacture of

convenience and fast foods (French fries, margarine, pastries). As with HFCS, it has the added advantage of keeping products "fresh" for a long time thus ending the need to replenish supermarket shelves and junk food machines. Regardless of the disadvantage for health and size, price was the determinant in palm oil's use: the concern at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which was thoroughly behind the development of HFCS and palm oil, was "pure farm economics" (Critser 2003: 10-11). The same goes for partially hydrogenated vegetable oils, used in fried food preparation (fried chicken, French fries) and food processing (tortilla chips, margarine, pies, microwave popcorn). Though aware of the health hazards, many restaurants continue to use partially hydrogenated oils (instead of vegetable, canola, and olive oils) as a money-saver: it doesn't spoil and it can be used repeatedly (Johnson 2006).

Another good way to make a buck in the food industry is to increase portion size, variously called "supersizing" or "value marketing." Value marketing became an effective tool to increase sales and profits at fast food and other restaurants and at movie theater which offers huge bags of popcorn at a small price (Critser 2003). Not surprisingly, it was found that if people were offered more food at a low price, they would buy it. So portion sizes increased, prices were lowered, food manufacturers made a lot of money, and people became fatter (Goode 2003).

Public schools rely on profit-oriented food corporations (Pizza Hut, Coca Cola, candy companies, etc.) to provide educational materials (for instance books) in exchange for the opportunity to sell high-fat food in the schools. Due

to budget cuts, schools can not afford basic needs, like books. Enter McDonalds and other purveyors of high-fat foods, risking school children's health in exchange for profit (Critser 2003).

SECONDARY SERVICES AND PRODUCTS

By-products or products that are purchased for fat people include plus-size medical equipment (stretchers, blood pressure cuffs, and mobile toilets that do not collapse under the weight of large bodies). For example, medical equipment manufacturers have super-sized stretchers, with thick aluminum frames, bulkier connectors and extra spine supports to create stretchers with a capacity of 650 pounds (Associated Press 2003). These secondary fat-relevant products are manufactured for purchase by those who are involved with fat people in some service-provider way; thus, these goods and services are purchased by individuals and organizations targeting services toward fat people.

Residential diet programs are an excellent example of secondary services and products for sale to fat people. Durham, North Carolina is the diet capital of the world, the hometown of the Rice Diet, the Duke Diet, and Structure House. These diet programs themselves are quite expensive, as witnessed by Jean Renfro Anspaugh's intriguing ethnography of her experience at the Rice House (Anspaugh 2001). But the diet programs are just the starting point for the money to be made in local Durham. Dieters in Durham pump more than \$51 million per year into the local economy. The secondary spending, beyond the diet center fees, includes new sneakers (when the dieters' feet shrink), new eyeglasses (when their

diabetes and thus their vision improves), to plastic surgery (when their bodies shrink and the excess skin is removed). Plastic surgery alone can cost \$25,000 for skin removal. Plus, the dieters pay rent, set up temporary workplaces, and some purchase permanent housing (Saul 2005).

MEDICAL AND PHARMACEUTICAL PROFITS

Some fat people are willing to undergo fat-reduction treatment in the form of diet pill prescriptions and fat-reducing surgeries (gastric bypasses, liposuction, plastic surgery to remove the abdominal "apron" and other loose skin after weight loss, etc.; see, for example, Kuczynski 2006). Another high-profit treatment is the inpatient weight reduction programs requiring long-term hospitalization for "drastic" weight loss, to reduce hundreds of pounds.

Pharmaceutical companies, never known for their altruism, develop diet "remedies" to presumably aid in weight loss as well as "treatments" for fat-related medical symptoms (diabetes, for instance). To wax draconian, if there is money to be made in the treatment of diabetes and other fat-related illnesses, it seems reasonable that the industry would not want to ruin a good thing and actually reduce the fat. Weight loss programs, pharmaceutical "remedies" for obesity, and weight-loss surgery in the name of health care, even if undertaken with the best health-care intentions, are profitable pursuits. Given that these regimens often are ineffective, perhaps because they are not accompanied by behavioral or lifestyle changes or because of genetic predisposition, one must question how different they are from obviously bogus treatments such

as diet supplements and fat-reducing belts as advertised on television.

CONCLUSION

Fat is an aesthetics and moral issue, as well as a health issue, with fat still being seen as socially repellent, physically unattractive, and as a personal matter of self-discipline. If we come to see fat as merely a physical "difference," we can then come to better grips with capitalism's influence on body size.

Normalization

"Normalization" is a phenomenon relevant to, though not exactly the same as, equality. We are coming to view the fat, by virtue of their numbers, as average or normal. Fat people are, in fact, average and normal, numerically-speaking and as measured by national studies but not in the manner in which size plays out in everyday social life. Fat people are marginalized in real and subtle ways by virtue of physical barriers and social barriers.

Fat children are increasingly seen as common, and, while their size and accompanying illnesses are not accepted by the medical community, they are increasingly accepted as such by broader society as common if not admired (Weil 2005). As to public opinion about the preponderance of fat people in the population, the Pew Research Center reports that nine out of ten Americans believe that their fellow Americans are fat. Amusingly, only four of ten of these same respondents believe themselves to be fat, which defies logic since they view 90 percent of everybody else as fat. One might infer from these figures that those who do not count themselves as fat, assuming that they really are fat, realize that they are not supermodels but are

unconcerned with their weight (Nagourney 2006).

As judged by the capitalist market support for increased body size, as I have described herein, we may conclude that fat and not-fat members of society are coming to view fat as the norm; or that fat people view themselves as normal relative to others. We find that a greater number of fat people are not viewing themselves as unusual, as they look around and find themselves surrounded by other fat people. Moreover, they see no reason to alter their appearance because they are "normal" (Stenson 2005). All the better for marketers since they can profit from all these newly-normal people. If fat people see no need to buy gym equipment and low-fat food, they can easily convert their purchasing power to buying sedentary entertainment devices (like TVs), order in high-fat pizza, while wearing plus-size sweats. None of this is to say that being fat is "okay" or not okay. It is to say that being fat is common and thus catered to as a source of profit.

Fat Consumers: A Grand New Market

Given that fat people comprise a majority of the US population, they are not a niche market (Erman 2002; Chakravorty 2003; Pressler 2003b). Thus, in true market-forces tradition, recognizing that fat people need the same things as thin people do, a huge market has opened up. As a result, we have a demand for fat-relevant products and services and this demand has joyously been met by manufacturers, retailers, and service providers. Naturally, businesses supply plus-size items such as larger towels, larger beds, larger clothes, larger clothes hangers, larger jewelry, larger furniture, larger coffins, seatbelt extenders,

larger umbrellas, scales that can weigh up to 1000 pounds, and workout videotapes for fat people.

While some might say that we need a solution to fatness, we have instead entrepreneurs making money from fatness. And that is not necessarily inappropriate. Recognizing fat people's needs and desires as legitimate is evident in this economic movement to meet those needs. I would propose, however, that we extend this recognition beyond material needs.

The fat-acceptance movement has already begun to make clear to various industries, via grassroots activities, that people-of-size are in the majority and they do make consumer choices; the wise manufacturers, advertisers and service providers have responded to this important marketing fact. It would be helpful if we could clarify our stance on fat and rid ourselves, as a society, of our ambiguity about fat acceptability. In a way, the capitalist support for fatness supports the notion that fat is an acceptable or even a good thing, requiring size-friendly products and services. Yet, we as a society retain negative views of fat as a bad thing, a health hazard, an aesthetic stigmata, and a sign of personal weakness. The more tangible evidence, though, are the fat-relevant goods and services newly provided. Intentional or not, this profit-seeking activity may be working toward size acceptance.

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