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Embodying neoliberalism: economy, culture, and the politics of fat

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Abstract. The purpose of this paper is to recast the politics of obesity in the United States in light of the unsatisfactory nature of the current, popular debates on this problem. The paper begins by taking stock of contemporary discussions about obesity through a review and analysis of the popular and academic literature on the topic. We show how discussions of obesity that rely on unidimensional structural, biological, and political causes are not only simplistic but also do not adequately historicize the present so-called epidemic of US obesity. To answer the questions 'why now?' and 'why here?', we argue, requires an ontological rapprochement between the more dialectical approaches to political economy, cultural studies, and political ecology. After laying out this more integrated approach, we apply it by showing how today's twin phenomena of the discursive war on obesity and the so-called epidemic itself are better understood through the historical lens of neoliberalism, both as a political – cultural economic project and as a form of governmentality. Our argument is that some of the central contradictions of global capitalism are literally embodied. The problem of obesity in its multiple material and discursive senses can then be seen as a partial fix—in some respects, even as a spatial fix—to some of the contradictions of neoliberalism. At the same time, we contend that the neoliberal shift in personhood from citizen to consumer encourages (over)eating at the same time that neoliberal notions of discipline vilify it. Those who can achieve thinness amidst this plenty are imbued with the rationality and self-discipline of perfect subjects, who in some sense contribute to the more generalized sense of deservingness that characterizes US culture today.

> "Whenever citizenship comes to look like a question of the *body*, a number of processes are being hidden."
>
> L Berlant (1997)

These days obesity shows up in the news with a stunning regularity. Almost every week, it seems, an article on obesity is featured in major newspapers. Although most of these pieces focus on the putative rise in obesity and/or on its links with public health, a significant proportion of them link obesity to other social problems. For example, through the voice of so-called experts, a sample of recent articles assert the following: that obesity is a security threat in terms of military readiness (Severson, 2003); it is a cost to businesses in terms of worker productivity (Murphy, 2004); and it is a weight-load problem for the airlines in terms of fuel costs (Yee, 2004). Obesity, that is, seems to be bigger than fat.

Complementing this unprecedented media attention on the so-called epidemic of obesity—along with the mind-boggling popularity of yet another specious diet trend (the low-carbohydrate mania as emboldened through the South Beach Diet and the Atkins Diet)—a flurry of popular books address a new politics of fat (for example, Brownell, 2004; Campos, 2004; Critser, 2003; Fumento, 1997; Nestle, 2002; Pool, 2001; Shell, 2003). Except for Campos, all of these authors accept that there is an epidemic of obesity and then go on to argue for the salience of one particular cause or set of causes for the problem of obesity. The goal, it seems, is to specify a singular target of blame, be it the fast-food industry, the television, regulation, biology, working mothers, or personal weakness.

At the outset we are not even willing to concede the epidemic of obesity in a factual sense. Indeed, as we write this, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, a major expounder of the epidemic discourse, has admitted to multiple statistical errors in its previous claims that obesity had overtaken tobacco as the leading cause of (American) death. Even if there is a secular rise in body weight among Americans, we feel that the terms 'epidemic' and 'obesity' are rhetorically loaded and must be subject to the same analytical scrutiny as the phenomena they supposedly describe. Like race, in other words, they are important not simply for what they presumably explain; rather, as social constructs with real consequences, they themselves require explanation, especially in light of how obesity is so blithely mapped onto seemingly unrelated issues. By treating obesity as an explanatory problem we are not suggesting that thinness is an unproblematic goal. To the contrary, we concur with Campos (2004) that the mass finger-pointing that goes on is not only simplistic, but also counterproductive.

The purpose of this paper, then, is to recast the new politics of obesity, in part by providing a different set of answers to a different set of questions. For, in our view, the primary question should be not 'why have US consumers come to eat endless amounts of fatty and calorie-laden food' but 'what is it about the contemporary period that has made obesity a social problem of such gargantuan proportions in the United States?' The explanations, that is, have to go beyond a search for the one cause and its counterpart, the silver bullet. Instead, they must address the temporality of the putative rise in US obesity as well as the effects of naming it as a problem: the question is not just 'why obesity?' but 'why now?' and 'why here?'.

To answer these questions we first need to take stock of contemporary discussions about obesity. As our overview will show, explanations of obesity tend to fall into either supply-side explanations that focus on our food-production system or demand-side explanations that focus on the US culture of consumption. We will argue that both sorts of explanations are overly simplistic and that a more integrated understanding of obesity requires a more dialectic approach that draws on both political economy and cultural studies. Furthermore, such understanding requires serious attention to how these theories bear on the production not only of food but also of bodies. What ties these approaches together, we will argue, are notions of contradiction and crisis, specifically the crisis of accumulation in the current capitalist economic regime in dialectical relationship with what the feminist philosopher Bordo (1993) refers to as a culture of bulimia. Within this 'dialectic of dialectics', in which economic and cultural contradictions mutually constitute and feed each other, the problem of obesity in its multiple material and discursive senses can be seen as a partial fix—in some respects, even as a spatial fix—to some of the contradictions of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism thus figures prominently in our analysis, as simultaneously a political economic project and a form of biopolitics that, following Dean (1999), we refer to as neoliberal governmentality.

In the first sections of the paper we lay out the three major contemporary explanations of obesity. In the following section, we show how these explanations of obesity are wanting not only in their reliance on unidimensional structural, biological, or political causes but also in their essentializing logic. We then go on to argue that to answer the questions 'why now?' and 'why here?' requires an ontological rapprochement between the more dialectical traditions of both political economy and cultural studies (via the notion of desire), which also incorporates the more politicized (and dialectical) ideas of nature found in political ecology. In our section on the 'dialectic of dialectics' we present a conceptual schema to bring these ideas into synthesis.

We will then turn to our main offering, which is to demonstrate some of the ways in which this dialectic of dialectics operates within neoliberalism to provide purchase on the problem of obesity in the contemporary United States. The main argument we will put forward is that the global political – economic contradictions of the neoliberal era are literally embodied, and that the problem of obesity is implicated in how neoliberalism recreates the subject – self. In that way we are not merely noting that the obesity debate is overlaid with neoliberal discourse, though that is also certainly the case. Our argument is much stronger: neoliberalism both produces obesity and produces it as a problem. As a consequence the obesity debate itself creates impossible, unachievable standards for economic, biological, and political competence in today's world, privileging a few and leaving the rest to their couch-potato doom.

The contemporary debate

Current explanations of obesity can be categorized roughly into three prominent ideas. The first is that the US economy has made high-calorie, nutritionally debilitated, and otherwise unhealthy food too available, too cheap, and too profitable. The second idea rests on the rather obvious notion that people are biologically predisposed to eating through sensations of taste and hunger, but that in the past food insecurity has kept them thin. The claim here is that contemporary influences of taste, variety, more sedentary lifestyles, and so forth have naturally made people gain weight. The third explanation, from a cultural and feminist perspective, discounts the problem by pointing to a larger one: seeing fat as a form of stigma in class, race, and gender struggles that use weight as a way to marginalize and control particular groups. Even though this third explanation is a different sort of argument, articulating an effect rather than an underlying cause, these three ideas—'it's the economy, stupid', 'it's only natural', and 'it's the politics of exclusion'—are no strangers to social science explanation. So it is hardly surprising that the solutions thrown up by each explanation of obesity map onto the more general current debates over how we shall govern ourselves.

Political economy and the thinness of supply-side explanations

Why are we fat? Several authors take their cues from political economy, without actually admitting to it, and instead refer to the 'toxic environment' as the problem (for example, Brownell, 2004). These explanations draw inspiration from analyses of the dynamics of food production itself as well as from more complex processes such as the growth of fast-food chains as forms of regional development and the feminization of the workforce. All of these explanations, however, rest on the presumption that the increased availability (and cheapness) of high-caloric food is a causal force in its increased consumption.

At its most basic, the argument is that we are fat because the United States produces too much food. Critser (2003) cites as support for this particular argument US Department of Agriculture reports that the amount of food available in the United States increased by 15% from 1970 and 1994 (from 3300 calories per capita to 3800) at the same time that the amount of calories consumed per capita increased at roughly the same rate. Although Critser's causal arguments run the gamut, this argument is taken up with vigor by Pollan (2003) as well, who singularly points to US agricultural policies that systematically create conditions of oversupply.

These critiques of agricultural subsidies are well deserved. [illegible]aked in the New Deal commitment to political support of the farm sector and to some extent intended to keep food cheap for US consumers as part of the social wage, the durability of the commitment to subsidize production of certain commodities has very little to do with protecting farmers these days. Instead, agricultural subsidies are wrapped up in a pernicious geopolitics, which is used not only to prevent foreign producers from competing in US markets but also to coerce military consent around the world through strategic control of food surpluses. We are less clear on how this overabundance suddenly appears on our hips.

As Critser and Pollan do note, a corollary of this argument is that unhealthy, higher calorie food has been subsidized relative to healthy, lower calorie food. Many of the subsidized strategic commodities (for example, corn, soy, sugar, wheat) are key ingredients in what Friedmann (1993) calls 'durable foods'—highly processed and highly fattening convenience foods from cake mixes to tortilla chips. They are also primary sources of fodder for livestock sectors, which are widely felt to be problematic, in part because grain-fed animals not only produce fattier meat but are also significantly more vulnerable to health problems (Pollan, 2002). Meanwhile, fruits and vegetables receive few direct subsidies (although they are, in fact, subsidized in other ways) and are thus more costly to purchase (Drewnowski and Specter, 2004). Thus, it is not only the abundance of food but relative cost that leads to fat.

A further variation of this argument draws its reasoning from another rather well-rehearsed literature in the political economy of agriculture. Fattening foods are profitable. Critser's (2003) focus on high-fructose corn syrup borrows from studies of the agrarian question as to why and how small farmers survive under industrial capitalism. One answer is 'substitutionism', the idea that industrial capitalists enter into those forms of food production that can be removed from the vagaries of nature on the farm and be put into factories, leaving farmers with the more risky and often unprofitable aspects of producing food (Goodman et al, 1987). It turns out that some raw crop materials are more amenable to incorporation into large-scale, industrial processes and so they have become the substitutes of choice. Of course, it does not hurt that many of these substitutes also have enabled powerful countries to reduce their reliance on imports during violent, unpredictable times (Friedmann, 1993), and that some transnational corporations monopolize and/or control trade in these commodities (Heffernan and Constance, 1994). So, for instance, beet sugar was substituted for cane sugar; and margarine was substituted for butter during the interwar years. Eventually, these more industrial substitutes became even cheaper to produce because of on-farm scale economies. Now, high-fructose corn syrup, a substitute for beet sugar, is a major ingredient in many processed foods, sweetening everything from soda pop to so-called natural cereals. According to Critser it is also a more pernicious form of sugar metabolically (as are highly saturated and partially hydrogenated fat substitutes), possibly contributing to weight gain and diabetes (although there is ample debate about this claim, as a quick perusal of the Internet will show).

Political economy, of course, speaks to more than the profitability of farm-level production. The food industry, and fast-food chains in particular, have been very clever in finding ways to increase profit margins by serving more food. Brownell (2004), Critser (2003), and many others point to the advent of 'supersizing' and 'value meals' in the emergence of the obesity epidemic. With supersizing, customers are charged a seemingly marginal amount extra for receiving several ounces more of, say, a beverage that costs only pennies to produce and pour. These profits go straight to the chain's bottom line. It is worth noting here that all-you-can eat buffets have long been the workhorse of high restaurant margins, and even so-called healthy choices can be supersized, as demonstrated by the smoothie chain Jamba Juice. We wonder if the recently released movie *Supersize Me* will push more than the usual suspects of McDonald's and Burger King to account for their practices.

Any discussion of the political economy of food must include a nod to the state. Not only has the state subsidized key commodity producers as discussed above, it has also been negligent in regulating food in ways that encourage healthy eating. Nestle's (2002) astute analysis of the politics of the food pyramid provides a key example of such regulatory capture by the industry that is the target of regulation. She shows that what gets defined as healthy in the pyramid has been heavily influenced by the food and agriculture lobbies, particularly by meat and dairy interests. Countless other examples of how nutritional science has been captured and used on behalf of a food industry can be found in the pages of Nestle's *Food Politics* (2002).

A related argument recognizes the significant cultural work that goes into selling food. So, in the case of fast food, we get explanations not only about the politics of nutrition but also about the power of food advertizing (Brownell, 2004; Nestle, 2002; Schlosser, 2001). In this vein are analyses of how fast-food advertizing fools people, particularly children, into the notion of food as fun rather than food as healthy—through the use, for instance, of icons such as Ronald McDonald and dye-filled breakfast cereals. This culture-industry critique of fast food emphasizes the media and its capacity to lie to the public. This critique is weaker in its explanations as to why the public believes this stuff.

To these rather straightforward examples of the political economy of food production and marketing we want to add wider socioeconomic changes that contribute to the supply of bad food. The huge flux of women into the workforce, for example, is coupled with the rise in fast, convenient, and snack food, although we believe the discussion about mothers' need for convenience has been overly simplified. With the retreat of property taxes, strip malls with fast-food joints have become central to city revenues—Schlosser (2001) is unique among critics in drawing that connection. Finally, many authors point to the prevalence of soda in the public schools as a problem; fewer people make the explicit connection that soda contracts first became attractive to school districts because of eroding tax support for public education. In general, fast, junky food has become widely available—at highway rest stops, gas-station minimarts—and is often the only thing available when and where you are hungry or thirsty.

Nature and the taste of deterministic explanations

The counterparts to the political-economy arguments, with their emphasis on infinite supply (and not on how food gets into our mouths), are those arguments that focus on infinite demand (and not, correspondingly, on how we are surrounded by junky food). In part these explanations arise because the supply-siders fail to deal with the obvious. Eating is pleasurable. We like food; it is yummy. Eating is also necessary, unlike tobacco. We eat because we are biological beings that rely on metabolizing organic material to generate the energy that sustains us as humans. Sociologists of food have long recognized the eater's paradox, though: that, even though eating is pleasurable, overeating past the point of fullness is uncomfortable, perhaps leading to the modulation of food intake (Beardsworth and Keil, 1997). Still, few of us have not, at least on occasion, allowed the pleasure of eating to supersede the displeasure of overeating. So, then, the question is why does overeating happen more routinely or why do the consequences of eating stay on our bodies more in the contemporary era? Most of these answers ultimately involve turning to nature.

For example, several recent books blame the rise of obesity on biology, based on a mismatch between current diets or lifestyles and human evolutionary development (for example, Pool, 2001; Shell, 2003). The basic idea is that over thousands of years, and in the face of uncertain and sporadic sources of food, people evolved to store fat. And, up until recently, people moved a lot more in their work, much of it around the acquisition and production of food. But, in a very short time frame, these exigencies have changed. Food is readily available (for most Americans, anyway), and, for various reasons—from changing work routines to the existence of video games and televisions—people are more sedentary than ever. Bodies cannot possibly adapt so quickly to these new conditions and as a result people are getting fat very fast. Several studies have demonstrated rapid weight gain among recently migrated or recently acculturated ethnic groups. The saga of the southwestern Pima, who developed a so-called thrifty gene to store fat in lean years and then became very fat on exposure to Western diets, has been cited widely (Brownell, 2004; Critser, 2003; Pool, 2001).

A related discussion treats obesity as a disease. The so-called medicalization of obesity allows for the possibility that some bodies are less able, if at all, to regulate signals of hunger and/or metabolize food at a weight-maintaining pace (Shell, 2003). For example, scientists have been able to pin some extreme cases of obesity on a gene mutation that restricts production of the hormone leptin, which is believed to instruct the brain as to how much fat the body needs. Bodies without leptin 'think' they are in a state of starvation (Pool, 2001, page 4). Taken to an extreme, these arguments veer towards genetic reductionism; ideas of a 'hungry gene' or 'thrifty gene' can easily lead one to believe that obesity is simply a scientific issue to be dealt with primarily by the medical establishment. Even the idea that most of us have 'set points' to which our bodies will naturally adjust unless we make conscious and sustained efforts to diet and exercise suggests little room for agency (Pool, 2001). Nevertheless, this literature brings the recognition that variation in metabolism and so forth makes for different-sized bodies.

The issue of taste enters into the nature-centered arguments from a different angle. For instance, one explanation of teens wanting soda and chips is that there is a natural desire for the sugar and salt that have come to dominate highly processed food. To be sure, these provide two of only four or five (depending on who you ask) tastes that can be picked up by the tongue alone, and the sensors for these are located at the most accessible parts of the tongue. At the same time, experts on taste recognize that not only do olfactory senses and 'mouth feel' contribute a good deal to the sensation of taste, but there are strong cognitive elements of taste. In other words, knowing *what* is being eaten through visual cues is as key to the taste experience as biophysical sensation (Korsmeyer, 1999). This suggests that taste is aesthetic as well as sensate.

This discussion thus begs the question of what tastes good to whom. Brownell (2004) argues that people eat junk food precisely because it tastes better than healthy food. In contrast, the Slow Food movement, a worldwide movement of artisanal food producers, high-end chefs, and various and sundry gastronomes (that is, foodies), seeks to "decelerate the food consumption experience so that alternative forms of taste can be (re-)acquired" (Murdoch and Miele, 2004, page 113). In other words, some people in this movement take for granted an essential notion of good food that the body can detect; they would bet the ranch that if kids only tasted food fresh from the garden (cooked by Alice Waters of Chez Panisse herself) they would be sure converts to another way of eating. Meanwhile, a recent discussion in The Center for Science in the Public Interest's (CSPI) *Nutrition Action Health Letter* several studies which found that people eat more if they are given more, regardless of taste (Liebman, 2004). Campos (2004) and others counter examples such as the latter with nods to the French paradox: that, although French food is rich, people do not eat as much because the food, unlike junk food, is intensely satisfying. But Stearns (1999) says it is because the French put much tighter strictures on children's eating. Evidence seems to point in lots of ways—for and against junk food as tasting better, whether or not better tasting food makes you eat more or less of it—all throwing into question whether taste as biophysical sensation has much to do with how much you eat at all.

Constructivism, cultural politics, and the beauty of fat

The third main approach to obesity is somewhat different in that it is concerned less with identifying the cause of obesity than with problematizing the war on obesity. For example, several studies address the social construction of norms regarding weight and body size (see, for example, Cogan, 1999; Hamin, 1999; Saukko, 1999), along with the social construction of the obesity epidemic itself (Campos, 2004). One central point is that measurements of obesity change with new scientific ideas and techniques, making historical comparisons of fatness difficult. For example, in June 1998, the National Institutes of Health released new guidelines on the measurement of obesity, using the now familiar body mass index (BMI)—a needlessly abstruse measure of height-to-weight ratio used to identify the 'overweight' and 'obese'. By reducing the recommended cut-off point from over 27 BMI to 25 BMI, several million Americans became overweight in one fell swoop (Kuczmarski and Flegal, 2000). Such changes would certainly call into question the rhetoric of epidemic. And, as Campos (2004) discusses at length, as a ratio the BMI fails to capture many other variables that could affect what is considered to be the optimal weight for different people—if, indeed, optimality could be divorced from the cultural context that simply equates thinness to health. The social-constructionist literature raises the additional issue that the norms of thinness vary among historical periods, and, of course, in different cultural contexts. The suggestion here is that what constitutes the ideal body has less to do with health and more to do with ideas of perfection, goodness, femininity, and so forth (DuPuis, 2001; McKinley, 1999; Saukko, 1999; Sobal, 1999).

Another thread points to the myriad problems with dieting. Many studies show, and countless anecdotes attest, that dieting rarely works in the long run and itself can be unhealthy (cited in, for example, Brownell, 2004; Campos, 2004, Cogan, 1999; Germov and Williams, 1999). The fact that many people go to great pains to be thin, from the use of dangerous diet drugs to invasive surgeries such as stomach stapling, also attests to the perverse physical self-accounting that the quest for thinness elicits (LeBesco, 2004). At the very least, people for whom thinness is a project necessarily have to deal with the constant discipline of self-denial (Campos, 2004; Saukko, 1999). In addition, this literature reminds us that there is no straightforward link between good health and thinness, particularly in light of different metabolisms, bone structure, and so forth. Thinness is at best a proxy for good health, signifying a lower risk for just a handful of diseases (Gaesser, 2002). For that matter, many thin people eat poorly, do not exercise, and may otherwise be unhealthy, but as a result of their socially acceptable body shapes they are not called to account.

In the main, though, this line of argumentation dismisses the war on fatness, because fat is treated as another form of stigma. Few would disagree with the notion that fat people are subjected to tremendous institutional discrimination and social humiliation, even to rage and disgust, as Millman (1980) elucidated early on. Particularly when obesity is seen as an acquired rather than as a given trait, fatness comes to represent moral inferiority, the inability to control one's impulses (Sobal, 1999). The supposition that fat people are products of gluttony and, therefore, are not worthy of full subjectivity is pervasive (LeBesco, 2004). Additionally, as Millman and many others discuss, those who consider themselves fat no matter what their size experience unnecessary psychological pain.

What is equally important to this argument, then, is how the fear of fat becomes a form of discipline (Bordo, 1993). Indeed, it is the recognition of how norms of thinness have been particularly oppressive to women that has evoked the most opposition to fat stigmatization. An extensive literature takes on the gendered dimensions of body image and how these norms often manifest in serious eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia (see, for the most widely cited works, Bordo, 1993; Chernin, 1981; Orbach, 1997).

A final, overlapping theme is how the war on obesity parallels other hygienic–eugenic projects (LeBesco, 2004; Turner, 1997). Much has been made of the notion that some cultural groups (for example, African–Americans and Latinos in this country) value plumpness, or at least do not worship thinness to the extent that white people do (Hughes, 1997; Massara, 1997). Hughes even argues that food can be an escape from a socioeconomically oppressive environment (1997, page 279). Others have argued from the obverse perspective that the presumption that body image is a problem only for white, middle–upper-class women serves to mask further the suffering of marginalized people (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2003; Powers, 1989; Thompson, 1992). In either case, it seems clear that efforts to impose norms of thinness are fraught, and often entwined with other projects to control, dominate, or marginalize racialized and gendered others (Osborne, 1997; Stoler, 1995).

Fat, in short, has become another way to police the bounds of normalcy (and class), to the extent that, as LeBesco (2004, page 85) aptly notes, we feel compelled to explain away fatness, just as we do homosexuality, whereas thinness, like heterosexuality, and, for that matter, whiteness—is generally taken for granted. In other words, even defining fatness as a problem holds an a priori assumption that thinness is normal, suggesting just how oppressive discourses of obesity can be.

Taking stock of the explanations

Each of these explanations has some salience, needless to say, but they also raise questions in ways that make them unsatisfying. Our dissatisfaction arises, in part, because the arguments are often put in highly simplified and essentialist terms. For example, in trying to garner popular appeal, the toxic-environment explanation underspecifies the dynamics—the political economy—that drive food availability. Soda pop appeared in the public schools because of a complicated array of political manipulations, including the racialized patterns of postwar regional development that incited the tax revolt (Shrag, 1998), along with Coca Cola's fantastical history of selling us bottled sugar. One cannot redress the problem of soda in the schools without acknowledging decreasingly sufficient support for public education which was perpetrated by the new right's antiwelfare agenda. Nor is it enough to say that the admittedly perverse support of the nation's corn producers (whether for geopolitical reasons or for farm security) creates systematic oversupply. In the name of policy efficacy, those who bemoan the growing supply of nutritionally debilitated food are reluctant to name this as the competitive ambitions of certain agro-food capitals. Without placing these developments within a broader political-economic dynamic we lose the sense in which they are deeply embedded and in some sense fixed to capitalism's crisis tendencies.

The other problem rests with the notorious weakness of political economy in explaining consumer demand. In its most unreconstructed (read: strictly Marxist) forms it ignores consumers altogether, or considers them capitalist dupes. We are simply fooled into being fat. The introduction of commodity chain methodologies and/or of systems of provision methodologies (Fine et al, 1996; Friedland, 1984; Hopkins and Wallerstein, 1994) was an attempt to address these sorts of lacunae but their top-down verticality still privileges production or distribution capitals, at the expense of insights into consumption (Goodman and DuPuis, 2002; Guthman, 2002). At best, consumers express their agency on the far end of the commodity chain, so that their messages are always mediated by supermarkets and other actors along the chain. Thus, political economy offers us little in the way of explaining how desire is constructed and expressed around certain foods, thereby belying the question of what makes us eat the stuff: does high-fat food, particularly fast food, create obesity by simply being there? Nor does political economy give us much purchase on the stigma of being fat.

Each of the theoretical frameworks of explanation contains within itself prescriptions for overcoming the social problem. In the case of the political economy of obesity, at the broadest level the goal is to unveil the commodity fetish—to show what is really being done to cows, for instance, so that disgust with the system will bring it down. There is little question that books such as *Fast Food Nation* (Schlosser, 2001) have been largely successful in generating disgust (with fat capital rather than with fat people). At the more mesolevel, groups such as CSPI work hard to get the public to understand the nutritional disaster of the Big Mac, to create alternate food pyramids, and so to educate the public to want better foods. At times the media attention that is showered on particularly egregious ingredients and practices even translates into changes in practice. Kraft Foods' immanent abandonment of the use of trans-fats is a case in point.

At the policy level the focus reverts to affecting supply: get soda out of the schools and fast food out of cafeterias and put healthy, often local, food in. Nevertheless, although we can get our kids to drink less soda by getting soda machines out of schools, will this get them to like soda less? To want it less? What makes kids want infinite amounts of soda in the first place? Or, let us say that anti-fast-food activists are successful in getting fast-food joints to provide informational nutrient labels on their hamburgers. Once you have walked into a McDonald's do you care? To paraphrase LeBesco (2004, page 31), can one assume that knowledge of a product will change either one's attitude of love for it or one's long-term behavior of consuming it?

As for the naturalistic arguments about genetic disposition and taste, they provide some explanation about why we want food (because we need it) and how we have become fatter evolutionarily (because humankind is maladapted to the wealth of modernity), but still say little about how we tend to like certain foods more than others. Their more significant contribution, in our view, is to remind us of the obvious, ironically, though: that biology is an important source of somatic difference. Unfortunately, though, by reverting to essentialist notions of nature, these explanations tend towards biologically determinism. Such explanations are of the type that Robbins (2004) has recently called 'apolitical ecologies'—which use seemingly unquestionable assertions of what is natural to explain something that is simultaneously social.

Furthermore, in the move to absolve the individual eater of responsibility, we are faced with an untenable polarity: fat people are stripped of their subjectivity while thin people appear to at least have the possibility of exercising a choice (LeBesco, 2004). In other words, if nature is *the* causal force for obesity, there are only two ways out. One way is to make it a medical problem, which either shifts the locus of politics to medical science, or, worse, depoliticizes the issue entirely. The other way is to urge that humans exercise control over their natural instincts.

To be sure, once most medical solutions are discounted, the prescriptions for the naturalistic causes tend to be puritanical, individualist self-denial: Don't eat it; don't drink it. Take the trouble to pack a lunch; bring a thermos from home; cut up vegetables for your child's school lunch. Exercise regularly and stay away from the television. It should be noted that the food industry echoes this platform, in response to "food as the new tobacco". We are just offering consumers a choice they say; the motivation to control your weight must come from you (and from your mother).

So, when all is said and done, even Critser (2003), who offers the most multicausal analysis, ultimately lays the problem at the door of personal and parental responsibility. But he does so in a backdoor sort of way, by pointing to those aspects of

US culture that allow fatness. In his discussion of the 'boundariless society', for example, he argues that Americans do not exert enough self-control, that parents are too permissive, that there is too much concern with low self-esteem, and that even the church has moved to acceptance of rather than admonition against gluttony. Indeed, in criticizing the 'cultural politics' that make it politically incorrect to set stringent weight guidelines, the disproportionate attention that, he feels, is given to anorexia, and even the way oversized clothes (as opposed to skinny jeans) make people feel comfortable in their fatness, he is effectively saying that people are not made to feel bad *enough* for being fat!

That Critser, among many others, returns the fulcrum of action to personal responsibility and resurrects shame is surely problematic. As geographer Valentine (1999) notes, the corporeal freedom—not only choosing what to eat, and when, but also choosing how to look—that women especially lack in different spaces of their lived lives belies the focus on individual responsibility in eating. For related reasons, food activists such as Nestle, Brownell, and company are fighting so hard against these arguments and focusing on the toxic environment. But, ultimately, even those who recognize the problem of supply enjoin us to use more self-control in what we put in our mouths, as evidenced in Nestle's pervasive 'eat less' message in *Food Politics* (2002). Likewise, one of the more unfortunate aspects of the movie *Supersize Me*, notwithstanding its explicit attack on McDonald's, is its not-so-hidden disdain of fat people, whose corpulent if often faceless bodies are regularly in the camera's eye. This, then, is one of the ways that the obesity debate on both sides is overlaid with neoliberal discourse, albeit in a more superficial way than we will later draw out.

Yet, from the stigmatization perspective, the social problem defined is exactly the opposite: we are *too* pressured to be disciplined and self-controlled. Those in this camp recognize that naming the problem is part of the problem. In addition, they recognize that judgments about body image as related to the disciplinary idea have created a culture of exclusion in a world where body difference has been central to the denial of rights. As LeBesco (2004, page 55) notes, stigmas are "useful means of framing notions of citizenship" and fat bodies, like (other) disabled bodies, "fail to register as fully productive in a capitalist economy".

We concur with the idea that naming the problem of obesity may itself be productive of the problem (Campos, 2004). Stoler's (1995) main point in her reading of Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1985) is that power does not prohibit or repress desire but causes it to emerge. In relation to discourses of sexuality, "naming, delimiting and thereby giving social meaning" to certain sexual practices give possibility to "precisely those desires [they] intended to eradicate" (Butler, 1987, page 218, cited in Stoler, 1995). So, just as proscriptions on masturbation were designed not to curtail a practice but to create new centers of power and knowledge in the surveillance of children (Stoler, 1995, page 139), the point of the war on obesity may not be to curtail it—to have people eat less—but actually to imbue eating with a greater kind of power. It is certainly arguable that proscriptions about food make us obsess about food. 'Nothing makes me gain weight faster than going on a diet', people say. The glossy pages of 'food porn' that constitute CSPI's *Nutrition Action Healthletter* do not exactly curb hunger, leading us to wonder if public education and exhortation actually do what they claim to do. We are also convinced by Lupton's use of Foucauldian arguments to say that the war on obesity fails to achieve its intended outcomes because it generates resistance. Many people refuse the disciplinary strategies that are supposed to lead to thinness (Lupton, 1997, page 102) and some may even opt for fatness as an embodied form of resistance (McKinley, 1999).

Even so, the most general response to stigmatization—fat acceptance—poses some bizarre twists. Fat acceptance as a movement developed both as a way to remediate rights and as a way to repair broken psyches—to turn self-loathing into self-love (Germov and Williams, 1999; Sobal, 1999). For some fat-acceptance activists, the point is not to blame people for conditions for which they have little control, whether it is the type of food they have access to or whether it is the way their bodies metabolize food—because there are no clear links between food intake and fatness. But these well-meaning attempts to absolve certain fat people of responsibility (for example, those who cannot afford better food or those who follow a strict exercise regime and remain fat) reinscribe those ideas forwarded by the biological determinists: that some people are simply not fit to be subjects, who, by definition, must be self-disciplining. Accordingly, those people who exercise some sort of choice in their fatness (by eating what they want regardless of what they know, as many thin people have the putative luxury of doing) are doubly condemned (LeBesco, 2004). Because of this conundrum, some people in the fat-acceptance movement are unwilling to acknowledge any of the possible causes or consequences of fat, thereby absolving the food industry of its deeds. For them, the response to stigmatization must be what LeBesco's calls 'fat resignification', which is about throwing off the yoke of biopolitical governance. Fat resignification is thus a complete inversion of the other two main arguments: fast food is blameless and subjectivity is defined by the refusal to comply with any notions of bodily control.

No matter what, the fat-stigmatization and fat-acceptance literature makes clear that the problem of obesity is, at least in part, an issue of governance. It is strange, then, that this literature elides the work that the problem of obesity does for governing the center—the rest who are not stigmatized by being fat yet are constantly engaged in obsessing about weight (compare Bordo, 1993). Indeed, most of the literature on fat focuses on the anorectic and the obese: those at the margins and/or extremes who 'emit signs' (Foucault, 1985) of being out of control (albeit in very different ways). It is as if everyone else is not affected by the discourse and social fact of obesity. In short, what is missing in these explanations suggests that we need to think about the problem in more synthetic and less essentializing ways.

Toward a dialectic of dialectics

To sum up our argument so far, political economy has offered a set of explanations that has some historicity—although these explanations have often been put in the bland and nondialectical terms of 'the toxic environment'. Furthermore, political economy falls short in addressing the cultural politics of fat. The nature arguments deserve a different sort of scrutiny, especially in light of Williams's (1980, page 63) aphorism that ideas of nature contain "an extraordinary amount of human history". For our purposes, we need to problematize the discourses that emerge by putting the problem on the doorstep of nature, yet simultaneously recognize that the object of scrutiny in the obesity debates is, in the final analysis, the materiality of the body. As for feminist and cultural studies of eating and bodies, many of which borrow from psychoanalytic readings of desire, they have pointed to the cultural contradictions around these issues but have done so in a way that does not fully contextualize them within changing forms of capitalism.

One of the problems in making sense of obesity in an integrative fashion is that food studies as a subdiscipline are bifurcated into cultural studies of eating and economic studies of the food system as a 'commodity chain'. A number of authors have recently discussed this ontological gap between production and consumption studies of food (Dixon, 1997; Goodman and DuPuis, 2002; Tovey, 1997). Dixon has advocated a bridging of this gap by constructing a 'cultural economy of food', an extension of commodity-chain studies that not only includes retailers and consumers but also recognizes that symbolic exchanges occur in arenas more typically associated with production just as economic exchanges occur in the household. What she effectively argues is that integrating production and consumption into a holistic view of the food system requires more than lengthening the chain to make it inclusive of all the actors in the system. Marston (2000) has made a parallel argument regarding the need to bring social reproduction and consumption into theorizing the social construction of geographic scale. Building on Goodman and DuPuis (2002), we argue that such moves also require putting ontologically distinct literatures in conversation with one another. Indeed, it is only by bringing the more dialectical traditions in both political economy and cultural studies into fruitful conversation that a deeper understanding of obesity emerges. In other words, only by seeing both culture and economy as a 'dialectic of dialectics' is it possible to understand the dialectic *between* culture and economy.

A second problem has to do with conceptualizing the body, too, as part of the dialectic between culture and economy, and doing so in a way that is true to both its material and discursive construction. Within the literature on the spatiality of the body, there seems to be agreement that the body is, as Valentine puts it, "a location which is the outcome or product of social relations" (1999, page 329). But, beyond that, we see a replication of the political economy and cultural studies split. Whereas Harvey (borrowing from Haraway ironically enough) talks of the body as a site of capitalist accumulation (1998), most other geographers have privileged poststructural ideas of the body. At the risk of grossly simplifying the existing literature, many authors see it as a site of discipline and control, and/or as a discursive production (for example, Grosz, 1995; Longhurst, 1997; Valentine, 1999). And, despite the concessions to the materiality of the body—as Nast and Pile (1998, page 1) say in their introduction to *Places Through the Body*, "since we are alive, we must have bodies"—there is a remarkable neglect of the nature of the body.

To remedy this we want to put cultural-studies notions of the body in conversation with political ecology. To be sure, with its almost singular focus on landscapes of livelihood, political ecology has been astoundingly silent on what occurs at the other 'end' of human–nature cometabolisms: eating and bodies (DuPuis, 1998). Yet, political ecology has other things to offer. Drawing on constructivist ideas, the tradition of political ecology has made great strides in denaturalizing the naturalisms, and in recognizing the social importance of fights over what counts as nature. Conversely, more recently, political ecology has been influenced by actor-network science studies, which argues for explanations that are inclusive of the ways nature collaborates, resists, or undermines its incorporation into human projects (Callon, 1986; Goodman and FitzSimmons, 1998). Therefore political ecology provides a way to maintain sensitivity to the social construction of obesity, to the political economy of obesity, and to the materiality of nature.

Figure 1 represents a sketch of the food commodity chain as representing this 'dialectic of dialectics'. As this figure shows, an ontological rapprochement between food studies and the political economy of food requires integrating the many literatures that in fact focus only on a specific part of the chain. In each case, it is the dialectical portion of those literatures that can be brought into dialogue with the other literatures along the chain. The unidimensional explanations of food production and consumption lead to endless 'either— or' arguments. Dialectical explanations, on the other hand, lend themselves to coproductive 'both–and' integrations that allow for more wholistic (but not totalizing) explanations (Jasanoff, 1996). So, by integrating political ecology into our framework, we can also bring a dialectical, coproductive bridge into the

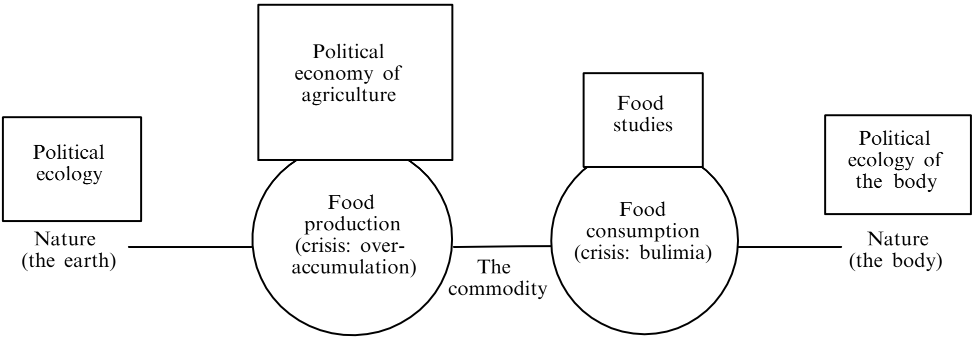

Figure 1. The dimensions of the obesity debate: literatures (in boxes) and ontological spheres.

somewhat neglected terrain of the material body in the study of food as a commodity system.

The central dialectic of capitalism, of course, is the contradiction of capital accumulation. In contrast to the unidimensional view of capitalism as simply a profit machine, dialectical political economy emphasizes the contradictions inherent in any economic system, contradictions that drive the system in particular directions and toward particular crises. Based in antagonistic relations of labor and capital, which struggle over the social wage, the contradiction often manifests as a crisis of overaccumulation, a problem of too much capital relative to profitable investment and effective demand (O'Connor, 1989). For now, we also want to note the possibility that crises of profitability may manifest in realms outside of the logic of capital per se.

On the cultural side, the dialectical notion most useful to our understanding of obesity is desire: the notion that human emotions form their own historical dynamic, contributing to the shape of our possible futures. Here we want to contrast a dialectical understanding of desire with a simpler and more unidimensional philosophy of desire. The simpler concept of desire is that people have and are motivated by a variety of tastes and pleasures, which they seek to fulfill. If they are successful they are happy. The politics of desire in this case is simply the struggle to pursue what we want despite the forces that seek to repress these desires—what Foucault (1985) calls and critiques as 'the repressive hypothesis'. Like its supply-side counterpart, this more quotidian understanding of desire supports some of the most popular arguments about obesity: that we are fat simply because the kind of food we like is increasingly available in time and space. The fat-acceptance perspective embraces this view of desire, and sees that the social control of obesity is another form of repression that needs to be struggled against.

More dialectical perspectives on desire see human emotion and social context in a coproductive (mutually constitutive) but intrinsically contradictory relationship. Stemming from the psychoanalytic theory of Lacan (2002) and his reinterpretation of both Hegel and Freud, these perspectives, we believe, are useful to understanding obesity today. Lacan argued that the human self was always fractured and incomplete, and that humans as language-using animals were always seeking to reunite themselves with the world they were separated from because they had named it. As a result, human social activity could be explained as an attempt to make the self whole by possessing or controlling that which lay outside of it. This attempt is doomed to failure because the language-using human self is intrinsically unable to fulfill this project of reunification. Desire, therefore, signifies to Lacan a project of impossible fulfillment, the project of creating the self by trying to reunite with that which it is not.

Lacan's idea of desire as an intrinsic aspect of human self-making, however, does not explain why these projects of impossible fulfillment change over time. Foucault and Deleuze and Guattari were Marxist theorists who brought a historical and more materialistic dialectic to the notion of desire by making desire not simply a product of intrinsic human impulses but emerging from dialectical relationship between self and social context. Like Marx's theory of modes of production they saw the dialectics of desire as varying from one historical period to the next.

Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) formulation of a 'politics of desire' addresses the effects of human dreaming and the attempts to create the world according to impossible dreams. In their account, the classic Western bifurcations between mind/body, nature/culture, self/other, male/female (and, in our case, production/consumption) not only define the Western worldview, they also haunt it with unfulfillment. Attempts to control and/or possess 'the other' are the *effects* of desire's drive to overcome these dualities. In this way, desire became a basis for the understanding of the Western drive for power. So, for example, in postcolonial literature, desire for the other—'orientalism' (Said, 1978)—became the motivating factor behind European domination of colonial subjects as a way of creating a European self. Therefore, unlike Lacan, Deleuze and Guatarri historicize desire and put it into the context of a dialectical view of society.

In the next two sections, then, we will show how this more dialectical approach deepens our understanding of obesity, first by placing the condition itself within the historic context of neoliberalism as a political–economic project, and second by showing how the problem of obesity works as a key facet of neoliberal governmentality—the way in which we govern ourselves. One of the implications of our argument is that the processes we describe work not only on the scales of the body and the global but between them (see figure 2).

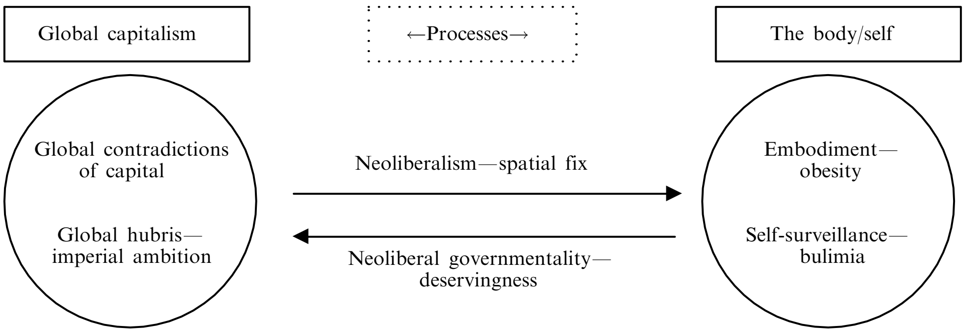

Figure 2. Between the body and the global.

Capital contradictions and the body as a spatial fix

As many have argued, neoliberalism as a political project emerged as a fix for the manifold crises in global capitalism that came home to roost in the 1970s (Harvey, 1989; McMichael, 2003). In the United States, the confluence of falling rates of profit under Fordist manufacture, high inflation, and the debt created by the Vietnam war, among other things, gave rise to an accumulation crisis of high magnitude, which provided fodder for the newly emerging new right and its desire to dismantle what existed of the Keynesian welfare–regulatory state. As Harvey notes in *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989), several possible fixes for the crisis existed in theory, but none were all too pretty. Devaluations (which did occur, notably in the rust belt) are always politically fraught; macro-economic regulation of the Keynesian sort was exactly what the new right was out to pull asunder, and temporal fixes of infrastructural development (which displace the problem into the future) would only add to the debt problem. This left the spatial fix—the absorption of excess capital and labor through geographic expansion—as the least rocky of the roads to take, paving the way to 'globalization'.

But, in the neoliberal impulse to tear down what its adherents considered restraints to capital accumulation, new contradictions emerged. The present-day worldwide recession is in large part a result of a lack of effective demand, as the middle class has eroded in the First World and 'bloody Taylorism' has led to disarticulated capitalism abroad. What has saved the US middle class, and even US capitalism writ large, is Wal-Mart producer–consumer relationships, which, it should be noted, have their counterparts in the fast-food industry. Cheap goods made by cheaper labor (including the superexploitation of Third World labor) prop up the declining wages of the middle class; their spending keeps the economy plodding along. In other words, contra Fordism, which had at its core a social wage that upheld demand for Fordist manufacture, the low-wage economy actively produced by McDonald's and its ilk makes people dependent on fast, cheap food. At the very least, disarticulated production–consumption relationships make supersizing seem a good deal—the dream of more pleasure for less money.

Nevertheless, disarticulated accumulation is itself crisis ridden, so that, as many people have remarked, neo-liberalism's broader solution has become the 'commodification of everything', not only making markets for things that were once held in common (the new enclosures) but also creating needs and desires where none previously existed. In that way the expanded availability of food, which provides the mainstay of the supply-side explanation of obesity, is the other side of the same coin as the attack on the social wage that gave rise to fast food. Fast food becomes a doubly good fix for capitalism; not only does it involve the superexploitation of the labor force, it also provides an outlet for surplus food. Insofar as this surplus manifests in obesity (Pollan, 2003), the contradiction is (temporarily) resolved in the body.

But what can be done when what economists call the 'problem of inelastic demand' kicks in, when one reaches an upper limit of food consumers' demand because there is a limit on the total amount of food that any one person can eat? Neo-liberalism's other fix is to create purchasable solutions to the problems it generates. One solution, as others have noted, is to commodify dieting as well as eating (Austin, 1999; Fine, 1998; Fraser, 1998). Jenny Craig's and Weight Watchers' frozen dinners, the thousands of diet books, and pay-as-you-go group weight-loss therapy all demonstrate that diets can be sold and bought. Not even CSPI is asking you to eat less profitable foods; the pages of their *Nutrition Action Healthletter* are filled with glossy, high-margin, processed, 'acceptable' low-fat substitutes for glossy, high-margin, processed, high-fat food. The relative neglect of fresh fruits and vegetables as a road map to thinness and/or health in these admonitions is certainly striking.

A related solution is to design food products that do not act like food. Products such as Simplesse, the substance used as fat in low-fat ice cream, or Splenda, the new low-calorie sugar, break right through the problem of inelastic demand. As the brand names evoke, the commodity simply passes through the body—enabling the product to be consumed with no weight-gaining effect. For that matter, some of the new pharmaceuticals (for example, Xenical) and nutritional supplements designed to reduce the body's absorption of fat (along with essential vitamins and minerals) fulfill a similar function. By thwarting the body's metabolizing functions, these products allow producers to sell much more of these products per person, ultimately speeding up the circulation of capital—another crisis fix. This double fix of eating and dieting, in other words, is not epiphenomenal; it has become a central piece of the US economy.

What these examples also suggest is that the material contradictions of neoliberal capitalism are resolved not only in the sphere of surplus distribution but also in bodies. Following Goldman, who looks at green governmentality as the perfect merge of nature politics and neoliberalism (for example, the commodification of water), we see that neoliberal moment is key here precisely because it extends capital power into previously unoccupied lifeworlds and natures (Goldman, 2005). Harvey's (2003) "accumulation by dispossession" has its counterpart in accumulation by engorgement in the spatial fix of the body. For the body is not only a site through which capital circulates as labor power, it is also a site through which capital circulates as commodities (Harvey, 1998). So by accommodating a faster turnover of commodities, either by obesity or disgorgement, the body becomes a place where capitalism's contradictions are temporarily resolved.

To put this in a broader sense, neoliberalism's commodification of everything ensures that getting rid of food—whether in bodies, municipal dumps, or food aid, for that matter, which has been shown to open up new markets—is as central to capitalist accumulation as is producing and eating it. Notwithstanding the laments of those who problematize the costs of obesity, the dieting, health-care costs, and waste management that accompany US food surpluses are internal to the logic of neoliberal capital and are not externalities. In other words, bulimia is not simply a way to read bodies; it is a way to read the neoliberal economy itself.

Cultural contradictions and neoliberal governmentality

At the same time that neoliberalism has produced a political economy of bulimia, it has also reinforced what Bordo has called a 'culture of bulimia'. She argues that the description of concomitant conditions of anorexia and obesity as a 'paradox' is incorrect: "Far from paradoxical, the coexistence of anorexia and obesity reveals the instability of the contemporary personality construction, the difficulty of finding homeostasis between the producer and consumer sides of the self. Bulimia embodies the unstable double bind of consumer capitalism" (1993, page 201). Although she presents a sufficiently dialectical perspective, Bordo stops there, defining modern culture as bulimic and the contemporary personality as unstable, but without fully historicizing how this culture articulates with the political economy of neoliberalism.

To build on her argument we thus draw on the notion of governmentality. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault (1985) referred to governmentality as the conduct of conduct. Dean (1999) clarifies this to mean the principles by which we govern ourselves as opposed to how we are externally governed. As what is considered proper or normative behavior changes in different historical eras, the notion of neoliberal governmentality suggests there are unique ways in which subjects act on themselves to produce their semiotic and corporeal identities within the larger context of neoliberalism.

One of the ways that neoliberal governmentality produces a certain sort of subject is through the fetish of consumer choice (along with the fetish of the market) and through the idea that choice represents a sort of right. According to Dean (1999, page 155), the notion of 'choice' emerged with the Thatcher–Reagan critique of excessive government. Since that formative period of neoliberalism, the reworking of notions of 'rights' as rights to consume has become a major ideological move (Marsden and Wrigley, 1995). This 'rights discourse', as Dean puts it, is certainly found in the politics of obesity; it undergirds, for instance, the representations of the Center for Consumer Freedom, the key group countering the group they call the 'food Nazis'. In their advertisements we are told not to be swayed by those who would regulate what we eat. By exercising our choice to eat we are exercising our freedoms.

Why, though, is it that the project of today is overeating rather than, say, the previous modern project of colonizing India? Although the colonial project has dissipated (notwithstanding the recent reemergence of US imperial ambitions), in today's slippery sloped economy the unreachable but desirable 'other' has arguably become capitalism itself. Consequently, as the many descriptions of modern America as the consumer society suggest, we have all but abandoned notions of citizenship as participation in the public sphere for a more individualist notion of self as the citizen consumer whose contribution to society is mainly to purchase the products of global capitalism. Whereas the role of the US consumer in the Fordist period was to work hard *and* to consume hard, in the neoliberal period of locating production off-shore only the consumption side is left to maintain US identity. Consumption has therefore become the way middle-class Americans maintain a toe hold on the map of the future. As Sklair states, "the creation of a culture – ideology of consumerism, therefore, is bound up with the self-imposed necessity that capitalism must be ever-expanding on a global scale. This expansion crucially depends on selling more and more goods and services to people whose 'basic needs' (a somewhat ideological term) have already been comfortably met as well as to those whose 'basic needs' are unmet" (1995, page 23).

In other words, the political – economic imperative to expand markets beyond realms of the social world to where none had yet existed suggests how colonization as a Western project has been superseded by overconsumption in the neoliberal era. And, although eating is in some ways not as grand a topic as colonialism, these days eating, as Probyn (2000) argues, articulates what we are. So, it can be read in the same way: eating becomes the embodiment of that which today's society holds sacred: consumption. We buy and eat to be good subjects.

At the same time, neoliberalism produces a hypervigilance about control and deservingness. For, in order to exercise choice freely, one must be shaped, guided, and molded into a person capable of exercising freedom (Dean, 1999, page 155). The neoliberal critique of too much intervention returns improvement to the individual, who is expected to exercise choice and to become responsible for his or her risks; at the same time, it also "identifies certain groups as without value and beyond improvement" (page 146). Neoliberal governmentality thus creates divisions between active citizens, those who can manage their own risks, and 'targeted populations', those who require intervention in management of risks (page 167) (see also Osborne, 1997).

So, in the first instance, neoliberal governmentality acts on the body, an idea best understood through Foucauldian notions of biopower. In *The History of Sexuality* (1985) Foucault describes how biopower emerged with the industrial revolution, which required able-bodied workers. It involved the penetration of social and self-disciplinary regimes into the most intimate domains of modern life, including the body. With the emergence of biopower the 'population' (along with the self) became a thinkable unit of regulation and intervention, as government increasingly intervened on behalf of improving biological vitality. In particular, the professing of norms and averages became a powerful regularizing mechanism, perhaps more so than legal codes. So, as Stoler (1995) shows, biopower was heavily imbricated with processes of 19th-century racialization. Not only was racial science about measuring, calculating, and specifying difference; racialized others were excluded (or eliminated) to ensure the security of the "normal' population. Eugenics, in that way, was not unthinkable.

Contemporary notions of public health—which inform much of the obesity debate, in particular the arguments which ascribe the epidemic of obesity to the 'toxic environment'—are similarly the terrain of biopolitics. Public health relies heavily on epidemiological statistics to infer cause. The statistics point to an abnormal 'at-risk' population. Yet, public health interventions are not directed primarily to the 20% or so of people considered at risk; indeed, the purpose of such interventions is to change societal norms of behavior, to intervene at the level of the population (Rose, 1985). The very idea of dividing populations into subgroups, some of whom are seen to retard the general welfare of the population, is in some sense, then, to prevent, contain, or eliminate the abnormal (Dean, 1999, page 100).

Here we see the biopolitical effects of constructing an epidemic of obesity. The interventions are really about warning, even about disciplining, the 'normal' by using the at-risk as examples. So, in the case of obesity, we get the shocking statistics about inexorable roads toward fatness if current eating patterns continue. We are shown how these statistics correlate with race, class, and gender. We are hounded with intense calculations of the nutritional constituents of all our favorite processed foods. Basically, we are told that obesity cannot be cured only prevented, in light of diet failure (Germov and Williams, 1999; Sobal, 1999). The war on obesity,—including the epidemic talk, that is—is directed toward the relatively thin and in that way is most centrally about disciplining the center.

In short, neoliberal governmentality produces contradictory impulses such that the neoliberal subject is emotionally compelled to participate in society as both out-of-control consumer and self-controlled subject. The perfect subject–citizen is able to achieve both eating and thinness, even if having it both ways entails eating nonfoods of questionable health impact (Splenda) or throwing up the food one does eat (the literal bulimic). Those who can achieve thinness amidst this plenty are imbued with the rationality and self-discipline that those who are fat must logically lack; they then become the deserving in a political economy all too geared toward legitimizing such distinctions.

At this juncture we want to 'jump scales' (Smith, 1992) with this insight to trace a connection between the self-governed body and the body politic (Schatzki and Natter, 1996), drawing from a striking piece by Price (2000). In it she draws parallels between new body norms and the political economy of the 1980s, juxtaposing the discourse of the tight, thin, sleek body to be made through diet and exercise with that of structural adjustment, for example, 'tightening their belts', 'cutting the fat', 'shaping up' 'bloated' economies (page 92). What she effectively shows is that the failures of Third World economies were similarly ascribed to the inability to self-manage; not surprisingly the metaphors of fat were the signs of such failure (despite the origins of structural adjustment). Gibson-Graham's (1996) apposite point about structural adjustment in developed societies, where they compare the rhetoric of neoliberal programmes to attract business to the rhetoric around the forced feeding of anorectics, goes to our argument just as strongly: nations out of control and needing management are equivalent to bodies out of control; they are either too fat or too thin. What this suggests, then, is that just as capital's contradictions manifest in new distributions of overaccumulation, the contradictions of neoliberal governmentality manifest in new ideational constructions not only of self but also of nation, contributing, perhaps, to the sense of global deservingness, even of imperial hubris, that characterizes much of US culture today.

Conclusion: the fat chance of 'eat less'

As LeBesco (2004) says, borrowing from Manheim (1999), "bulimics, inasmuch as they satisfy the insatiable needs of the capitalist machine and at the same time please the thin-obsessed society, are the perfect citizens" (page 56). Of course, historians and sociologists of food have also long noted 'the paradox of plenty' (Levenstein, 1993), such that, as societies (or classes) become wealthier, thinness becomes valorized and class is performed in bodies (Bourdieu, 1984). Many others have ruminated on the contradictions related to eating: how, for instance, modernity's anxieties are present in opposing messages about what constitutes proper eating (Beardsworth and Keil, 1997; Warde, 1997). Bordo has taken it a step even farther, arguing the existence of a persistent culture of bulimia, albeit one that affects women more than it does men. Ours, however, is actually a more expansive argument, because, under neoliberalism, the dual cultural imperatives of eating and of dieting and disposing are directly tied to the fate of the economy. Bulimia is a metaphor not only for consumption but also for production.

Neoliberal governmentality makes subjects into consumers to prop up a fragile capitalism. We are told to have all we want, to have as much as we want, and to have things we have not had before, in short to be utterly acquiescent to being the good consumer. To argue from the obverse, can there be any doubt that neoliberalism was also a response to the 'consume-less' ideas that circulated in the 1970s crisis period which spawned its emergence? 'Eat less' may well be construed as a threat to capitalist growth much like 'drive less'—a concept that many consider to be laughable these days. Obesity, then, becomes an embodiment of this phenomenon, the spatial fix of a crisis-ridden political economy in which ever-expanding unsustainable capitalist growth requires those who have eaten—and produced—enough to eat—and produce—more.

But neoliberal governmentality also creates privilege, a 'possessive investment' (Lipsitz, 1998) both in wallet and in body. Because thinness is so hard to obtain in a world of plenty, thinness becomes a marker of self-restraint (Bourdieu, 1984). And, as thinness becomes a performance (and requisite) of success in a neoliberal world, it effectively becomes a criterion by which one is treated as a subject. Thinness, then, separates the deserving from the undeserving by favoring those who exercise self-denial. To be worthy of more in a neoliberal polity, then, one must *want less*. Yet, unlike the Puritan ethic, in which wanting less was a mark of salvation, the worthy neoliberal citizen must want less while spending more.

The idea that many contradictions of neoliberalism are worked out through the body certainly puts the politics of obesity in a new light. But we must still come to terms with the war on obesity as a project. Here the politics becomes quite messy. For it seems to us that the supply-siders have been all too willing to concede not only that fatness is on the rise but that fat people are a problem, while the cultural politics people have refused to entertain the notion that the pervasiveness of debilitated food is a problem. By conceding to two very different sorts of power (capillary and agro-food capital) and not seeing how they are related in a dialectic of dialectics, both camps, it seems, have allowed the war on obesity to become another disciplinary story to produce fear and neurosis. One way out is first to recognize that we cannot solve the problem as it has been presented to us, precisely because the essentialized positions that characterize the debate are part of a multidimensional contradiction to which there is no silver-bullet solution. More importantly, perhaps, we need to consider that conceding the very idea of obesity as an epidemic, a runaway pathology, is in some sense tantamount to ceding to the biopolitical governance of neoliberalism. This latter concession, we would argue, needs to be resisted, bodily and politically.

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