
Books Forum Introduction

Biosociological weight watching: From European famines to Guatemalan love handles

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Big was beautiful in resource-poor fourteenth-century Europe. As food became more plentiful, large people became fat – gluttonous, indolent, undignified. Today, they are pathologically obese and the diagnosis is spreading from affluent countries to places we used to associate with kwashiorkor, not spare tyres. This Books Forum is dedicated to recent literature on the so-called obesity epidemic.

Susan Greenhalgh's *Fat-Talk Nation* examines its epicentre, the United States. Stephanie Schiavenato reads the book as an ethnographically armed intervention in the battleground between public health policies and fat identity politics. While Greenhalgh sets out to disperse the “biomyth” of bodily perfection, she continues to think of obesity as an emotional pathology, which makes Schiavenato wonder whether it was possible to be both fat and happy.

Isabel Fletcher reviews Georges Vigarello's *The Metamorphoses of Fat*, which examines how Europeans ceased to praise massive bodies and opulent banquets and came to condemn and medicalize overweight bodies. But what does it mean to be overweight? The second book Fletcher reviews sheds light on the construction of measures such as the body mass index, abdominal circumference and bioelectrical impedance analysis, which draw the line between the normal and pathological. Looking beyond these numbers, the authors contributing to Megan B. McCullough and Jessica A. Hardin's edited volume *Reconstructing Obesity* also explore the different meanings and lived experiences of obesity by assembling case studies ranging from Samoa to the Emirates.

This more global perspective on obesity is also reflected by Jessica Hardin's own review essay on Emily Yates-Doerr's *The Weight of Obesity*. This ethnography of the Guatemalan city of Xela follows the rapid changes in diet that have accompanied urbanization. In everyday life, the resulting spread of metabolic disorders pose practical incommensurabilities between supposedly incongruous logics of health, the author argues, for example when a woman with hypertension refuses vegetables for fear of pesticides. The study leaves Hardin wondering how the lack of context-independent measures of health could be integrated into theories of disease emergence and prevention practices.

By drawing our attention to contemporary cultures beyond Europe, America and Australia as well as Europe's own premodernity, the publications discussed in this Books Forum effectively decentralize prevalent conceptions of the obesity epidemic.

Nicolas Langlitz is Associate Professor at The New School for Social Research in New York. He is the author of *Neuropsychedelia: The Revival of Hallucinogen Research since the Decade of the Brain* and currently studies the epistemic culture of neurophilosophy as well as the intersection between primatology and the human sciences in chimpanzee ethnography.