J. ERIC OLIVER

FAT POLITICS

The Real Story
Behind America's
Obesity Epidemic

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It seems almost daily we read newspaper articles and watch news reports exposing the growing epidemic of obesity in America. Our government tells we are experiencing a major health crisis, with sixty percent of Americans classified as overweight, and one in four as obese. But how valid are these claims? In Fat Politics, J. Eric Oliver shows how a handful of doctors, government bureaucrats, and health researchers, with financial backing from the drug and weight-loss industries, have campaigned to create standards that mislead the public. They mislabel more than sixty million Americans as "overweight," inflate the health risks of being fat, and promote the idea that obesity is a killer disease. In reviewing the scientific evidence, Oliver shows there is little proof that obesity causes so much disease and death or that losing weight is what makes people healthier. Our concern with obesity, he writes, is fueled more by social prejudice, bureaucratic politics, and industry profit than by scientific fact. Misinformation pushes millions of Americans towards dangerous surgeries, crash diets, and harmful diet drugs, while we ignore other, more real health problems. Oliver goes on to examine why it is that Americans despise fatness and explores why, despite this revulsion, we continue to gain weight. Fat Politics will topple your most basic assumptions about obesity and health. It is essential reading for anyone with a stake in the nation's--or their own--good health.

Fat Politics: The Real Story Behind America's Obesity Epidemic Details

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Stefani says

I was first interested in reading this book when it was referenced in a podcast I listen to. I remember listening to the author talk about the "flimsy" evidence of the medical consequences of obesity and my jaw dropped. What do you mean the evidence is flimsy?! The entire United States, and much of the western world, takes these evidences as absolute fact, and I know my doctor preaches to me about them all the time! So, it must be fact or it wouldn't be touted as such....right? Then I happened to remember when I was a teenager and the public was being inundated with "facts" that regularly eating tomatoes or tomato products caused cancer. At the time I remember thinking that sounded weird, but if doctors said it was true then it must be true. Only later did I realize that these "factual" statistics were based on looking at people who died of cancer and seeing that most of them reported regularly eating tomatoes...then they took that association and called it a cause, so that was the basis for this "fact". Then recently you had a finding that sugar consumption has been shown to cause cancer in rats....though they neglect to include in the news reports that this occurred when they force fed rats 30 times their body weight in sugar every day for a month. Um, right, but I should be worried why? I'm pretty sure it's impossible for me to consume 1 times my body in sugar in a month, let along every day!

This was when I realized that I needed to read this book. I found it to be exceptionally well researched and well notated. The author looks at the statistics on obesity and tells the truth about what they really mean. This makes sense to me. I remember a quote I heard once...there's lies, there's damn lies, and there's statistics. The problem with statistics is that you can tweak them to say whatever you want them to say. And if the right people with the right motive get a frenzy started then it can take the focus away from the real problem. This is what has happened in this country with the obesity epidemic. We have pushed all the focus on weight, rather than health because weight is something that one can easily point a finger at and think they have determined what is healhty. But being healthy is much more ambiguous, someone who is thin could be much less healthy than someone who is overweight, but that isn't what the public wants to hear.

I have seen the "weight bias" of this country for years. Fat people are the new politically correct group to discriminate against. I mean, after all, if you're fat it's just because you're lazy and have no self control right? Well, part of it might be that, but weight is not that simple. And similar things have been said about black people, jews, or those of Hispanic heritage in the past too...was it true then? This is the main thing that the book addressed. Why have we focused so much on weight when the facts just don't support it while we completely ignore real solutions to improving health? I am not sure I can agree with all of the authors conclusions, but he raises some very valid points. I think this is a must read for anyone who has invested their belief in the obesity epidemic but hasn't really looked in depth into the facts that brought our society to this point.

Paul Ivanov says

very eye-opening - "epidemic" created overnight without the country gaining a pound, just by changing the legal definition of "obese" from one arbitrary Body Mass Index, to a lower one.

I recommended it to a friend, and she had this to say:

"Just finished Fat Politics yesterday, and I really enjoyed it. It's certainly not perfect; there were many times when I would read his conclusions from research/studies and just shake my head. But there's a lot of good stuff in there, and I especially liked the history of 'why we hate fat.' It really affected me, as I've certainly been guilty of judging people based on weight. Thanks for the recommendation"

Anne says

I liked it, although it's a bit dry. Oliver delivers a mostly clearly reasoned argument which has provoked some thoughtful discussion in our household. Oliver argues that obesity is misclassified as a disease and excess weight is wrongly blamed for many of the health issues, such as diabetes, which are on the rise in much of the industrialized world. Instead he asserts that what we eat and our activity levels are the underlying causes of health problems but that there is little or no evidence which ponts to a causal link between weight and these problems. There is a lot of food for thought here. I could see the book as part of a high school or college course on gender and society or something which touched on health care issues or contemporary public policy issues because students could learn both by evaluating the argument and the author's interpretation and use of statistics and by being exposed to a different point of view regarding obesity, the US health care system and comtemporary American society. It's one of those books that I would have enjoyed reading as part of a facilitated group so that I could think about these issues outside my own head. At any rate, if you are interested in the "obesity epidemic" the US health care system, fatism, or the link between public policy and behavioral outcomes, it's worth a read.

Karen says

I read this on the Kindle edition. Part of me is glad I didn't spend extra for a dead tree version, part is frustrated because I still find Kindle editions difficult to go back and browse for information. I still find it easier to flip pages than click through. My clippings file doesn't necessarily make it easier to find what I seek either.

When I've sorted out my opinion on this book, I'll write more.

Jenny says

I'm interested in the politics of food, so I picked this up since it came up during a search for the Omnivore's Dilemma at the library.

While I'm not sure that I agree with Mr. Oliver's arguments, he does make some interesting ones, esp. the premise of why WASPs are more opposed to being fat than other cultures. I did not buy this argument as it seemed too limited in it's research -- in case you didn't notice, Asians are also "opposed" to being "fat" -- in any case... the book was well written which is why I am recommending it and it makes several arguments that I am not familiar with, so from that perspective, it was an interesting read.

Rebecca Cluff says

This book was sometimes hard to get through (read a little like a textbook), but the information and his research notes were very interesting. It certainly caused me to question many of the ideas that I had believed previously. I felt his conclusion was slightly lacking, but still a book I would recommend.

Tara Brabazon says

Fat Politics is tremendous and courageous. It offers a well written argument about the obesity 'epidemic.' Instead, obesity becomes a proxy that stops policy makers addressing issues with work, leisure, stress, health and automobility. It is easier to pop a diet pill than to think about the problems resulting from unlimited choices, and to celebrate an aspiration to be free rather than healthy.

The book provides a sustained argument. It is well referenced and the case is effectively made.

Sheryl Tribble says

Initially a great summary of a lot of stuff I'd already figured out. Basically, sedentary skinnies who eat a lot of junk food are less healthy than active fatties who eat a healthy diet, plus many weight-loss approaches are unhealthy, therefore focusing on the weight instead of exercise and eating habits is not going to lead to a healthier population.

But one point he makes that I hadn't really thought about is that the national weight rise is likely linked to the fact that more women are working, so fewer meals are prepared at home from scratch. As a home cook, I'd long ago realized that high fat, high sugar food is often faster and easier to cook, and also keeps longer, but since we don't eat a lot of the stuff he considered junk food I hadn't considered that those keeping properties are the main reason those junk foods are more popular. "Less hassle, long keeping" food tends to use more products like corn syrup, sugar, white flour, and trans fats, all of which can cause problems.

In other words, soda keeps a lot longer than milk, so it's cheaper and easier to store, transport, and keep on the shelves where turnover isn't rapid. And since we eat so often "on the run" or in restaurants, that's the food we like and are familiar with, so when we sit down to a "home cooked meal" we're more likely to make something similar in terms of fats and sweets. For a lot of people, home cooking is more likely to be a Thanksgiving-type feast than the everyday healthy fare of most cultures.

According to Oliver, our obsession with freedom has led to trying to free ourselves of the "limitations" of cooking from scratch, and from the "limitation" of restraining our preference for sweets and fats, and also the "limitation" on time caused by cooking stuff that requires much preparation (so much easier to grab a cookie than to prep some carrots!). But this particular form of freedom carries a high cost to our health.

elise says

I am not a person who struggles with my weight but I found this book to be facinating. this book reminds of when people say there was a conspiracy for 9/11, the government planned it. I typically don't believe that stuff. But, when I read this book, I wonder. It talks about the old measurments that are still being used today to designate if someone is over weight. And, the people that set guidlines for these things are all people that are connected to phamecudical (sorry can't spell?) companies. These are the people that benefit from you ebing over weight. It's facinating. And, this one guy studied research and found that studies don't actually indicate that being over weight mens you are more likely to die or get sick. It's worth everyone reading because we are taught about healthy weight from this perspective.

Alex says

This is a good examination of the so-called "obesity epidemic" in this country. A few facts that underscore the thesis: there is no established causal link between fat and the leading killers in this country, and yet the conflation is often present in discourse. (More likely health is rooted in what you eat, not what you weigh.) Exercise is crucial in overall health but not terribly efficient for weight loss. And regulating the free market is challenging. In short, the author advocates shifting the focus away from weight loss and onto general health concerns.

Dan Spradlin says

This book had some good bits here and there, but the premise that being fat isn't the cause of much of the heart disease, type 2 diabetes, etc. is dumb. I think its obvious that the fatness isn't what kills you. Its the not how much we eat, but what we eat and our lack of exercise. 2 stars only for some good research points.

Angela says

In *Fat Politics* Oliver sets out to prove what a few moments of reflection should make fairly obvious: body fat is, for the most part, a symptom of many of the same things that cause disease rather than a cause of disease in itself. He makes a persuasive case that being active and fat is much healthier than being sedentary and thin, and that our attempts to target only our weights are unhelpful and occasionally harmful to our health. The figures backing up fat stigma being worse on women (white women in particular) for no clear health reason are interesting as well.

The book has a few flaws, though. Oliver rejects that this added pressure on women is due to sexism or any traditional feminist interpretation. Fine, but what he offers instead - an attempt to look at fatness from an anthropological/biological lens of attractiveness and mating - doesn't quite fit with the facts (or with standards of attractiveness being very culturally engrained) either. It seems like he's really stretching his case, but I find that common with "biological" justifications for most civilized human behavior.

Also, after proving that fatness doesn't make us unhealthy in itself and doing some debunking of an "obesity epidemic," Oliver goes on to tell us why we're getting fatter and what we can do about it, except that we can't

because we're unwilling to change how we live. Except that he says we CAN'T actually change our weights or how we live in any long term effective way. But not doing so IS making us bigger. I think that what Oliver would probably clarify is that different lifestyles can push to different ends of a certain range of long term sustainable weights unique to each person. But instead the message gets muddled. I would also have liked to have seen more attention to things like the effect of healthcare providers' biases on disease treatment and prevention and the effects of repeated dieting on health.

Jen Helfand says

Generally pretty good. Could have gone to some richer places connecting body politics and the social construction of the obesity epidemic to other forms of social control. Racism, ableism queer ness did not find home here. No anti-capitalist solutions either which to me seemed like an obvious jump based on what he presents. I liked the bit about white (cis) women and body politics. He's definitely accurate there.

Gina says

I very much enjoyed Oliver's interview in the documentary Fat Head, so I sought out this book. I found it very well-researched and written in a fairly entertaining style, which made it easy to read in spite of the fact that every page is densely packed with text. But I left this book feeling there was no real reason for it to be written. Oliver's premise all the way through is, essentially: we can't change biology, we can't change this thing or that thing about how society has evolved, it won't help if we try to try to change legislation, etc. But wait! Here's one thing we can change! Let's just eliminate prejudice against fat people!

Yeah! Snap your fingers, it's fixed!

So, basically, Oliver is saying there's nothing that can be done. Because that kind of social change will probably never occur. This book would have had a much stronger impact on me if Oliver had just left out that final section.

M says

There are some points made in this book that I'd argue with or think may be misinterpretations of the literature, but understanding the primary point of this book - that BMI was not developed as a scientifically supported index of health - is important; Weight is not always synonymous with health and fitness.