
WEIGHING IN

OBESITY, FOOD JUSTICE,
AND THE LIMITS OF CAPITALISM

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS

Berkeley Los Angeles London

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University of California Press
Berkeley and Los Angeles, California

University of California Press, Ltd.
London, England

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Guthman, Julie.

Weighing in : obesity, food justice, and the limits of capitalism / Julie Guthman.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-520-26624-7 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN 978-0-520-26625-4 (pbk. : alk. paper)

I. Obesity, Social aspects. I. Title.

RA645.O23G88 2011

362.196'398—dc22

2011003848

Manufactured in the United States of America

20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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What's Capitalism Got to Do with It?

On October 14, 2009, the *Colbert Report* (a faux news/comedy television show) featured Amy Farrell, a contributor to the newly released *Fat Studies Reader*. Before introducing his guest, Steven Colbert warmed up with a monologue that, among other things, poked fun at Senator John Ensign for his proposed amendment to what was then the still-being-formed health care bill that would have mandated lower premiums for those who lost weight. To that Colbert said, "The government is really sending mixed messages here. First, they subsidize corn, making it so cheap we can gorge on subsidized corn syrup, and then they charge us more for health insurance just because our organs have caramelized. . . . Well, I'm sorry," he quipped, "but our bodies are the only growth industry America has left."

With one quick barb, Colbert captured my most central argument: in the interest of economic growth, contemporary US capitalism has helped to create obesity as a material phenomenon and then made it a moral problem that must be resolved in a way that is equally kind to capitalism. This political economy of bulimia, as it were, is indicated by the mixed messages Colbert highlights. The fact that obesity (as well as responses to it) is utterly wrapped up in the fate of America's place in the global political economy presents quite a challenge for the alternative-food movement, which has largely steered clear of policy approaches that address capitalism's excesses.

The purpose of this chapter is to expand on Colbert's argument, to demonstrate how bodies have emerged as a growth industry in the context of contemporary capitalism. Here I want to work more thoroughly with neoliberalism as an explanatory concept. Of course, not all current policy and norms that affect our bodies can be tied to neoliberalism, especially since many agricultural policies remain protectionist (rather than free trade-oriented).

Yet, insofar as neoliberal economic policies have unleashed a no-holds-barred approach to capital accumulation, worsened inequalities, and generated ideas of self-governance that encourage both excessive consumption and not having it show, much can be tied to it. Neoliberal policies have helped produce many of the food qualities, built environments, and chemical exposures associated with obesogenesis. At the same time, these policies have made available for investment and marketing many (but by no means all possible) solutions to problems they have generated. Thus, the body has become a site for a spatial fix for capitalism's inherent growth problems—for capitalism's limits, such that the political-economic contradictions of the neoliberal era are literally embodied in ways that run up against the limits of the body.

It is the inequalities that neoliberalism has exacerbated that reveal the limits of the alternative-food movement, however. Recall that the theory of change for the alternative-food movement asks that people pay more for better food. It is certainly puzzling that this market-driven approach to food system change entirely concedes neoliberalism's parameters. It is maddening, though, that this theory of change feeds into neoliberalism's culture, which has allowed those who have fared the best to trump the moralities of those who have fared the worst with discourses of healthy bodies and foods. In this chapter I want to show that the intense moral outrage with fatness gets it wrong. I want to begin, though, by explaining the limits of capitalism—and, specifically, how the twentieth-century crises of capitalism led to neoliberalism.

LIMITS TO CAPITALISM

What some have called the most important book in academic geography, *Limits to Capital*, written by David Harvey and first published in 1982, is the starting point for this chapter. When Harvey invoked the limits to capital, his meaning was double-edged. Writing this book as an exegesis of Marx's *Das Kapital* (or *Capital*), on the one hand he was qualifying the book he otherwise much admired. The primary limitation was that Marx failed to consider fully how geographic space figures in capitalism's persistent tendencies toward crisis. On the other hand, he was speaking to the limits to capitalism itself, given its self-destructive tendencies. Capitalism, that is, experiences periodic crises because it must always find new sources of accumulation or profit. Without new profit opportunities, those with capital lose value. Most of capitalism's crises, then, are crises of "overaccumulation." When there is too much capital

in circulation and not enough profitable investment opportunities, capitalism stagnates, sometimes profoundly. And, indeed, at the time that *Limits* was penned, around 1980, prospects looked bleak, as many of the available fixes had already been played out.

As spelled out by Harvey in *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989), there are several ways to fix a crisis of capitalism, some more painful than others. Historically, the easiest fix to crises of overaccumulation was geographic expansion—or what Harvey famously called the spatial fix. By this, he meant the displacement of the problem of overaccumulation elsewhere in space. Pretty much all rounds of global capitalist expansion, whether classic colonialism, “development,” or “globalization,” are versions of the spatial fix, which creates the conditions for capitalism to develop in areas of the globe that are not yet fully subsumed by it. The colonial project that dominated the later part of the nineteenth century was thus precisely about solving the problem of overaccumulation precipitated by the industrial revolution. Likewise, the Great Depression was precipitated when the world’s industrial capacity and raw material production outdistanced effective demand from both industrialists and individual households alike. Simply put, all that had been produced could not be profitably sold, especially given the skewed income distribution that characterized the late 1920s.

To understand why capitalism is prone to these periodic crises, it is critical to grasp that the primary source of capitalism’s contradictions is the wage. In capitalist economies, most people work for wages; in turn, they buy the goods that capitalism produces. Even though profits are made in production, it is an economic system that still depends on consumption. (It is also important to keep in mind that capital is also a consumer of goods—machinery, tools, software, etc.—to make salable goods.) So, to generate demand for the goods produced, capitalists need to pay out wages. That was the heart of the Fordist social contract that first emerged in the second decade of the twentieth century (but truly solidified after World War II), named after the Ford Motor Company, which was the first among American corporations to pay a good family wage. Henry Ford realized that to sell his cars he needed to guarantee a decent income for his workers. But wages also cut into profitability, so capitalists have a contradictory imperative to keep wages low enough to shore up profits but not so low as to quash demand for consumer goods.

To characterize the antidote to economic collapses as “fixes” may falsely suggest that such fixes are deliberate and explicit. This is not necessarily the

case. Rather, Harvey's notion of the fix turns on the absorption of excess capital so that investment becomes profitable again. Indeed, the cruelest fix is to allow assets to devalue. Devaluation is inevitable when no policy exists to moderate the booms and busts. In boom times, that is, when many people are earning money, assets—be they factories, homes, inventories, financial investments, or pension funds—gain value both because they are in demand (i.e., people will buy them) and because people speculate that such values will continue to rise. However, when buying power dries up, through, for example, layoffs, wage reductions, or poor sales of commodities produced, those assets lose value. Those who own the assets lose a great deal of wealth, as do those who lose their jobs, who must live on whatever savings and pensions, if any, they have accumulated. Devaluation is only a “fix” inasmuch as some usable assets and inventories eventually become so cheap that people will buy them up and put them back to work. Such massive devaluation was one of the “fixes” for the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Indeed, the severity of the devaluations of the Great Depression is in part what allowed the ideas of the economist John Maynard Keynes to become influential, ideas that neoliberal economists have reacted against. Keynes observed that capitalist economies systematically fail to generate stable growth or fully utilize human and physical resources, leading to systematic inefficiency and unemployment. Crucially, he also argued that the market operating by itself *cannot* eliminate economic crises and unemployment. Instead, he argued, the state has a large role to play in moderating business cycles. It can use deficit spending (debt) to create labor-intensive jobs or use direct payments to individuals to stimulate economic growth when times are tough. When times are good, direct payments automatically slow down as people find lucrative employment. This is the time to tax income and save those surpluses for the next rainy day. Many of the entitlement programs established during the New Deal or shortly thereafter, including unemployment insurance, Social Security, and welfare, were based on the ideas of Keynes. Remember that the agricultural subsidy program was also developed under the New Deal and, along with cooperative marketing agreements, was at least originally intended to ensure fair prices for farmers (see chapter 6).

Whether through infrastructural development or redistributive economic policy, much, though not all, of American economic policy from the New Deal to about 1980 was roughly Keynesian. This was especially so in the

late 1960s, when state expenditures on welfare, health care, education, and housing grew considerably, thanks to Lyndon Johnson's Great Society programs. The development of a set of institutions governing wage determination and collective bargaining, such as the National Labor Relations Board, also helped stabilize the economy. Well-paid workers disrupted less and some of the bargain enjoined them from disruption (so-called corporatism). The public safety net of entitlement programs, together with the unprecedented social compromise between owners and workers, made for improved income security and much less inequality. Putting money in lots of people's pockets spurred demand for consumer goods, and consumer purchasing also helped boost the economy (Cohen 2003). Accordingly, the postwar period was characterized by considerable economic growth, much of it spurred by pent-up demand after the war and Fordism's decent family wage. This golden age of capitalism wasn't perfect—indeed, white male workers fared much better than everyone else—but it was a huge improvement over the economic hardship that preceded and followed it.

Although the combination of Fordism and Keynesianism was the most activist and widely beneficial of fixes for the economic crisis of the Great Depression, it turned out that it wasn't stable for the long haul. It reached its limits—and the chickens came home to roost during the 1970s. The expansive state, together with the cost of the war in Vietnam, produced a huge federal debt. The oil crises, as well as high wages and demands on the state, led to rampant inflation. Inflation was particularly harmful to people dependent on fixed incomes, such as retirees who were beginning to draw on Social Security. In addition, the United States had amassed an unprecedented trade deficit because Americans had begun the habit of buying cheaper goods from abroad, cheaper in part because they were made in places with lower wages. US profit rates were falling, causing considerable frustration to investors, which led many major companies to shut down old, unprofitable plants and set up shop abroad—an example of the spatial fix (Harvey 2005). And, frankly, many (white) taxpayers, who were happy that an expansive state during the New Deal had brought them Social Security and unemployment insurance, were far less pleased when welfare expenditures began to target urban African Americans in Johnson's Great Society programs (Quadagno 1996). So racism played a big part in the emerging tax revolt. All of this paved the way for a new configuration of state and society, a putative fix for the manifold crises of capitalism that manifested in the 1970s. This fix has since come to be

called neoliberalism in academic circles, although it was called “trickle-down economics” at the time.

CONSUMING NEOLIBERALISM

Although much neoliberal thought has come to be taken for granted, it wasn't always that way. Harvey (2005) explains that neoliberalism originated with a group of thinkers who were considered extreme in their views. Like the Far Right of today, Friedrich von Hayek and Milton Friedman saw socialism everywhere they looked, including in “embedded liberalism” (the economic system described in the previous section), and thought that anything that interfered with the market was an attack on freedom (thus the term *neoliberal*, which was applied to this school of thought by others). They didn't obtain prime time for their policies, however, until the elections of Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom in 1979 and of Ronald Reagan in the United States in 1980. Reagan's election, as well as the broader agenda to reduce wages and social programs, was in large part built on demographic and racial resentments. The white working class resented job loss and black welfare, and retirees resented paying taxes for, among other things, public education. More generalized fears of foreign economic competition played a big role, too.

In practice, the effect of neoliberalism on policy has been quite mixed, especially if you consider the huge public expenditures in prosecuting wars and imprisoning people (Peck and Tickell 2002). The protectionist agricultural policies discussed in chapter 6 are hardly in keeping with neoliberal principles either. Still, using the pretense that the market was the optimal allocator of goods and services—and, thus, government was the problem—the Right steered the agenda to a set of policies that would erode the tax base by reducing the tax burden for corporations and wealthy individuals, lower wages, keep entitlement programs at bay (preventing some from expanding, capping others, and cutting still others), and decline to enforce many health, safety, and environmental regulations (sadly, just as the effects of the postwar chemical revolution were becoming more broadly understood). From the vantage point of 2011, as I write this, it is clear that these policies also failed to create employment-generating economic growth (much less stability). Thus, the neoliberal agenda has been an utter disaster: economically, socially, and ecologically.

After Ronald Reagan was elected president in 1980, one of his first agenda items was to break the power of organized labor. Flaunting the optimism enshrined in his “morning in America” speech, he saw strategic potential in using the strike of the well-paid air traffic controllers’ union, PATCO, to gain support for his agenda. He knew that PATCO workers would gain little sympathy from those who were losing their jobs from plant closures or whose retirement income had lost buying power in a period of rampant inflation. The broken PATCO strike marks a watershed in US labor history, and union membership declined steadily in the years that followed, until very recently. So did wages—and they are not recovering. According to statistics gathered by Working Life (n.d.) (formerly the Labor Research Association) from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, inflation-adjusted weekly earnings of privately employed nonfarm workers declined from \$302.52 in 1964 to 277.57 in 2004—and that statistic does not even address increasing disparities between different segments of the labor force. The long-term decline in wages, as well as the much greater number of people who are only partially, insecurely, or not employed, has in many ways contributed to the contemporary economic crisis, reducing, as it has, what economists call “effective demand.”

For a while, the economy muddled along through the massive entry of women into the workforce, prompted at least as much by necessity as by feminist proclivities. Two-wage-earner households kept the economy afloat, and, in turn, “the market” met their needs and provided more goods and services outside of the household (takeout and ready-made meals being chief among them). With growing costs for services such as education and health care, and steadily declining wages, economic growth faltered again, substantially, in the early 1990s. This time it was saved by a huge expansion of consumer debt in the form of car loans, mortgages, and credit cards, to the extent that consumer debt as a percentage of disposable income doubled between 1975 and 2005 to a record 127 percent (Foster and Magdoff 2009: 29).

Nevertheless, what consumers bought with their credit cards was generally not domestically produced goods. One important exception to this trend was the tract houses purchased with subprime mortgages, although many of the materials with which they were built were imported. So, what also has kept the US economy nominally afloat is what can be called globally disarticulated production-consumption relationships (deJanvry 1981). Production takes place in sweatshop economies where workers’ wages are so low and their free time so limited that they are unlikely to buy much of the goods they actually

produce (notwithstanding new consumption centers in Singapore, Bangalore, and Shanghai). Instead, much of what is produced in Bangladesh, Vietnam, and Honduras, for example, is exported and sold to American consumers who would not be able to afford the goods if they were made with domestic union labor. Making those jeans and other goods available for sale through retail is one of the few sectors, besides food, that provides nonprofessional jobs in America.

In other words, Wal-Mart capitalism (low-cost retail that rests on exploited labor abroad) is one of the few means that have allowed the United States to retain a toehold in the global economy. Let me be clear. Consumption was also a mainstay of the golden age of capitalism and greatly contributed to postwar growth (Cohen 2003). Yet, in that earlier period, American growth was based on production as well as consumption; in this more recent period of offshoring production, only the consumption side contributes much to the economy. Inasmuch as middle-class consumers actively participate in this economy by purchasing goods from abroad, they have effectively accepted the bargain of having access to cheap goods rather than high wages (Miller and Rose 1997). For the (low-paid) US middle class, that is, Wal-Mart producer-consumer relationships have become one of the few ways to maintain middle-class status.

Although cheap goods made by cheaper labor (involving the super-exploitation of labor in the global South) have propped up the low-cost retail sectors of the US economy, they have also contributed to unprecedented trade deficits, deficits funded primarily by government debt. As such, they concatenate with the deeper problem of financialization, which threatens to undermine the entire global economy. For, on the other side of consumer debt have been investors willing to extend credit because that was the only game in town, owing to the lack of potentially profitable investments in the production of goods and services. More generally, financial instruments themselves have proliferated as sites of investment, indicating a crisis of accumulation of the highest magnitude. Without good investment opportunities, that is, those with money to invest either will put it in places that protect what they have (e.g., savings accounts that pay interest) or will use it to speculate in financial markets (stock and bond markets, government borrowing, and foreign exchange) to see their money grow. Yet, with little capacity for the economy to make good on these financial instruments, the markets for them crash. And that is precisely what happened in the 2000s. Especially following a slump in the early 1990s, a huge proportion of economic activity was not even nominally

linked to productive investment. Rather, capital was being put into various combinations of safe havens (e.g., offshore banks), government debt instruments, and more speculative financial instruments, such as mortgage-backed securities. The problem, as the 2008–9 banking crisis made clear, is that more credit was extended than there was income generated to pay off the debt.

When all is said and done, neoliberal policies have actually done very little to restore profitability or otherwise stimulate the economy since 1980. Sure, there was growth in what some call the “real economy,” particularly in information, communication, and media technologies, with huge fortunes made by tycoons like Bill Gates. By the *real economy*, I am referring to industries that actually employ people, including services. Yet, statistics of GDP per capita, nonfinancial-sector profit rates, and unemployment suggest that the 1990s and into the 2000s were not a high-growth period at all (Brenner 2002).¹ To the extent that labor productivity slightly improved, this resulted from all sorts of cost-cutting measures that either deny jobs or make them nearly unbearable, as the speedups in meat processing attest. And in some industries, such as the airline industry, price competition has led to such deep cost cutting as to compromise the very services that the industry offers. (In this light, the focus on the obese as a problem for the airlines seems particularly perverse.) Speculation, rather than “real” economic growth, has ruled the day, as the bursting of the high-tech, dot-com, and housing bubbles of the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, respectively, surely indicate.

Tragically, the main achievement of neoliberalization, besides controlling inflation, has been to redistribute rather than generate wealth and income (Harvey 2005). Bush’s tax reductions didn’t spur investment, nor did the Federal Reserve’s low interest rates. Nor did deregulation and the proliferation of new sorts of financial instruments unleash market forces to develop new enterprises. What they did instead (as Harvey so pointedly wrote) was to restore class power. Tax breaks made rich people richer, offshore banking provided rich investors with safe havens from taxation and scrutiny, and a lack of oversight allowed the sort of outright fraud of which Bernard Madoff’s Ponzi scheme may be the tip of iceberg.

In short, neoliberalism has put the US economy in a bad way, and the fixes available aren’t pretty. The gentlest way to fix the economy would be to tax and spend. This was the heart of Keynesianism, but it was expensive and was bad for US international competitiveness, and its proponents lost their political will in the face of the New Right’s attack on welfare. Obama’s tepid

attempt at stimulus has been dismal in part because of previously accumulated debt, the US economy having had the Keynesian cake of high government expenditures and eaten it too with reduced taxes. The bailout following the 2008 banking crisis was a poor substitute for putting people to work through direct government investment (as in New Deal work programs); that such a direction seemed pie in the sky (to continue with the just desserts theme) speaks to the continued rhetorical power of the Right, which as of this writing is now blaming America's financial problems on public-sector workers.

A lot more possibility exists for a spatial fix, if you consider that at least one-third of the world's population is utterly impoverished and, if paid wages, would create markets for goods. But there are political costs to such expansion, quite obviously, and it's unclear that American capitalism and American militarism are on the same page (Harvey 2003). Still, if you think about the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, during which companies like Coca-Cola, GE, McDonald's, and Johnson & Johnson had access to the largest barely tapped market in the world, you can see that the strategy has hardly been abandoned. Neoliberals know that the spatial fix is a path out of the economic slump. That's why they call for free trade. But they really have no way to clear the path politically—nor should they, morally speaking.

The only fix to this sort of crisis is a massive devaluation of existing assets (be they factories, homes, currencies, securities, or commodities) that had gained value in the good times through speculation—a purge, that is, after the binge. And that is what has been happening. While all lose, the middle class has lost a huge percent of its wealth to home foreclosures, bank failures, and devalued pension funds, and the poor had no safety net to begin with. So only those with remaining assets stand to recover. Yet even if such massive devaluation may in time provide a new fix, since it will release a set of assets at fire-sale prices that can be put to profitable use, who will be able to purchase these assets? And who will buy the goods that are produced with them? The contradictions are far from resolved. Capitalism appears to be up against its limits.

So, you may ask, what does all of this have to do with obesity? Much, I am going to argue. For along with making the economy thoroughly dependent on (low-cost) consumption and exacerbating inequalities in wealth, neoliberal logics have helped produce many of the food qualities and environmental features associated with obesogenesis. In keeping with a political economy of

bulimia, they have also produced opportunities to profit from having created obesity as a problem.

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF BULIMIA: MAKING A VIRTUE OF NECESSITY?

As I discussed in chapter 6, the US agriculture economy is entrenched in long-term dynamics that tend toward overproduction, a tendency that has been exacerbated by existing food and agriculture policies. The US food sector, in other words, has its own problem with excess. In *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, Michael Pollan (2006) argues that those crop surpluses end up in our bodies; subsidized crops like corn and soy are most likely to go into the processed foods that have become a mainstay of American diets. In turn, these processed foods may contribute to fatness (although not necessarily in the ways he discusses). But he pretty much leaves it there. My argument is much more expansive. I argue that a much broader set of food and agricultural policies are implicated in fatness—but also thinness, and a host of other health conditions that may not manifest in either direction. The food economy, that is, mirrors the larger economy: it is full of contradictions, some of which are literally embodied. But I take it even a step further, to consider policies not even directly related to food and agriculture, such as taxation, financial regulation, and economic development policies that have created huge disparities between rich and poor. To the extent that socioeconomic status and body size are associated, these policies must somehow be implicated in fatness and thinness. Part of this inverse association between size and class status appears to rest on cheap food and the need that neoliberal policy has created for it.

To begin with the food sector, it is critical to remember that Wal-Mart producer-consumer relationships have their counterparts in food consumption, particularly in the fast-food industry. Mass-produced food was part of the political bargain of the US Fordist period (DuPuis 2001). Yet it was made affordable not only by government agricultural subsidies, but also by the scale economies of industrialized agricultural production and by union wages in nonagricultural production. As discussed earlier, the fast-food industry was at the forefront of attacking wages and thus helped usher in a sharply different social contract from that of Fordism. Unlike Fordism, that is, the fast-food industry has assiduously worked to ratchet down the income and wages of those who work in or for the industry. The industry has been at least as

successful as the auto industry, however, in creating a market for its goods. For in a low-wage, low-income economy, people come to depend on cheap goods to make ends meet.

In this light, supersizing, a practice much vilified by food writers, begins to take on a different moral valence. With supersizing, customers are charged a marginal amount extra for receiving several ounces more of, say, a beverage that costs only pennies to produce and pour. The same is true of large portions, the mainstay of the national chain restaurants: the cost of the incremental amount of food served is minor compared to the cost of setting and serving a meal. From the purveyor's perspective, the rationale of supersizing and value meals is that you increase profits by serving more, since the food is cheap and the labor (relatively) expensive. But there is also an inversely related consumer rationale, which is that when real wages are low, in part owing to the practices of the food industry, you need to fill up with the dollars you spend. Is it all that surprising that those with marginal incomes seek out foods that give you more calories for the buck (aside from the pleasure of eating what you want)?

Similar things can be said about ready-to-eat meals and the vilification of convenience. The decline in family wages more broadly has pushed many women into the workforce, and many household providers hold multiple jobs to make ends meet. Having to work several jobs has surely increased the need for fast and convenient food and contributed to the decline of the much-lauded (and perhaps overly romanticized) family meal. Snack foods, heat 'n serve meals, supermarket takeout, and eating on the run are not just "lifestyle choices" or, for that matter, signs of the failure of women to fulfill their familial duty. For many, managing jobs, children, and elderly parents and taking time for the most minimal self-care are real challenges that no amount of cajoling about how we should cook our own meals is likely to solve.

The point, though, is not only to defend those who cannot follow the food gurus. It is to note that these ways of eating are central to the current economy. If anything, fast and convenient food has been a triply good fix for American capitalism. It entails the super-exploitation of the labor force in its production, it provides cheap food to support the low wages of the food and other industries by feeding their low-wage workers, and it absorbs the surpluses of the agricultural economy, soaking up, as it were, the excesses of overproduction to keep the farm sector marginally viable. For that matter, it has also substituted for an adequate social safety net.

Thanks to neoliberal welfare policy, that is, cheap food has also become almost a necessity for those who are food insecure, in contrast to what came before in the form of Keynesianism or embedded liberalism. Keynesian fiscal policy introduced the use of food assistance and other publicly funded safety nets for those with inadequate income to buy what they need. (And remember, food insecurity in the United States results from insufficient income, not insufficient food production.) Beginning in the 1930s, the federal government negotiated the opposing imperatives of keeping farmers in business and feeding the hungry by either directly purchasing food and redistributing it or providing direct payments for those who fell beneath a certain income level (i.e., entitlements). Notwithstanding the dubious nutritional quality of the food that was donated or authorized (in the case of the school meal program) by today's standards, such redistributions did reflect the state's role in mediating incomes for both farmers and the poor (Poppendieck 2010).

Yet at the same time that the fast-food industry was facilitating the spread of the low-wage economy, state-guaranteed entitlement programs were beginning to be dismantled. Having invoked a fictional black welfare queen in his campaign speeches, President Reagan took on the food stamp program almost immediately following his election. He restricted eligibility guidelines and then went after other sorts of direct aid programs. The attack on entitlements continued under President Clinton in his own welfare reform (although championed more visibly by House Speaker Newt Gingrich). Among other things, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 made both food stamps and WIC subject to even more stringent eligibility guidelines and placed a limit on the amount of time able-bodied adults could receive them. As a result, the number of households receiving government food program assistance decreased at the same time that poverty rates were beginning to rise again (Fitchen 1997). During the same period, the use of the emergency food system (e.g., soup kitchens, food banks, food pantries)—developed primarily through charitable contributions—swelled tremendously, to the extent that many households started to depend on them as a regular source of food (Fitchen 1997; Poppendieck 1998). Completely voluntaristic emergency food assistance was in keeping with calls by both Reagan and the elder Bush to devolve social services to the voluntary sector, the “thousand points of light.”

Today, use of the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP), which replaced food stamps, is on the increase because so many people meet

the already raised bar to qualify as in need. Now such assistance is under attack by some nutritionists and foodies because it allows people to buy sodas and junk food. Yet the alternative safety net, food charity, has proven to be a source of low-quality (basically, unwanted) food, too. Consider the handwritten sign I once spotted at the checkout counter of my local Whole Foods supermarket. The sign requested that customers bring in cans of conventional food, for which they would receive the equivalent in 365, the market's private "quality" label. The donated cans would be taken to the county food bank. That sign captured perfectly the limits of food charity as a way to address the problem of food insecurity in America: poor people get the dregs. To be sure, much of the enormous network of food banks, food pantries, and soup kitchens that collect and distribute donated food to those in need relies on the damaged goods of low-cost retailers and the surplus of the government's commodity support programs (Poppendieck 1998). And when people need it most, these programs are least able to deliver, because many who would otherwise donate cannot during hard economic times. For these problems and more, scholars of hunger like Jan Poppendieck have long championed government food assistance, such as the food stamp program, as the most efficient, dignifying, and effective way to provide reasonably nutritious food to people with insufficient income to buy it. Even then, current SNAP benefits are far below what would be necessary to buy fresh meats and fruits and vegetables and whole-grain breads from a high-quality grocery store, much less the farmers market (in 2009, \$135 per week for a family of four).

Interestingly, the national school meals program has been one of the few welfare programs to survive the cutbacks of the neoliberal period, in no small part because of the market it provides for the farm sector. Yet, more generalized cutbacks in public education, a consequence of an eroding tax base, have affected this guarantee, as well. Many school districts, no longer able to raise adequate revenue from taxes, turned to fast-food franchises and pouring contracts with soft-drink manufacturers to generate revenue. Many more offered a la carte items alongside school meals to make ends meet. According to the 2000 California High School Fast Food Survey, 95 percent of California school districts were offering a la carte menus from fast-food chains, often in lieu of meals supported by the school meal program. The introduction of fast food went hand in hand with cuts in school service staff, effectively disabling the possibility of serving foods prepared in-house (Poppendieck 2010). Contemporary farm-to-school programs are attempts to redress the nutritional effects

of these debilitated school lunches; at the same time, they themselves are uneven, driven by private money and initiative, and have thus far been implemented in few school districts that serve low-income children. For example, one of the first farm-to-school programs was initiated in Santa Monica, with the support of the pop-jazz artist Kenny G, who offered his personal chef for the program's use. The Berkeley program has been mainly supported by the largesse of the Chez Panisse Foundation. These programs also tend to employ volunteers and NGO staff rather than traditional school service workers (Allen and Guthman 2006). In that way they are ironically contributing to the underemployment problem that is the basis of food insecurity. Mostly, though, school districts that have implemented farm-to-school programs using federal meals program money find that the program is inadequate to purchase high-quality ingredients, much less have them tastily prepared.

In other words, it is not only that the junk food that putatively causes obesity is subsidized and cheap; it is also that existing entitlement programs and wages are inadequate to ensure the affordability of the healthy food that is so lauded. As an important aside, it is worth noting that many people involved in the alternative-food movement are quite skeptical of food assistance, favoring instead more entrepreneurial means to deal with hunger (Allen 1999). In 2004–5, my colleagues and I conducted a study to understand to what extent alternative-food institutions, such as farmers markets and CSAs, were trying to address issues of food security (Guthman, Morris, and Allen 2006). Although managers of these institutions generally supported the idea of improving the affordability of the food they provide, most felt that these institutions existed to support farmers first, so prices should be set accordingly. Some were quite antagonistic to customers who used food assistance. I remain haunted by a CSA manager, not atypical, who said, "I'm not sure that I agree that subsidy is the best route. In my experience, the subsidy customers are the least committed/reliable."

Many of the features associated with the obesogenic built environment can be traced back to neoliberal economic policy, as well. Tax rollbacks certainly helped build much of what is associated with the foodscapes of national fast-food chain strip malls, big-box store malls, and even food deserts. Specifically, localities starved for tax revenue encouraged such retail development to generate sales tax revenue, with the effects of California's Proposition 13 providing the example par excellence (Schrag 1998). The rollback of both commercial and residential property taxes to 1976 assessments (with 2 percent per year

limitations on increases unless property changes hands) spurred many cities to welcome strip malls and discount centers. Although much residential property has subsequently been turned over and reassessed (with one unintended consequence being that neighbors can have vastly unequal tax assessments), commercial property, including former farmland, has hardly changed hands at all. In addition, many of these strips were built on the outskirts of town where land was cheap, making it necessary to use automobiles to reach them and more generally contributing to urban sprawl (Schlosser 2001). Building these suburbs on cheap former farmland is in some sense a substitute for the affordable housing that might have stayed in urban areas with capital for renovation, the continuance of the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and some curbs on gentrification. The flip side of this kind of retail-oriented economic development was the severe disinvestment that created food deserts, which are largely attributable to the weak buying power of poor urban residents, especially as job training, welfare, and other entitlement programs have been cut in the neoliberal era (Massey and Denton 1998). Notwithstanding the complex ways that class matters in negotiating daily food practices, these “obesogenic environments,” in other words, are themselves a result of neoliberal policy.

Yet, it is the failure of environmental and food health and safety regulation that is most directly traceable back to neoliberal policy and forward to obesity. A key objective of neoliberalization was to remove or disable regulations seen as unfriendly to business. Accordingly, regulation of agricultural chemicals especially was put on hold, just a decade after the EPA had been established. It wasn't that the Environmental Protection Act was repealed. Rather, the EPA slowed down and in some cases stopped review of potentially toxic chemicals (not to mention endocrine disruptors), and agency mandates turned to nonenforcement of existing prohibitions. And the FDA became an utter patsy in preventing food substances of questionable safety and necessity from being put on the market.

In short, neoliberal policies may not have solved the problem of profitability for the economy as a whole, but in that endeavor they seem to have greatly contributed to aspects of the built environment and the quality of food that many believe contribute to obesity. By the same token, let us not forget that the obesity epidemic, and its tendency to dignify obsessions that equate thinness and beauty, is hugely profitable. It has proved a boon to a \$100 billion

per year weight-loss industry (by some estimates) that distributes specialized products and services, alongside the money made on bariatric and cosmetic surgery. Television shows like *The Biggest Loser*, sponsored by purveyors of diet foods, fitness centers, and pharmaceuticals, contribute to the false idea that diets work in the long term, and thereby increase the market for such goods and services. Jenny Craig 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, and that weight loss itself is a commodity (Austin 1999; Fine 1998; Fraser 1998).

For that matter, the pharmaceutical industry has much to gain by hyping an obesity epidemic, and, in fact, the research-oriented International Obesity Task Force receives much of its funding from the pharmaceutical industry (Campos et al. 2006; Oliver 2006; Saguy and Riley 2005). It appears that the industry is banking on the hope that people will learn, once again, that diets don't work and "lifestyle changes" aren't easy to make, and when one of these companies finally comes up with the magic bullet, profits will be good, at least for a while. In the meantime, industry involvement in setting and lowering thresholds of "at-risk" levels for glucose, cholesterol, and other obesity-associated biomarkers also sells drugs (Angell 2005). Functional and other "health" foods must thus be seen through this lens, too. Functional foods isolate and include specific nutrients and substances believed to promote health, whether vitamin C, antioxidants, or probiotics, even if marketed as alternatives (Scrinis 2008). Whole Foods, a major purveyor of more natural-sounding functional foods, has much to gain as an antidote to cheap food. Again, organics and even "local" food are commodified remedies to obesity, albeit indirectly so.

That producing and selling junk food gives rise to all sorts of investment potential for those seeking to produce and sell solutions to its effects instantiates a political economy of bulimia, as it were. It also puts a dent in the rhetoric of obesity alarmists and public health professionals who urge us to simply follow the money to determine where blame must lie. It is true that the big players in the food industry—from Tyson to Coca-Cola to Jack in the Box—have profited tremendously from selling poor-quality food, but they are not the only ones. If you're really going to follow the money, you might find yourself taking a long, circuitous journey through the entire economy. And you might also discover how central bodies have become to making and resolving capitalism's crises.

BINGING AND PURGING: THE BODY AS SPATIAL FIX

Over the course of capitalism's history, spatial fixes have been politically costly. They have given rise to deserved resistance, to which many of the wars of the last two hundred years can be attributed. They are rife with environmental destruction, as well, whether the killing of the buffalo to make way for the railroad in North America, or burning of the rainforest to make pasture in the Amazon. Although environmental destruction can and does lead to political resistance, it can and does also provide opportunities for capitalism, whether by selling solar panels, recycled paper, or carbon offsets. Still, the tendency for capitalism to destroy its own conditions for reproduction is a second limit to capitalism, one theorized by another noted Marxian scholar, James O'Connor (1989). O'Connor agreed with Harvey that perpetual crises of overaccumulation constitute the first contradiction of capitalism. Unlike Harvey, though, he shared with environmentalists the notion of ecological limits to growth, limits that may manifest as environmental degradation or resource depletion. Therefore, what he called the second contradiction results directly from endless efforts to resolve the first. The specter of continued global climate change may be the most extraordinary example of his second contradiction, a consequence of a spatial fix writ large that seriously compromises the possibilities for capitalist expansion, with its fundamental dependencies on fossil fuels and fresh water (and yet, like obesity, can't be thoroughly understood without a set of measurements and models that have shaped how we know the problem).

These grand (and depressing) contradictions most define the world we live in, and food and body issues seem to exist on another scale of analysis and seem comparatively humble as social problems. I think, though, they are all of a piece. That is because, along with the soils, seas, and air, bodies (both human and animal) are absorbing much of capitalism's excesses. That the fixes are more intensive than expansive and more "in here" than "out there" is perhaps what allows them to be treated as personal concerns rather than political ones. Still, environmental-human interactions are most certainly altering body ecologies, possibly in ways that undermine future profit opportunities.

To the extent that people eat more than they did in previous generations, that is one of the more prosaic ways in which the body is providing a spatial fix. (Again, there is no doubt that people are bigger than they used to be, although whether and how that comes from eating more is somewhat debatable.) Still,

markets for food cannot be infinitely expansive because there are limits to how much food any one person can eat, certainly at a sitting and possibly over time. We don't know precisely what those limits are, but we know they exist. This is what economists refer to as the problem of inelastic demand (or Engel's Law), which I touched on earlier.

Remarkably, some of capitalism's efforts to create purchasable solutions to the problems it generates (both materially and discursively) work against those limits. In the case of obesity, this would include the design of food products that do not act like food. Products such as Simplese, the substance used as fat in low-fat ice cream, or Splenda, the low-calorie sugar substitute, break right through the problem of inelastic demand. The commodity simply passes through—enabling the product to be consumed with no weight-gaining effect. For that matter, some of the new pharmaceuticals (e.g., 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 markets, but not necessarily waistlines, to expand, albeit with less than salubrious side effects.

The degree to which people eat more foods of questionably quality provides another fix. Ingesting nutritionally vacuous—or deleterious foods—that exist to solve problems of profitability for the food industry puts the ecological burden on the body, as does inhaling fouled air or drinking fouled water. In effect, individual bodies are absorbing the so-called *externalities* of production processes, so the food companies most definitely do not have to pay the full cost of doing business. And then bodies became a site for commodifiable cures to the conditions and illnesses created through these foods and exposures. Despite the rhetoric about the burden of health care costs, let us not forget that in a for-profit health care system, illness also creates profit-making opportunities, with pharmaceuticals at the leading edge of raising health care costs (Angell 2005). This is something the 2010 health care legislation has not fundamentally altered.

Aside from assisting in the political economy of bulimia, what does this suggest about the role of the human body in capitalism today? In 1995, the science historian Donna Haraway declared that the body has become an accumulation strategy in the deepest sense (Harvey and Haraway 1995: 511). By this she meant much more than the shallow observation that an increasing number of commodities are produced and sold to enhance bodies. She even meant more than the Marxian sense that “bodies” are central to capitalism in

their role as both laborers and purchasers of goods and services (Harvey 1998). Rather, she was saying that bodies are now endemic to capital flows in ways beyond their role as human subjects who work and shop. To be sure, as bodies are increasingly used for drug transportation, mined for organs, sperms, eggs, and genetic material, rented out for human reproduction and other biomedical uses, and bought and sold in various trades, it is clear that bodies are involved in capitalism in ways that go significantly beyond the processes of producing and consuming commodities in market exchange.

So, in arguing that the body is part of the spatial fix, I am suggesting something along the same lines: that the body is wrapped up in the material processes of capitalism quite apart from the “decisions” that human subjects make around production and reproduction. Rather, bodies as material entities are literally absorbing the conditions and externalities of production and consumption. Of course in some respects there’s nothing new here. Bodies have always been affected by both their working conditions and their consumption practices, which can manifest as strengthening, wasting, hunching, fattening, and so forth. What is new, then, is the convergence of a barely regulated economy that celebrates profit over all other notions of the public good with seemingly endless technological and biomedical possibilities for fixes. Bodies become part of what makes new rounds of accumulation possible. At some point, though, bodies can’t absorb any more of capitalism’s problems than can geographic expansion. The illnesses and conditions that arise, in their capacity as fixes for capitalism, suggest an internal limit to capitalism—in a way that seriously challenges ideas that these illness are the result of personal lifestyle choices.

This raises the question of where those limits lie. Following O’Connor, I argue that in a theoretical sense the limits are reached when capitalism begins to destroy its own conditions for production. How can this be ascertained with conditions, like obesity, that are contested as illnesses? Limits cannot be defined by what pleases the eye—flab or no flab—and part of what I have sought to show is that thin bodies also absorb these externalities of production. Nevertheless, when bodies start producing their own fat cells irrespective of what is eaten, or are no longer able to metabolize sugars into energy, then that’s a limit. When bodies do not produce their own reproductive organs, then that’s most definitely a limit. It is also a limit when, under the pressure of the “obesity epidemic,” people routinely use laxatives or induce vomiting, thereby upsetting the body’s acid-base balance and damaging tissue (Rome

and Ammerman 2003)—or, most obviously, when they starve themselves to death. It must also be a limit when the substances and procedures designed to “fix” obesity create digestive disorders, anal leakage, and inability to absorb crucial vitamins and minerals. If all of these latter problems occur because of fear of obesity, then the problem is being conceptualized in the wrong way. There really are limits to what responsible individuals can do faced with a polity that allows food produced with toxic materials or nutritionally vacuous ingredients to be sold in the interest of economic growth and then blames people for eating it or, in the case of endocrine-disrupting chemicals, even breathing them.

CLASS AND THE CULTURAL ECONOMY OF BULIMIA

And yet, that is precisely what we are being asked to do, to resolve an impossible contradiction. For the political economy of bulimia I have just described is supported by a culture of bulimia. On the one hand, we’re supposed to keep the economy afloat by consuming and not interfering with the business of business. To be sure, with so much of today’s economy based on retail, we have also been led to believe that shopping is good for the nation, to help prop up a fragile capitalism. Let’s not forget what Bush stated on the eve of going to war in Iraq: Keep shopping. 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? “Buy less” is a huge threat to capitalist growth, which is why contemporary capitalism crucially depends on a culture and ideology of consumerism (Sklair 1995: 23). On the other hand, we’re supposed to exercise self-control and restraint and not tax our health care system through diet-related illnesses, notwithstanding that our health care system also employs people and contributes to the economy.

Given the accentuation of class disparities much in sync with body size disparities, you would think that everyone might be on at least equivalent moral footing in working out this contradiction. As it happens, though, poor and barely middle-class people have not only been made poorer but also morally punished for their tendency to “overconsume”—and overextend their credit. They are the ones who, in wallet and body, are accused of not being able to control their impulses and failing to make good decisions, although those who are not fat are punished far less. Should fat people be the subject of such moral outrage in the wake of this thirty-year experiment in feeding the rich?

Meanwhile, relatively privileged people have been credited with exalted consumption choices that putatively lead to thinness and, for those attracted to alternative food, environmental sustainability. And those who have fared best in the neoliberal economy—those who are the main beneficiaries of neoliberal capitalism that others' borrowing and consumption habits have kept afloat—have a broad range of ways to resolve the contradiction of spending more and showing less. They can buy houses with nearby walking trails, hire personal trainers, spend hours exercising (especially if they are stay-at-home spouses), and eat at upscale restaurants where the presentation and taste of the food is more important than satiety. They may also be able to afford plastic surgery and other shortcuts to achieving thinness. It is also possible that their chemical body burdens (in regard to potential endocrinal effects) are also lower, given where they live and what food they buy. In fact, their options for resolving the political economy of bulimia may be much less deleterious to health than the options available to those who are stuck with both cheap "fattening" food and cheap "diet" food, and thus are most likely exposed to far more obesogenic substances. The degree of internalization of the spatial fix is therefore another way that class disparities become manifest.

The unkindest cut, then, is that because thinness has been so associated with self-efficacy and control and even achievement, essentially those who are thin and rich are doubly rewarded, not only for having made off with much of the wealth but also for having appeared to earn it by displaying it bodily. This sheds a whole new light on the old quip that you can't be too rich or too thin.