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# Fattening Austerity

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*English abstract: This essay presents “fattening austerity” as a new conceptual framework that will enable a collective resistance to austerity politics and fat oppression. Austerity and fatphobia have not, to our knowledge, been analyzed in tandem. But the discourses that uphold both punitive austerity measures and the pathologization of fat people’s bodies are deeply imbricated. Austerity and anti-fat stigma each invoke a language of crisis to authorize social practices that inflict hunger and bodily injury upon people who are fat and/or poor. In addition, anti-‘obesity’ rhetoric and pro-austerity arguments each utilize the neoliberal values of “personal responsibility” and corporeal “choice” to further marginalize people who are poor, fat, or both. We argue that it is incumbent upon the political Left—which thus far has been remiss in challenging the anti-fat prejudice that often animates its own movements—to make fat justice a central part of its critique of austerity.*

The title of this essay introduces a new way of intervening in what we will show to be the inter-connected discourses of fat shaming and neoliberal economics. Our phrase “fattening austerity” is meant to signify in two overlapping ways. First, like other fat scholars, we employ the word “fattening” in ways that resemble the terms “cripping” (in disability studies) and “queering” (in queer theory); fattening a concept means examining it through the lenses of fat studies and the fat justice movement. To fatten austerity, we bring a critical fat studies perspective to bear upon our account of the failures of austerity. Second, since a language of dieting, leanness, and self-sacrifice is frequently invoked in the service of austerity politics—and since, as we shall see, austerity literally makes people go hungry—our phrase “fattening austerity” calls for an end to punitive austerity measures.

Such measures have been in effect around the globe since the worldwide economic crisis of 2008. Especially in and around the eurozone, architects of austerity have made drastic cuts to disability benefits, healthcare, education, food stamps, and unemployment compensation. Severe shrinkages of public assistance and services have been described as necessary responses to an economic emergency. Yet assertions that urgent interventions must be mobilized to “reduce government deficits” and “bail out banks” have served as smokescreens for the real purpose of austerity: protecting capital and profit, often at the expense of people who are already squeezed. Among the many devastating effects of austerity’s economic belt-tightening programs is that people are going hungry. In Spain, where the unemployment rate

hovers at twenty-three percent, formerly middle-class people scavenge food from trash bins outside of grocery stores and restaurants.<sup>1</sup> And in the UK, a group of public health experts writing to the *British Medical Journal* has warned that the rise in food poverty has “all the signs of a public health emergency.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, some poor people in Britain have found themselves forced to choose between stealing food and starving.<sup>3</sup>

The response to the 2008 crisis was less draconian in the US than in Europe; rather than putting its faith entirely in the free market, the Obama administration put into place a limited stimulus package (thereby implementing a mild Keynesianism, the belief that government deficit spending would increase employment, spending, and investment). However, one could argue that a logic of austerity has nonetheless already been deeply embedded in US social and economic structures. Austerity likely contributed to the riots that exploded in Baltimore after Freddie Gray, a young, unarmed African American man, was killed in police custody. In an analysis of those riots, and of the militarized state response to them, the cultural critic Ruth Wilson Gilmore described the rebellions as “uprisings against austerity” in the context of police violence.<sup>4</sup> As in

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- 1 Suzanne Daley, “Spain Recoils as Its Hungry Forage Trash Bins for a Next Meal,” *New York Times*, September 24, 2012, accessed September 29, 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/25/world/europe/hunger-on-the-rise-in-spain.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/25/world/europe/hunger-on-the-rise-in-spain.html?_r=0).
- 2 Quoted in Mary O’Hara, *Austerity Bites: A Journey to the Sharp End of the Cuts in the UK*. (Bristol: Policy Press, 2014), 23.
- 3 Aditya Chakraborty, “Today’s Britain: Where the Poor Are Forced to Beg or Steal from Food Banks,” *The Guardian*, October 27, 2014, accessed December 2, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/27/todays-britain-poor-forced-steal-food-banks>.
- 4 Quoted in Ed Vulliamy, “The Rebellion in Baltimore Is an Uprising Against Austerity, Claims Top US Academic,” *The Guardian*, May 2, 2015, accessed July 29, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/may/02/baltimore-rebellion-is-uprising-against-austerity-freddie-gray>. By drawing attention to the ways in which austerity played a key role in these uprisings, our intent here, of course, is not to discount the *multivalent* ways that structural racism operates in the United States: Even economically privileged African American people are subject to disproportionate levels of police surveillance and violence. Although that multivalent racism will not be our main topic in this article, we are in decided agreement with Gilmore that more attention needs to be directed towards the ways that austerity has been racialized in the US. It has, indeed, been racialized in Europe as well, taking into account the ways that southern European countries (Spain, Italy, and Greece) have been forced to endure the

Europe, austerity measures following the financial crisis of 2008 caused hunger: in 2013, over fourteen percent of US households were food insecure.<sup>5</sup>

In assessing these lean (and mean) times, many activists and scholars on the Left think they know whom to blame: everything that is big. “Fat Cats” is a favored name for the wealthy profiteers who made off with the public’s meals, and “Big Pigs” is a popular icon for the bankers and corporate executives who take more than their share. In some ways, these size-focused tropes are fitting: When banks and industries are rescued at the public’s expense because they are said to be “too big” to fail, the institutions served by austerity are aptly described in terms of excessive size. But the figures of the Fat Cat and the Big Pig also exemplify a leftist rhetorical construct that this essay critiques: the use of fat people’s bodies as metaphors for capitalist exploitation and corporate greed. Left-leaning cartoonists portraying the excesses of the One Percent draw fat men feasting on fatty foods, making an analogy between wealthy people’s high levels of economic consumption and the over-consumption of food in which fat people are believed (incorrectly, as we shall see) to engage.<sup>6</sup> The commonplace practice of associating fatness with wealth and excessive consumerism obscures the real relationship between body size and socioeconomic status: Fat people are more likely than thin people to be working-class or poor.

In addition, when the Left uses fat bodies as signs for what’s wrong with contemporary economic arrangements, it reinforces the same

harshest austerity measures. In a broader sense, moreover, austerity in both the US and Europe reflects policies that global bodies such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank have imposed on the Global South for decades under the rubric of “structural adjustment policies.”

5 Alisha Coleman-Jensen, Christian Gregory and Anita Singh, “Household Food Security in the United States in 2013,” *United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service*, September 2014, accessed July 29, 2015, [http://www.ers.usda.gov/media/1565410/err173\\_summary.pdf](http://www.ers.usda.gov/media/1565410/err173_summary.pdf).

6 In order to avoid reinforcing their fatphobic messages, we choose not to provide references to specific examples of these ubiquitous cartoons. A recent instantiation of the formulaic analogy between body size and consumerism appears in Buzz Bissinger’s *Vanity Fair* article about Caitlyn Jenner. Bissinger decries the Kardashian family’s financial expenditures as “the materialistic equivalent of morbid obesity”—the idea being that purchases made by Jenner’s ex-wife, step-daughters, and daughters are comparable to the patterns of eating that, Bissinger uncritically assumes, are practiced by people marked “morbidly obese.” Interestingly, Bissinger’s efforts to absolve Jenner of the guilt associated with the consumerist “lifestyle” that he compares to “morbid obesity” (by pointing out that her \$3.6 million house is inexpensive “by celebrity standards”) is mirrored, by analogy, in the much-discussed photo spread accompanying the article, which celebrates Jenner’s lean physique. Buzz Bissinger, “Call me Caitlyn,” *Vanity Fair*, July 2015, 106.

assumptions that provide justification for austerity politics. This is because the values undergirding austerity are deeply imbricated with the ideals that fuel worldwide worry about a so-called obesity crisis. In the interest of “reducing” (whether government spending or the sizes of citizens’ bodies, concerns that are increasingly being linked in neoliberal discourses), the populace is urged to cut back: to “trim the fat,” cut out the “pork,” and exercise “personal responsibility.” Thus, when the Left stigmatizes “obesity” as a sign of excessive consumption, it risks becoming complicit with neoliberalism’s imposition of impoverishing austerity practices.<sup>7</sup>

Don’t get us wrong: We count ourselves as members of the political Left, and we would not suggest turning to the right wing for solutions to the social problem of fatphobia. On the contrary, this essay argues that fatphobia—which operates in myriad leftist political contexts, including feminist, queer, disability, progressive, environmental, and food justice movements (indeed, in practically every Left arena except for the fat justice movement)—demands rigorous interrogation precisely because it is incompatible with Left political ideals.<sup>8</sup> Elsewhere, Anna has called for intersectional analyses of fatphobia in feminist, queer, and disability politics and scholarship.<sup>9</sup> This article builds upon both Anna’s earlier

7 Throughout this essay, we place the word “obesity” in scare quotes to signal our rejection of medicalized constructions of fat bodies. Whereas the terms “obese” and “overweight” define fatness as pathological, we regard fatness as a benign form of human variation.

8 For a response to the pervasive claim, on the part of environmentalists, that fat people’s alleged “overeating” is a contributor to climate change, see Anna Mollow, “Fat Liberation is Totally Queer,” *Bitch*, accessed August 26, 2015, <http://bitchmagazine.org/post/fat-liberation-is-totally-queer>. Reprinted on *Huffington Post*, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/07/03/fat-liberation-\\_n\\_3540220.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/07/03/fat-liberation-_n_3540220.html); reprinted on *Autostraddle*, <http://www.autostraddle.com/fat-liberation-is-totally-queer-183512/>. For challenges to fatphobia in food justice movements, see Bianca D.M. Wilson, “Widening the Dialogue to Narrow the Gap in Health Disparities: Approaches to Fat Black Lesbian and Bisexual Women’s Health Promotion,” in *The Fat Studies Reader*, ed. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 57-58; Julie Guthman, *Weighing In: Obesity, Food Justice, and the Limits of Capitalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 140-62; and Sondra Solovay and Galadriel Mozee, “Intersection,” *Curve* April/May (2014): 64-65. Paraphrasing remarks made by Fresh, a fat activist whose political work involves food justice and accessibility, Solovay and Mozee note that fatphobia “poisons the food justice movement” (64). “I’m constantly in communities where others fighting for food justice and accessibility to fresh food are doing so on the ‘fight obesity,’ ‘anti-fat’ bandwagon,” Fresh reports (qtd. in Solovay and Mozee, *Intersection*, 64).

9 See Anna Mollow, “Sized Up: Why Fat is a Queer and Feminist Issue,” *Bitch: Feminist Response to Pop Culture* 59 (15 Jun 2013): 17-19, accessed Mar. 26, 2015, <http://bitchmagazine.org/article/sized-up-fat-feminist-queer-disability>; and Mollow, “Fat,” for challenges to anti-fat prejudice in feminist and queer movements.

work in fat studies and Robert's work-in-progress on the centrality of disability to a global austerity politics.<sup>10</sup> Here we train our attention on fatphobia in the context of Left economic critiques, specifically efforts to dismantle austerity policies.

Yet, some readers may wonder, amid the disaster of austerity, doesn't the Left have bigger fish to fry than fretting about the "special" concerns of a minority group of fat individuals? We say no. For one thing, in western industrial countries fat people are a majority, not a minority. As international panic about body size escalates, approximately two thirds of citizens of wealthy nations are pegged as "too fat." Also, the widespread rhetorical connections that get made between austerity and anti-"obesity" measures are not merely metaphorical. Earlier this year, prominent Tory politicians in the UK announced plans to cut disability benefits for "obese" people "unless they submit to treatment,"<sup>11</sup> while in the US the right-wing commentator Jason L. Riley lambasted "federal feeding programs" (i.e., food stamps, or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) for supposedly "making the poor fat."<sup>12</sup> As we shall see, when pundits and politicians combine pro-austerity and anti-fat rhetoric, they legitimize policies that: blame poor people for being poor, help the weight loss industry make bigger profits, and inflict hunger and bodily suffering upon fat and poor people.

Our critique of austerity and fatphobia is divided into three sections. We start by pointing to a commonality between the Right and the Left: Across the political spectrum, subjects position themselves as members of "anti-candy" parties; that is, they state their opposition to foods that, they believe, make people fat. In taking up anti-candy positions, the Left may contribute to neoliberalism's upward redistribution of wealth by reinforcing prejudice against fat people, a group that is already subject to economic discrimination. In the second section, we call out the diet industry as a conglomeration of corporate interests that plays a central role in fat shaming by perpetuating the myth of "slim pickings," or the idea that thinness is a state that one can and should choose to embody. This

10 "Crippling austerity" is a central concept in Robert's work-in-progress, Robert McRuer, *Crip Times: Disability, Globalization, and Resistance*. Unpublished manuscript. See Anna Mollow, "Disability Studies Gets Fat," *Hypatia: Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 30, 3 (2014): 199-216 for an invitation to disability scholars to undertake analyses of fatness, a topic that has been neglected in disability studies.

11 "Obesity welfare plans defended by disability minister – video," *The Guardian*, February 16, 2015, accessed July 29, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/video/2015/feb/16/obesity-welfare-disability-minister-mark-harper-politics>.

12 Jason L. Riley, "The Next Welfare Reform: Food Stamps," *The Wall Street Journal*, 25 March 2015, A15.

section also invites leftist thinkers and activists to reconsider a longstanding tendency to avoid discussing biological contributors to bodily difference. Drawing on the fat activist slogan “Diets don’t work”—and on the corollary claim that ninety-five percent of diets fail to produce permanent, substantial weight loss—we apply the name “the Ninety-Five Percent” to those subjects whom we position as central to our articulation of a fat-positive, anti-austerity cultural critique. In the final section, we underscore similarities between austerity politics and the culture of weight loss dieting: Both dieting and austerity cause people to endure hunger, and both almost always fail to deliver the rewards that they promise.

### Anti-Candy Parties

It was the leanest of times; it was the most fatphobic of times: Perhaps this is how future historians will characterize our present moment. These hypothetical historians will be correct, especially if they point out that the fatphobic and lean facets of our times are two sides of the same ideology: Cultural biases against fat people and justifications for austerity go hand in hand. We have seen such pairings in conservatives’ uses of anti-fat arguments to justify cutting benefits and public services. Now, we will flesh out the shape of these leanest and most fatphobic times by telling a tale of two candies. Our story will demonstrate that seemingly disparate discourses surrounding two sweet treats—the bonbon and the Mars Bar—each reveal a persistent investment, on both the Left and the Right, in presenting oneself as anti-candy.

Let us begin with the bonbon. On a September 17, 2013 installment of Fox News, beamed to Left-leaning audiences a few months later via Jon Stewart’s *The Daily Show*, the conservative commentator Greg Jarrett castigated recipients of welfare in the United States by opining that “sitting on the couch eating bonbons is now more financially lucrative” than working.<sup>13</sup>

“Bonbons!” riffed Stewart in a mock British accent, as if to say, “Who eats bonbons?!” Fat people, of course, are classically stereotyped as major consumers of the bonbon.<sup>14</sup> Right after donuts and cheeseburgers,

13 “Fox’s Jarrett: Obama’s Policies Have Made ‘Sitting On The Couch Eating Bonbons More Financially Lucrative’ Than Working,” *Media Matters for America*, n. d., accessed 25 Apr. 2015, <http://mediamatters.org/video/2013/09/17/foxs-jarrett-obamas-policies-have-made-sitting/195918>.

14 For those unfamiliar with this aspect of US American culture, the cliché “sitting on the couch eating bonbons” is a staple of fatphobic theories about the origins of fatness. For a critique of US journalists’ tendency to assume that “fat people usually get that

bonbons are the food of choice in fantasies about fat people's supposed dietary indulgences. To some American patriots, the word "bonbon" may have an ominously anti-freedom ring: As the "Freedom Fries" debacle of 2003 made clear, French-sounding foods are perceived by some in the US as disreputable, dangerous, and possibly even deadly.<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, the french fry (which actually originated in Belgium) has been portrayed in the US as a threat not only to national security but also to bodily health: If, as the US prepared for military intervention in Iraq, an order of french fries was posited as the wrong treat for a freedom-lover to eat, a "large fries" continues to be cited as an indulgence that no fat person deserves to enjoy.

These anti-French, anti-fries impulses form part of a broader pattern in the US, in which fatphobic discourses depict fat as a foreign threat. Intersections of fatphobia, xenophobia, and racism were the basis of an egregious legal case in New Mexico in 2001. Anamarie Regino, a three-year-old Mexican American girl whom doctors described as excessively fat, was removed from her home because social service professionals determined that her parents did not "fully understand the threat to their daughter's safety and welfare due to language or cultural barriers."<sup>16</sup> As the lawyer representing the family explained, the justifications given by the authorities who removed Anamarie from her home were filled with "veiled comments which added up to 'You know those Mexican people, all they eat is fried junk, of course they're slipping her food.'"<sup>17</sup>

Links between fatphobia and anti-immigrant animus have a long history in the US. Amy Erdman Farrell has shown that fantasies of racial, ethnic, and size-based superiority permeated the work of nineteenth-century political cartoonists, who "frequently drew immigrants as fat, a

way by sitting on the couch scarfing bonbons," see Kate Harding and Marianne Kirby, *Lessons from the Fat-O-Sphere: Quit Dieting and Declare a Truce with Your Body* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 177.

15 After France opposed a US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, Republicans in the U.S. Congress briefly renamed french fries, on the menu in the Congressional cafeteria, "Freedom Fries."

16 See Paul Campos, *The Obesity Myth: Why America's Obsession with Weight Is Hazardous to Your Health* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 100, for a scathing critique of this remark. Anamarie Regino's mother, Adele Martinez-Regino, was a native of the US and spoke fluent English, but because her heritage was Mexican, she was treated with the same xenophobia that Latino/a immigrants regularly confront. See also April Michelle Herndon, *Fat Blame: How the War on Obesity Victimized Women and Children*, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2014), 1-3, for an illuminating discussion of this case.

17 Quoted in Campos, *Obesity Myth*, 102.

quick way to signify to readers their inferior status.”<sup>18</sup> But although in the US fatness has historically been figured as un-American, on the other side of the Atlantic it is fashioned as a quintessentially American “problem.” As the British fat activist Charlotte Cooper points out, “the anti-fat rhetoric of the alleged global obesity epidemic continually locates its axis of evil within the United States.”<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the cliché of the fat American is a key term in a competition that has taken shape in recent decades: Fatphobic journalists representing various countries seem to be vying with each other for the privilege of affixing the label “second fattest” to their respective nations, with the US assumed to be the solid occupier of first-place status.<sup>20</sup> Notwithstanding these national rivalries, industrialized nations around the globe have gathered together under the same anti-fat, anti-candy banner, a flag that unequivocally declares: Fat is Bad.<sup>21</sup>

Certainly, the anti-fat flag waves high in the UK—the actual place, not Stewart’s comical idea of it. In a now-infamous July 7, 2008 speech identifying what was allegedly needed to fix Britain’s “broken society,” the future Tory Prime Minister David Cameron pointed his finger at fat people, blaming “obesity” and “poor diets” for overtaxing the cash-

18 Amy Erdman Farrell, *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 76. Similarly, Laura Fraser has observed that in the late nineteenth century “Americans of Northern European extraction wanted to be able to distinguish themselves, physically and racially, from stockier immigrants.” See Laura Fraser, *Losing It: America’s Obsession with Weight and the Industry that Feeds on It* (New York: Dutton, 1997), 18.

19 Charlotte Cooper, “Maybe It Should Be Called Fat American Studies,” in Rothblum and Solovay, *The Fat Studies Reader*, 328.

20 See, for example, “Scotland is now the second-fattest nation in the world,” *Daily Mail Online*, Sep 28, 2007, accessed July 29 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-483997/Scotland-second-fattest-nation-world.html>, and “As Obesity Rises, Chinese Kids Are Almost as Fat as Americans,” *Wall Street Journal – China*, 29 May 2014, accessed July 29, 2015, <http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2014/05/29/as-obesity-rises-chinese-kids-are-almost-as-fat-as-americans/?mod=e2fb>. Sometimes, non-US journalists claim first-place status for their own countries; as Sondra Solovay and Esther Rothblum point out in their introduction to the *Fat Studies Reader*, between 2003 and 2008 British, German, Canadian, and Australian journalists each claimed that their respective country was “the fattest.” See Sondra Solovay and Esther Rothblum, “Introduction,” in Rothblum and Solovay, *The Fat Studies Reader*, 1.

21 This point is made by Solovay and Rothblum, *Introduction*, 1. Additionally, Solovay and Rothblum note that, according to 2006 data from the World Health Organization, “the United States ranks twentieth, Australia thirty-fifth, and Canada thirty-seventh in global rates of ‘obesity.’ Ranking ahead in weight are a number of nations in the Pacific (e.g., Fiji, Samoa) and the Middle East (e.g., Kuwait, Jordan).” And “countries that have the greatest number of ‘obese’ children include a number of nations in eastern Europe (e.g., Albania, Armenia) and some African nations (e.g., Algeria, Lesotho)” (see *ibid.*).

strapped public and implying that cuts to social services would be necessary “consequences” of the bad “choices” that poor and fat people supposedly make.<sup>22</sup> Evidently delighted, the right-leaning tabloid *Daily Mail* summarized Cameron’s speech as: “Fat or Poor? It’s probably your own fault.”<sup>23</sup>

The formulaic linking of the terms “fat” and “poor” conflates poverty and fatness in ways that are not only inaccurate (one can, after all, be economically privileged and fat, or poor and thin) but also insidious, as a rhetoric of personal responsibility is repeatedly invoked to justify the oppression of fat people of all socioeconomic classes, and of poor and working-class people of all sizes. The “poor and fat” construction upholds the messages of pro-austerity politicians: When poverty is blamed on economic and alimentary self-indulgence, or a predilection for “sitting on the couch eating bonbons,” a critique of economic inequality is made impossible.

Given the Right’s habit of targeting fat people as embodiments of dietary and financial irresponsibility, one might expect that the Left would couple its critiques of austerity with an indictment of the Right’s promulgation of fatphobia. Since conservatives are an anti-candy party, shouldn’t the Left come out in favor of candy? Signs of a formulation of a candy-positive platform on the Left did appear during the run-up to Scotland’s September 18, 2014 vote on independence from Britain. Poverty is widespread in Scotland (as it is in the rest of the UK), and many English people have applied a mocking version of the “fat and poor” trope to Scotland, making fun of the Scots for their putatively excessive enjoyment of Mars Bars.<sup>24</sup> Alex Salmond, the leader at the time of the

22 This rhetorical move would become a trademark for the Tories as they took power in 2010 and began a harsh campaign of austerity cuts and privatization of public services. Owen Jones, in his important book *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class* (London and New York: Verso, 2011) reported on how newspapers across the country “left their readers in no doubt as to what Cameron was getting at”: “‘David Cameron tells the fat and poor: take responsibility,’ as *The Times* put it” (73-74). See Abigail C. Saguy, *What’s Wrong with Fat?* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013), 146 for a discussion of proposals in the US to impose fines upon Medicaid recipients who are “obese.”

23 Jones, *Chavs*, 74.

24 Currently, 820,000 Scots are classified as poor. This represents about 16% of the population and was discussed as a serious issue leading up to the September 2014 independence referendum. In the UK generally, however, 22% of the population is in poverty (a percentage that has increased under austerity measures). See “Scottish independence: 820,000 Scots ‘living in poverty,’” BBC News July 1, 2014, accessed July 29, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-28106456>, and Tom MacInnes, “UK poverty: the facts considered.” *The Guardian*, Dec 2, 2011, accessed July 29, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2011/dec/02/poverty-working-families-with-children-uk>. For an overview of English jokes about Scotland, see Stuart

Scottish National Party (SNP), who vehemently critiqued the austerity politics coming out of Cameron's London, was routinely subjected to fatphobic insults. Indeed, at times it seemed that one unofficial Conservative position on Scottish independence was "Don't vote yes for Scotland because Alex Salmond is fat."<sup>25</sup>

When Salmond was widely perceived as winning a key debate related to the independence initiative, he marked his victory by appearing on television eating a Mars Bar. Did this moment constitute a "crunch heard round the world," a resounding announcement of the Left's embrace of fat positivity? Since Salmond's Mars Bar consumption flouted conservatives' uses of anti-fat stigma as rationalizations for austerity, his public munching could have been heard as a one-two punch, or crunch, that attacked austerity and anti-fat animus at once. Yet neither Salmond individually nor the political Left (in Scotland or elsewhere) is unequivocally pro-candy or fat-friendly. The SNP has an official "Action Plan" designed as an "Obesity Route Map" that gives directions for making Scottish people thinner, and Salmond himself has talked about being on the so-called Bikini Diet.<sup>26</sup>

If Salmond's savoring of a Mars Bar was not quite a crunch heard round the world, perhaps this is because anti-fat rhetoric, on both the Left and the Right, has reached such high volume that it drowns out fat-positive messages. True, fatphobia takes different forms on the Left and the Right. While the Right uses a language of individual responsibility to stigmatize fat people, leftists define fatness as a problem requiring social interventions. Anna has elsewhere described the Left's pathologization of fatness as a central component of what she calls "the pity model of fat," a paradigm that, she contends, calls for a disability studies critique.<sup>27</sup> Much as cloying displays of pity infantilize disabled people, leftists' preoccupation with a "foodscape" that ostensibly induces "obesity" are

Jeffries, "Dear Scotland: here are 76 things we'd like to apologise for, love England." *The Guardian*, February 19, 2014, accessed 29 July 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/feb/19/scottish-independence-76-things-apologise>. Jeffries points out that the English comedian Paul Merton suggested that the Mars Bar would become the national currency of Scotland if it were to be independent.

25 Thousands of such attacks appeared on Twitter, YouTube, and other social media outlets. Again, we choose not to reprint the content of these easily searchable insults.

26 The Scottish Government's "Preventing Overweight and Obesity in Scotland: A Route Map Towards Healthy Weight" was first published in 2010 and continues to be available on the government website. On Salmond and the Bikini Diet, see Mark Macaskill and Jason Allardyce, "Salmond to try 'bikini panic diet,'" *The Sunday Times*, July 7, 2013, accessed July 29, 2015, [http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/news/uk\\_news/scotland/article1284343.ece](http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/news/uk_news/scotland/article1284343.ece).

27 Mollow, "Disability," 202.

highly condescending to the individuals whom they aim to “help.”<sup>28</sup> Such condescension was apparent in a 2013 BBC report, conducted by Samantha Poling, which sought to “figure out what is making Scots so much fatter” than the rest of the world. The occasion for the report was a study (like many before it, in numerous locations round the world) claiming to show that Scotland was “the second fattest place in the developed world,” the US, “of course,” being number one. Poling travels to Glasgow, a location that she chooses because “statistically it’s one of the unhealthiest areas in the country,” and sets up a produce stand, where she quizzes passersby about their knowledge of “fruit and veg.” Reporting on the results of her inquiry, Poling remarks: “[T]he courgette [i.e., zucchini] was a tricky one for many, butternut squash a bit of a baffler and a pineapple completely stumped one guy.” She also notes that experts say it’s “common for people not to know how to chop an onion or peel a carrot.” Adhering to the pity model of fat, Poling explains that Glaswegians’ putative dearth of culinary knowledge is “not their fault, [as] they’d never been taught.”<sup>29</sup>

Although proponents of the pity model of fat profess to want to help, their interventions may worsen the socioeconomic stresses faced by people who are fat, poor, or both. By figuring fatness as the result of ignorance (as in an inability to identify, or chop, common vegetables), leftists reinforce social stigma against fat people, thus increasing the likelihood that they will be discriminated against in employment, housing, and education.<sup>30</sup> Size discrimination is legal in most of Europe

28 This is not, of course, to deny that lack of access to nutritious food is a serious problem in poor communities. Rather, it is to suggest reframing this issue as one that is relevant to people of all sizes, instead of targeting fat people as a “problem” population.

29 Samantha Poling, “Scots Are the Second Fattest People in the World, Behind Only the Americans,” *Daily Record*, August 15, 2013, accessed July 29, 2015, <http://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/lifestyle/health-fitness/scots-second-fattest-people-world-2167621>; Samantha Poling, “Preventing Overweight and Obesity in Scotland: A Route Map to Healthy Weight,” accessed July 29, 2015, <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2010/02/17140721/0>.

30 As April Herndon notes, there is “overwhelming evidence” that fat people are “discriminated against in health care, housing, employment, and virtually every other arena where one might expect to see a marginalized group face discrimination” (Herndon, *Fat Blame*, 45). On the prevalence of size discrimination, see Gina Kolata, *Rethinking Thin: The New Science of Weight Loss—And the Myths and Realities of Dieting* (New York: Farrar, 2007), 69-70; Dylan Vade and Sondra Solovay, “No Apology: Shared Struggles in Fat and Transgender Law,” in Rothblum and Solovay, *The Fat Studies Reader*, 167-175; Mark V. Roehling, Patricia V. Roehling and L. Maureen Odland, “Investigating the Validity of Stereotypes about Overweight Employees,” *Group and Organization Management* 23, 4 (2008): 392-424; R. M. Puhl, T. Andreyeva, and K. D. Brownell, “Perceptions of Weight Discrimination: Prevalence and Comparison to Race and Gender Discrimination in America,” *International Journal of*

and in most of the US, and fat people are frequently stereotyped as lacking the “discipline” that would make them good workers. Clearly, being fat puts one at a disadvantage when competing for the material rewards to which liberal democracies promise to afford their citizens equal access.

Indeed, when the Left argues that poverty-induced “ignorance” and lack of access to “healthy” foods makes people fat, it overlooks another important possibility: Much of the oft-discussed relationship between fatness and poverty may result from discriminatory treatment of fat people. In an analysis of several epidemiological studies investigating the relationship between body size and class, Paul Ernsberger concludes that “the driving force behind the concentration of fatness among the poor is social stigma and systematic discrimination” against fat people.<sup>31</sup>

By affording thin people more than their share of the economic pie, the pity model of fat authorizes the unequal distribution of wealth. This framework also relies upon a host of facile assumptions, which we will challenge in the following section. For example, does crunching on carrots instead of candy bars really make fat people thin? Is “fat” truly a synonym for “unhealthy”? And, most important for a Left critique of austerity, what economic interests influence the authorities who disseminate anti-candy, anti-fat directives?

## Slim Pickings

Pick and choose: fat or thin? Around the world, shouts are heard: Make healthy choices! Take the stairs! Cut back on carbs! What does it mean to use fatness as a proxy for the wrong kind of “choices”? In many political and social contexts, choice has been a longstanding Left value: When it comes to reproductive freedom, sex work, social equality for queers, and recreational and medicinal drugs, the Left has a strong record of supporting the right to choose what one does with one’s own body.<sup>32</sup> But

*Obesity* 32 (2008): 992-1000, and Sondra Solovay, *Tipping the Scales of Justice: Fighting Weight Based Discrimination* (Amherst, MA: Prometheus Books, 2000). An online commenter to Mollow’s “Sized Up” gave a compelling firsthand description of anti-fat bias in employment: “I don’t get hired because of my body. I see the faces fall when the committee that had been thrilled by the resume and phone interviews and work samples meets my body” (qtd. in Mollow, “Fat”).

31 Paul Ernsberger, “Does Social Class Explain the Connection Between Weight and Health?” in Rothblum and Solovay, *The Fat Studies Reader*, 32-33.

32 In the context of neoliberal discourses, the term “choice” signifies in a different way; rather than referencing individual liberties, the term is often invoked to uphold corporations’ “rights” and consumers’ freedom to make purchases. As we shall see, when the Left fails to challenge the diet industry, it reinforces this neoliberal

when fatness is at stake, a “my body, my choice” thematic is more likely to be mouthed by conservatives, while leftists worry that the public, especially those who are poor and/or fat, need protection from an excess of dietary options. In a recent op-ed piece about “obesity,” the *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman (whose critiques of austerity we admire, but whose views on fatness we could do without) asserts that, in the realm of nutrition, “increased choice can be a bad thing, because it all too often leads to bad choices.” By “bad choices,” Krugman means menu selections that allegedly make people fat; he sarcastically dismisses those who “take a stand for the right to add extra cheese” to their pizza.<sup>33</sup>

Why does the concept of “obesity” often prompt the Left to abandon its traditional support of freedom of choice? Krugman’s answer is that “diet isn’t purely a personal choice,” since “obesity imposes large costs on the economy as a whole.” This assertion is a staple of anti-fat discourse across the political spectrum. As if echoing conservative Cameron’s “broken society” speech, Krugman reiterates the commonplace claim that fatness causes disabilities whose economic costs are unfairly borne by the thin portion of the population.<sup>34</sup> The frequently heard argument that fat people place an undue “burden” on the healthcare system depends upon neoliberal notions of governmentality: Rather than emphasizing the state’s role in protecting its citizens, this argument focuses on individuals’ alleged responsibility for reducing their dependence upon the state.<sup>35</sup>

In support of his depiction of thinness as a civic duty, Krugman invokes the authority of science: Contending that “the Republican base doesn’t

conception of choice as freedom to “better” oneself through self-help endeavors (see Guthman, *Weighing In*, 18, 47).

33 Krugman does not go so far as to suggest that laws should be passed to eliminate the right to consume foods that, he believes, make people fat. Instead, he favors “labeling requirements” for restaurant menus (presumably, to indicate calorie content) and “healthier” (read: low-calorie) school lunches. Paul Krugman, “Today, Even Pepperoni is Partisan,” *The New York Times*, March 6, 2015, accessed July 29, 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/06/opinion/paul-krugman-pepperoni-turns-partisan.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/06/opinion/paul-krugman-pepperoni-turns-partisan.html?_r=0).

34 Of course, thin people also get sick; indeed, thinness is a risk factor for many medical conditions; see Glenn A. Gaesser, *Big Fat Lies: The Truth about Your Weight and Your Health* (Carlsbad: Gürze Books, 2002), 99-103, and Campos, *The Obesity Myth*, 25. And as Abigail Saguy points out, many “obesity”-related healthcare costs may result from “overdiagnosis and treatment” of fat people (Saguy, *What’s Wrong?* 162, 143-44).

35 Moreover, as Julie Guthman has noted, blaming fat people for putting stress on the healthcare system overlooks “the role that the health care system plays in economic stability”; since the “health care system provides an enormous number of jobs, ... care for the sick is an economic burden only in health care systems where profit is the bottom line and public services are underfunded and politically unsupported—that is, systems in which only market logic is considered legitimate” (Guthman, *Weighing In*, 54-55).

much like experts, science or evidence,” he likens critics of anti-fat government policies to conservative climate change deniers. But when leftists take up arms in an international war on “obesity,” they are not fighting on the side of science. Rather, they are accepting as incontrovertible two unsubstantiated hypotheses: that “bad choices” make people fat; and that fatness causes disabilities and illnesses.<sup>36</sup> In doing so, the Left ignores major financial conflicts of interest between the diet industry and the so-called experts who pathologize fatness. A few key examples of the many financial conflicts of interest between “obesity” researchers and the diet industry: The former US surgeon general C. Everett Koop’s Shape Up America! campaign, which launched the “war on obesity” in 1995, received funding from Weight Watchers, Jenny Craig, and Slim-Fast.<sup>37</sup> The American Obesity Association, whose claims are treated as authoritative in the media, is funded by pharmaceutical companies that sell, or are in the process of developing, weight loss drugs.<sup>38</sup> And the International Obesity Task Force, which was instrumental in developing the World Health Organization’s guidelines

36 These hegemonic claims about fatness have been called into question by numerous authors who compellingly argue that seemingly objective “facts” about body size have more to do with cultural prejudices than with scientific certainty. These authors observe that the media and medical authorities have greatly exaggerated the association between fatness and poor health: “Overweight” people live *longer* than people of “normal” weight, and “obese” people live almost as long (Campos, *Obesity Myth*, 10-20; Kolata, *Rethinking Thin*, 201-09; Harriet Brown, *Body of Truth: How Science, History, and Culture Drive Our Obsession with Weight—and What We Can Do About It* (Boston: Da Capo, 2015), 14-16; as Paul Campos notes, “in developed nations, ‘morbidly obese’ women routinely have longer life expectancies than ‘ideal weight’ men” [19]). These writers also emphasize that *correlation is not causation*; that is, the small discrepancies between fat and thin people’s life expectancies may result not from fatness per se but from various social factors associated with fatness. Discrimination in health insurance and anti-fat bias on the part of healthcare providers (who often fail to treat fat people’s medical conditions appropriately because they dismiss symptoms with directives to “lose weight”) mean that fat people often receive substandard healthcare (Saguy, *What’s Wrong?*, 140-44); and discrimination in employment, education, housing, and marriage increases the level of economic and psychological stress that fat people face (Saguy, *What’s Wrong?*, 141-42). In addition, weight loss dieting and diet drugs, which are commonly prescribed to “treat” fatness, may shorten life expectancy (Gaesser, *Big Fat Lies*, 79-80, 135-50; Campos, *Obesity Myth*, 28-34). Furthermore, it is inaccurate to describe fatness as the result of individual “choice,” since there is no known way of making fat people permanently thin (Gaesser, *Big Fat Lies*, 135-36; Kolata, *Rethinking Thin*, 188; Campos, *Obesity Myth*, 29; Brown, *Body of Truth*, 36-37).

37 Fraser, *Losing It*, 143. And Pat Lyons, “Prescription for Harm: Diet Industry Influence, Public Health Policy, and the ‘Obesity Epidemic,’” in Rothblum and Solovay, *The Fat Studies Reader*, 79.

38 Harding and Kirby, *Lessons*, 170-71.

for defining “obesity,” receives most of its funding from Hoffman-La Roche and Abbott Laboratories, the makers, respectively, of the diet drugs Xenical and Meridia.<sup>39</sup> As J. Eric Oliver has pointed out, “most of the top obesity experts in the United States, including David Allison, George Blackburn, Tom Wadden, James Hill, and Judith Stern, are financially tied to diet and pharmaceutical companies.”<sup>40</sup> Indeed, Oliver remarks, “it is difficult to find *any* major figure in the field of obesity research... who does not have some type of financial tie to a pharmaceutical or weight-loss company.”<sup>41</sup>

This is a big fat deal: The shouts that one hears about a supposed choice-induced epidemic of fatness come from sources that are supported by the weight loss industry. Diet companies make big bucks by telling people they’re too big and insisting that they can pick, or choose, to be slim; currently, the total global weight loss market is worth over \$586 billion, and the margins of profit for the global industry average significantly higher than for other personal-service industries (11.8% of revenue as opposed to an average of 4.2%).<sup>42</sup> Not bad, in these lean times. But for consumers seeking weight loss measures that actually work, the pickings are slim. As the *New York Times* science writer Gina Kolata has documented, body weight is primarily determined by genetics and over the long term is not subject to individuals’ efforts to choose their sizes.<sup>43</sup> Some dieters may manage to lose large amounts of weight, but one’s biologically determined “setpoint” ensures that within five years almost everyone regains the lost weight.<sup>44</sup>

39 J. Eric Oliver, *Fat Politics: The Real Story Behind America’s Obesity Epidemic* (New York: Oxford UP, 2006), 28-29.

40 *Ibid.*, 30

41 Oliver, *Fat Politics*. For further discussion of these conflicts of interest, see Fraser, *Losing It*, 14, 210-14, 229; Kolata, *Rethinking Thin*, 204; Lyons, “Prescription”; Oliver, *Fat Politics*, 29-31; Campos, *Obesity Myth*, 43-46, 60, 221-23; Brown, *Body of Truth*, 105-114; and Harding and Kirby, *Lessons*, 170-74.

42 Nadège Droz and Pedro Marques-Vidal, “Selling Dreams: An Overview of Slimming Products’ Advertisements in Switzerland,” *Obesity Facts: The European Journal of Obesity* 7, 5 (October 2014): 283 and Catey Hill, “10 Things the Weight Loss Industry Won’t Tell You,” *MarketWatch*, January 14, 2014, accessed August 1, 2015, <http://www.marketwatch.com/story/10-things-the-weight-loss-industry-wont-tell-you-2014-01-10?page=1>.

43 Kolata, *Rethinking Thin*, 122-23, 157-58, 176-81.

44 Although genetic factors are the most important contributors to body size, they are not the only ones. Indeed, some readers may wonder: If body size is hereditary, then why have populations of many wealthy countries become larger in the past few decades? No one knows for sure, but the assumption that we eat more and exercise less is questionable at best (Kolata, *Rethinking Thin*, 194; Guthman, *Weighing In*, 93-95). Other possibilities include: a decline in smoking rates (smoking makes people thinner) (Campos, *Obesity Myth*, 121); better childhood nutrition and higher rates of

And that's a good thing: Fatness is a form of human variation that should be celebrated, not a disease to be subjected to specious cures. We know, of course, that many on the Left are wary of pointing to genetic causes for any form of bodily or mental difference. This is understandable given the racist, sexist, classist, ableist—and, indeed, fascist—uses to which claims about genetics have historically been put. But fat activists who highlight the hereditary aspects of body size are hardly eugenicists. On the contrary, the fat justice movement's focus on genetic diversity directly opposes the eugenic project of sorting individuals into hierarchical categories. Boldly asserting that "a diet is a cure that doesn't work for a disease that doesn't exist," fat activists of the 1970s confronted the medical profession head on and, in doing so, spotlighted the scandalousness of the weight loss industry's immense profits. Their interventions make it clear that a one-size-fits-all, "never say genes or biology" approach is not a viable strategy for leftist political movements that take fat justice seriously.

Pointing to biology as the reason for the slim-to-nil success rate of the products that the diet industry peddles, fat activists forward arguments that can usefully be applied to a range of other critiques of neoliberalism. A fantasy of infinite corporeal malleability is at the heart of neoliberal ideology; according to this fantasy, one can be or become whatever one wants, as long as one is willing to keep trying, or keep buying. This fantasy of limitless agency is shattered by the fat justice slogan "Diets don't work." In place of neoliberalism's valorization of personal agency (as in "losing the weight and keeping it off"), fat justice calls forth a conceptualization of fat agency as a collective mode of acting in the world. Arising out of what Anna has elsewhere defined as "setpoint epistemology"—that is, the embodied knowledge that diets don't work—fat justice is grounded in the lived experiences of what we might call the Ninety-Five Percent, after the approximate number of diets that fail.<sup>45</sup> Like the Ninety-Nine Percent of

vaccination (Kolata, *Rethinking Thin*, 208-09, 221); the increase in popularity of weight-lifting (statistics about "obesity" are based on BMI, a ratio of height to weight, and this system of classification categorizes George Clooney as "overweight" and Dwayne Johnson and Matt LeBlanc as "obese") (Supernifty, accessed August 4, 2015, <http://www.supernifty.org/bmi.php>); an increase in the use of SSRIs and other mental health medications (many of which cause weight gain); the proliferation of environmental pollutants (many of which are endocrine disruptors and may therefore contribute to weight gain) (Brown, *Body of Truth*, 12-13; Guthman, 98-115); and, paradoxically, the fact that more people are attempting to lose weight (dieting makes people fatter in the long term, as most dieters not only regain the weight that they lost but also gain additional weight) (Gaesser, *Big Fat Lies*, 33; Brown, *Body of Truth*, 36, 41; Lyons, *Prescription*, 81; Saguy, *What's Wrong?*, 37).

45 For an articulation of setpoint epistemology, which brings together the scientific concept of "setpoint theory" and the disability scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's

the Occupy movement, fat justice's Ninety-Five Percent shuns the neoliberal values of "self-discipline" and "personal responsibility" that are given as justifications for both dieting and austerity. Indeed, as we shall see, the ideologies underlying dieting and austerity are strikingly similar; both rely on elite subjects' unwillingness to recognize and respond to hunger experienced by people who are poor and/or fat.

## Anti-Hunger

Two things that austerity and diets have in common: Both cause hunger, and both don't work. Of course, if the executors of austerity acknowledged that the real purpose of their policies has been enabling the rich to get richer, then their benefits-and-services-slashing programs would have to be recognized as a smashing success: Notwithstanding the global economic crisis, the upper classes are doing quite well.<sup>46</sup> But further enriching those who are already wealthy is not the official *raison d'être* for austerity: Cutting benefits and privatizing social services was supposed to spur economic growth, the idea being that a little bit of short-term suffering (on the part of the middle-class and the poor) would ultimately benefit the economy as a whole, thus ensuring a happily-ever-after ending for everyone. Clearly, this has not happened; indeed, there is growing consensus among many economists that austerity absolutely cannot work. In a book titled *Austerity: The History of a Dangerous Idea*, Mark Blyth points out that rationalizations for austerity depend upon numerous logical contradictions.<sup>47</sup> For one thing, how is an economy supposed to grow when people, made poor by government cuts, have less money to spend on products and services? Also, the theory that consumer confidence would increase as citizens witnessed the state's frugality

concept of "sitpoint theory," see Mollow, "Disability." Discussing diets' ninety-five percent failure rate, Brown notes: "Dieting *can* make people thinner for a while—six months, a year or two, maybe three. Which, coincidentally, is about how long most studies follow dieters, and how they claim success. In reality, your chance of maintaining a significant weight loss for five years or more is about the same as your chance of surviving metastatic lung cancer: 5 percent. It doesn't matter what flavor of diet you try—Paleo, Atkins, raw, vegan, high-carb, low-carb, grapefruit, Ayds (remember those chewy chemical-infused caramels?)—only 3 to 5 percent of dieters who lose a significant amount of weight keep it off. Weight-loss treatments are cash cows, in part because they *don't* work; there's always a built-in base of repeat customers" (36-37).

46 See Richard Seymour, *Against Austerity: How We Can Fix the Crisis They Made* (London: Pluto Press, 2014), 29, for an astute account of austerity as a "class strategy".

47 Mark Blyth, *Austerity: The History of a Dangerous Idea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

overlooks the fact that austerity measures bring overwhelming economic insecurity into individuals' lives. In its "suffer now, be rewarded and feel more confident later" mentality, austerity is much like dieting in that the promised reward does not arrive.

Much as economies do not become robust under austerity programs, fat people rarely become permanently thin under dieting regimens. But don't say "diets don't work" unless you are willing to make people mad. In the summer of 2013, Anna published two articles in *Bitch* magazine in which she asserted (among other things) that body size is not the result of individual choice.<sup>48</sup> This claim incited outrage on the part of hundreds of online respondents, many of whom maintained that fat people should be stigmatized precisely because fatness *is* a choice, and a bad one at that.<sup>49</sup> Such comments (which are predictable responses to the posting of fat-positive material online) do not merit serious consideration: Even if fatness *were* a choice, this would not mean that fat people deserved to be stigmatized.

Yet the argument that individual choice does not determine one's body size has also met with skepticism on the part of people who oppose anti-fat stigma. Anonymous readers of Anna's previously published writings on fatness (as well as an outside reviewer of the present essay) have asked: Can't we defend fat people without saying that diets don't work? Perhaps, but fat justice is about more than "defending" fatness by convincing thin people that fat people are okay. Rather, fat justice aims to end fat oppression, and in our view such a project would be impossible without a sustained critique of the cultural imperative to diet. In addition to being inaccurate, an argument claiming that "fatness probably is a choice, and probably does cause all kinds of diseases, but should still be supported as a valid choice" would fail to address the ways that fatphobia functions in the actual world, where fat people (and remember, that's close to two thirds of the populations of most industrialized countries) daily receive the message that their size is a choice that's likely to kill

48 Mollow, "Fat" and "Sized Up."

49 Such arguments are not the sole province of internet trolls. In his bestselling book about fatness (Greg Critser, *Fat Land: How Americans Became the Fattest People in the World* [Boston: Mariner, 2004]), Greg Critser argues that "social stigma may serve to control obesity" (121). And the respected bioethicist Daniel Callahan advocates "discrimination lite" against fat people (qtd. in Lindsay Abrams, "A Case for Stigmatizing Obesity," *Atlantic*, January 23, 2013, accessed August 26, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2013/01/a-case-for-shaming-obese-people-tastefully/267446/>). See Herndon, *Fat Blame*, 20 for an analysis of Critser's and Callahan's remarks.

them. In the face of pervasive “diet or die” mandates, it is vitally important to share the information that diets are both ineffective and unnecessary.<sup>50</sup>

Another objection to the “diets don’t work” argument is that it risks stigmatizing those people who, it seems, do choose to be fat. Responding to one of Anna’s articles, a commenter with the tag “Jasmin” asked: “So what if it’s a choice? ...I like to eat and I don’t like exercise. I choose to live my life in a way that I enjoy. That involves eating cake and watching TV. ...Others choose differently—they choose to restrict their diets and run on treadmills.” We join Jasmin in affirming a variety of corporeal choices; and, as we hope our tale of two candies will have suggested, we are most assuredly pro-cake. But does a decision to eat cake and watch television constitute a choice to be fat? If you are hungry enough to eat cake but instead you crunch on a carrot and then head off to the gym to do crunches, is this choice really sustainable over the long term? Will you be able to keep up your treadmill-running-while-hungry regimen day after day, all the way past the five-year mark—the point after which almost every diet fails? Not if you are one of the Ninety-Five Percent.

And even those rare dieters who achieve such feats of neoliberal bodily disciplining do not always have socially approved thin bodies to show for it. According to researchers who postulate that one’s body size is governed by a biologically determined “setpoint,” struggling to “eat less” (than one wants) and “move more” (than feels good) usually won’t make a fat person permanently thin. Ultimately, the body gets its way about what it wants to weigh: If one starves and over-exercises, the body compensates by increasing appetite and reducing metabolism.<sup>51</sup> Setpoint theory helps explain why (contrary to popular belief) many fat people *do* run on treadmills and don’t have a particular penchant for cake—and why plenty of thin people do not do exercises and eat plenty of desserts.<sup>52</sup> “People are different from each other,” Eve Sedgwick famously asserted.<sup>53</sup> Although Sedgwick was talking about sexuality, her observation equally

50 Diets may also be dangerous. For a discussion of medical literature suggesting that illnesses conventionally attributed to “obesity” may be caused in part by weight loss dieting, see Campos, *Obesity Myth*, 29-33; and Brown, *Body of Truth*, 40.

51 For a discussion of this mechanism, see Kolata, *Rethinking Thin*, 118-19; and Tara Parker-Pope, “Behind the ‘Fat Trap,’” *The New York Times*, December 28, 2011, accessed July 29, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/01/magazine/tara-parker-pope-fat-trap.html>.

52 For a celebratory account of “running on the elliptical machine” by a fat woman *not* trying to lose weight, see Emily Anderson, “Fat at the Gym,” in *Hot and Heavy: Fierce Fat Girls on Life, Love and Fashion*, ed. Virgie Tovar (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2012), 20-24.

53 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 1990 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 22.

applies to body size.<sup>54</sup> It seems a distinctively neoliberal prejudice to assume that bodies, like commodities produced in a factory, should, as the result of carefully rationalized inputs and outputs, take on predictable, normative morphological forms. As researchers who have tried, and failed, to make fat people permanently thin have observed, “[i]t is entirely possible that weight reduction, instead of resulting in a normal state for obese patients, results in an abnormal state resembling that of starved non-obese individuals.”<sup>55</sup>

Indeed, insisting that one chooses one’s weight—or insisting that fat scholars and activists must bracket this question, which in the present cultural moment amounts to almost the same thing—means eliding this important reality: *It is possible to be hungry and fat at the same time*. To many thin people, this idea seems nonsensical. In analyses of global hunger and nutrition, it is common to draw a contrast between the “overfed” and the “underfed”—that is, between people who are hungry and people who are fat—as if these two groups were mutually exclusive.<sup>56</sup> Tell that to Mary Frances Neely, a fat woman who could not shrink her body to a so-called healthy size until she forced herself to follow a diet featuring cigarettes, black coffee, and salad (without dressing). “I was in the worst physical shape that I had ever been in... I didn’t have any energy. My skin was real pasty-looking. My nails wouldn’t grow and they split.”<sup>57</sup> Or to Wendy Shanker, who survived on packets of Optifast powder and “mountains of Metamucil” for four months but still remained fat.<sup>58</sup> Or to the millions of fat people who have dieted and lost large amounts of weight, only to regain it, for this simple reason: Like the rest of the Ninety-Five Percent, they got too hungry to keep dieting.

“Let them eat celery instead of cake,” fatphobic thin folks say to fat people, who, they tell themselves, can’t really be *that* hungry. Marianne Kirby recalls being told by a doctor that one-seventh of a small head of broccoli was enough food for her entire dinner.<sup>59</sup> In these austere times, the capacity to ignore other people’s hunger is not a skill that the Left should be reproducing. In and across countries hard hit by austerity, authorities are already cultivating such ignorance—or, even worse,

54 Sedgwick was a leader in bringing together analyses of fat oppression and homophobia; she noted that her experiences as a fat woman informed her field-defining analyses of the politics of male homosexuality (Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, 63).

55 Quoted in Kolata, *Rethinking Thin*, 115.

56 For example, see Gary Gardner and Brian Halweil, *Underfed and Overfed: The Global Epidemic of Malnutrition* (Washington, D.C.: World Watch Institute, 2000); and Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke UP, 2011), 106.

57 Quoted in Kolata, *Rethinking Thin*, 166-67.

58 Wendy Shanker, *The Fat Girl’s Guide to Life* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2004), 27.

59 Harding and Kirby, *Lessons*, 49-50.

blaming and scapegoating people for their needs. In the UK, as increasing numbers of people are being forced to turn to food banks, the British government continues to insist that its policies will work—and it continues to impose capricious sanctions on people who rely upon public assistance; for instance, one’s benefits can be cut as punishment for “infractions” such as missing an appointment or filling a form out incorrectly. Similarly, in Spain hunger is widespread; the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe drew attention to “reports about children fainting in school due to lack of proper meals.”<sup>60</sup>

But the powers-that-be there seem unbothered by poor people’s hunger; during the years of austerity in Spain, the gap between rich and poor has become the largest in the European Union. Austerity has also enforced hunger in Greece: The director of a community solidarity group in Athens that is feeding more than one hundred people per month notes that “teachers were reporting cases of kids who had turned up at school with nothing more than rice or stale rusks for months.”<sup>61</sup> Despite such reports of hunger continually emerging from Greece, and despite a national referendum in which the population itself indicated that it could not bear any more austerity, its wealthy creditors have refused to offer any relief. Instead, the wealthier and more powerful nations in the eurozone take a stance toward other people’s suffering that strongly resembles the condescending remarks regularly directed at fat people. As Owen Jones explains, the view of these nations is that Greece and Spain “must live within their means” because “they are suffering from years of profligacy, unlike the thrifty German state.”<sup>62</sup>

Connections between fat people’s oppression and poor people’s hunger were made during the early days of the fat liberation movement. Sara Fishman (a.k.a. Aldebaran, one of the founders of the Fat Underground and a coauthor of “The Fat Liberation Manifesto”) recalls that she and other feminist fat activists of the 1970s saw world hunger and dieting-induced hunger as deeply interrelated. Emphasizing that it is a “tenet of

60 Commissioner for Human Rights – Council of Europe, “Spain: Human Rights Need Particular Protection in Times of Economic Crisis and Austerity Budgets,” July 6, 2013, accessed July 29, 2015, <http://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/spain-human-rights-need-particular-protection-in-times-of-economic-crisis-and-austerity-budgets?inheritRedirect=true>.

61 Quoted in Helena Smith, “Greece’s Food Crisis: Families Face Going Hungry During Summer Shutdown,” *The Guardian*, August 6, 2013, accessed July 29, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/aug/06/greece-food-crisis-summer-austerity>.

62 Owen Jones, “We Must Stop Angela Merkel’s Bullying – or Let the Forces of Austerity Win,” *The Guardian*, January 28, 2015, accessed July 29, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jan/28/syriza-merkel-economic-greece-europe>.

fat liberation that all people have a right to live free of hunger,” Fishman asserts that “our resolve to end global hunger is compromised by our willingness to accept hunger at home—indeed, to impose it on fat people at home.”<sup>63</sup>

On the surface, it may seem that the imposition of hunger upon fat people is consensual; after all, a fat adult can choose whether or not to diet. Yet fat people face enormous social pressure, which often constitutes coercion, to subject themselves to weight loss dieting. From doctors’ threats that they will die if they do not lose weight; to corporate “wellness” programs that punish workers for being fat; to legally sanctioned discrimination against fat people in housing, employment, and education, the pressure to diet is intense. And sometimes, dieting is not consensual. Recall, for example, the legal case in which Anamarie Regino was removed from the custody of her parents, who were charged with feeding her too much. As Paul Campos explains, Anamarie’s parents were far from “overfeeding” her; instead, they had, in accordance with the advice of their physicians, placed their daughter on a series of ever-more-restrictive diets.<sup>64</sup> Eventually, Anamarie was subsisting on two Kindercal drinks per day (approximately one third of what a “normal” three-year-old would be advised to consume), but despite their compliance with medical authorities’ directives to starve their child, Anamarie was taken away because she remained fat.<sup>65</sup> Even after she was eventually returned to her home, the family remained under intense surveillance, Anamarie’s diet closely monitored by state authorities who forbade “all candy, cake, ice cream, juice, fried food, or fast food.”<sup>66</sup> Nor is this an isolated case. As April Herndon observes, “courts in Iowa, New Mexico, New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio have also removed [fat] children from their homes, and doing so is quickly becoming seen as a logical means of making children thin”<sup>67</sup>. Meanwhile in the UK, approximately seventy-five fat children were removed from their homes between 2009 and 2014.<sup>68</sup>

Desperate times call for desperate measures: That is the reasoning behind both dieting and austerity. Medical authorities who advise removing fat children from their homes concede that these interventions produce psychological trauma and do not usually result in fat children becoming thin; yet the prevailing societal attitude about the global

63 Personal communication with Anna, July 24, 2015.

64 Campos, *Obesity Myth*, 101-102.

65 *Ibid.*, 99-103.

66 *Ibid.*, 103.

67 Herndon, *Fat Blame*, 1.

68 Ian Johnston, “Children Taken into Care for Being Too Fat,” *The Independent*, February 28, 2014, accessed July 29, 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/health-news/children-taken-into-care-for-being-too-fat-9158809.html>.

“obesity crisis” is that “something must be done,” even if that something only makes matters worse.<sup>69</sup> And since the purpose of taking fat children away from their parents is to place them in environments in which their food intake will be more strictly controlled, the outcome of these placements will be hunger. A rhetoric of crisis has also authorized the imposition of drastic austerity programs on hungry and suffering people. As Robert notes in his work-in-progress, “[a]usterity is generally wrapped up in rhetorics of emergency, whether the topic is reducing a national debt, paying for an International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan, or protecting banks from catastrophic loss.”<sup>70</sup>

Given the many striking similarities between the justifications for dieting and for austerity, why have Left critiques of neoliberalism so frequently failed to challenge the discursive power of the weight loss industry—an industry that, as we have seen, exerts enormous influence over the medical profession’s recommendations regarding body size? Perhaps because many on the Left, even those who forward trenchant critiques of capitalism, still hold out hope of upward mobility, a hope that our culture codes as a downward movement of the digits on the bathroom scale. Shop till you drop enough pounds to make your body look like a status symbol, the weight loss industry says. By “going Paleo,” watching one’s waistline, and exercising to “work off” dietary “indulgences,” consumers buy into the myth that one can’t be too rich or too thin.

This myth derives its power by exploiting economic fears. Since the threat of looking “too fat” is inseparable from the risk of appearing poor, it’s no wonder that in these lean times preoccupation with body size is such a big thing. During an era of economic uncertainty, when lives are frequently upended by forces outside of one’s control, dieting offers the illusion that thinness, one of our culture’s most potent symbols for affluence, is always within one’s power to choose. Yet those who are afraid of fat live precarious dietary lives, always worrying that they are a meal or two away from losing the control that, they tell themselves, keeps them from getting fat, or fatter. Eyes trained on the scale, even the most stringent critics of capitalism risk losing track of the economic forces that throw lives off balance. Fear of fatness can displace concerns about genuine threats wrought by neoliberal political economy: food insecurity, lack of access to healthcare, overwork, and climate-change-induced food shortages and droughts. To strive to pick slimness is to become a docile subject, dutifully exercising “discipline” to keep one’s appetite in line.

When in line to be lean, one is less likely to complain about the increasing smallness of one’s economic lot. After all, a common dieting

69 Herndon, *Fat Blame*, 81.

70 McRuer, *Crip Times*, Unpublished.

strategy exhorts eaters to reframe needs as “wants”: Egg-white omelettes are prudent investments, while ice cream is an extravagant expenditure. Efforts to reprogram appetites may spread insidiously to other contexts, dampening the outrage that we should express in reaction to economic injustice. If we convince ourselves that solid meals are shameful self-indulgences, then perhaps other necessities, such as living wages and unemployment compensation, can more easily be defined as wants. Dieters are perfect subjects of austerity politics, because dieting itself is a practice of austerity.

All this disciplining is imposed upon us in the name of a crisis that must be stopped: In order to save the bodily and budgetary health of the populace, citizens are ordered to move more, eat less, spend more, slim down, shut up, and stop complaining about the fact that many people do not have enough food. Refuting this reasoning, a group of anti-austerity activists in Spain occupied a central plaza in Madrid on May 15, 2011 and attempted to turn the tables: “*No es una crisis; es una estafa!* [It’s not a crisis; it’s a scandal!]” they shouted. Their protest formed the basis of the 15-M movement, recognized internationally as “Los Indignados.” That summer and in the years ahead, Los Indignados (“the indignant ones”) mobilized against their government’s enforcement of a multitude of hunger-inducing austerity measures. Seconding these activists’ justified indignation, we hope that *this* shout-out to the Ninety-Five Percent will be heard round the world: let’s refuse austerity, reject weight loss dieting, and insist that everybody should get to eat.

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Gay Studies, 2003). *He is completing a manuscript titled Crip Times: Disability, Globalization, and Resistance.*