

Child Obesity in America: “Mommy, Mommy! Why Am I Fat?”

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Malnutrition comes in a delightful assortment of colorful flavors nowadays. But poverty and obesity are a correlation that Americans find hard to swallow.

“Genetics and family history can predict whether you will become obese but then so can your ZIP code,” says Adam Drewnowski, world-renowned leader in innovative research approaches for the prevention and treatment of obesity, and Director of the Nutritional Sciences Program at the University of Washington in Seattle. In December of 2003, Drewnowski said, “If poverty and obesity are truly linked, it will be a major challenge to stay poor and thin.” [1]

In a more recent interview regarding her new “Let’s Move” campaign to combat childhood obesity, First Lady Michelle Obama argues: “A recent study put the health care cost of obesity-related diseases at \$147 billion a year. This epidemic also impacts the nation’s security, as obesity is now one of the most common disqualifiers for military service.” [2]

It seems morbid that national security is Michelle Obama’s primary concern regarding obesity in American children. After all, raising healthy American children to become dead American soldiers doesn’t seem like a viable health care objective. But aside from that, poverty is directly correlated with obesity in Americans of all ages. So isn’t American poverty an even worse security threat than American obesity?

Through the magic of photography, Ken Burns’ productions of “The Civil War” and “The National Parks” comprise an epic pictorial scrap book of American History, spanning more than 150 years from the early 1800s through the 1960s. But in all those pictures of millions of typical Americans, there is no sign of obesity, except occasionally amongst the extremely wealthy. So, comparing those pictures to more recent audience footage from any “Blue Collar Comedy” tour, it’s easy to see that American obesity is a relatively new phenomenon, imposed over the past 30-years or so.

Are most Americans fat because they are typically more affluent now than in past generations — or is it because the American food supply has been poisoned with chemical additives that make cheap trash more accessible and flavorful than more expensive and more nutritional food choices?

While American society has become abundantly more affluent over the past quarter century, most of that gain has been concentrated amongst a shrinking upper class minority of people whose incomes are derived primarily from ownership, not from wages. In response, the FDA has prescribed additives like monosodium glutamate and high fructose

corn syrup for American workers that are in debt up to their eyeballs because they haven't had the purchasing power to pay for healthy food since the 1960s.

The result is that deep-fried fast foods and chemically-charged, frozen garbage tend to be cheaper, more flavorful and conveniently microwavable than fresh and more nutritional, albeit less exciting, food alternatives. Efforts to improve sales by enhancing cosmetic appeal require even the 'fresh foods' found in the meat and produce departments of most grocery stores to be chemically treated, artificially retarding the discoloration inherent in the natural decomposition that results from the death of any plant or animal. Moreover, genetic modifications tend to compromise nutritional quality for the sake of increased production, distribution and sales of dead plants and animals that comprise the general inventory of every American supermarket.

Under capitalism, this is called 'economic efficiency'. But all those preservatives are also high on the glycemic index and spike insulin levels that tell our brains to store fat, prompting the FDA to approve an endless variety of diet pills and weight loss programs to combat American obesity. This in turn, only exacerbates the problem of American obesity and facilitates a multi-billion dollar weight loss industry, forcing most Americans into a spiral of financial debt, psychological depression and spiritual bankruptcy. [8] [9]

According to Richard C. Cook, veteran Project Manager for the U.S. Treasury Department and Policy Analyst for the U.S. Food and Drug Administration:

"Cheap, mass-produced foods are largely based on grains and beef raised by massive agribusiness firms, so that the atrocious American diet is inextricably linked with capitalist enterprise controlled by Wall Street. A key ingredient is high fructose corn syrup (HFCS), suspected of being a major cause of diabetes and heart disease, as well as obesity. Much of the HFCS is extracted from corn grown from genetically-modified seed which has been rammed down the throats of American farmers, again by the massive agribusiness firms such as Monsanto.

"American farming at present is completely incapable of supplying nutritious foods on a scale that would make a difference. In order to furnish natural and healthy foods to poorer markets would require a revolution in American farming where small family farms using heirloom seeds and natural farming methods would once again become prosperous. Unfortunately, this sector has been destroyed by agribusiness and by the federal government policies, not to mention bank lending practices, that favor it. We also have a massive food chemical industry, closely aligned with the pharmaceutical industry, that thrives on doctoring unhealthy and non-nutritious food, with the aid of the Food and Drug Administration which approves their chemical formulas.

"In other words, a big part of the U.S. economy, again under the control of Wall Street, gets rich off making kids obese and unhealthy to the point where we no longer have the capability of producing anything else on a large scale. If Michelle Obama wants to take on all this she has a pretty big job ahead of her." [3]

It's easy to find academic research on the Internet to support all these conclusions, and much of the information suggests that race is a key determinant in both poverty and obesity. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. made similar observations 40 years ago, and a mountain of recent data supports his conclusions today. So why hasn't the wife of our nation's first Black President made the obvious connection between poverty and obesity?

Some of the best thinking on the matter of childhood obesity in the United States appears in an essay written by a high school student. Emily Cumbie-Drake of Theodore Roosevelt High School in Iowa suggests that lower income families are at the highest risk for malnutrition since foods with low nutritional value relative to calorie content are often the most economical choices available. [4]

In a more detailed analysis, Professor Adam Drewnowski suggests that “many health disparities in the United States are linked to inequalities in education and income:

“A reduction in diet costs in linear programming models leads to high-fat, energy-dense diets that are similar in composition to those consumed by low-income groups. Such diets are more affordable than are prudent diets based on lean meats, fish, fresh vegetables, and fruit. The association between poverty and obesity may be mediated, in part, by the low cost of energy-dense foods and may be reinforced by the high palatability of sugar and fat. This economic framework provides an explanation for the observed links between socioeconomic variables and obesity when taste, dietary energy density, and diet costs are used as intervening variables. More and more Americans are becoming overweight and obese while consuming more added sugars and fats and spending a lower percentage of their disposable income on food.” [1]

But instead of responding appropriately to more than 40-years of existing research conclusions by attacking poverty directly, Michelle Obama insists upon reinventing the wheel. Her revised goals include ending what she refers to as “food deserts” with a \$400 million a year “Healthy Food Financing Initiative,” which will bring grocery stores to low-income neighborhoods and “help places like convenience stores carry healthier food options.” [2]

However, increasing the availability of healthier foods does not improve access unless American consumers have the purchasing power necessary to make healthier choices. Basic economics suggests that effective demand is not merely needs or desires; it is needs and desires backed with purchasing power. Moreover, pushing more grocery stores (i.e. Wal-Marts) into poor neighborhoods historically forces millions more people out of their homes in the name of economic development and eminent domain. From this perspective, “Let’s Move” seems a most appropriate title for Mrs. Obama’s new campaign.

According to Michelle’s new “Let’s Move” Web site, “grants will also help bring farmers markets and fresh foods into underserved communities, boosting both family health and local economies”. On the surface, this seems like a great idea. But as long as this program is reliant upon government funding, it is inherently unstable and does not empower local economies in the long run. [5]

A more effective approach would be for the US government to legislate in favor of cooperative enterprise and cooperative financing to facilitate the self-sufficiency of local cooperative markets. The role of an effective government is simply to govern and protect its citizens, not to provide funding for sustenance and commerce through taxation and borrowing.

Of course, government funding would make a lot more sense if it were provided from the economic surplus already generated by the nation’s productivity. Emergency programs, implemented in previous times of economic crisis, could have formed the basis for a stable American economy. This was the case when President Lincoln issued the Greenbacks during

the civil war — and when colonial paper currencies allowed an emerging American society to monetize the value of the goods and services its inhabitants were able to produce — and again when President Herbert Hoover created the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC), which moved to recapitalize failing non-Federal Reserve state banks in rural areas and small towns. Hoover’s efforts are not remembered as the most popular in US history. But much to his credit, RFC loan programs had a major impact over the next twenty years, providing low interest loans to the railroad industry, farmers, exporters, state and local governments, and wartime industries. [6].

But this is not the way government funding is provided today. Instead, the US government — even when it is led by a Black President — rewards the corruption of the extremely wealthy with billion dollar bailouts and punishes the working people of this nation with rising food costs, unemployment, mortgage foreclosures, homelessness, crime and starvation, along with a failed health care system.

Even in times when the US government seems more egalitarian in its pursuit of the general interest, it either taxes the rich to provide for the poor, and/or it lends money into circulation, borrowed from a privately owned bank called the Federal Reserve, which must be repaid with interest. The former approach at least temporarily returns to the working class some of the surplus that passive ownership has siphoned away from their productive activities. But it is also unsustainable because tax legislation is so politically driven and volatile. Meanwhile, the latter approach is nothing less than organized crime, since it forces all of American society into debt that can never be repaid.

Assuming the American public has had enough of these criminal arrangements, the most viable alternative is expansion of the cooperative sector from the local level worldwide through self-management, self-financing and the development of renewable technologies for transportation, industry and agriculture. That is to say, cooperative expansion must be self-supporting through its own contributions. This will certainly involve a network of publicly owned banks that provide credit as a public utility rather than a financial playground for an exclusively entitled minority. Eventually, it will also involve a Basic Income Guarantee, provided to every US citizen regardless of employment status. [7] But more importantly, these measures need to become permanent fixtures in the American economic system, not temporary emergency programs implemented in response to economic crisis.

To become a positive legacy for the First Lady, her “Let’s Move” program against American obesity must first be a campaign against American poverty. It must seek to establish more genuine conditions of economic democracy across the globe by driving people everywhere to reject both wage-slavery and debt-slavery in favor of “liberty and justice for all”. But since these are obviously not the objectives of Michelle Obama’s campaign, American communities need to find more viable ways to foster economic self-sufficiency and healthier food choices at the local level through cooperative reorganization.

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Notes

[1] Drewnowski, Adam. (12/29/2003). “Poverty and Obesity: The Role of Energy Density and Energy Costs”. The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition.
<http://www.ajcn.org/cgi/content/full/79/1/6>.

[2] Starr, Penny. (2/9/2010). "First Lady Links Childhood Obesity to National Security in Launch of "Let's Move' Campaign. CNS News.

<http://cnsnews.com/news/article/61157>

[3] Cook, Richard C. (3/13/2010). Email correspondence.

[4] Cumbie-Drake, Emily. "Poverty and Obesity in the United States". Theodore Roosevelt High School, Iowa.

<http://www.worldfoodprize.org/assets/YouthInstitute/05proceedings/RooseveltHighSchool.pdf>

[5] Obama, Michelle. (2010). "Let's Move". <http://www.letsmove.gov>

[6] Cook, Richard C. (2008-2009). "We Hold These Truths". Tendril Press, LLC. Aurora, CO. Chapter 5, "Credit as a Public Utility", pgs 81-112.

[7] Dorrien, Gary. (5/15/2009). "A Case for Economic Democracy". OpEd News.

<http://www.opednews.com/articles/A-Case-for-Economic-Democr-by-Gary-Dorrien-090513-750.html>

[8] Living for a Better You. (10/21/2009). "The Importance of Nutrition and the Effects and Causes of Malnutrition".

<http://www.livingforabetteryou.com/2009/10/21/the-importance-of-nutrition-and-the-effects-and-causes-of-malnutrition.html>

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