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The Economics and Sociology of Food and Obesity: Let's be Libertarians

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They have decided to sue. Some enterprising American ladies and gentlemen are hoping to make millions of dollars by taking to court the companies (like McDonalds) who sell fast food. Hamburger purveyors, goes their argument, have made them addicted to Coke and Chicken McNuggets, and this has done in their waist lines, and therefore their health.

That seems self-evidently foolish. Human beings who like to eat a lot can hardly blame anyone other than themselves.

But this does raise all sorts of interesting points about the economics and sociology of food. What determines how much people eat? What should be the role of a government in all of this?

Obesity has increased remarkably in the last couple of decades in Britain. The simplest way to see this is to watch black and white television clips from the 1960s. Everyone is thin; it is so noticeable. Even in football highlights, I am always struck by the slender physique of our 1966 world-cup-winning team.

When I first went to work in the United States, in the early 1980s, I was amazed. First, there were so many giant people everywhere, both in height and girth. I was a solid sort of size about 5 feet 10 or so and 170 pounds at Oxford on October 1st, and then in Princeton on October 2nd I was positively weedy. Second, Ivy League students and people with a PhD were thin. Those who worked in the shops were enormous (and usually black, though that is another, and very complicated, story). Third, food was in endless supply, at all hours.

Since then, Britain has become like America. The link between obesity and social class has now established itself here, and it really

is one of the most fascinating patterns that one sees in society. What makes this especially paradoxical, of course, is that rich people can afford to buy more food, so one would expect to see the reverse of the actual pattern. It should be the highly-paid who are fat, as happened centuries ago.

To get your mind around this, you have to know what BMI stands for: body mass index. It is the measure used by health professionals to assess obesity. Here goes the arithmetic. Take your weight in kilogrammes and make that the numerator in a ratio. Take your height in metres, and square it, and then make that the denominator in the ratio. Hence $BMI = \text{weight}/(\text{square of height})$.

Although it depends a bit on age, the healthy BMI is a number like 20, or a bit over. Obesity is classified as a BMI of over 30.

The facts are these.

In Britain, professional men are fairly thin, or at least not massively over-weight. About 12% of them have a body mass index above the crucial number of 30. Professional women are a wee bit fatter: 15% are obese.

But then we find a fascinating and smooth relationship between ever-lower social class and greater weight. For example, 20% of skilled manual men are obese. And 32% of all unskilled manual women are obese. Again, this goes against one's intuition. After all, manual workers are the very ones expending the energy that I (and probably you) do not, when we do little more than typing in an 8 hour day.

It must be a product of diet and of social pressure. First of all, we know from the government's National Food Survey that unskilled workers eat far more fatty food and, in particular, around 50% less fresh fruit and vegetables than do professional people. They also eat doughnuts and red meat more, and oatcakes and fish far less often.

But the really interesting part is about social pressure. Why do those with university degrees eat in way that ensures they tend to be fairly thin?

One possibility that has been suggested is that these men and women have greater self-control. People who are able to put off their desire for short-term gratification also manage to concentrate on education and to do all sorts of other things that are 'investments' rather than simple 'consumption today'. Another possibility is that simply to get high-powered white-collar jobs it is an advantage to be beautiful, because you are in the business of persuading clients across polished tables.

Whatever the explanation, we have much to understand here. And it is true that being over-weight means you are more prone to illness.

Nevertheless, I would like to put in a word for libertarianism. I detect growing criticism of those people who weigh more than the average. Governments can, if they absolutely must, produce lots of publicity about how eating makes you fat and that fatness is not very good for you. But, let's face it, everyone knows this. It is really none of my business how much other people eat, whether they go to the gym, and how they live their lives. It is none of the government's. In case you are tempted to say that because we have a National Health Service we are also entitled to interfere in others' lives, I don't think that is an easy argument to sustain. Every British citizen does something to worsen his or her health.

So let's have a bit of live-and-let-live in McDonalds. And pass that ketchup bottle, please.