

Diet for a Small Planet? Fat Chance

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As I was hurrying through a popular bookstore during the winter holiday rush, my attention was caught by the cover of a prominently displayed book, *Hope's Edge: The Next Diet for a Small Planet*. The work is a sequel to Frances Moore Lappe's appeal to Americans in the early 1970's to eat lower on the food chain. I was attracted to the earlier volume after becoming acutely aware of the issue of world hunger as an undergraduate at Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia in the mid 1970's. There, inspired by a Jesuit faculty member's assault on the world hunger issue, I became active in the Bread for the World movement and organized a "Run for Hunger" that raised money for local hunger organizations.

In her first book, Lappe held the food industry accountable for promoting inefficient sources of food production aimed at satisfying the rich American palate when, in fact, the natural resources and technology are available to feed the entire world. Like the advocates of many social causes in the 70's, Lappe called for corporate responsibility, arguing that "hunger is human-made" and that it could be corrected if good citizens called for big business and the government's industrial food complex to be socially responsible and change the way we produce and market food.

While Lappe received much praise for the earlier book, which sold some three million copies and moved many people to think about the Darwinian need to eat frugally, her plan was visionary in the socio-political and economic realms. Inspired by her daughter, Anna, who by now was the same age, 26, as Frances Moore Lappe had been when she wrote that first book in a musty library at the University of California at Berkeley, Lappe recommitted herself to our primal relationship to food and argued in this new work, written with her daughter, that there is still hope that we could follow a diet for a small planet.

Diet for a small planet? Fat chance. The past decade or so in America can be characterized as a period of bloat. Our penchant for bigness-or-bust and our improvidence in what we eat, what we drive, where we live and how we work belies a modicum of consideration to live smaller on this planet. Today, one can easily see that Lappe's appeal to consume in moderation is quixotic. Generally, Americans of every age, gender, race and ethnic origin are consuming more food and drink and are getting larger.

The average American is consuming 2,750 calories per day, when 2,200 calories would do. Led by the marketplace's need to sell more food to make more money, the American appetite has grown precipitously. The biggie-biggie, and venti food and beverage offerings are no longer limited-time deals but everyday portions—whether in-house or take-out. Starbucks' coffee cup sizes are telling. The smallest-sized cup is actually called "tall." The large fast-food fries of yesteryear are now called the small portion. Today it

takes a lot more Coke for “things to go better with.” An 8-ounce soda used to be a nice treat; today’s generation reaches for Big Gulps, some 40 to 60 ounces of high caloric drink. How did small become so tall?

Americans’ newfound habit of super-sizing food orders has come at a big price. Government health reports continue to show that we are expanding. About two-thirds of Americans are overweight, and one in three is considered obese. The percentage of overweight children has doubled since the 1980’s and now stands at 13 percent. Among adolescents, the rate has tripled to 14 percent. The body expanse has also affected our very young, with 10 percent of preschoolers overweight. Public officials at the national and state levels are looking at novel ways to fight the fat, now that researchers are quantifying the economic burden of our increasingly overweight stature.

Another sign of conspicuous consumption among Americans lies in the increase in the size of the family automobile. The automobile reflects American culture and our psyche. It tells the world, even if vicariously, who we are. And we are proud to project sizes that are big, bigger and biggest. Ironically, while the American family has decreased significantly in number (we actually have more cars per family than kids), the vehicles we drive are now long enough to carry easily Lappe’s late 1960’s California long board, and some sport utility vehicles stand as tall as an N.B.A. center.

The nostalgic, paneled station wagon has morphed into two to three tons of raw steel. These S.U.V.’s, light trucks, minivans or crossovers have redefined our road space—changing how we travel (they are—name the favorite room in your house—on wheels), how we drive and how we park our “basic transportation” vehicles. As the girth of our bodies comes with a price, so does the weight of these vehicles take its toll. They are so large today that parking spaces need to be reconfigured. Small cars squeeze in next to behemoths, whether they are moving or parked. Clearly these gigantor S.U.V.’s own the road and parking lots, and they are not fond of sharing space. Federal, state and local street and highway officials are under pressure to respond inventively to the consumer’s need for big cars. Few of our roads were built for these mini-homes. Their popularity has hit rural, suburban and urban dwellers alike. S.U.V.’s accounted for 20 percent of noncommercial vehicles in 1985. This has grown to 25 percent today—actually 50 percent if light trucks and minivans are considered.

Bigness on wheels starts early. America’s change of lifestyle calls for our toddlers to ride in luxury mega-strollers. Strollers today are designed and built to accommodate kids from 36 months to four years. They tolerate an additional 10 pounds of toddler. Such lack of activity for these coddled toddlers counters our government’s call for all of us to be more physically active. Shuttling them for convenience sake in these kid cruisers may prep them for a spot in remedial gym.

Certainly America’s mass consumption behavior is not new, but at least most families used to keep the size of their “stuff” to a reasonable scale. Again, while the family has been shrinking in number, there has not been a concomitant shrinking of our living space. Most parts of the country are dealing with suburban sprawl. John Miller, founder of

Scenic America, rails against our tolerance for blatant commercialism built on top of our living space in his book, *Egotopia: Narcissism and the New American Landscape*. The new American landscape is wholly about commercialism. It is about the exaggerated sense of self and not about communal values.

Articles published in two major public health journals report evidence that the combination of living in the suburbs, where a jaunt in a vehicle is necessary to secure our basic living needs, and owning an S.U.V. , which has all the comforts of a home on wheels, is itself a risk factor for obesity. It seems that our girth is a fallout from our desire to secure living space away from others and our corollary aversion to venturing into the fresh air to do basic errands.

The demands placed on us by our workplaces or our self-inflicted workaholic routines do not make for a salubrious existence. Americans are working more hours per week today than they have done since the 1920's. About 40 percent of us work 50 hours a week. The adage "work hard, play hard" is no longer true. On average, Americans are demanding a scant 8.1 days of vacation after a year on the job and not even two weeks after three years—the lowest among the industrialized nations. The result is chronic stress, absenteeism and strained family affairs. The stress engenders another co-morbidity working against the diet plan for a small planet. Biomedical researchers are reporting that stress spawns fat cells and that it can be placated by comfort food—that is, foods high in sugars, fat and salt. The advent of the home computer and access to the Internet will not ameliorate this trend. A national household survey found that we contributed an extra 5.9 hours a week to our employers by logging on to the Internet from home.

We have become the alien Coneheads from "Saturday Night Live," whose modus operandi is to "consume mass quantities" of food. President Bush's recent challenge to find a route to Mars could now be of national importance, given our improvidence, if we continue to expand down here in "Fat Land."

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