

THESE DAYS, IT SEEMS, almost everyone has a habit that he can't control. For millions of people, this habit is overeating.

Never have so many human mastodons bestridden the earth as now. At one time, not so very long ago, such mastodons were rare enough to be curiosities, charitably thought by others to be the victims of their "glands." We had such a fat boy at school: His cheeks were so adipose that his eyes had become mere slits. We thought that he was ill rather than a member of a cultural avant garde.

In America, more than a third of the adult population is now obese (obesity being defined as having a body-mass index more than 30). This is nearly three times as many as in 1960, and half as many again as in 1990.

But the increase has been greatest among those known as the morbidly obese—that is to say those with a BMI of more than 40. As a proportion of the population they have increased in America by more than six times since 1960, and three times since 1990. They are now about 6% of adults.

The cultural meaning of obesity has changed at the same time. For most of human history, fatness has been a sign of prosperity, of having risen, socially and economically, above the day-to-day struggle to obtain enough to eat. But sadly now, in Western societies, obesity is concentrated among the poorest and least educated. In America, blacks are 50% more likely to be obese than whites, and Hispanics 20% more likely.

I once saw the change in cultural meaning of body size happening before my very eyes, when I practiced briefly in the mid-1970s as a doctor in Zululand in South Africa. The

Obesity is spreading—and eating away at America's economy and health. Theodore Dalrymple on how society can bite back.

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women who still lived in a traditional way, in mud huts, wanted to be fattened up for their menfolk, who saw in a fat wife a sign of their own success and prestige. These women would ask for medicine to become even fatter than they already were. By contrast, the young women who attended university wanted medicine to make them thinner than they already were. It almost seems as if, for human beings, there is no contentment with their body size.

If overeating is not in itself a disease, it certainly has health consequences. By now, there surely cannot be anybody left who does not know that obesity causes Type II diabetes, any more than there are smokers who do not know that smoking is bad for them. When I started out as a doctor, Type II diabetes was often known as maturity-onset diabetes, but as children have grown fatter and fatter, maturity has nothing to do with it.

The economic consequences of fat are enormous, if health economists are to be believed. Obesity-related medical costs were 9.1% of all annual medical costs in 2006, up

from 6.5% in 1998, according to a study released last year from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and RTI International, a nonprofit research institute. The annual health-care costs of obesity in America have risen from \$74 billion in 1998 to \$147 billion in 2008.

According to a paper presented at the Obesity Society's annual conference last year, fat people are less productive than thin. They take more time off work because of their various ailments, and when they are at work the morbidly obese produce less, equivalent to 22 days of lost production per year. The health-care costs and lost production caused by obesity are driving American manufacturers to locate to countries where the population, for the time being, still has a lean and hungry look.

The fiscal consequences of obesity for America have also just increased, with the recent passage of the health-reform bill. Obesity is disproportionately concentrated among those previously uninsured, who will now presumably have access to more care, possibly including expensive bariatric sur-

gery. Indeed, obesity is associated causatively to so many expensive diseases (rather as smoking is) that the health-care costs of treating the impoverished obese are likely to be enormous. Since treatment is unlikely by itself to make this sector of the population more employable or productive, America has just assumed an economic cost without an economic benefit. Truly, economics is the dismal science.

Is there no hope, then? In one rather peculiar sense there is. The whole world is becoming fatter, not just America. Not long ago in Bangkok I observed some children, obviously of the elite, emerging from a school. There are not many fat people in Thailand, but these children were fat.

Like so many of their counterparts in the West, they seemed unable, or unwilling, to progress further than a few yards without refreshing themselves with sweetened drinks and fast fatty food. And they were being collected by chauffeurs or adoring parents so that they might be spared the rather minimal exercise afforded by going home by public transportation.

As yet in Thailand, the poor mostly cannot afford to be fat, but that time will come, and then the great reversal will occur: The elite will abandon its fattening habits, and take seriously the advice of the late Duchess of Windsor: that one can be neither too rich nor too thin.

In the West, the march (or waddle) of obesity is in step with other social (or anti-
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