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From the Selected Works of Natalie C. Boero

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Review Essay of “Men and the War on Obesity: A Sociological Study”

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In this regard, it might have been more useful for the author to draw direct parallels between prostitution and normative institutions like marriage (which similarly merge economics with intimacy) in lieu of her insistence upon clients' "humanity and humility" (p. 206).

Men and the War on Obesity: A Sociological Study. By Lee F. Monaghan. London: Routledge, 2008. Pp. xi+214. \$45.95.

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In an era in which the physical and fiscal health of the developed world is said to be threatened by a global obesity epidemic, Lee F. Monaghan's book, *Men and the War on Obesity: A Sociological Study*, is a timely publication. Monaghan's work is a welcome and original contribution to the burgeoning field of *critical weight studies* or *fat studies*. Monaghan's book joins a growing literature critical of obesity orthodoxy, most notably the work of Paul Campos (*The Obesity Myth: Why America's Weight Obsession Is Hazardous to Your Health* [Gotham Press, 2004]) and J. Eric Oliver (*Fat Politics: The Real Story of America's Obesity Epidemic* [Oxford University Press, 2006]). What Monaghan adds to the literature is a distinctly sociological perspective that attempts to bridge the structural and experiential levels of the obesity epidemic.

In the book Monaghan uses interactionist and embodied sociology to bring men's bodies and experience into the scholarship on weight and size. Monaghan sees himself as offering a critical perspective on the obesity epidemic: he draws on the insights of fat activists without "taking sides" in the debate about the purported health effects of obesity. While acknowledging that men and women are not equally victimized by fat phobia and "sizism," the author makes the case that understanding men's place in the obesity epidemic is theoretically, empirically, and politically important as the epidemic is indeed one built around the universalization of the risks of fatness and a moral imperative to diet.

In chapter 1, Monaghan describes his project and situates himself in the literature on identity, size, and masculinity. He explores the military metaphors used to describe the "war on fat" and looks at how obesity has become defined as a correctible problem that serves to justify the continuation and intensification of fat phobia on a large scale. Monaghan closes the chapter with an illuminating discussion of the resistance of fatness to incursions from the sociological imagination and the role of sociology in reproducing knowledges about fatness and fat people that have helped fuel the epidemic.

Chapters 2–5 present the data from Monaghan's observations in slimming clubs and his interviews with men whom current measures deem overweight or obese. Monaghan offers a critical interpretation of these

men's voices. In chapter 2 Monaghan explores how men account for and understand their own bodies in light of the symbolic violence of the obesity epidemic. He details how men account for their size and organizes these accounts into a typology that offers a critical interpretation of individualized and depoliticized explanations of excess weight. Chapter 3 looks at the conditions and triggers for men's participation in various weight loss efforts. Though dieting has been understood as a largely feminized practice, Monaghan's informants actually see weight loss efforts as a means to protect and reassert masculinity in the face of feminized fatness. It is interesting to note that although the men Monaghan interviewed had various reasons and motives for wanting to lose weight, sizism and antifat prejudice emerged as common themes. Similarly, chapter 5 explores men's relationship to physical activity and shows that while the men do not necessarily shun the idea of activity, they resent the government's targeting of overweight and obesity in public health campaigns that encouraging exercise and end up making thinness and fitness part and parcel of good masculine citizenship.

Monaghan concludes with an elaboration of the theoretical, empirical, and political contributions of his work. He offers several policy recommendations designed to highlight the role of fat phobia in the social production and reproduction of the obesity epidemic and he argues for a more structural understanding of the determinants of health. While he certainly makes important contributions in all of these arenas, what stands out as most original about the book is the rich and vivid data from Monaghan's interviews and observations. These men's voices make it possible for Monaghan to so effectively bridge the gap between a critical stance on the obesity epidemic and an understanding of how that epidemic is lived in the lives of men. Monaghan's strength is not so much in theorizing masculinity as it is in giving the reader a window on men's embodied lives. My central critique of the book then is that Monaghan's data often get lost in his efforts to ground himself in any number of different literatures. Monaghan's voice and the voices of the men he interviewed would be that much stronger if he had been more judicious in orienting his work to the work of others.

The strength of this book comes in Monaghan's ability to use a sociological perspective to bring together the macro and micro in his analysis of an issue that has been largely overlooked by sociologists. This is an important book, and it is my expectation that Monaghan's work will help advance scholarship on health, weight, and size as well as on gender and masculinity.

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