

Fat Backlash

May 7, 2006

[Original link](#)

*They told me exercise and diet
If I would try it, would cure my ills
But though I'm already past my quota
I want another load o' those magic pills*
— They Might Be Giants, [“Renew My Subscription”](#)

The response to [my suggestion that there might be a simple and painless way to lose weight](#) brought some interesting responses. Many people who wrote in were excited about it or were actually trying it. But some of the rest were downright hostile.

tuomov wrote:

No pain, no loss. Forget all these bullshit weight-loss manuals. Those four words above summarise all that you need to know. The rest is just pain management and scheduling. If you don't feel hungry occasionally, you're not losing weight.

And Martijn commented:

But how is this healthy? This diet sounds like a trick to fool your body. [...] Why not just eat well? [...] Somehow people want to lose weight the easy way, pff.. just proves how lazy this 'McDonalds' generation has become.

Such comments strike me as slightly odd. “Eat better” has been the diet advice for as long as I can remember and undoubtedly everyone overweight has heard it by now. And yet, as these writers clearly know, obesity is, as I understand it, an epidemic in this country. So this supposed solution clearly isn't working. Yes, it might work in the sense that if everyone followed it they'd be fine (although even that is somewhat unclear), but plainly it's too hard to follow. If our goal is to actually stop obesity, then we're failing.

But I suspect for some people, that isn't the goal. And Martijn's last sentence hints at this. In [my last piece](#) I drew an analogy between being poor and being fat. And I think this rage at an easy way to lose weight parallels the rage we see at “government handouts” that provide an “easy way out” of being poor.

(To be clear, I'm talking about people who are opposed to easy ways to lose weight in general; not the people who were skeptical about this diet in particular or sick of fad diets altogether. Such reactions are perfectly right and reasonable.)

This is one thing I didn't really predict in my last piece on the subject, but undoubtedly such far-reaching changes will also have their backlash. People who have spent their whole lives putting themselves through the pain of starvation and strenuous exercise to maintain their physique are undoubtedly going to be a little upset to figure out it was all unnecessary. It would be bad enough if it was some new invention that made fat disappear — after all, it hadn't been invented yet when they'd gone through all that so there was no way they could take advantage of it. But olive oil and sugar water? That's been around forever! How could they have missed it?

Ronald Reagan got elected campaigning against imaginary "welfare queens" in supposed-Cadillacs. Will right-wing politicians of the future rail against those who take the easy way out of being fat?

One major difference is that economics is at least thought to be a zero-sum game. Those welfare queens are taking "*your money*", in the form of taxes. But you lose nothing if more people get thin. By the same token, there's not a whole lot the government can do about this problem. The welfare payments were theirs, so they could cut them (as Clinton savagely did) but what's the government going to do about the diet? Ban olive oil?

Perhaps instead we'll see social pressure. The major visible difference between someone on the diet and someone who isn't (considering that the olive oil can be taken in private) is that someone who's on the diet simply doesn't eat much. But eating is a major social function, around which much business and friendship is conducted. Perhaps backlash members will heap scorn on those who skip lunch or eat little, perhaps even ostracizing them until they start eating like normal (and thus weakening the effects of the diet).

I've seen a little bit of this myself — as a supertaster, my tastes are sufficiently strange that when eating with new people I'm often asked about my choice of food and then queried and lightly mocked for my explanation. It's not so bad and I'm sure people mean perfectly well by it, but it is a cost and if people are actually angry about the diet, it may get worse.

So while actually being fat may go away easily, the stigma might be a little harder to erase.