

Scandalous bodies and our relationship with food

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Pathological Bodies: Medicine and Political Culture

Attitudes toward over-indulgence, obesity and body shape were being hotly debated and used for political purposes as early as the 19th century, a new book claims. 'Pathological Bodies', by Dr Corinna Wagner from the University of Exeter, shows that body consciousness is not just a modern-day phenomenon.

Instead, medical warning about excessive eating and drinking, and [public attitudes](#) about self-control and discipline emerged more than 250 years ago, when the perceived decadence of the Georgian period gave way to the more moderate and austere approach adopted by the Victorians.

Dr Wagner's book demonstrates how political turmoil, the rise of the middle classes and new medical knowledge about 'corpulence,' [excessive alcohol consumption](#) and related disorders like gout, resulted in a greater

emphasis being placed on the value of self-discipline.

These medical conditions became linked to historical political events. For instance, drinking rum and taking sugar with tea was frowned upon because it was linked with the slave trade, with exoticism, and with poor health. The book also highlights how [19th century](#) political propaganda, including the popular caricatures of James Gillray and the satirical images in magazines like Punch, set out to fully exploit these cultural and medical changes.

An example is of King George IV, whose extravagant lifestyle led to vitriolic public condemnation. His obesity became the focus of press and public ridicule – to be fat was to be immoral, irresponsible, and out of control. As a result, George IV's weight was seen as a sign of his unfitness to rule, and politicians agitated for a transfer of power from the monarchy to government.

Increasingly, physicians, moralists, poets and political philosophers in late Georgian England argued that the history of eating paralleled the history of humanity's decline or progress. Dr Wagner said: "King George IV is just one of many cases that show how the habits, practices, and the bodies of individuals became the focus of public attention. The practice of publicly naming and shaming became more widespread and the general public felt the pressure to conform to the new culture of austerity and self-control. Public figures like George IV were used as an example to promote polite, responsible, communal styles of eating. This embraced good, honest British foods like roast beef and beer, and shunned exotic foods like George's beloved mulligatawny soup and 'Persian' delicacies."

Dr Wagner charts these changes, from the eighteenth-century milk and vegetable diet of George Cheyne to the strict Victorian regimens (sea-biscuit for breakfast and boiled macaroni and a piece of lean meat for

dinner) prescribed by diet doctor Thomas King Chambers. In books with titles like *The English Malady*, Cheyne described his own weight loss (from 32 stone to a 'normal' size), for aristocrats who were used to city life, sedentary pursuits and groaning sideboards. There was a growing emphasis on a lean body. In 1780, James Graham opened his "Temple of Health" for celebrity clients. He gave lectures, sold tonics, treated patients with electricity, and displayed his assistants, the Goddesses of Health, who were held up as models of physical perfection.

But by the mid-Victorian period, fighting fat was a pastime for a much larger part of the population: middle-class urban dwellers with office jobs. Since then, moderating one's intake of food and alcohol has been a sign of credibility and social accountability for almost everyone.

Dr Wagner explained: "We are defined and regulated by modern definitions of the normal and the abnormal, the natural and the unnatural, the healthy and the pathological. To a large extent, we owe those definitions to the Victorians."

Provided by University of Exeter

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