

## The eating self: a history of the political in the United States from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> century

In recent years, obesity has been described as a problem of epidemic proportions in modern societies such as the United States. Taking this current observation as a vantage point, our project seeks to write a history of eating, fatness, health and their regulations in the United States from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century until today. We argue that the histories of eating and obesity are crucial for understanding the formations of modern liberal societies.

During the age of Enlightenment and the Atlantic Revolutions, the idea of a liberal self had taken centre stage. Man, conceptualized as white and male, came to be understood as the driving force and basic foundation in the formation of modern liberal societies. However, the success of the new liberal American republic was regarded as doubtful and fragile. Society and its citizens were perceived to be in need of constant re-formation and improvement. In fact, the notion of fragility and the constant strive for improvement that resulted from this notion can be read as central driving forces in the formation of liberal societies. Accordingly, liberal selves were constantly challenged to prove that they were able to act responsibly and in the best interest of society, and that they would use their liberties productively and thus contribute to the success of the American republic.

By the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many people began to perceive the body as a marker for the individual's ability to function according to the requirements of liberal society. For example, a fit and well kept body seemed to signify the ability to take good care of one self and act responsibly. Thus, the body seemed to point to the individual's state of mind. At the same time, on a much larger scale, the state of the individual body also seemed to point to the rate of success or failure of liberalism as such.

In this context, obese bodies came to be regarded as problematic. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, diet-, fasting and fitness movements started to take shape and promised solutions to the problem. We argue that debates about eating, health and the state of bodies both explicitly and implicitly referred to the ability of people to act in accordance with the requirements and challenges addressed to them in liberal societies. We suggest that historic notions about eating, health and the body need to be read as notions about liberal society and its pitfalls. Thus, historic ideas about health, eating and the body point to the changing perceptions of subject positions and the roles which individuals and their minds and bodies have played in the composition of liberal orders.

Starting in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, we approach the field from three interdependent perspectives: Firstly, we will analyze eating as crucial in the formation and regulation of modern societies and liberal subject positions. Secondly, we seek to explore how eating and powerful sociocultural distinctions along the lines of race, class and gender were related to one another. How did the field of eating establish and re-establish different subject positions? Thirdly, we analyze historic

discourses, institutions and the everyday practices of historical actors as interdependent. In fact, a strong emphasis of the project will be on the everyday lives and practices of individuals within historically changing circumstances. How did discourses about eating and the body materialize and impact on the everyday experiences and practices of historic individuals? And how did these practices shape notions of diets, food, and the social order?

The project will benefit from and at the same time contribute to several fields of historical research, ranging from historical anthropology, the history of the body, cultural- and social history, the history of consumerism and the history of the political. The project's scope is highly interdisciplinary. It employs approaches that have been developed in diverse academic fields such as sociology, cultural studies, governmentality studies and food studies. It interacts with nutrition and health studies.

Due to the broad scope and time frame of the project, there will be two distinct yet interacting sub-projects. Sub-project I (Nina Mackert) will explore the interdependencies of eating, obesity, socio-cultural orders, subject positions and the formations of discourses, institutions and the everyday practices of historical actors from the 1850s until the 1950s. Sub-project II (Nora Kreuzenbeck) will tackle these issues from the 1930s to the present.

Both sub-projects follow a discourse analytical approach that goes beyond text, language and images and includes sociocultural structures and the everyday practices of historical actors. We argue that this approach is crucial for the understanding of the formation of subject positions in history.

We will thus analyse a variety of source materials. Firstly, we will explore advice literature, diet books, health manuals and other publications that told people how to eat and take care of themselves. We will secondly explore institutions, self-help groups and organisations, such as the "Fat Men's Clubs" of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and groups like "Overeaters Anonymous" in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Last but not least, we will read these documents alongside ego-documents such as diaries, letters and autobiographies. A close reading of such ego-documents will reveal if and how people incorporated eating advice into their everyday lives. How did people make sense of their eating? How did discourses on food and practices of eating inform the understanding of their selves? By asking questions like these, we aim at writing a history of eating as a history of modernity and its transformations.