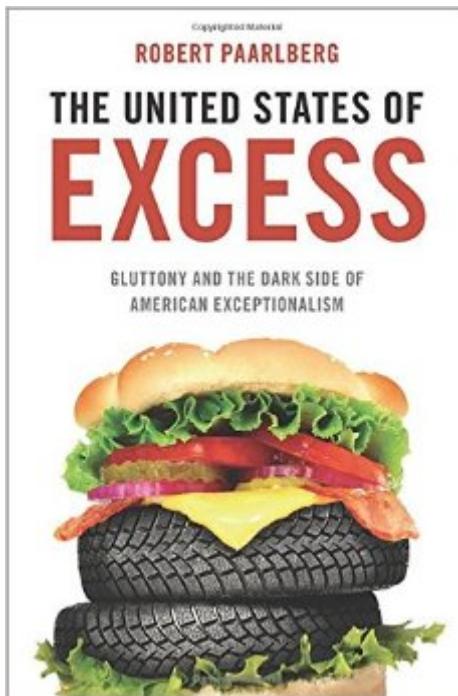


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The United States Of Excess: Gluttony And The Dark Side Of American Exceptionalism



Synopsis

Compared to other wealthy countries, America stands out as a gluttonous over-consumer of both food and fuel. The United States boasts an obesity prevalence double the industrial world average, and per capita carbon emissions twice the average for Europe. Still worse, the policy steps taken by America in response to obesity and climate change have so far been the weakest in the industrial world. These aspects of America's exceptionalism are nothing to be proud of. Is it possible that America is hard-wired to consume too much food and fuel? Unfortunately, yes, says Robert Paarlberg in *The United States of Excess*. America's excess is driven in each case by its distinct endowment of material and demographic resources, its unusually weak national political institutions, and a unique political culture that celebrates both individual freedoms over social responsibility, and free markets over governmental authority. America's over-consumption is shown to be over-determined. Because of these powerful underlying circumstances, America's strongest policy response, both to climate change and obesity, will be adaptation rather than mitigation. As the damaging consequences of climate change become manifest, America will not impose adequate measures to reduce fossil fuel consumption, attempting instead to protect itself from storms and sea-level rise through costly infrastructure upgrades. In response to the damaging health consequences of obesity, America will opt for medical interventions and physical accommodations, rather than the policy measures that would be needed to induce better diets or more exercise. These adaptation responses will generate serious equity problems, both at home and abroad. Responding to obesity with medical interventions will fall short for those in America most prone to obesity - racial minorities and the poor - since these groups have never enjoyed adequate access to quality health care. Responding to climate change by building more resilient infrastructures at home, while allowing atmospheric concentrations of CO₂ to continue their increase, will impose greater climate disruption on poor tropical countries, which are far less capable of self-protection. Awareness of these inequities must be the starting point toward altering America's current path.

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Customer Reviews

What I like most about Paarlbergâ™s "The United States of Excess" is that he lays out the facts in well-referenced detail, offers clear and concise analyses, and then gently coaxes the reader along to his or her own conclusions. I found this to be true as well in his previous two works, "Starved for Science" and "Food Politics". His style is also more conversational than academic; this is a plus for retirees such as me who never had/took the opportunity to study political science in college. While you may think that obesity and CO2 emissions are strange bedfellows, Paarlberg uses a political construct of adaptation and mitigation to bring both together for that Aha! moment. Itâ™s an enjoyable read that in the end gave me the feeling of having successfully completed a 6-star sudokoâ™ in ink! "The United States of Excess" could easily be characterized -- given "Starved for Science" and "Food Politics" -- as Volume Three of the Paarlberg Trilogy.

Paarlberg reminds us that we have among the highest rates of obesity and less effective responses to environmental crisis. Lots of relevant facts pop up throughout the book, a delight to this fact-addicted reader. Regrettably, there will be no quick and easy answers to the challenges he so effectively identifies.

A quick look at what makes our culture tick --- bread and circuses. Putting aside the obvious problems associated with our over consumption of gas and calories --- which this book does an excellent job in doing---what concerns me most is the lack of civic awareness associated with this mindless pursuit of consumption. Readers interested in a deeper look into the source of excess should read: "How much is enough: Money and the good life," by Robert and Edward Skidelsky.

While the two excesses cited by this book, food and fuel consumption, sometimes are strained to seem analogous, the authors chief contention that they are manifestations of the same political and cultural processes seems valid. This is a very readable analysis of America's maddening

combination of problems and promise.

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