



Against Health: How Health Became the New Morality (Biopolitics Series)

Jonathan M. Metzl (Editor), Anna Kirkland (Editor)

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You see someone smoking a cigarette and say, "Smoking is bad for your health," when what you mean is, "You are a bad person because you smoke." You encounter someone whose body size you deem excessive, and say, "Obesity is bad for your health," when what you mean is, "You are lazy, unsightly, or weak of will." You see a woman bottle-feeding an infant and say, "Breastfeeding is better for that child's health," when what you mean is that the woman must be a bad parent. You see the smokers, the overeaters, the bottle-feeders, and affirm your own health in the process. In these and countless other instances, the perception of your own health depends in part on your value judgments about others, and appealing to health allows for a set of moral assumptions to fly stealthily under the radar.

Against Health argues that health is a concept, a norm, and a set of bodily practices whose ideological work is often rendered invisible by the assumption that it is a monolithic, universal good. And, that disparities in the incidence and prevalence of disease are closely linked to disparities in income and social support. To be clear, the book's stand against health is not a stand against the authenticity of people's attempts to ward off suffering. *Against Health* instead claims that individual strivings for health are, in some instances, rendered more difficult by the ways in which health is culturally configured and socially sustained.

The book intervenes into current political debates about health in two ways. First, *Against Health* compellingly unpacks the divergent cultural meanings of health and explores the ideologies involved in its construction. Second, the authors present strategies for moving forward. They ask, what new possibilities and alliances arise? What new forms of activism or coalition can we create? What are our prospects for well-being? In short, what have we got if we ain't got health? *Against Health* ultimately argues that the conversations doctors, patients, politicians, activists, consumers, and policymakers have about health are enriched by recognizing that, when talking about health, they are not all talking about the same thing. And, that articulating the disparate valences of "health" can lead to deeper, more productive, and indeed more healthy interactions about our bodies.

Against Health: How Health Became the New Morality (Biopolitics Series) Details

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Nicholas Bobbitt says

This is an interesting take on this topic, if patronizing and supporting people who choose to do things which society considers disgusting and which professional doctors consider unhealthy like smoking or overeating. I was recommended this book by a professor and I don't see why, other than it being "interesting", or "brave" as the English might say.

Jennifer says

An excellent look on how the concept of 'health' is used to cover a whole host of unseemly social behaviors ~ worth the read...

Hannah says

I thought this was going to be my jam judging by the introduction, but the essays are all over the place, only one or two gems (one being "Fat Panic and the New Morality"). despite what the book claims to be, many essays buy into the idea that there is an "obesity" problem, so frankly I only skimmed those. if anyone has any recommended readings/podcasts/whatever about health as a social construct, please send them my way!

Daniel Cunningham says

I didn't find these essays to be particularly revealing. Most present information I am, at least generally, already aware of; worse, several are written in the convoluted, murky "humanit-ese" that I suppose makes certain writers/readers feel technical and special. That said, many do raise interesting, concerning, values points (even if it takes 2000 words to finally get to them in a couple of cases.)

Adam says

The arguments against health made in this volume are really anything but. Rather, the various authors challenge our current conceptions of 'health.' While widely accepted as a ubiquitous good, many argue that 'health' is in fact a social and political construct, often used to buttress certain agendas while diminishing others. In turn, to be truly for health, one must acknowledge and challenge the commonly held but little questioned conceptions of what is healthy.

The points made by the authors are interesting and definitely worth considering. However, to a casual reader not looking for scholastic sources to cite, the writing is a bit dense and academically dramatic. For a good introduction to the subject, a paragraph long abstract of each article would likely suffice.

Jennifer says

I'm always up for a book that challenges the status quo, and it's very intuitive to think that health nowadays enjoys a certain cachet previously associated with religion and law. Some of the essays in this book are too angry, yes, but oh gosh, I will read anything written by the sublime Richard Klein, who talks about the pleasure principle in a way that makes me salivate.

Andy says

This seemed to be a very promising book, and it was disappointing that the fact that it had some bad articles featured made me rate it lower. I picked it up because I was intrigued, and agree with, the concept of how health has frequently been used lately as a moral barometer and how this has, paradoxically, been damaging. There are some truly stellar articles in here, challenging the imperialistic tone of global health efforts, debunking the myths around obesity, advocating for people with disabilities, and so on.

Unfortunately, there were also some lackluster articles and some awful ones, the latter being the articles concerning mental health. I won't deny that I'm biased, being a former psychology student, a friend and family member of people with mental illness, and someone who has been diagnosed himself. Despite having my own criticisms of the diagnosis of mental illness, however, I at least understand the importance behind doing so and the two main articles raising arguments against passive-aggressive personality disorder and obsessive-compulsive disorder (using these as a criticism of all diagnoses) were the weakest articles in the book, ruining the good points they raised by using that tired "Since X is diagnosed as a mental illness, that means all negative thoughts are going to be diagnosed at some point!" that I hear from people all the time. (There is a big difference between "sadness" and "clinical depression." Really.) To make matters worse, one of the first articles even makes the obnoxious comparison of taking antidepressants to overindulging in alcohol which pretty much soured me on the book from the get-go. Ironically, the same tactic of denying mental illness and vilifying people who choose to take medication (or cannot function without it) is used by some of the more extreme people I've met who use health as a basis to make moral judgments (i.e. disorders are caused by vitamin deficiency, lack of exercise, or just having a negative outlook on life). It's disgusting and silencing, and I'm disappointed that this book resorted to the same misconceptions to try and get its point across.

Considering that there are some good articles in here that are well worth reading, I might try this book again and find myself reassessing my judgement. Until then, however, I would argue that there's not going to be much progress in trying to rectify how we view health if we throw people who deal with mental illness under the bus in the process.

Michelle says

This book is a collection of "biopolitical" essays on how the concept of health has been hijacked by various forces. It wasn't what I expected, but it was still valuable. The essays were written by intellectual academics and sometimes - ok often - went over my head, but the main idea is that what we call "health" is a lot more complex, cultural, political and sociological than we could ever imagine.

Mskabatas says

Aslında isminden ve yayın dan yola karışık içeriğini çok incelemeden aldım bir kitap olduğunu itiraf ederek başlamalıydım yorumuma... Fakat okudukça ne kadar doğru bir karar verdimimi anlamadım oldum. Kitapla ilgili görümlerime geçmeden önce çeviriyi yapan Nurettin Elhüseyni'ye bu kadar zor bir yayın? bu kadar güzel çevirdiğimi için teşekkür etmeliyim. Okuduğum en iyi çevirilerden biri olduğunu söylemeden geçemeyeceğim.

Kitap ile ilgili tek bir cümle yazacağım.

Bu kitabın, sizin de biliyor olmanız bir çok şeyi yeniden derlendirebilmek ve farklı açılardan bakabilmek için okuyabilirsiniz.

Margaret Adams says

A multi-disciplinary critique of what we mean by "health" and the ways in which the word has become a euphemism for other moral, social, and political ideals. Super thought provoking, a great find. If nothing else, this book forced me to examine assumptions.

Elizabeth says

The essays included, not surprisingly, vary widely in quality; my individual ratings might give equal representation to the full spectrum of 1-5 stars. But there's a lot of good questions raised here as to what purpose the concept of health serves, along with analysis of how assumptions and definitions of health reinforce oppressive, death-dealing structures. I am especially interested in pursuing more writing from Dorothy Roberts and Kathleen LeBesco.

Tracy says

I barely got started on this before I had to return it to the NYU library. Then I got an NYPL copy, and finished enough of it to add this book to my "read" list (also that meant I could try the barcode scanner feature of the Goodreads iPhone app, which is super-shiny. Yay!)

Asha Tenbroeke says

Against Health is a collection of essays, written mostly by scientist in the field of humanities. Some chapters are utterly unreadable - I would strongly advise anyone to skip chapters 3 and 4 entirely. The other chapters however, vary from interesting to absolutely illuminating. In chapter 2 Richard Klein links our very physical notion of health to Epicurean philosophy, asking if something (health food, for instance) can be 'good for you' if it greatly reduces your pleasure in life. Klein argues that our mental wellbeing and happiness should be taken into consideration when making decision about our health. Very good point.

Another especially inspiring chapter is chapter 7, in which Joan Wolf poses some spot on questions about breastfeeding and health. Is it the sole responsibility of a mother to minimize all the potential risks to her infant, even if this comes at a great cost to herself? (I know from experience breastfeeding a child with 'a healthy appetite' can be exhausting, yet dominant culture tells us this is a price you will have to pay for being a good mum). Wolf also challenges the common wisdom that 'breast is best', something which so will do in more depth in her forthcoming book 'is breast best?', which I will be sure to read.

Other fascinating topics covered in Against Health are: is our fear of the obesity epidemic actually a case of moral panic? (yes) Is there any objectivity or scientific underpinning in how our current definitions of personality disorders like passive-aggressive or obsessive-compulsive disorder came into being? (no) Is asexuality necessarily a sign of bad health? (not unless it bothers you).

Over all Against Health is an excellent read for anyone who is interested in a non mainstream, provocative take on our modern notions of health. Truly worth your time.

Melissa A. Fabello says

This collection of smart essays is an excellent read for anyone interested in the social construction of health. In it, authors are asked to comment on the idea of being "against health" from their place of expertise. As such, you end up with a series of enlightening thoughts on everything from weight stigma to breastfeeding to asexuality to the atomic bomb. And all of these short essays make a brilliant point about how health, as a concept, is created.

The book is a bit academic in tone, but it's not inaccessible to folk without advanced degrees. However, a couple of the essays – the ones in which I wasn't super interested – made my eyes glaze over a bit. It's hard to keep up with an expert's opinions on a topic when you're not keen on the topic itself. But I also found myself fascinated by chapters that I didn't think would move me.

This is definitely one of those books where you find yourself injecting what you've recently learned into conversations, and it works well as an introduction to new and exciting ideas.

I highly recommend this book to anyone interested in health, wellness, bodies, sociology, or philosophy.
