

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Georges Vigarello, *The Metamorphoses of Fat: A History of Obesity* (trans C. Jon Delogu), New York: Columbia University Press, 2013. ISBN: 978-0-231-15976-0 (cloth)

This book is a translation of a manuscript that originally appeared in French as *Les métamorphoses du gras: Histoire de l'obésité* (Vigarello 2010). Published as part of Columbia University Press's 'European Perspectives' series, it is described as a text that "maps the evolution of Western ideas about fat and fat people from the Middle Ages to the present, paying particular attention to the role of science, fashion, fitness crazes, and public health campaigns in shaping these views". It joins texts such as Sander Gilman's (2008; 2010) *Fat: A Cultural History of Obesity* and *Obesity: The Biography*, which offer cultural histories and insights into fatness and obesity, but are distinct from the growing number of fat studies¹ texts which are informed by more radical, feminist politics. Vigarello's book is much more detailed than previous cultural histories and presents a longer, less American-centric account.²

The book follows a broadly chronological structure, with six parts, each centred largely (although not exclusively) on one time period, here associated with particular tropes in representations of fatness. Part One, 'The Medieval Glutton', outlines shifts from ancient understandings of "bigness"³ as a marker of health and wealth, to more ambivalent understandings during medieval times due to concerns

¹ For an introduction to fat studies, see Cooper (2010) and *The Fat Studies Reader* edited by Rothblum and Solovay (2009). For fat studies work in geography, see, for example, the symposium in *Antipode* 41(5), 'Critical Geographies of Fat/Bigness/Corpulence', edited by Colls and Evans (2009); Evans and Colls (2013); Hopkins (2012); and Longhurst (2005).

² As a preface to this review, it is important to acknowledge the translations involved in my reading of this text: first, linguistically as I read the English version translated from French; and second, disciplinarily from history to geography. These translations no doubt inflect my reading and review.

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

about the dangers of excess and moral ideologies about behaviour (rather than morbidity or aesthetics). Part Two, ‘The “Modern Oaf”’, then deals with changes in approaches to fatness in the Renaissance, as understandings of fat people centre on “the slowness, laziness, and ignorance about things and people” (p.31) and the emergence of fat as a focus of ridicule and stigma. Here, Vigarello also details the development of diets and slimming aids, particularly for women, outside of the medical world; for example, pulverised chalk or clay as a means to dry the body out in a context in which humidity and humours were considered important, and “vinegar, lemons, and other acids” taken as “thinning agents” (p.73). Also important here is the development of mechanical aids to ‘sculpt’ the body, such as corsets, belts, and other devices including steel blades suspended from the neck to “prevent women in childbirth from experiencing any enlargement of their mammaries” (p.75).

Part Three, ‘From Oafishness to Powerlessness’, documents changes during the Enlightenment with the emergence of practices of measurement of the body. As Vigarello explains, the focus here, initially, is not on fat, but rather on vapours, humours, and water, measured through perspiration. The roots of the modern focus on size and weight is, however, established here in the early use of string to measure waists; “the string transformed the body’s volume into an ‘object’, while the marker of weight takes hold more slowly” (p.82). In this period, concerns are therefore framed around ‘slackening’ rather than weight, with the response being attempts to ‘tone up’ via tonics and exercise. This is accompanied in this time period by the introduction of the word ‘obesity’, as fatness begins to be framed as disorder.

³ The terminology here is important, as I will discuss below. In this review, other than where directly reproducing terminology used in the book, I use ‘fat’ rather than ‘big’ or ‘obese’ when referring to bodies, in keeping with fat activist and fat studies moves to ‘reclaim’ this word as a marker of pride.

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Part Four, 'The Bourgeois Belly', deals with the early nineteenth century, the growth in practices of measurement, and the emergence of understandings of the body in mechanical terms. Here, fatness is framed in relation to a model of combustion in which food is understood as fuel, and fat as a combustion 'problem' and signifier of inefficiency. The roots of modern concerns about calories and the 'energy balance' equation in understandings of obesity are made evident here, and the association of fatness with disorder is furthered through ideas about "morbid immanence" (p.130).

Part Five, 'Toward the "Martyr"', moves to the late nineteenth century when the idea of combustion really takes hold, alongside the proliferation of commercial weight-loss 'treatments' and uses of measurement as a form of risk assessment, influenced by the growing power of American insurance companies. Thus, the fat person begins to be framed as a dual threat: both an aesthetic and a health problem. Here, Vigarello focuses in particular on the emergence of a second discourse surrounding fatness – one of the martyr. As aesthetics play a greater role, responsibility for 'treatment' of fatness begins to be shifted to the individual, whilst the inadequacy of treatments and continued stigmatisation of fat is acknowledged. In this section, Vigarello notes the co-emergence of modern narratives of weight loss and the recognition of failed weight loss attempts, as weight management begins to be framed as a 'battle' and the "disappointment and pain associated with anti-obesity treatments" (p.139) starts to be recognised.

Finally, Part Six, 'Changes in the Contemporary Debate: An Identity Problem and an Insidious Evil', argues that "today's obesity culture confirms how much things have swung from accusation to self-testimony, from stigmatization to victimization" (p.185). This section traces some of the earlier tropes, such as calculation, through to their "logical conclusion", as statistics generate their own vocabulary, like

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

overweight, and themes of invasion, emergency, and epidemic come to frame fatness as both a sign of a “broken identity” and a threat to the population at large.

My discussion above doesn't do justice to the detail, and multiplicity of examples, given in each of these parts. The sources consulted are extensive and the depth of research reflected here is impressive. Fashion and ‘innovative’ weight loss techniques are chronicled alongside accounts drawn from literature and art, and political and ‘scientific’ texts, producing a dense descriptive account, which will no doubt prove valuable for anyone researching histories of fat/obesity. The early history presented here, particularly that which documents how understandings of body size have evolved alongside changing understandings of the body (from a focus on perspiration, humours and waters, to organs, materiality and combustion) is an important addition to contemporary social studies of fatness.

This said, as a geographer and fat studies scholar reading this text in English, there were some aspects that I felt were perhaps ‘lost in translation’, and it's worth reflecting on these here. First, some of the strength of the account is diminished due to the way in which terminology relating to body size is translated from French to English; specifically, as the translator explains in the first endnote to part one “[b]ecause *gros* can mean ‘big’ or ‘fat’,...here *gros* will be translated as ‘big’ when the associations are mostly positive, and as ‘fat’ when they are mostly negative” (p.202). As fat studies scholars have noted (see, for example, Cooper 2010), multiple terms are used to refer to fat bodies: big, fat, obese, overweight, adipose, rotund, large, flabby, and so on. Each of these terms is highly contested. One of the potential strengths of a historical account of fat such as this, particularly given the detail and range of accounts presented, is the ability to explore the variability in these terms, and to demonstrate that fat has not always been (and is not always) figured negatively. The translation decision to use the word ‘fat’ only when negative, therefore, means

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

the critical potential of the English version is muted. It would have been useful to have a translator's note/prologue that addressed some of these issues in more detail at the outset. Without this, it is difficult to know (without reading the original French) where terms are directly translated, and where similar decisions have been made either by the author or translator about how to use the multiplicity of terms that relate to body size/composition. It is also worth noting that the cover picture is different in the French and the English versions, with the English version problematically adopting an image of a 'headless fatty' (Cooper, 2007), not used for the French version.⁴ Some more detail on where this image is from, why it is used, and why the two versions are different would be useful.

Secondly - and this, perhaps, is a result of interdisciplinary translation in my reading of a history text as a geographer - I was left wanting detail on method. As noted above, the range and detail of the examples is impressive, no doubt reflecting extensive archival research. There is, however, nothing on the parameters for inclusion or exclusion of examples, or on the archives consulted. As Sara Ahmed writes, "it matters how we assemble things, how we put things together. Our archives are assembled out of encounters, taking form as a memory trace of where we have been" (2010: 19). Thus, the book is open to criticism due to its claim to present an account of 'Western' understandings of fatness when it is a partial account of such understandings without any statement of the parameters of analysis or position of the author.⁵ The focus is largely, in the early chapters, on European (especially French) accounts, and, as noted above, in a context within which much work on fat is centred on the US, this is a welcome addition. There are, however, notable absences in the

⁴ See <http://cup.columbia.edu/book/978-0-231-15976-0/the-metamorphoses-of-fat> and <http://www.seuil.com/livre-9782020898935.htm>

⁵ Cf. Charlotte Cooper's (2011a) critique of Gilman's (2008) history of obesity.

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

discussion if it is to present an account of ‘Western’ understandings. For example, there is no discussion of race and fatness, or of colonial influences on understandings of body size. Whilst discussions of gender are better developed, there is a notable absence of any discussion of feminist, queer, or fat-activist histories of resistance to the stigmatisation of fat bodies. The account presented here is overwhelmingly one in which the body in question is assumed to be male and white (and European) unless otherwise specified. The partiality of the account is particularly evident in the final two parts, and given the importance of feminist accounts to understandings of fatness this omission is significant. Further contextual details in the introduction, about the parameters of the account presented, would have negated some of these critiques.

Thirdly, I felt that the chronological structure of the book didn’t make the most of the ability of the material presented to offer insight into the genealogy of the multiple contemporary, often ambivalent, understandings of fat. This is undoubtedly a result of my positionality and transdisciplinary reading: as a geographer, I was interested in reading across the time periods presented, rather than in the distinct historical eras, and would have liked some more reflection on the themes that emerged throughout the text. For example, a complex relationship between class and fatness emerges throughout Vigarello’s account. The opening discussion begins by noting the association of prestige with the ‘big’ person, before documenting a shift to a more ambivalent association of fatness with excess in the Middle Ages (Part One). Fat, then, in the Renaissance (Part Two) is inherent to the stigmatisation of the beggar, through the association of ‘softness’ with laziness. Thus, Vigarello notes a paradox that “at a time of intense social segregation and the nobility’s contempt for manual labor,...it is truly the idea of ‘inactivity’, doing nothing, and softness that is stigmatized more than work” (p.34).

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

In Part Three, this discourse shifts away from a focus on the inactivity of the poor, and the accounts presented here demonstrate how fat, whilst framed around the dual negatives of loss of power and gluttony, was aimed *at* privilege, particularly evident in France in work by Revolution-era caricaturists. Fatness, here, “can literally embody profit, advantage, and ‘surplus’ to the point of figuring the fraudulent swindler” (p.96). In Part Four, Vigarello notes that the role of fatness in representations of class warfare continues in satirical magazines in the late nineteenth century via illustrations which oppose rich, fat, “redundant bigwigs and a half-starved looking people” (p.152). In the early 1930s (Part Five), there is then an inversion of these earlier hierarchies with increasing representations of fat working class people and calls for civilised restraint amongst the working class. This, in recent times (Part Six), develops into the association of fatness with the “insufficiencies” of the eating habits of the poor (p.186).

Reading across these chapters, then, fat moves from being seen as a marker of wealth, to allowing vilification of the non-working poor, to being part of the stigmatisation of the wealthy, to being inherent in the vilification of the working classes. This is a really interesting element of the book, but excavating this requires work to trace it through the various chapters. I would have liked to have seen some more discussion of themes across the eras rather than their separation. This would have enabled acknowledgement of the co-existence of these different tropes in different time periods, not least in contemporary representations of fat and class. Whilst a synthesis isn't provided, in signposting different historical sources the text provides a starting point for such analysis. Acknowledging that these various historical understandings of fat co-exist in contemporary representations is potentially very useful and important. As Cooper (2011b; 2011c; 2011d) has argued, the ‘Left’ has failed fat through continuing to evoke ideas that fat is a marker of privilege and

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

overconsumption (think of the trope of the ‘fat cat’ banker). The role of fat in the stigmatisation of the ‘beggar’ described in Part Two is also, perhaps, evident in our time in relation to the vilification of welfare recipients as lazy and soft. Recognising the continued co-existence of these tropes is therefore important in understanding the limitations of some forms of radical politics to challenge fat stigma (see Cooper 2013).

There are, similarly, interesting discussions about the ways in which fatness is conceptualised as a result of the body’s relationship to the environment (from humidity to the identification of obese nations) that are present throughout the chapters. Again, I would have preferred to see these accounts traced through rather than separated chronologically – not to tell a simple story of development from one understanding to another, but to explore their co-existence. The accounts presented provide a means for further work to explore this, useful to geographers, for example, to understand the genealogy of the forms of environmental determinism present in accounts of ‘obesogenic environments’ (see Colls and Evans 2013).

In short, the breadth and detail of the account presented here provides a valuable resource for researchers to begin to understand the multiplicity of approaches to fatness over time. This will be useful for critical geographical and fat studies work interested in challenging the dominance - and assumed objectivity - of medical accounts of the fat body. It is inevitable that any account is partial, and so it is a shame that the parameters aren’t more clearly outlined at the outset and that reflections on race and feminist and activist histories are excluded here, particularly given the importance of feminist activism and research on fatness. Given the importance of language when it comes to representations of fat bodies, the translation from French to English presents challenges that mean for those able to read French, the original version may be better. Importantly, however, this book does not begin

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

from the assumption that fat is bad, and instead demonstrates the historical ambivalence of understanding of fat/big bodies. The tracing of the co-development of medical, artistic, political, and fashion related understandings mean this account is multi-textured, and the European focus goes some way towards addressing the (over)concentration on the US in work on fat/obesity. Thus, whilst it needs to be supplemented by engagement with work in feminist and fat studies, it offers a useful resource for further work in this area.

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Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

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