

Obesity: From Glory to Disgrace

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From medieval disapproval of gluttony to the modern obsession with fatness, corpulence has always provoked criticism whilst also remaining in line with logics of social distinction. Georges Vigarello's history of 'fat' adds some weight to previous research into the history of beauty and the body.

Reviewed: Georges Vigarello, *Les Métamorphoses du gras. Histoire de l'obésité*, Paris, Seuil, 2010, 21 €.

Following on from his books about the body (upright, dirty, clean, healthy, unhealthy), Georges Vigarello, a research director at the Centre National de Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) and joint director of the Centre Edgar Morin, focuses on a subject he already dealt with implicitly in his previous research: 'fat' and, more generally, 'fatness' and obesity. In his introduction, the author says that "fatness has not always been so strongly criticised", which, for him, "is what justifies a historical questioning". However, the issue surrounding this kind of research is, in fact, far wider: this book has been published at a time when the question of weight and obesity is a subject of keen political and media interest, while the human and social sciences have remained relatively quiet. One can only praise an author's desire to highlight these debates while making his own original historical contribution.

From the sin of gluttony to hopeless obesity

Drawing from a vast corpus of texts and iconographic sources, Georges Vigarello traces the history of fatness from the Middle Ages to the contemporary era. He shows how society's criticism of plumpness has changed over the centuries. While in medieval times the focus was on capital punishment and controlling greed and gluttony, a shift took place during

the Renaissance: criticisms of fatness centred on the issue of weakness and incapacity; obese individuals were henceforth characterised by their idleness and slowness. However, at that time the focus lay on the most extreme cases of obesity, those in which the individual was unfit to carry out particular tasks, particularly in the military field. Nevertheless, body sizes became more individual and more diverse during the Enlightenment, while a new kind of social criticism surfaced: the ‘fat person’ was no longer simply an uncultured, incapable oaf, but instead became a useless, unproductive figure. Criticism of the faults and weaknesses that caused obesity – the obese individual who overindulged – gave way to criticism based on the shortcomings of the obese people themselves: they were the ones who could not control themselves, who were unable to lose weight. They were ‘incompetent’ – a view that is still very widespread in images portrayed today, at the start of the 21st century.

This history of fatness is part of a wider theoretical framework that the author developed in his previous works: the history of obesity overlaps with that of large organic models. In the 19th century for example, representations of the body as a ‘fire machine’ led to fat being represented as an unburned substance. However, one of the main interests of Georges Vigarello’s work lies in the way in which he combines his analysis of representations with that of practices. He describes the evolving practice of constriction, such as the use of belts and corsets, which became standard in the 16th and 17th centuries, in an effort to get ever closer to the desired physical shape by remodelling the body, sometimes painfully. He therefore shows how two social problems, long confused with one another, can today be distinguished: “the demand for thinness” on the one hand, and the “growing presence of a condemnation of fatness” on the other. The first is a cultural “norm of social appearance”. The second is “an indication of a health risk” based on economic logic. And yet, much of today’s discourse on corpulence and obesity mixes up these two very different logics, thereby increasing the pressure on overweight people, particularly women.

Weighed down by measurement

The most remarkable aspect of this book, however, is its emphasis on the issue of measurement. This factor, which might seem trivial or of secondary importance, is in fact shown to be fundamental as well as under-analysed and is, for us, the major contribution of this research. Georges Vigarello gives a perceptive description of the way in which the actual point at which one becomes too fat has always been extremely vague. While doctors in the 16th century deplored the many problems brought on by obesity, they did not seem to be in

any hurry to define the point at which one was considered obese. Until very recently, measurement was limited to personal observation, like Cardano in the 16th century, who judged the stability of his weight from the pressure exerted by his rings, or like Madame de Sévigné, who estimated her weight loss on the basis of how well her clothes fitted.

Georges Vigarello shows how we have gone from a long-term, subjective measurement of weight to the standardisation of weight, with the use of increasingly accurate and more rigid weight standards. This development has enabled a greater sensitivity to variations in weight and therefore to modes of social distinction, according to people's build.

The desirable body: an issue of social distinction and gender

Another way in which this book makes a contribution is by emphasising the importance of social differences in people's assessment of corpulence over the last few centuries. The role of the stomach in asserting strength and social status, for example in nineteenth-century France, is fairly well known to researchers in the human and social sciences, and was already discussed – although in less detail – in Georges Vigarello's previous books: the prestige attached to fatness or, on the contrary, the belittlement of it, were primarily linked to the social position of the person being judged. Different assessments of a body were made depending on the individual to whom the body belonged. However, body shape also varied according to the social milieu in question and, both in the past and nowadays, corpulence gave and continues to give a vital air of distinction.

We also find a clear symbolism attached to corpulence, characterising certain people or professions for reasons that were both practical (a butcher must use his strength in order to prepare the meat) and symbolic (the size and the fat associated with the products he is selling). The author rightly shows how illustrations from the 15th century portray certain professions such as bakers, chefs and butchers, in whom heaviness became a highly valued trait, corresponding to the "body for the job" that characterised certain professions and which Pierre Bourdieu described at the end of the 1970s in *La Distinction*.

Beyond these social differences, Georges Vigarello highlights another vital aspect that can help to clarify the contemporary debate on obesity: the importance of taking gender differences into account when analysing fatness. This point has long been ignored or underestimated in assessments of the issues surrounding obesity in contemporary society, and

this book highlights its relevance in past centuries. The author notes that condemnations of women's bodies are more severe, while they are much more lenient towards men, whose size is more likely to be an expression of their social status. Female beauty, of which size is a vital attribute, is thus portrayed as a “decorative beauty”, something designed to welcome, (the “domestic sphere”), as opposed to masculine appearance which is more focused on the “public sphere” and in which strength is valued above all.

What was the situation before the Middle Ages?

Although Georges Vigarello makes a careful analysis of people's attitudes to obesity since the Middle Ages, his history of obesity seems a little incomplete insofar as it begins very late. It would have been helpful to learn more about attitudes to thinness in ancient Egypt, as revealed by papyruses and bas-reliefs; or the view of obesity expressed by ancient Greek doctors such as Hippocrates. This would no doubt have enabled the author, and his reader, to have even greater objectivity when analysing the contemporary era.

Furthermore, a reader who is accustomed to sociological literature on this subject will notice a few minor inaccuracies relating to the most recent period. For example, this is the case with the widely held, though mistaken, belief that in France today there is still a link between poverty and high obesity rates. While this link has been proved for adult women, who are slimmer when they belong to a household with a high standard of living, the same is not true of men: the poorest men are not necessarily the fattest, which reflects the author's observations on the different treatment of male and female obesity in previous centuries.

The most bothersome error, however, relates to Adolphe Quetelet, a key figure for anyone trying to understand the history of weight and its measurement. This Belgian scientist was the first to use the weight of a large number of people and put forward a scientific study of the results. He even went so far as to lend his name to the body mass index that today serves to assess weight, commonly referred to as the “Quetelet index”. The fact that the author adds an accent to his name where one is not required in French – a common error – is of no real importance. However, to use the wrong first name and call him “Auguste Quételet” on a number of occasions is more of an annoyance. Unfortunately, this mistake with his first name is fairly widespread in Anglo-Saxon scientific circles and has spread from one project to the next, revealing those authors who make second-hand use of scientific analyses, without taking

the trouble to refer to the original text or even to check the first name of this author who is so often cited incorrectly.

Nevertheless, that does not take away from the high quality of this work, which makes an essential contribution for those wishing to understand the development of weight standards. Georges Vigarello succeeds in showing how figures and measurement have resulted in a more nuanced notion of obesity and an established social norm that currently weighs down on the more corpulent among us. While it is sometimes a little less convincing on the contemporary era, the work clarifies the historical dimension of the “martyrdom of the obese”, which has hitherto been under-analysed and yet is fundamental to an understanding of contemporary debates and the origins of that insidious habit of identifying the obese individual by his weight.

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