The Weight of Discrimination

by Isabel Boni-Le Goff

Based on a study of the social experience of overweight people in three European countries, Solenne Carof's book explores the logics behind weight-based stigmatization.

Reviewed: Solenne Carof, *Grossophobie. Sociologie d'une discrimination invisible*, Paris, Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, "Interventions" collection, 2021, 240 pp., €12.

Over recent years, the term 'grossophobia' has gradually established itself as an activist category, fueled by collective mobilizations condemning the multiple experiences of marginalization and rejection—ranging from mockery in the public space to denial of employment—to which people designated as fat are subjected. On social networks, increasing numbers of people are asserting their right to be fat, while there is a proliferation of blogs, podcasts and broadcasts in which fat people share their experiences and journeys and call for a change of perception. Artists such as French singer-songwriter Yseult have used their notoriety to turn the stigma on its head.

Disgust for fat bodies: construction, condemnation and punishment

Solenne Carof is a senior lecturer in sociology at Sorbonne University. Her book expands on a thesis exploring people's differentiated experiences of being overweight, drawing on a qualitative survey of more than 90 women and men considered

overweight or obese in three European countries (France, England and Germany). She engages in a dialogue with these voices and the cause they are building, following the common thread of the social experiences that are associated with being overweight to a greater or lesser degree.

According to Carof, to be identified as "fat" in contemporary European and North American societies is to be socially sanctioned on a regular basis through rejection and unequal treatment. The six-chapter book analyses this experience on three levels: the socio-historical dynamics of the construction and transmission of weight norms; the interactions and routines that shape social life, where ordinary judgments and exclusions linked to the stigma of being fat are enacted; and finally, the institutional level (educational institutions and labor, health and welfare organizations), where forms of discrimination are regularly practiced.

A hygienist and moral barrier

The first two chapters—one focusing on history, the other on contemporary weight norms and the ways in which individuals are confronted with them—bring to light the long process by which a thinness norm was constructed and established, crystallizing in an indicator: the Body Mass Index (BMI). Initially developed in the 19th century by statistician Adolphe Quételet to establish a predictive link between weight and height, the BMI gradually became dominant in medical circles and public health debates in the second half of the 20th century, until it was officially adopted for international comparisons by the World Health Organization at the turn of the 2000s. Its simplicity made it the preferred indicator for measuring and monitoring body weight. That dominance has gone far beyond the simple introduction of a technical indicator. According to Carof, the BMI is a social mechanism that categorizes bodies and establishes boundaries between those that are normal-weight, overweight and obese. This system reinforces the vilification of people considered fat, and is the culmination of a long process in which our perception of bodies has been transformed.

Of course, as the book reminds us, negative judgments about being overweight go back a long way, and the "valorization of health and its consequence, the devaluation of people suspected of eating 'too much' or 'badly', and therefore of being responsible for their poor health, are part of a long history" (p. 29). Medical treatises have addressed this issue extensively since antiquity. However, moral judgments on

the overweight have undergone a series of changes right up to the contemporary period, with disapproval tending to increase. In the Middle Ages, appetite and corpulence were valued, but from the Renaissance onwards, new standards of aesthetics and thinness took hold, amplifying criticism of fat bodies, particularly those of women.

This trend has continued in recent years. Alongside the substantial production of medical expertise on obesity, the BMI has played a part in constructing a scientific discourse that is linked to the development of disgust towards fat people. The contemporary social undesirability of fat bodies is thus doubly constructed by heightened forms of pathologization on the one hand, and by moral judgments—sometimes contradictory but always stigmatizing—on the other. This rejection is taking place at a time when living and dietary conditions are undergoing profound changes in industrialized countries, creating a climate conducive to weight gain: the book cites numerous medical studies from the United States and other northern countries establishing a correlation between the consumption of industrially processed foods and the prevalence of obesity.

The power of stigma

The subsequent chapters explore different aspects of overweight people's social experience, identifying how processes of stigmatization and discrimination are actualized: chapter 3 ("Living in a grossophobic society") and chapter 4 ("Intimacy and self-esteem in a grossophobic society") look in particular at their everyday experiences and ordinary life in the public space, on public transport, at school and at work on the one hand; and their private and family life on the other. To complete this overview, chapter 5 ("Health and grossophobia") looks at a third area of the social experience: healthcare, and the care and treatment pathways followed by people who are overweight or obese.

Each facet of these social experiences primarily involves mechanisms of stigmatization. The stigma of being fat manifests itself through repeated episodes of verbal and symbolic violence (mockery, insults, non-verbal expressions of embarrassment or disapproval). For overweight people, it complicates relationships and interactions, whether with close friends and family, colleagues, or strangers encountered in the public space, while at the same time causing those who are

stigmatized to become paradoxically invisible. On the one hand, this invisibility stems from the taboo surrounding the representation of fatness in images, be they in advertising photographs and videos, or in fiction; on the other hand, it is caused by the internalization of stigma by people who are constructed as fat and who deploy strategies to make themselves very small and symbolically disappear.

For many of the interviewees, this involves wardrobe strategies designed to "conceal flaws and embarrassing features: unwieldy curves, bulges, cellulite, the whole materiality of a voluminous body that is perceived socially as unattractive and immoral" (p. 130 & 131). Self-censorship also affects a range of situations—such as going to beaches, swimming pools or saunas—where the body is more exposed to scrutiny.

The second aspect of the social sanctions that fat people suffer involves significant discrimination, particularly in the professional sphere (greater difficulties during recruitment, longer periods of unemployment, less favorable career prospects), but also in the areas of health and the adaptation of everyday objects (from public transport facilities to the availability of clothing). The book combines empirical data—based on 90 interviews and a questionnaire with 319 responses—with an exploration of a very extensive bibliography (in medicine, psychology and the social sciences). It thus provides a wealth of material shedding light on the relationship between stigmatization and discrimination, as well as on the extent and persistence of the social sanctions to which fat people are subjected throughout their lives. It highlights the fact that discrimination is differentially constructed according to position in social relations of class, race and gender, showing in particular the highly gendered nature of these mechanisms, with women being subjected to far more severe aesthetic demands and forms of social control. For instance, the weight standards that apply to women are stricter, and failure to meet them exposes women to statistically more frequent sanctions in their emotional and sex lives, as well as in their professional careers.

These chapters thus give a very precise account of the multiple social processes of marginalization and social exclusion that the category of "grossophobia", which the book draws on extensively, can potentially reflect. However, it is only in the last chapter of the book (Chapter 6, " Combating grossophobia ") that the way in which this activist category has been constructed and popularized becomes clear. Although still vague, the legitimacy it has gradually acquired is evidence of the mobilization and active commitment of women entrepreneurs engaged in individual and collective

strategies in response to the challenges of stigmatization and discrimination. These strategies were pioneered in North America by the feminist movement in the late 1960s, and were taken up by women entrepreneurs in Europe in the 1980s, who denounced the arbitrariness of weight standards and asserted the right of fat people to enjoy full civic rights.

The book provides a very complete picture of the social condition to which fat people have been subjected. This condition may be seen as that of the pariah, in the broad conceptualization proposed by Eleni Varikas[1] and, subsequently, Rostom Mesli and Mathieu Trachman[2]: confronted with relentless forms of marginalization and rejection, fat people are akin to "outsiders from within (...) legally integrated but de facto excluded". The book also sheds light on the socio-historical dynamics in which this social condition has developed: the creation of social boundaries by bodily norms, and the construction of a cause and its emancipatory effects.

What 'phobia' reveals and hides

But where does this 'phobia' come from? What are its motivations and the logic behind its proliferation? Carof's book only partially answers these questions. While she clearly shows the dual nature of the barrier (hygienist and moral) that extends across a wide spectrum of social situations, she chooses to focus on stigmatized individuals and the manifold effects of marginalization and exclusion, exploring very little of what happens on the other side of the weight barrier to people who are constructed as "normal weight". The book certainly reveals the intense social activity that signals disapproval and brings bodies into line, but struggles to account for the social mechanisms that sustain the moral panic at the root of exclusionary practices.

Yet the collective rejection of fat people highlights the social demands to which all bodies are subjected: the contemporary power of these demands—to maintain the body as capital, to keep it within certain aesthetic and hygienist norms, to retain control over it—points to a veritable "enterprise of the self", characteristic of the neo-liberal capitalist ethos[3]. Implicitly, the expressions of disapproval and hostility

---

[1] Eleni Varikas, *Les Rebuts du monde. Figures du paria*, Paris, Stock, 2007.

[2] Rostom Mesli et Mathieu Trachman, « Introduction. Dossier Parias sexuels », *Genre, sexualité & société* [En ligne], 11 | Printemps 2014, http://journals.openedition.org/gss/3124

[3] Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*, Gallimard, 1999; Scarlett Salman. *Aux bons soins du capitalisme. Le coaching en entreprise.* Presses de Sciences Po, 2021.

towards fat bodies, the violence of which becomes increasingly apparent throughout the book, signal the scale of the anxiety that is triggered by the transgression symbolized by bodies that fail to conform to contemporary bodily discipline. If these bodies pose such a threat, it is because they undermine a social project and a "civilization based on the deep internalization of health norms"[4]. It is therefore a pity not to learn a little more about the experiences, practices and outlook of people constructed as being of normal weight, and about the subjective trajectories of people who have lived on either side of the boundaries constructed between normal weight, overweight and obesity.

At the same time, when it comes to addressing the political issues raised by weight norms and their effects, it is problematic to frame the social phenomena under study in terms of the category of "grossophobia", as this is not theoretically discussed. Of course, the scale and virulence of the opprobrium heaped on fat people in the various spheres of social life could empirically justify the use of a term that underlines the obsessive and impulsive nature of this phenomenon, notably through the intense use of mockery and insults. Moreover, as Carof points out, the fact that this term circulates in spaces mobilized around a collective struggle against stigma and discrimination makes it a vector of politicization.

Paradoxically, however, the construction of the term "grossophobia" from the generic notion of "phobia" semantically assigns it to the field of mental pathology; through its systematic use, this label also produces a particular framing of the social phenomena studied: by placing them on the side of a pathological, irrational rejection, it runs the risk of individualizing and depoliticizing them. The popularization of the neologism "grossophobia" also makes it a common-sense notion, which can contribute to the vagueness of its scope and a certain "conceptual malaise" when it is mobilized by the social sciences, as is also the case with the term "homophobia"[5]. The questions and issues raised by the use of this problematic category echo the tensions and conflicts described in the book with regard to movements combating the discrimination of fat people, in particular between movements committed to a radical social critique of

---

[4] Dominique Memmi, *Faire vivre et laisser mourir. Le gouvernement contemporain de la naissance et de la mort,* La Découverte, 2003, p. 239.

[5] Line Chamberland and Christelle Lebreton. « Réflexions autour de la notion d'homophobie : succès politique, malaises conceptuels et application empirique », *Nouvelles Questions Féministes,* vol. 31, no. 1, 2012, pp. 27-43.

biopolitics and groups that limit themselves to condemning certain social norms with regard to health and body aesthetics.

Despite these shortcomings, Solenne Carof's book provides a detailed insight into processes hitherto little studied by the social sciences, and plays a role in documenting an important aspect of the body-based construction of social hierarchies.