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GENDERED FAT BODIES AS NEOLIBERAL BODIES

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In this chapter, my aim is to shed light on the relationships between neoliberalism, fatness, and postfeminist body politics. I will present the idea that neoliberal thought has had a significant effect on the formation of our present-day body norms. My intention is to investigate some of the ways in which “neoliberal bodies” are constructed. In particular, I am interested in how neoliberal thought motivates the normalization of certain gendered body practices and encourages the exclusion of those bodies that do not fit in.

Neoliberalism, a school of thought in economics that emphasizes freedom and choice in the form of the free market and the deregulation of the economy, has dominated political and economic discourses since the 1980s (Harvey 2007; Ventura 2012). Neoliberal thought has noticeably shaped the structures of society, its institutions, and organizations over its reign. The consequences of the neoliberal orientation are evident in present-day societies, whether we talk about business, governance, education, or social and health care (Ventura 2012; Wrede et al. 2008, 17; Yliaska 2014).

The effects of neoliberalism, however, are not limited to the sociopolitical and economic spheres. Its social and cultural effects are substantial and widespread. It has been argued that neoliberalism has become the leading cultural ethos that guides the way in which we see and interpret the world and ourselves (Gill 2017, 608; Ventura 2012).

In neoliberally attuned societies, economic factors are considered first and foremost. The effectivity, productivity, cost-effectiveness, and measurability of the aforesaid are promoted and valued in all spheres of life. It has also been shown that these “neoliberal norms” have come to govern the so-called intimate sphere, for example, how we eat, move, relax, and rest. Everything from diet and working out to sleep can be programmed, scheduled, counted, and quantified for the best

(or most effective) possible result. Furthermore, the requirement to do so has become commonly adopted and accepted; that is, it has become normalized in the present day, for example, in what is known as the wellness culture (Cederström and Spicer 2015). Neoliberalism as a form of governmentality (Brown 2003; Lemke 2001; Oksala 2013) has arguably come to inform our understanding of socially acceptable bodies: the way in which bodies are perceived, treated, and evaluated as well as the relationship one is supposed to enjoy with one's own body (e.g., Guthman 2009; Harjunen 2017; Sutton 2010). Even the terms used to describe one's relationship with one's body are nowadays imbued with economic rhetoric. The body is increasingly considered "property" (Crawford 2006; Gill 2007); taking care of the body is body "management," and one's appearance is seen as social "capital" that can and should be used to one's advantage (Kukkonen et al. 2019).

Health has been observed as one of the principal arenas in which people are being moulded into neoliberal subjects (Ayo 2012; Cheek 2008; Crawford 2006). The neoliberal body must meet certain, often numeric, and somewhat arbitrary, norms regarding size, diet, and exercise, among other things. This numeric and quantifiable evidence is then taken as a sign of healthiness or lack thereof. The body mass index (BMI) is a prime example of this logic.¹ Other common examples could be the random requirement to take 10,000 steps a day or a diet that allows one to eat for only six hours a day. Furthermore, as the health and normative appearance and attractiveness of the body are regularly conflated, those with non-normative bodies, such as fat bodies, are routinely assumed to be unhealthy solely based on their size and appearance. It has been argued that so-called healthism—a lifestyle that prioritizes the pursuit of health, which it sees as the property and responsibility of the individual and often a matter of one's own will—is a central part of neoliberal governmentality (Crawford 1980, 2006). It effectively individualizes health and ignores the structural factors that contribute to it, such as people's socio-economic position or access to healthcare.

Failing to meet set requirements concerning the body's appearance/health is readily interpreted as a personal failure, a sign of one's bad choices and lack of moral fibre. This kind of logic has been typically applied to fitness and fat people. Fitness has been understood as an individual's problem, one that they have caused and must solve by themselves. In essence, an individual's health, behaviour, virtuousness, and worth are all read off the surface of their body (Harjunen 2017; Sutton 2010). Most importantly, the ability to self-govern is taken as a cue of one's productivity or at least a suitable social performance of it.

As a number of scholars have shown, fat prejudice and fatness as a stigmatized quality are by no means a new phenomenon (Braziel Evans and LeBesco 2001; Rothblum and Solovay 2008). Fatness has been constructed as an unhealthy and socially unacceptable form of embodiment over the course of decades, even centuries (Farrell 2011; LeBesco 2004; Harjunen 2009). However, the fat stigma

seems to have intensified in a society and culture dominated by neoliberal norms and values (LeBesco 2010, 2011).

The ideal neoliberal body is, or at least appears to be, always in control, effective, and productive. The appearance of the body is bound to signal that one has internalized the neoliberal ethos. Self-monitoring and the ability to self-govern and make rational and “good choices” are essential qualities of a good neoliberal subject.

In this context, the fat body is regarded as, and fat people appear to be, diseased (i.e., “obese”), expensive, and irresponsible. It could be said that the fat body has been chosen to represent a kind of “anti-neoliberal” body that signifies everything a proper neoliberal body is not: it appears unproductive, ineffective, and unprofitable (Harjunen 2017). This apparent asynchronicity with the dominant ethos could also explain, at least in part, why fatness and fat people have become so vilified over the past two decades. The so-called obesity epidemic discourse, which will be discussed below, has been one of the major constituents in this process (Boero 2012; Campos et al. 2006; Gard and Wright 2005).

The Obesity Epidemic Discourse as a Neoliberal Discourse

Public and academic discussion on fatness has been in flux in the 2000s. Even though fatness has been talked about as a health concern and a medical issue for a long time, the emergence of the so-called obesity epidemic discourse has added volume and intensified both public and academic discussion on fatness. It created a global moral panic, or a “fat panic,” which has moulded public opinion on fatness and fat people to a considerable degree (Campos et al. 2006; Oliver 2006). The so-called obesity epidemic discourse has presented fatness as the number one health threat (e.g., Boero 2012; Gard and Wright 2005; Oliver 2006), but it does not end here. The discussion on fatness has been increasingly moralistic in tone and has established fatness and fat people as an overall social and political problem on a global scale.

It has been well recognized in research that the obesity epidemic discourse has enhanced fat stigma (Boero 2012). During the height of the obesity epidemic discussion in the early 2000s, fatness—that is, fat people—were found to be guilty of just about any and all social and political ills of the world. During the past 20 years, fat people have been accused of destroying public economies and healthcare systems as well as contributing to oil price hikes, causing climate change, and being responsible for the problem of starvation, among other things (Harjunen 2017).

What happened is that the obesity epidemic discourse helped transform fatness from an issue that was thought to exist primarily in the personal, medical, and health realms to occupying a prominent place in the global economic and political spheres (Harjunen 2017). Paradoxically enough, and despite this shift, individual fat people continue to be blamed and made to feel guilty for causing a vast array

of social problems, while structural problems are being overlooked. The major social and political issues connected to “obesity,” such as poverty, food insecurity, disability, access to healthcare, and racism, are rarely considered or discussed in connection with the “obesity epidemic” (Herndon 2005; Strings 2019). It is obvious that correcting these issues is far beyond any individual’s control.

The emergence of the obesity epidemic discourse has been linked to the intensifying neoliberal ethos of the 2000s (Harjunen 2017). It is evident that this discourse has never been exclusively about health. It is a medical (Gard and Wright 2005), economic (Harjunen 2017), and moral (Jutel 2005) discourse all at once. It is a great example of biopolitics that has multiple motivations concerning population control (Wright and Harwood 2008). It has somewhat cynically showcased fatness and fat people as an embodied manifestation of the social, economic, and moral degeneration that the neoliberal economy has been responsible for creating. For example, Guthman and DuPuis (2006) have linked the obesity epidemic discourse to the prevailing neoliberal thought, arguing that neoliberalism produces obesity both as a phenomenon and a problem. They see the obesity epidemic as part of the inner logic of neoliberalism, which includes widening differences in income and living standards, the overproduction of foods low in nutritional quality, the growth of the health business/industry, and increased responsabilization of individuals for their own health (healthism). In this sense, the obesity epidemic could be called a “neoliberal epidemic.” The obesity epidemic and, consequently, fat people have been scapegoated and used as a way to deal with the wider problems of the neoliberal global economy.

Gender and Neoliberal Care for the Self

Feminist research has shown that women and their bodies have been the target of oppressive body norms and patriarchal social and moral control. Women’s bodies are under constant social monitoring and regulation (Bordo 1993; Gill 2007). Body norms, especially the body size norm, are more strictly observed for women than for men. The size norm has become the most central in terms of the female body. Women are taught to routinely monitor their body’s appearance, especially size, from an early age. It has been shown that women feel considerable pressure to attain and present a body that looks normative, and therefore, they often use unsafe methods to achieve it (e.g., Bordo 1993; Heywood 1996; Wolf 1991).

As is the case with body norms in general, neoliberal body norms are also gendered and embodied. A number of feminist scholars have discussed neoliberalism as a gendered ideology and have pointed out the manner in which this reflects on gendered bodies. Neoliberal ideas and practices shape our conceptions of both (gendered) bodies and physical bodies (e.g., Harjunen 2017; Sutton 2010; Ventura 2012). The effects of neoliberalism on gendered body norms and body practices can be detected, for instance, in the representations of women in popular culture (Gill 2007), health, sports, fitness culture (Dworkin and Wachs

2009; Heywood 2007), and the mainstream commercial appropriation of the body positivity movement (Puhakka 2018). It should be noted here that most of the feminist research on gendered body norms has focused on heterosexual and cis women, including my own. Other sexual orientations and genders have been clearly under-researched in this respect.

It is well known that the so-called capitalist consumer culture has played a significant role in creating and maintaining normative body norms and that women have been its primary target audience (Bordo 1993). Therefore, how do gendered body norms that draw from neoliberal ideology differ from the body norms that have been previously recognized by feminist scholars (Bartky 1990; Bordo 1993)? A number of differences have been identified. For example, neoliberal body norms seem to combine their ideal of choice and freedom to feminist ideas about self-determination and empowerment. Body norms and the constant requirement of body management have thus become viewed as part of women's own subjectivity and being. Body work has become something that is part and parcel of being a woman (Gill 2007, 2008; Harjunen 2017).

British scholar Rosalind Gill (2007, 164) has claimed that, in the 2000s, the media discourse of popular women's magazines seems to have constructed women as ideal subjects of neoliberalism. According to Gill, an integral part of this has been the post-feminist sensibility, which seems to be in line with neoliberal thought. Gill proposes that instead of interpreting post-feminism as the end of feminism or a new stage in feminism, as it has been sometimes presented, it could be seen as a contemporary "sensibility" that draws from neoliberal thought (Gill 2007, 148). It could be said that postfeminist sensibility is at least partially a product of neoliberal capitalism and consumer culture. The neoliberal discourse on the body has appropriated feminist ideas, and feminist ideas have been infiltrated by neoliberal ideas. This has made possible the rather odd blend of feminist subjects that have adopted the neoliberal body discourse and practices as signs of empowerment and subjectivity.

Gill (2007, 155) has alluded to three ways in which neoliberal culture aims to control women. The first is the requirement of self-surveillance, despite the simultaneous denial that such a requirement exists. Second, the demand for self-surveillance is extended to cover new spheres of life such as one's conduct in the intimate sphere; and third, the expectation to work on oneself is extended to one's interior life, which also needs to be transformed. The whole body and soul are in need of transformation.

All three methods described above are easily detected in the present-day approach to fatness and fat bodies, both in media representations and women's material lives. Women in general, but fat women in particular, are duty bound to self-monitor, discipline, and constantly improve the flawed self and out-of-control body (Harjunen 2009). The omnipresent makeover paradigm that exploits fat bodies aims to produce dutiful and docile subjects who are forever dieting, exercising, and toning in order to achieve the elusive ideal. The numerous dieting

makeover shows can be held as a crystallization of the neoliberal approach to the fat body (Ritter 2021). Fat shaming of women is used as a moralizing tool to label them as “bad neoliberal citizens” (Rose Spratt 2021).

Interestingly, as Gill (2007) has maintained, women’s body work is often presented in the semblance of something that will make you both look and, thus, feel better. It is marketed as self-improvement, empowerment, and a form of “pampering” or as “taking time for oneself.”

Even though body work takes a great deal of time and effort, an appearance of naturalness and effortlessness should prevail (Gill 2007, 155). This ensures that the post-feminist practices of self-governance and discipline become ingrained in one’s conduct and, thus, indiscernible from the self.

Neoliberal Health, Gender, and Fatness

The obesity epidemic discourse positioned the fat body as the focus of neoliberal governance (Boero 2012; Wright and Harwood 2008). This discourse can be viewed as a form of neoliberal governmentality (Foucault 1991), one that aims to produce certain types of (normative) bodies and (normative) citizens. In some way, it is logical that fatness and fat people have been targeted. Many of the cultural consequences of neoliberalism have been played out in the arena of health, whether we are talking about conceptions of health, the pursuit of health, health practices, or the organization and accessibility of healthcare. Since fatness has long been understood almost exclusively in the biomedical frame, fat people have been socially stigmatized and morally condemned, and fatness seems like an easy target for neoliberal governance (Gard and Wright 2005).

In the neoliberal context, health is considered a personal matter. It is one’s own responsibility and merit. Health is assumed to be a result of one’s own actions and correct lifestyle choices (Crawford 1980, 2006). One key expectation of neoliberal health is economic in nature. In neoliberal society, the ideal citizen should not be a financial burden to society; they should not be a cost to society. Paradoxically enough, they are expected to invest their own money to buy health products and services. Consumption is an essential part of doing neoliberal health, for health is constant doing. In the neoliberal economy, certain bodies, such as fat bodies, are readily deemed unhealthy and, thus, expensive, and assumedly lacking in health investment.

One can become a good neoliberal health subject by being controlled, effective, self-responsible, always aiming to make good choices, and investing a great deal of time, money, and energy into one’s health. Neoliberal health is visible in the way in which healthcare is organized and the increased responsabilization of individuals for their health and healthcare costs. In countries such as the USA, where universal healthcare does not exist, this has been the case for some time, but in recent years, the trend has also permeated Nordic welfare states in the form of

budgetary cuts, privatization, and the outsourcing of healthcare. (Crawford 2006; Harjunen 2017).

Neoliberal body norms are often connected to gendered ideas concerning health and fitness. Healthism also targets women and women's bodies (Dworkin and Wachs 2009; Heywood 2007; Markula 2008). Patriarchal, biomedical/healthist, and neoliberal capitalist expectations are intertwined in today's body norms and are acutely felt by fat people, specifically fat women. These three discourses also play together—they are intertwined and overlap in many contexts, such as in discussions concerning gender and the body, fatness, health, exercise, and diet culture (Dworkin and Wachs 2009; Heywood 2007; Markula 2008). Capitalist beauty, diet, and fitness industries have encouraged women, in particular, to think of and treat their bodies as property and social capital that they need to work on, take care of, and keep normatively sized and ever youthful. Women's bodies are a central part of the neoliberal economy, both as products and consumers.

The post-feminist stance has helped create neoliberal female subjects, with the emphasis being placed on individual responsibility, self-regulation, and free choice in applying femininity to the body. Kauppinen (2012, 96) has observed that while the discourse of post-feminist self-management might appear feminist, it operates according to the logic of neoliberal governmentality. Feminism is exploited to create the entrepreneurial subject of neoliberalism. According to Kauppinen, we are not in fact dealing with feminism so much as gender-specific neoliberal governance.

Consequences of Neoliberal Body Norms

The transgression of body norms often results in social penalties of some kind. Fat people, women especially, are subject to discrimination and are habitually discussed and represented in stereotypical and biased terms. Fatness is generally seen as a temporary phase that one should aim to leave behind. Constant questioning of the validity of fat people's embodied subjectivity has an effect on their sense of agency. As long as fatness is seen as liminal and transient, the fat body cannot be understood as a valid base for subjectivity, and fat people will be stuck in the liminal state (Harjunen 2009; Kyrölä and Harjunen 2017). All this is paradoxical in light of what is known of the success, or failure rate of diets (Sarlio-Lähteenkorva 1999). Considering that neoliberal thought emphasizes freedom and choice, the range of acceptable choices concerning the female body, in particular, is very limited and marked by normative ideas of femininity (Gill 2007). When it comes to bodies and body norms, instead of freedom, neoliberal thought seems to promote increased control, self-discipline, and anxiety, which are not exclusive to women.

The free choice that forms the basis of neoliberal rationale does not extend to freedom to choose one's body size. The only choice that is acceptable is the one that results in a normatively sized body that performs health in a normative

manner. Fatness is considered an individual's own choice only in the accusatory sense: the individual has failed in their body's weight management and has chosen not to do anything about it or given up entirely. Fatness is not seen as a valid choice for body size. Fat people who are not seemingly engaging in weight loss (performing health in the acceptable way) are treated as unreliable witnesses of their own experience. It is usually assumed that every fat person would like to lose weight, even when they claim to be happy with their body size. Choosing to be fat has been, until recently, exclusively a stigmatizing choice. By "choosing" a body that does not comply with the norms, one inevitably places oneself outside the norm. The active shaping of the body and its appearance signals progress, goals, and a work ethic.

Especially for women, changes in body size are only socially acceptable if they result in a body that does not transgress the normative boundaries set for the size and shape of the female body. In current neoliberal body culture, women who do not seem to engage in body-shaping practices or exercise that might result in weight loss are not performing health, neither are they performing femininity in the correct way. Being able to perform a normative body size is paramount, even at the expense of health. Even when weight loss is a result of a life-threatening illness, it is applauded.

Weight-loss dieting, which is mostly performed by women, can be seen as part of the neoliberal performance of health and normative femininity. Women's body norms, which were previously thought of as something external, oppressive, and imposed on women, now work through the incorporation of discipline disguised as "free" choice. Self-management and self-discipline are construed as part of female subjectivity. Women become entrepreneurial subjects, and in doing so, body work and performing femininity in a certain way become crucial.

In the 2000s, feminist fat activism has become mainstream in the form of the body positivity movement. For many people, this movement has provided respite from observing the norm of being oppressively thin (Puhakka 2018). Over the last decade, however, the movement has been increasingly appropriated by mainstream commercial culture. It has become a catch-all term that is abundantly used in fashion, wellness, fitness, exercise, and even the diet industries. Curiously, in this brand of marketized body positivity, fat people do not seem to be the target group. In fact, fat bodies seem to be forgotten, or only appropriately sized (smallish) or shaped (hourglass) fat people are represented.

In this context, anything relating to body, be it body shaping by exercise or even dieting, can be deemed body positive. The only requirement seems to be that what one is doing is experienced as empowering by that individual. The vital idea of body positivity to include all kinds and body sizes has effectively been diluted. This kind of body positivity could be called neoliberal and post-feminist, for it seems to repeat their ideas about individual responsibility, doing health, and normative female appearance through the misguided naming of body positivity. Despite attempts to broaden women's body size norms, the thin norm remains

dominant. What has changed is that the terms of the normative body seem to follow the logic of neoliberal governmentality (Gill 2008).

Since the 1990s, women's intersectional differences relating to sexuality, class, race, and ability, for example, have become better represented in both academic and popular feminist discourse. It is now well known that the assumed normative female subject of feminism has reflected existing social and political power relations and favoured white, middle class, heterosexual, Western, able-bodied, and thin subjects. This privileged group of women was often also considered the primary and only subject of post-feminism (Gill 2017, 612). In Gill's (2017) article, in which she revisits the concept of post-feminism, she noted that post-feminism had become a hegemonic form of feminism that cut through intersectional differences. Gill did not specifically talk about body size as an intersection, but she discussed how the post-feminist and neoliberal discourse had taken on queer, racialized, or transnational subjects and cultures. The same development has taken place regarding fat people and fat activism or, in the least, the body positivity movement. It has been transformed from a radical political movement to a matter of a neoliberal post-feminist subjectivity construction. One of the biggest challenges that fat activism faces in the post-feminist and neoliberal era is how to maintain focus on social change and strive for social justice for fat people.

Note

- 1 On criticism of the use of the BMI, see, for example, Harjunen (2017).

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