

Neoliberal Culture Shapes the Body

Hannele Harjunen: *Neoliberal Bodies and the Gendered Fat Body*. London: Routledge, 2017. 117 pp.
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If neoliberalism is not seen only as an economic theory but rather as a pervasive culture, it is reasonable to think that it shapes contemporary body culture and, consequently, our bodies. This is the main point of Hannele Harjunen's argumentation in her book *Neoliberal Bodies and the Gendered Fat Body*. However, Harjunen also summarizes

her extensive earlier work on the gendered fat body and the Finnish context of her analyses along with her argumentation of the neoliberal body.

The archetypical example of a neoliberal body, as Harjunen points out in this very timely book, is the long-distance running, triathlon-competing, fitness-training, health-conscious citizen, who is familiar to many of us from media representations. In contrast to that, the fat body is seen as wasteful and expensive. In neoliberal culture, fatness has become a target of disapproval, stereotypes, and prejudices, and the only acceptable means to become a proper neoliberal subject is through private consumerism. However, it is not just the fat body, but also the poor, the old, the disabled, and the chronically ill bodies, for example, that have become too costly and a burden to society, when perceived through the neoliberal ideology. Thus, Harjunen does not forget or ignore other kind of bodies besides the fat ones but gently reminds the reader about their existence.

Harjunen is undeniably an expert in sociology of the body, and she has a deep knowledge concerning the gendered fat body. In this book, she puts it in the context of medicalization, economization of health, healthism, individual responsi-

bility, and commodification of the body. These phenomena she has identified as occupying key roles in the social construction of fatness and, simultaneously, as forms of neoliberal governmentality that aims to produce slim, fit, and healthy bodies.

As for empirical material, Harjunen focuses on discourses and texts, which makes the book very approachable and neat. The only section that gives a glimpse of the experiences of being fat is the passage in the first chapter in which Harjunen describes the background of her interest on the topic. Therefore, if the reader is after a lived body in its materiality, this is not the right book to look for it. However, that cannot be considered a shortage of the book.

Harjunen depicts how fatness has been constructed as a medical problem in an obesity epidemic discourse. This discourse itself has spread like an epidemic, as she points out, and it has made fatness a global biopolitical concern. The discourse has also been described as a moral panic, which is largely based on the medicalization of fatness. Yet, fatness has been described also with metaphors that connect it directly with public economy. By discussing individuals' fatness in economic terms, such as "risk, surplus, excess, and waste", the

fat body has metaphorically become to represent the austerity policy of neoliberal economy. Thus, according to Harjunen, in a neoliberal culture, people are treated as economic units, bodies as another kind of commodity, health as an expense, and being healthy as a chore.

The book also presents a weight-loss campaign that was run in Finland in 2010. The idea of the campaign was that people were encouraged to join in a nationwide weight-loss campaign and try to lose as much weight as possible in a period of three months. For every kilogram of weight lost, an anonymous sponsor paid fifteen euros towards improving teacher education in Nepal. Harjunen criticizes the campaign for its principle to lose as much fat as possible in a relatively short period of time, which seems to go against everything that medical experts and other authorities involved with weight loss usually advise. This encourages unhealthy weight-loss methods, which usually result in only short-term weight loss and weight cycling, as Harjunen reminds the reader.

The campaign is also a good example of how the fat body, as well as other bodies, are commodified. This consolidates and naturalizes a link between the body and the economy, Harjunen points out. While the

body was previously measured in terms of its physical qualities, such as height, weight, circumference, and fat percentage, it now also has an economic and moral value assigned to those physical qualities. This is the very core of neoliberal governmentality, states the author. These kinds of examples clarify and concretize the author's arguments in a worthwhile way.

In sum, the relatively short book gives a good insight into the ways in which the fat (female) body is constructed by biomedical and neoliberal discourses. It will appeal to anyone who has an interest in the sociology of fat, gendered body, and how the neoliberal rationale influences the way we think, talk about, organize, and govern our bodies.

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