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Introduction: Fat Agency

Nina Mackert and Jürgen Martschukat

English abstract: The introduction lays the ground for this issue's critical inquiry into fat and agency. Agency is a crucial yet ambivalent tool for historical, cultural and social analysis. It denotes a combination of self-reliance, self-will and self-respect among historical actors. On the one hand, it is a symbol for the reappropriation of alienated and seemingly overpowering discourses, social relations, and institutions. On the other hand, it often serves as an idealized counterpoint to representations of fat bodies. Therefore, agency is not necessarily and exclusively tied to oppositional acts of resistance or withdrawal, but it is also a premise of the social and political organization of liberal societies: exerting agency performs our compliance with its demands.

Fatness, we are told, indicates self-indulgence and a lack of willpower and self-control. It represents submission to the temptations of sugary, fatty, high caloric and easily available food; food that is engineered by a powerful food industry which maximizes its profits by creating a base of consumers who are addicted to its products. The connotation of addiction and danger is omnipresent in the contemporary discourse and politics on food, indicating that control over our bodies and our wellbeing has slipped from our hands. This notion is reinforced by the framing of fatness as deviant, abject, and pathological. The understanding of fat as a disease dates at least as far back as ancient Greece, and the Oxford English Dictionary documents the first use of the term "obesity" in 1611.[1] Yet it was not before the second half of the 19th century and the emergence of biopolitics[2] that fatness came to be seen as a medical problem with sociopolitical implications. After all, with Herbert Spencer and the social Darwinist discourse, the struggle for the "survival of the fittest" became a prominent concept in modern societies. Finally, since the late-20th century, 'obesity' has been described as being of "epidemic" proportions in modern Western societies.[3] In 2013 'obesity' was officially recognized

1 On understandings of fat see Chris Forth, "Introduction: Materializing Fat," in *Fat: Culture and Materiality*, eds. Chris Forth and Alison Leitch (London, et.al.: Bloomsbury, 2014), 3-16; on fat as pathological see Sander L. Gilman, *Obesity. The Biography* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010), 21ff.

2 Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76* (New York: Picador, 2003).

3 Abigail C. Saguy, *What's Wrong With Fat?* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013), 107ff.

as a chronic disease by the *American Medical Association*,[4] which, according to the World Health Organization, has been spreading across the globe for over a decade. In 2001, the WHO even coined the term "globesity" to capture and express this phenomenon.

One way or another, in modern culture and society fat people are presumed to be lacking agency, either by a deficit of willpower or because they are overpowered by a chronic disease of epidemic proportions. At first glance, these arguments seem to provide diverging explanations, but a closer look reveals that they are more tightly connected than they initially appear. As cultural critic Susan Sontag argued after she had been diagnosed with cancer in the 1970s, a fatal disease tends to imply moral stigmatization, and illness turns into a metaphor for individual failure in many respects, particularly of having lost control over one's existence.[5]

Agency is a crucial heuristic tool for historical, cultural and social analysis, a tool which helps us to understand the complexity and twisted nature of fat and the self in modern society. On the one hand, agency denotes a combination of self-reliance, self-will and self-respect among historical actors who somehow manage to reappropriate alienated and seemingly overpowering discourses, social relations, structures, and processes which appeared to be beyond their control. By the means of their agency, historical actors use cultural resources as well as economic and political structures in transformative ways and create a grammar different from existing hegemonic patterns. In a word, agency denotes the ability to exert resistance within seemingly overpowering discourses and structures.[6]

On the other hand, in thinking about agency, it must also be taken into account that liberal societies prompt historical actors to be in control of their own lives. Liberal societies are built upon the principle that their citizens use their freedom adequately and efficiently and present themselves as self-reliant and productive. As stressed by sociologists Nikolas Rose and Susanne Krasmann, liberal societies are premised on 'governing through freedom,' which entails government that functions not by constraining its citizenry but by inciting it to action.[7] Since the age

4 Andrew Pollack, "A.M.A. Recognizes Obesity as a Disease," *The New York Times*, 18 June 2013.

5 Susan Sontag, *Illness as a Metaphor* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1978).

6 Bill Ashcroft et al, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2000), 6f.; Alf Lüdtke, "Geschichte und Eigensinn," in *Alltagskultur, Subjektivität und Geschichte. Zur Theorie und Praxis von Alltagsgeschichte*, ed. Berliner Geschichtswerkstatt (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot Verlag, 1994), 139-153.

7 Nikolas Rose, *Powers of Freedom. Reframing Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999); Susanne Krasmann, "Regieren über Freiheit," *Kriminologisches Journal* 31 (1999): 107-121.

of Atlantic Revolutions, members of liberal societies have been asked to prove their ability to self-government, make the best of their lives, optimize themselves by exerting self-control and agency, and thus qualify as citizens. Therefore, agency is not necessarily and exclusively tied to oppositional acts of resistance or withdrawal, but it is also a premise of the social and political organization of liberal societies: exerting agency performs our compliance with its demands.

Seen against this backdrop and in the wider context of liberalism and self-regulation in modern history, the fat panic takes on different meanings and connotations. It is intertwined with the health, fitness, diet, and health food waves that have been unfolding since the 19th century.[8] Putting aside their many differences in scope and detail, they have sought to strengthen historical actors in their resistance to the temptations of fat and sweetness and to the power of the food industry. These actors would thereby regain agency which, in this case, entails self-determination and control over their bodies and lives. At the same time, the same historical actors have been subjected to a powerful, highly normative hype for health, fitness, and ability, which, according to disability studies scholar Robert McRuer, generates a "compulsory able-bodiedness" in modern societies.[9] This "compulsory able-bodiedness" should be perceived as being embedded in a powerful and heterogeneous dispositive,[10] which is nourished by the fear of fat and food and the demand for instant action against the putative imminent danger of the epidemic and chronic disease of "obesity."[11]

8 See for instance Roberta J. Park, "Muscles, Symmetry and Action: 'Do You Measure Up?' Defining Masculinity in Britain and America from the 1860s to the early 1900s," The International Journal of the History of Sport 24, 12 (2007): 1604-1636; Jonathan Black, Making the American Body. The Remarkable Saga of the Men and Women Whose Fears, Feuds, and Passions Shaped Fitness History (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2013); Shelly McKenzie, Getting Physical. The Rise of Fitness Culture in America (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2013).

9 Robert McRuer, "Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence," in Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities, ed. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Brenda Jo Brueggemann, and Sharon L. Snyder (New York: MLA Publications, 2002).

10 Foucault describes a dispositive as "a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble, consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural planning, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic proportions." Michel Foucault, "Le jeu de Michel Foucault," in *Dits et Écrits III* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 298-329. English translation quoted after Sverre Raffnsoe, Marius Gudmand-Hoyer and Morten S. Thaning, "Foucault's Dispositive. The Perspicacity of Dispositive Analytics in Organizational Research," *Organization* (2014): 1-27, 1-2.

11 On the normativity of health, see Jonathan M. Metzl and Anna Kirkland, eds., *Against Health: How Health Became the New Morality* (New York: NYU Press, 2010); see also Julie Guthman, *Weighing In. Obesity, Food Justice, and the Limits of Capitalism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013); Julie Guthman and Melanie DuPuis,

From a historical perspective, the fear of an "obesity epidemic" is a fairly recent phenomenon. Until the late 19th century body fat carried different meanings. Whereas the lean, brisk-footed manager serves as the ‚fat cat' prototype in today's capitalism, corpulence could still indicate economic success, wealth, and evolutionary fitness in the late 19th century.[12] Thus, body fat and eating practices are deeply historical phenomena and simultaneously incorporate many different meanings and interpretations. They are highly complex and much more difficult to read than they appear at first glance. Eating fat and sugary food may mean subjecting ourselves to the power of the food industry and a consumer society and express a total lack of agency on the side of the individual consumer. Yet it can also represent an act of resistance against the normativity of the health discourse, the power of the health system, and the increasing power of the health food industry. It may also mean seeking pleasure. And it may mean many more things.

This volume on "Fat Agency" takes these considerations as its starting point and assembles scholars who are exploring the meanings and implications of body fat and of eating fat food in European and North American history from the 19th century (and earlier) to the present. They discuss the complex relations between agency and how it interacts with discursive, structural, and institutional patterns and practices. They also consider non-human actors and their impact on our foodways, a perspective that has gained momentum with Actor-Network-Theory and the study of matter and things. Sociologist Bruno Latour defines an actor as someone or something that "is *made to act* by many others."[13] Therefore, as Joyce Huff points out in her article in this volume with a nod to Jonathan Lamb and Bill Brown, matter and things are not merely inanimate objects but rather have the ability to resist human control and to shape human subjects.[14] This prompts us to raise questions addressing

"Embodying Neoliberalism: Economy, Culture, and the Politics of Fat," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 24 (2006): 427-448, and Charlotte Biltekoff, *Eating Right in America. The Cultural Politics of Food & Health* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2013); Harvey Levenstein, *Fear of Food: A History of Why We Worry about What We Eat* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

12 Nina Mackert, "'I want to be a fat man / and with the fat men stand' – U.S.-amerikanische Fat Men's Clubs und die Bedeutungen von Körperfett in den Dekaden um 1900," *Body Politics* 2, 3 (2014): 215-243.

13 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social. An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005), 46.

14 Jonathan Lamb, *The Things Things Say* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2011); Bill Brown, "Thing Theory" in *Things*, ed. Bill Brown (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); see as well Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2010), 20-38; Ian Hodder, "The Entanglements of Humans and Things: A Long-Term View," *New Literary History* 45 (2014): 19-36.

the agency of fat and how it can be grasped. How does fat "make a difference in the course of some other agent's action," as we might ask with Latour, and how does it "authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid" human action, thinking, and self-perception?[15] What is the impact of fat on the health movement? How does fat shape our understandings of beauty? What are fat's relations to feminism? How does fat serve as an engine of desire? How does fat structure our thoughts and actions, and how can we fathom its capacity to resist? These are only some of the questions that are to be raised in this volume on "Fat Agency" in modern history.

Two "perspectives" delineate the broader field of concepts and questions, which are then explored in greater detail in four articles. In a first "perspective," Nina Mackert puts the study of fat and agency into wider historical and historiographical contexts, discussing the state of current research and desiderata of fat history. She first outlines how modern selves are governed through body shape and health, with fatness becoming "a biopolitical vanishing point." Second, Mackert critically points out how body shape has become equated with health and character, and third, she elaborates on the ambivalent role of agency in what she calls "the politics of fat," suggesting the incorporation of matter in fat history.

"The politics of fat" is also a key term to describe the second "perspective," a think piece by disability and queer studies scholars Anna Mollow and Robert McRuer, and one that demands a rethinking of current fat debates. They prompt us to consider how in times of leanness the call to austerity reinforces fat-phobic images and the social stigma against fat people. Yet even more than that, by "Fattening Austerity" Mollow and McRuer turn fatness into a vehicle for critiquing the contemporary politics of austerity.

In the first article, historian Christopher E. Forth elucidates in a wide historical sweep how the notion of fat as agent is not exclusively modern but instead rooted in ancient perceptions of fat as a material substance. By drawing upon sources from Antiquity up to the 1930s, Forth shows how fat has long been endowed with encumbering materiality that acts upon the person and calls into question the sovereignty of the human will. Fat is thus an active agent entwined in complex power relations which transform living creatures into objects. As Forth points out, in this process the "flabbiness of fat" was juxtaposed to the "firmness of muscularity,"

15 Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 71-72; on the agency of fat see for instance Forth, "Introduction," 12-16, and R. Colls, "Materialising Bodily Matter: Intra-action and the Embodiment of 'Fat'," *Geoforum* 38 (2007): 353-365.

with muscles validated as emblematic of human agency, willpower, and masculinity, putting, as he writes, "inner commands into action."

Literary scholar Joyce L. Huff's article also revolves around the relation of "inner commands" and corporeal matter. In her piece on "The Narrating Stomach" she presents a compelling close reading of British author Sydney Whiting's *Memoirs of a Stomach*, published in 1853 and thus ten years before William Banting's classic *Letter on Corpulence* came out and a fat focused dietary discipline began to sediment in British culture. Whiting's attempt to both render the stomach as agent and simultaneously subjugate it, sheds light on our contemporary obsession with fat and its potential to impact human life. Yet *Memoirs of a Stomach* presents both the "prehistory" of our contemporary powerful discourse on body management as well as a very particular kind of resistance to human willpower. As Huff points out, in Whiting's text, "the stomach, like all parts of the human body, has an agency of its own, one that resists human desires and also acts upon humans."

The third article by Amy Erdmann Farrell begins where Joyce L. Huff ends: with the modern fat stigma. Farrell explores the relation between fat stigma and motherblame, in particular by analyzing a mid-20th century psychological and sociological discourse on motherblame and by tracing its power and effects through late 20th and early 21st century popular culture. She draws on popular films from *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?* (1993) to *SuperSize Me* (2004) and *Precious* (2009), and delineates how the "guilty mother" has been inscribed into the heart of the contemporary obesity discourse. Farrell shows how these stories normalize an environment that distrusts and punishes mothers and fat people, and how they "pathologize both mothering and fatness." Yet in the end, as Farrell argues, the interdependence of motherblaming and fatshaming affects every woman and every fat child, "as they are under scrutiny for their threat to the family and to the nation."

The fourth article, by Nora Kreuzenbeck, focuses on a single human actor and her struggle for agency and against the agency of fat. It introduces readers to the 1960s and 1970s, to the civil rights movements and, specifically, to fat activist groups such as the National Association to Aid Fat Americans. The NAAFA sought to fight discrimination against fat people, raise their self-confidence, and thereby endow them with agency. By focusing on the case of Wilma Kuns, Kreuzenbeck shows how Kuns' claim for agency went against the grain of the dominant diet, health and ability discourse. Instead of continuing an ongoing, seemingly endless, and obviously ineffectual struggle against body fat, Kuns stresses that she finally accepted her body shape, came to the conclusion that she had

"nothing to lose," and thus regained agency, self-control, self-confidence and a life-affirming attitude.

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