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# Fat and Identity Politics

A REVIEW OF PAUL CAMPOS'S RECENT TALK IN THE GENDER AND BODY SIZE SERIES

*...this is the part that never ever gets acknowledged by people who know better, even though they will acknowledge it and then renounce that they have acknowledged it moments later. We can't make people thin, okay? There's no empirical proposition in medicine that is better established than this. There is no known way to produce significant long-term weight loss in a statistically significant population. We just don't know how to do it. And that includes weight-loss surgery or stomach amputation. That does not produce significant long-term weight loss among most people who undergo it. Certainly what absolutely fails completely in terms of significant long-term weight loss is haranguing people about their weight, and telling them that if they ate right and exercised more they would be thin. For the vast majority of people, that description is a complete failure. It's hopefully relatively rare in medicine, in particular, and social policy in general, to keep pursuing an intervention which is demonstrably a failure, over and over again. Now I'm sure many of you are familiar with the definition of insanity—it's doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. That's just another word for dieting.*

– Paul Campos

**MOST OF US HAVE HEARD IT BEFORE:** “Fat is a Feminist Issue.” Ever since Susie Orbach wrote her book of this title (published in 1978), prominent feminist scholars, including Naomi Wolf, Susan Bordo, and Kim Chernin, have had much to say about what Chernin has described as “the tyranny of slenderness”. This tradition of feminist critique has depicted fat hatred as a problem of patriarchy. Recently, however, academic discussions of body weight have been dominated by health policy concerns over the so-called obesity epidemic. Although these concerns insist that slenderness is necessary for health, they have surprisingly seen very little critique from feminist scholars. Moreover, while feminist

scholars have spilt much ink on the pressures on average size women to be as thin as emaciated fashion models, there has been very little feminist work on the experiences of *very fat* women. The CSW Winter 2010 Faculty Curator lecture series, “Gender and Body Size,” curated by Professor Abigail Saguy, Department of Sociology at UCLA, is responding to this void in public and academic discourse, by hosting three speakers with expertise ranging from the epidemiology of body size to “fat activism.”

The first of three talks in the CSW Gender and Body Size lecture series was given on January 20th by Paul Campos, Professor of Law at the University of Colorado, and the author of *The Obesity Myth: Why America’s Obsession with Weight is Hazardous to Your Health* (Gotham, 2004). Campos’ talk, titled “Fat and Identity Politics,” was well attended, with all seats taken and a few dozen audience members opting to stand. Campos drew comparisons between the issues of sexual orientation and body size, arguing that the idea that gay individuals can (and should) become straight is not dissimilar from our culture’s general

belief that fat individuals can (and should) become thin. Yet, while “conversion therapy” for gay individuals has been thoroughly debunked and openly denounced by the modern medical community, weight loss for “overweight” and “obese” individuals is instead largely embraced by both the medical community and the general public, despite strong evidence that it is quite possible to be both fat and healthy and that significant long-term weight loss is incredibly rare.

Campos introduced himself by explaining to the audience that, because his body mass index (BMI) is around 26, he is medically “overweight.” He then verbalized what most of his audience was already thinking—that despite being in the *medical* category of “overweight,” he is not actually “fat,” which is a *social* category. “But...” he reminded us, “...if I were a *woman* with this BMI, I *would* be fat!” This illustration helped to reveal the gendered nature of our culture’s ideas about body size. Importantly, Campos admitted that his status as a “socially” (though not medically) thin man, has allowed him to speak and write about body size with greater authority—something he feels he would be



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less able to do if he were a fat woman.

Speaking of “fat”, Campos challenged his audience to consider “getting over the F-word”. He asked us to contemplate whether the word “fat” could be used as a more neutral physical descriptor, stripped of its negative moral connotations. He argued that, to him, the term “fat” is vastly preferable to the words “overweight” or “obesity,” which, by definition, are imbued with assumptions about health, as well as morality. Because of this, these words are medicalizing and stigmatizing to individuals with fat bodies. It was striking to consider using the word “fat” in a neutral way—many members of the audience laughed with discomfort when Campos suggested the idea. Driving home the widespread discomfort with the word, Campos reflected on his experience studying the Monica Lewinski scandal (in which news commentators often remarked at Lewinski’s “zaftig” body): “I noticed in the context of the Clinton-Lewinski thing that people flinched a lot less at “semen stained-dress” than they did with [the word] “fat.” I felt *myself* flinch at the

imagined thought of describing a woman as “fat.” (*How impolite! How cruel!*) I flinched again when I realized that as a feminist scholar studying issues of body size, I need to get more comfortable with the term “fat”!

Campos is not the only person who has decided to embrace the word. In his discussion of identity politics, Campos explained that numerous “fat activists” *proudly* reclaim “fat,” much like gay activists reclaimed “gay” in the 1970s (when the term “homosexual” was used by the medical community, defining same-sex attraction as a mental disorder). Campos’ striking comparisons between body size and sexual orientation continued: gay and fat people have both been told that their “condition” is a “choice,” both have (often willingly) been subjected to highly invasive medical procedures and other radical interventions aimed at “curing” their condition, and in both, the “cures” almost uniformly fail.

By asking his audience to consider these similarities across body size and sexual

orientation, Campos illuminated the failed logic behind our own (culturally reinforced) assumptions about dieting and weight loss. “Why,” he asked, “is choosing to *leave fat people alone* considered radical to the point of unacceptability?” It was a thrilling and moving—but also overwhelming—call to radicalism. Reflecting, I found myself noting that the choice to simply leave *our own bodies* alone feels similarly radical and brave. With passionate scholars like Campos (and upcoming speaker Marilyn Wann, an outspoken “fat activist”!), the task of accepting and embracing “fat”—in others and ourselves—is becoming much easier.

*Kjerstin Elmen-Gruys is a graduate student in the UCLA Department of Sociology. Her dissertation project compares body size standards in the medical realm (i.e., ideal height/weight standards) with those in the fashion industry (i.e., clothing size standards), asking how these divergent standards have changed over time, how they are produced, and how they are understood by people in their everyday lives. Her other research interests include sociology of gender, sociology of work, and cultural sociology.*