
Editorial note.

A group of my friends decided to get together and read some feminists books. The first text suggested was *Fat is a Feminist Issue* — and frankly I didn't believe it was. After three fiery meetings I knew I was wrong. And when CWS/CF received two reviews of this same book I knew I was really wrong. This is a 'burning issue' for women! So the editorial board decided to print both of them. ENJOY.

Fat is a Feminist Issue, Susie Orbach,
Paddington Press, 1978, pp. 193, hardcover \$11.25.

Judith Posner

A few years ago I came across a fascinating article in the Journal of Radical Therapy called *The Fat Story or Eating as an Act of Revolution*. The authors of the piece (Cathy Fat-woman and Deborah Berson) linked obesity to women's lib, arguing that fat women have opted out from the traditional weak and passive feminine role. In letting their bodies go they assert their physical territoriality and thumb their nose at the slim femme fatale convention. Around the same time that this article appeared the mass media was reflecting increasing interest in a strange and controversial disease called anorexia nervosa, a psychosocial malfunctioning of the appetite which affects girls around the time of puberty. Anorexics starve themselves in an effort to become unbearably thin. It is within this context that Susie Orbach's recent publication should be viewed.

Orbach, a feminist psychotherapist and women's studies lecturer describes herself as first and foremost an X compulsive eater. Her book reflects her egocentric interest. It rings true. All women who have ever questioned their figures should be able to identify with it. And while the book is too brief, a little repetitive and lacks depth from a theoretical or conceptual point of view it definitely offers a new model for looking at weight problems, one which Orbach calls demystifying. In the final analysis, however, her book will be more useful to those with pragmatic rather than academic interest in weight loss although it is no mere diet guide.

In fact Orbach's major theoretical contention is that all existing diet approaches are inadequate due to their failure to redefine one's relationship to food. Existing diet programs actually exacerbate one's symbolic attachment to food by treating foods as good and bad, legal or illegal, treats, rewards, etc. Therefore diets accentuate one's food obsession as anyone who has ever dieted can tell you (all you *do* is think and talk about food all day long — boring yourself and your friends). Thus, diet plans and workshops fail to help the individual alter her relationship to food in a substantial way, accounting for the high rate of recidivism among fat people.

... the compulsive dieter knows two realities; compulsive eating (out of control) or compulsive dieting (imprisonment). p. 106

Orbach contends that the only way out of this neurotic food dichotomy is through examination of the roots of the problem — and the roots are not surprisingly societal and sex role related.

It is the thesis of this book that compulsive eating in women is a response to their social position. As such, it will continue to be an issue in women's lives as long as social conditions exist which create and encourage inequality of the sexes. Any treatment for overweight women must address this fact. p. 165

Some of her contentions include the notions that gaining

weight is rejection of the female role; that women's sex object role in our culture causes such severe self-consciousness that women cannot help being fixated on their bodies and its nutrients; and that the role of wife and mother necessitates so much nurturing of others that one way in which women learn to cope with daily life is through extreme self nurturing in the form of food intake. While Orbach's arguments are convincing one cannot help but wonder about male obesity which she never mentions and which is likely more statistically prevalent than female obesity. We can assume however, that its causes are quite different, reflecting discrepant sex-role socialization problems.

In addition to the issue of the psycho-social roots of over-eating, Orbach offers a variety of therapy techniques that can be used in breaking the neurotic food chain. For example, she reiterates what obesity experts have told us for years, that fat people seldom experience hunger because they are eating for other reasons and tend to preempt this primary experience. Gradually then, they lose touch with their own physiological sensations and desires. Since diets tend to dictate when and what you eat they don't alleviate the problem. So Orbach suggests non-structured anti-diet eating which enables the individual to get in touch with her desires and learn to exercise discrimination. She also suggests doing therapeutic work on a variety of 'guided fantasies' — imaginary situations involving food into which members are supposed to project themselves. The main purpose of the therapy is to demonstrate to women that they have an interest in being fat. Until they recognize this fact all attempts at permanent weight loss are doomed to failure.

While the book offers many useful suggestions in the practical realm, it is deficient in taking into account existing relevant material. For example, Orbach only gives brief discussion to the topic of anorexia nervosa which is very centrally relevant to the notion of fat as a feminist issue. For those who would like to look more deeply into the issue of women's body image and culture they will not find a wide range of bibliographic materials available here. (You would do well to consult recent books on anorexia nervosa in this regard). But if you want to have your interest nudged on some fresh feminist insights or you're just interested in losing weight, Orbach's book is well worth the cost (10.57 at Toronto Women's Bookstore). Less than a spaghetti dinner at *George's*!

Fat is a Feminist Issue, Susie Orbach, Paddington Press, New York, 1978, pp. 193, hardcover \$11.25.

Greta Hofmann Nemiroff

Susie Orbach sees fat as an issue faced by many women and as one which calls for a feminist interpretation. My own observation has also indicated to me that obesity is a condition experienced by many feminists. Over the ten or so years that I have been actively involved in Women's Studies and women's issues, I have gained about forty-five pounds. Not that I was emaciated before, let us say that I was always somewhat ample and cannot recall a time this side of childhood when the Standard Life Insurance Company would have been totally enchanted by my height/weight index. In the 'movement' however, I was not alone. Many of us were overweight and if we weren't, as a group we were not over-solicitous about our general appearance. Concomitantly I—as were so many other women of my vintage—was rising in a managerial hierarchy due primarily to the vast bureaucratic expansion of the late '60's and early '70's in Canada. We women were being asked (in small numbers, mind you) to 'fill' more important or 'weighty' jobs than we'd had before. A cursory review of upwardly mobile female contem-