



Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture

By Amy Erdman Farrell

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To be fat hasn't always occasioned the level of hysteria that this condition receives today and indeed was once considered an admirable trait. *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture* explores this arc, from veneration to shame, examining the historic roots of our contemporary anxiety about fatness. Tracing the cultural denigration of fatness to the mid 19th century, Amy Farrell argues that the stigma associated with a fat body preceded any health concerns about a large body size. Firmly in place by the time the diet industry began to flourish in the 1920s, the development of fat stigma was related not only to cultural anxieties that emerged during the modern period related to consumer excess, but, even more profoundly, to prevailing ideas about race, civilization and evolution. For 19th and early 20th century thinkers, fatness was a key marker of inferiority, of an uncivilized, barbaric, and primitive body. This idea—that fatness is a sign of a primitive person—endures today, fueling both our \$60 billion “war on fat” and our cultural distress over the “obesity epidemic.”

Farrell draws on a wide array of sources, including political cartoons, popular literature, postcards, advertisements, and physicians' manuals, to explore the link between our historic denigration of fatness and our contemporary concern over obesity. Her work sheds particular light on feminisms' fraught relationship to fatness. From the white suffragists of the early 20th century to contemporary public figures like Oprah Winfrey, Monica Lewinsky, and even the Obama family, Farrell explores the ways that those who seek to shed stigmatized identities—whether of gender, race, ethnicity or class—often take part in weight reduction schemes and fat mockery in order to validate themselves as “civilized.” In sharp contrast to these narratives of fat shame are the ideas of contemporary fat activists, whose articulation of a new vision of the body Farrell explores in depth. This book is significant for anyone concerned about the contemporary “war on fat” and the ways that notions of the “civilized body” continue to legitimate discrimination and cultural oppression.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Overall, this is a very interesting book that is easy to read and engage with. Farrell's use of visual information (showing some of the cartoons, post cards, and posters that she discusses in text) is compelling and adds to her arguments." -*Metapsychology Online Reviews*

"An eye-opening history about how fatness obtained its stigma in the US. Provocative and illuminating, Farrell unearths fat's associations with whiteness, citizenship, feminism, and civilization. *Fat Shame* will interest scholars of the history and sociology of body politics and those involved in projects of the self, as well as readers who can't help but wonder, 'When did we start hating fatness? And why?' Farrell has penned a new classic."-Kathleen LeBesco,author of *Revolting Bodies? The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity*

"Farrell's explorations of fat primitivism in mainstream and feminist cultures are invaluable to understanding the contemporary stigmatization of fat that has become nearly ubiquitous in America today...a soon-to-be classic text in the field of Fat Studies." -Deborah McPhail,Teachers College Record

"*Fat Shame* can serve as a "go to" resource for historical examples of discrimination against fatness. The book appears especially relevant for the fields of sociology, women's studies, or history and could readily serve as an additional resource for course work focused on multiculturalism, obesity, weight management, or body image."-Jill Salsman,*PsycCRITIQUES*

"Amy Erdman Farrell offers a wide-ranging and significant contribution to the relatively new but now substantial contribution on the history of the body."-*American Historical Review*

"In this bold and powerful book, Amy Farrell uncovers the history, meanings, and consequences of fat stigma. With passion, insight, and eloquence, she condemns the many institutions that denigrate fat people, from the medical establishment and diet industry to the popular culture. *Fat Shame* challenges Americans of all sizes to accept each other without judgment."-Elaine Tyler May,author of *America and the Pill: A History of Promise, Peril and Liberation*

"As part of an actual campaign against weightism, as opposed to Colbert's satirical one, *Fat Shame* allows us to see how discrimination against fat people became a central feature of American life. Armed with this history, we can better imagine a day when the declaration Farrell made on The Colbert Report—"I like the word 'fat'"—won't be greeted with laughter." -*Bitch Magazine*

"In this groundbreaking and fascinating text, Farrell repositions the fat body within a political framework...a must-read for feminists, body theorists, and anyone interested in understanding our cultural obsession with fat"-Amanda Cosco,*Women's Post*

"[Farrell's] historical account of shifting social response to overweight people is interesting...[her] observation about stigma related to overweight people is correct."
-S.K. Hall,*Choice*

"The strength of this text is the fascinating range of intersectional perspectives it provides concerning the

historical linkages between hierarchies of citizenship and fat stigma... Farrell's important work to expose the 'cultural baggage that has fueled a fat-hating perspective' generates an intriguing historical intersectional framework... [*Fat Shame*] illuminates a troubling, discriminatory social landscape framing American body politics and industry with far reaching influences, including present day food movements."
-, *American Studies*

"Farrell's Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture [is] an exciting and much-needed addition to fat studies. Carefully researched and well written, Farrell's book investigates the history of fat stigma in the United States, arguing that negative associations with fat existed long before weight became inextricably tied to notions of health."-Anna E. Ward,*American Quarterly*

About the Author

Amy Farrell is Professor of American Studies and Women's and Gender Studies at Dickinson College in Carlisle, PA. She is also the author of *Yours in Sisterhood: Ms. Magazine and the Promise of Popular Feminism*. She lives in Carlisle with her husband and two children.

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