

Fat body and Fatness in material culture: “Beyond the visual, beyond the human, and even beyond the bodies”

Christopher E. Forth¹

Interviewer:
Aliana Aires²

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8514-856X>

When I was invited to organize the issue “Fat Fashion: Cultural Perspectives”, I had in mind to interview an international scholar whose works and studies were not translated into Portuguese. I figured this might be a way to get to know some of the excellent studies I had access to when I lived in New York as a visiting scholar at Parsons. I thought of several names I had the pleasure of “meeting” on the shelves of libraries in New York. This was not the case with Professor Christopher Forth, as I had heard of him before, in my research in Brazil, when I came across his vast contribution to the studies on the fat body. I even planned to move to Kansas, where he works at the University of Kansas as a professor in the Department of History, just to have the opportunity to absorb some of his knowledge. I sent him an email at the time and was very well received. Although other reasons for research have made me choose to go to New York, his work has continued to impact my research, especially his book, *Fat: A Cultural History of the Stuff of Life* (Reaktion Books, 2019), which he describes as a “study in the formation of stereotypes”, and in particular about the negative stereotypes that have been connected to fat people over time.

Professor Forth holds a Ph.D in History from the University at Buffalo (SUNY) in 1994, and his interdisciplinary and thematic research revolves around the cultural history of gender and sexuality, the body and senses, masculinities and the intellectual history of Europe. With extensive research and a very fertile intellectual life, he has numerous pub-

¹ Ph.D in History from the University of Buffalo (SUNY) in New York (1994). Since 2007, he is professor of History at the University of Kansas (KU). He has also worked at Universities in Australia, Finland and Germany. Forth is editor-in-chief of the journal “Cultural History” and has extensive academic research with publications of books, articles, reviews and book chapters on the following topics: Cultural History of Gender, Sexuality, the Body and the Senses and Intellectual History of Europe.

² Master and Ph.D in Communication and Consumer Practices (PPGCOM-ESPM SP), with a visiting period at PARSONS - The New School in New York (2017-2018), sponsored by CAPES. Author of the book “From fat to plus size: large sizes fashion” (2019). She teaches undergraduate and graduate (lato sensu) courses and coordinates the graduate (lato sensu) program in Fashion, Retail and Consumer Behavior at University Center Santo Agostinho (UNIFSA) E-mail: alianaires@gmail.com.

lications, from books to book chapters, magazine articles and reviews. He has published several significant works, such as *Zarathustra in Paris: The Nietzsche Vogue in France, 1891-1918* (2001), *The Dreyfus Affair and the Crisis of French Manhood* (2004), *Masculinity in the Modern West* (2008) and *Fat: A Cultural History of the Stuff of Life* (London: Reaktion Books, 2019). Forth is also co-editor of the book *Fat: Culture and Materiality* (2014) and editor-in-chief of the academic journal *Cultural History*. He is also a member of the executive board of the Department of History at the University of Kansas, and in 2015 was a Research Fellow at Universidade Erfurt in Germany.

When I emailed him for the interview, I was again very well received and promptly attended. At the end of October I had the pleasure of talking to Professor Forth about the fat body and beliefs around fat and fatness. He brings a new view on the issue that refutes some of what has been said about it, and that's why it seems so interesting to me. Yet instead of weakening these studies, in fact it only complements them, since understanding the cultural meanings of the fat body is an extremely complex and ambiguous task. I hope you enjoy the interview. I was thrilled to have the opportunity to dialogue with him.

When did you feel interested about the fat body? Can you tell us a bit more about it?

My interest in fat developed around the time I was conducting research for my book *The Dreyfus Affair and the Crisis of French Manhood* (2004), so we're talking about the late 1990s or so. While exploring how French intellectuals were represented a century ago I noticed that the body of Emile Zola, one of the most high-profile defenders of Captain Alfred Dreyfus, was lampooned in the right-wing press for being fat. This was meant to offer a negative commentary on his moral character and masculinity. When Zola lost weight many of his supporters celebrated what they saw as his renewed willpower and heroism. There seemed to be an inverse relationship between fatness and masculinity that flew in the face of the common assumption that men of size usually benefit from an ability to "take up space." This was surprising to me as so much scholarship on fat at the time was focused women and sometimes gay men (e.g., "bear" culture), with few serious attempts to explore how fatness and masculinity have been understood over time. It seemed like a timely topic that warranted more serious historical attention, one to which I found myself returning in subsequent work.

You brought a very interesting issue here, which contradicts most studies on beauty patterns existing in the West, claiming that the meanings of beauty in the past, when there was scarcity of food, exalted the fat body as synonymous of wealth and abundance, and that only from modernity the slim body got desired, as a result of various issues related to capitalist culture, especially arising from the 1920s. In fact, with my studies I have noticed that the excess fat body even in ancient times seems to have always

been somehow problematic, always implying moral issues. Even though the meanings of fat have changed over time, as fat is a fluid significant. Can you talk a little more about it? Is it true that fat was a trouble as well in ancient times? If so, how does it differ from the way our culture sees fat? What are the major differences between the meanings of fat along the time?

As those are big questions I'll need some space to address them properly. Whereas other scholars had studied the history of health, beauty, and dieting, I was more concerned with trying to understand the background to the hatred and disgust that fat bodies often elicit in the present. Existing scholarship at the time maintained that such prejudice was a distinctly modern phenomenon with origins extending to the sixteenth century. It was around that time that bodies seemed to undergo more systematic forms of discipline and constraint through complex processes that have been studied in some depth by Michel Foucault, Norbert Elias, Mikhail Bakhtin, and many others. Earlier periods were much more favorably disposed towards fatness, I was led to believe, though most historical works only *began* their inquiries with the early modern period and showed scant interest in antiquity or the Middle Ages. When asked to write a "short" survey of fat in history, then, I decided to devote one chapter to these earlier periods, expecting to find little to contradict the received wisdom. That way I could say that yes, I looked, and then move on to what I thought was the "real story": fatphobia as a modern phenomenon primarily related to health and beauty. What I found by examining ancient and medieval texts as well as anthropological and archaeological studies changed my mind. Not only was there more going on during these earlier times than I had imagined, but much of what I noticed persisted in various forms to the present. And that single chapter I had originally planned for the classical and medieval periods? Well, that ultimately grew into five chapters, roughly half the book. So, what happened?

In short, I began to explore the meanings of "fat" beyond the visual, beyond the human, and even beyond bodies altogether. Without trying to summarize more than two thousand years of history in a few paragraphs, several things became apparent to me as I explored premodern ideas about fat. Here are the basic points:

1. Fat was understood as an *adjective* referring to the size and shape of bodies, and thus referring to issues of appearance. This is perhaps the most common way for us to think about fat today and has been the most obvious way for historians to approach the subject. Such an approach focuses quite a lot on the visual, thus reinforcing common tendencies to view corpulence as mainly a matter of appearances. Of course it's true that fat bodies were not discriminated against in premodern Europe as they often are today, but this doesn't necessarily mean they were tolerated or celebrated without reservation. I have found no evidence of a time in Western history when fatness was celebrated as an unequivocal good in terms of health or beauty. This is partly because health and beauty do not exhaust the potential meanings of fat.

2. Fat also referred to a *material substance* that facilitates the swelling of bodies, a substance that is itself ambiguous in that it is capable of being a solid or a liquid. Thus fat refers to adipose tissue, of course, but also to oil and grease. The ambiguous materiality of fat, it seemed to me, played a considerable role in how fat bodies could be experienced. For instance, the Greek observation that fat was an *insensate* material that seemed to block perception and sensation contributed to the ancient – and enduring – stereotype that fat people are themselves cognitively “thick,” foolish or even stupid. That fat could partially *motivate* meaning legitimated an openness to recent anthropological inquiries into the “agentic” potentiality of matter that complement the cultural/discursive models that predominate in the field.
3. Beyond its material qualities, premodern fat was also a *vital substance* that was also regularly observed in the natural world – for instance, in the bodies of non-human animals but also in soil, water and even air. This is important because, until the late eighteenth century or so, human bodies were often conceptualized with direct reference to plants and animals. This too was a source of ambivalence: fruits and vegetables may swell as they grow (a “good” thing) but soil that is too “fat” (that is, too unctuous) could promote overgrowth and thus putrefaction (a “bad” thing). Fat was thus implicated in agricultural cycles where fertility and abundance were moments on a continuum that always included death and decay, which in turn generated new life. Our modern notion that fatness implies fertility – and that fertility is unequivocally “good” – disregards the cyclical nature of organic process that necessarily includes death and decay.
4. Bodily fatness implied that some process of *fattening* has occurred or is ongoing. This, too, has roots in the agricultural imagination. The process of fattening evokes the situation of nonhuman animals, especially those domesticated for human use. Of course comparisons of fat human bodies to those of certain nonhuman animals – notably cows, pigs, whales, seals, etc. – recur throughout Western history, but this is not only due to some supposed physical resemblance. Some animals are fattened by being kept in small pens where their movement is restricted, others are fattened by being force-fed or castrated. As a form of disempowerment and even domination, fattening was never something done for the benefit of the fattened animal. The language of unflattering animality continues to play a role in fat stereotyping, where the image of being “fattened for the slaughter” suggests the subordinate, weakened position of the corpulent. This theme recurs in modern claims about fat. A further dimension of fattening might also be mentioned: soil that was deemed too “thin” for planting was usually “fattened” through the addition of rotten or excremental matter, thus adding a layer of “filth” to the stereotype of abject animality. We can thank early Christianity for helping to concretize this link between filth and fatness.

Fat, fatness and fattening offer unpleasant reminders of the dirt, animality, vulnerability, and mortality that are inescapable features of embodied life. Insofar as what I call the “fat imaginary” is deeply implicated in past models, ambivalence about the processes and substances associated with organic life has played a role in structuring Western cultural responses to fat. To describe fat (as I do) as “the stuff of life” is thus to engage with something profoundly equivocal, which is why it is misleading to draw hard distinctions between the modern and the premodern.

In Western culture being a fat woman seems to be much more a trouble than being a fat man for many reasons, among them the aesthetic pressure that women have always suffered, according especially to most feminist scholars. Susan Bordo (1993) in her classic book “Unwearable weight” observes that in fact excesses have always been disapproved for women: whether it was excessive sexual desire, excessive freedom, excessive wisdom or the over-starvation. Joanne Entwistle (2015) states that beauty today requires a new form of discipline: in order to reach the firm belly, it is necessary to exercise and observe what one eats. The author still makes a comparison between the stomachs of women of the century 19th and 20th centuries: while the stomach of the woman wearing corset in the 19th century was disciplined on the outside, the woman of the twentieth century has a disciplined stomach by exercise and diet, imposed by self-discipline. Valerie Steele (2007) also reflected on this phenomenon, disbelieving it more specifically, as the “Internalization of the corset”. This evidences the biopolitical control of the body as described by Foucault at its most advanced stage, connecting to what Byung Chul-Han (2017) identified and named psychopolitics, in which we watch over and exploit our bodies, then the control is exercised from within, since it is through the body that we connect with our subjectivity. Can you talk a little more about it and expose your view regarding the pressure that Western women have suffered to conform to the thin body ideal?

The modern pressure on girls and women to conform to unrealistic and often unhealthy beauty standards is undeniable and deplorable. As there are good reasons to contend that in the modern world “fat is a feminist issue,” it’s understandable that this would provide the framework for early thinking about the historical meanings of fat. So I don’t disagree with anything you’ve said. However, if fat, fatness and fattening may offer unpleasant reminders of the dirt, animality, vulnerability, and mortality, there is a long history of representing women’s bodies as materializing exactly these potentially disturbing realities. Historians like Caroline Walker Bynum demonstrate a deeply entrenched Western tendency to closely associate women’s bodies with organic processes generally. Social psychologists Jamie L. Goldenberg and Tomi-Ann Roberts use Terror Management Theory to show how this remains the case to the present. Although they propose ways of mitigating such attitudes, they note that “the objectification of women serves an important existential function—it strips them of their creaturely connection and thus provides psychic protection from the

threat of death” (2004). So while what you say above is entirely legitimate, one may also wonder what other functions are served by female beauty conventions and how these relate to fat. If the aesthetic demands placed on women became more intense in the modern period, what does this tell us about Western culture’s shifting attitudes towards corporeality? In the book I propose that by the twentieth century anti-fat attitudes expressed a tendency towards bodily or corporeal “utopianism” and a desire to transcend human limitations. Of course these wishes are probably primordial, but by the modern era technological developments have made them seem more and more obtainable. Could it be, then, that fat is also an *existential* issue?

Regarding gender issues and the fat body, you bring in your studies a focus on masculinity and the body, which few scholars do, especially in Brazil, showing that the male body had pressure to lose weight since Ancient Times, as long as fat was considered as something belonging to the female body. Do you think that the recognition of fat as something belonging to the feminine body affected men due to gender issues? In a macho centered culture, does having a fat body mean you were less of a man? It may help to understand the culture of bodybuilding and very strong muscle cultivation nowadays, specially by men, although it is gaining more and more women adept. According to this perspective, can we say that a woman who cultivates muscles becomes less of a woman?

I mentioned that my first reflections on fat came out of historical studies of men and masculinities and an ongoing interest in thinking about embodiment. Further research into historical perceptions of the male body suggested that what happened to Emile Zola around 1900 was not an isolated case or even particularly new at the time. Once I began looking more closely at the premodern West it became clear that I was dealing with something quite ancient, something that would be reiterated over the centuries in different ways. It became clear that fat is a *feminine* as well as a *feminist* issue. Speaking in very general terms, I would say that fat and fatness are ambiguous when it comes to males in the West. The idea that men have historically been able to consume more food and grow as fat as they like may speak to a certain degree of privilege and status. Moreover, very large male bodies, especially when they’re tall, have been capable of being viewed as imposing, even monumental. But such impressions have always been potentially subject to challenge by others that emphasize the weakness, softness, and even foolishness that have been connected to fat since antiquity. There is, in fact, a historical and deeply *gendered* tension between muscle and fat that persists to the present. Boys and men are encouraged to expel “feminine” fat from their bodies, but rather than strive for the reassuring hardness of bone (as one often sees in anorexia) they seem more inclined to replace fat with muscle. While it’s not difficult to see that athletic training and muscle-building have been culturally encoded as “masculine,” a woman who wishes to cultivate muscles is not less of a woman. As gender-encoded traits arguably refer to broadly human qualities and activities, why should males have a monopoly on “the masculine”?

Yours studies invite us to look beyond the “before-and-after” approaches about fat, showing that excess fat has not seem to be celebrated throughout history. However, we cannot deny that there are real narratives pointing out how fat women were desired all over the Ancient World. The historian Denise Bernuzzi de Sant’Anna, an expert in the history of beauty in Brazil was the only one to study the history of the fat body in our country. She brings an important contribution to the meanings associated with the fat body, especially the female. An interesting narrative that she tells dates back to the 1930s in rural Brazil, when marriages were a deal and the body size influenced the choice for the bride. At this time, being fat was considered positive and women with this biotype were called “warehouse fat”, a name that expressed abundance. Then, men who married these women would accumulate wealth, as long as their body as well as a warehouse would be able to store fat. On the other hand, the lean woman was called “bad skinny”, which had an extremely negative sense as these women eat and do not show themselves able to accumulate fat, so marrying a skinny one meant a bell of material losses. I understand that these narratives were in rural Brazil, where the richness was associated with the cultivation of land and cattle raising, so it makes sense these animalistic comparisons. Although we no longer use the term “warehouse fat” today, the term “skinny bad” persists in our culture, but now with a different and positive meaning. The “bad skinny” is a woman blessed with the gift of thinness and contemporary men tend to prefer getting married with them because they are closer to the body idealized by Western culture. As seen this narrative conforms to the “before-and-after” approaches. What do you think can better explain this contradictory scenario over the time? Do you believe that most studies seeing fat as positive in the past were referring to an acceptable fat and not to the excess of fat? So, is there a division between good and bad fat? If so, the perception of fat since antiquity hasn’t changed much? Or do you believe that the “before and after” notions on fat are valid and this contradictory scenario has more to do with the ambiguous character of fat, that still needs to be more observed and studied?

I don’t deny any of this, but it would be useful to know how “fat” is being defined in the study you cite and what else the author explored, for on the surface it seems to conform to the standard “before-and-after” approaches that have predominated in historical studies of fat. That’s not a criticism or refutation, by the way – it makes perfect sense to note such obvious differences over time and it would be odd to ignore them. Moreover, what you describe echoes what I’ve read about perceptions of fatness in other rural and traditional cultures. For instance, plump female bodies were signs of abundance and prosperity in medieval Europe as well. Yet the positivity of this impression was always subject to challenges by those who pointed to fat’s potentially negative implications. After all, the presumed benefits of fatness often faded when corpulence was seen as extreme. Was that the case in 1930s

Brazil as well? So yes – my view is that fat and fatness are at best ambiguous, which is one reason why we see conflicted attitudes over time. The rustic sayings that appear frequently in European proverbs, for instance, display this ambiguity pretty clearly. The same culture that embraced fatness as a sign of fertility and abundance could also produce statements like “fat flesh is flesh of ice,” “the fattest is the first to rot,” “a gross belly does not produce a refined mind,” etc. So if fat country women in 1930s Brazil were preferred due to the abundance their bodies suggested, is this where the story ends? What if fat also happened to be a signifier of foolishness or stupidity, as it was throughout Western history? In that case whatever was “positive” about large rural women might have been diminished by the assumption that fat brides must also be meek, stupid, and docile. These are “good” traits when thinking about livestock, but not so great for the domesticated animal itself. Worse still for the women being treated like livestock. This is one reason why feminist writers from the 1880s through the 1970s criticized certain non-Western cultures precisely because women in those cultures were expected – if not compelled – to be fat.

According to your studies, what are the main reasons why fat became a problem in Western culture? And at the same time why thinness is so desirable?

In various ways fat has always been problematic in the Western world, though it became especially vilified in the 1920s when slenderness came into fashion. The reasons for this are varied and complex. This stemmed partly from a colonial legacy where non-white fatness was consistently deemed ugly, disgusting, and inappropriate for “civilized” white people. This racial stereotyping functioned alongside several other factors, including widespread interest in performance and efficiency (where fat signified waste, if not dirt) and growing attempts to use the body as locus of control in an increasingly fluid and disorienting modern world. These are just a few facets of what strikes me as a complex development.

You are one of the editors of *Fat: Culture and Materiality*. This volume breaks new ground in the study of the relationship between culture and the material world. It addresses the role of fats in a variety of cultural settings. Can you explain more about it, especially how fat as a substance has elicited disgust and how it evokes perceptions of animality?

I use the emotion of disgust as a way of approaching the complex materiality of fat, something which has typically been neglected by those who focus more on discourses and representations. The key senses involved in disgust are less visual than tactile and even olfactory, involving a recoil from potentially coming into contact with the object in question. Moreover, the things that elicit disgust tend to provide reminders of animality and mortality. But while it’s true that fat bodies and substances *may* elicit disgust at various times, they certainly don’t *need* to. Rather I try to show that the close association of fatness with disgust that we see today was constructed gradually over time and in response to shifting ideas about beauty, hygiene, race, class, and other variables. This is why I think it’s important to

analyze how bodies are perceived at a given time by exploring a wider range of cultural factors beyond health and beauty. Idea about the healthy and the beautiful are often connected to many other issues as well.

Do you believe that this could help to explain why in common sense fat is yet considered good for women in terms of fertility and why at the same time is considered a bad thing in terms of beauty?

I think that the assumption that fat is “good” for fertility is only true to a point. We all know that women suffering from anorexia may have difficulty becoming pregnant or carrying a pregnancy to term. Yet physicians today echo what the Greeks knew centuries ago: whereas a measure of fat is necessary for reproduction, excess fat can promote infertility or sterility in women as well as men. I don’t think that overly sharp binaries like fat/thin, fertility/sterility, good/bad are very useful when the situation seems much more complex.

Do you think that the disgust we feel about the material fat can be somehow transferred to the fat physical body?

Yes, this happens all the time. For quite a while in the West weight gain was explained as the accumulation of unexcreted substances in the body, notably grease, sweat, and other “filthy” things. This is partly why the image of the fat person as breathless and profusely sweating after the slightest effort has recurred since the early modern period. It suggests a kind of *leakiness* that was bound to provoke responses as modern bodies were increasingly expected to maintain secure and contained boundaries. This is true even if at other times sweat is validated as a sign of transformation – as if exercise instantiates a kind of “alchemy” whereby an abject substance (fat) is expelled from the body or transformed into something more admirable. Some even falsely claim that through exercise fat *turns into* muscle, which further illustrates how this activity is seen as something alchemical. Others today go further to suggest that constipation is itself partly responsible for weight gain, a claim that explicitly links fatness to filth and echoes some eighteenth-century medical thinking. Arguably things become even more complex when fat is viewed as a bodily substance that is almost *agentic*, as if fat is an actor in its own right. Ever since the mid-nineteenth century one encounters claims that fat is a stealthily creeping “invader” against which vigilance must be maintained (that is, when a sort of “battle” has not been joined). The gym slogan “sweat is fat crying” seems to gesture towards a personification of fat, a substance whose “feelings” need to be hurt. If such harsh attitudes have become gradually more pronounced in the modern era, their basic ingredients are not entirely “modern” at all.

In your book, *Fat: A Cultural History of the Stuff of Life*, you note that there exists a “geographic division between the West and ‘the Rest’” when thinking about fat, which has set up a dichotomy in which fat is framed as a “problem” in need of investigating within Western contexts, while it goes under-examined beyond the Western frame. What aspects about fat in non-Western cultures lack studies?

I'm not a specialist in this area, but from what I've seen the literature on fat in non-Western cultures is sometimes too eager to celebrate the embrace of fatness without also attending to instances of ambiguity. This is especially the case when it comes to exploring the materiality of fat as a vital, and sometimes taboo, substance. But there are some excellent, theoretically savvy studies out there as well. A standout title for me is Rebecca Popenoe's *Feeding Desire: Fatness, Beauty and Sexuality Among a Saharan People* (2004), a rich, nuanced, and conceptually sophisticated ethnography of fattening practices in Mauritania.

How do you see the role of capitalism and consumer society, especially the fashion industry publishing the thin body ideal and segregating fat bodies?

Julie Guthman's work on neoliberalism and fat persuasively shows how our health-minded world is located within an aggressively consumerist society, creating a "culture of bulimia" in which the excesses of compulsory consumption are supposedly "fixed" by the equally compulsory consumption of weight-loss programs and products. The fashion industry isn't something I've studied in depth as it seemed to have been covered by other scholars, but it's easy to see how the world of high fashion reinforces stereotypes about fat bodies while showcasing those that appear to be dangerously thin.

Do you think that the emergence of Fat Studies, especially in America, has contributed for the study of fatness? How do you evaluate that?

Absolutely – fat studies has played an important role in helping to legitimize body size and shape as worthwhile objects of study. There have also been important early contributions by scholars unconnected to fat studies, for instance, Sander Gilman and Peter Stearns. As a historian I was disappointed by some of the early historical work being done in fat studies: often conducted by non-historians, some of these articles and books seemed prone to exaggeration and more concerned with activism than rigor. As more professional historians turn their attention to fat more sophisticated and nuanced perspectives are emerging. The theoretical repertoire of fat studies also seems to be developing in interesting ways: an early focus on Foucauldian notions of "discipline" and Bakhtin's "grotesque body" is now complemented by scholars making good use of the "new materialism" and the phenomenology of embodiment.