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# Adiposity and Anarchism: Exposing and Examining Fat Oppression in a Capitalist Society

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# Adiposity and Anarchism: Exposing and Examining Fat Oppression in a Capitalist Society

“No real social change has ever come about without a revolution [. . .] revolution is but thought carried into action.”

(Emma Goldman, *Anarchism and Other Essays*, 1910)

*This is an auto-ethnographic essay looking at the ways in which fat oppression is linked to capitalism. This research looks at oppression and discrimination stemming from adiposity (fatness) through an anarchist and queer theory perspective. There is a void of research and writing on the intersections of fat oppression, from an anarchist and queer theory perspective, yet many fat studies researchers have found that fatness is oppressive, discriminating and affects ones socioeconomic status. In the white supremacist, capitalist heteropatriarchy that we live in, there is a systematic ‘othering’ of anyone who does not fit inside the mold that society lays out for us. This work looks at the binary systems that society is built around and aims to disrupt them.*

### **Trifecta: A Fat, Anarchist, Feminist**

I'm a fat girl. I have a body that will probably always be fat, and in the past thirty-two years, I have experienced a number of obstacles that have been either directly or indirectly related to the shape and size of my body. Society plays a large role structuring the ways we view bodies and what we think are "acceptable" sizes and presentations of bodies. In contemporary American culture we are socialized to think of beauty as a narrow pathway between thin and slightly curvaceous, almost exclusively light-skinned and submissive. For those of us who do not fit inside this very small box, we are given ample opportunity to assimilate, at a cost. If we fail or reject assimilation, however, we take on the role of the *outsider*. This idea of beauty that groups, ranging from schoolgirls to gender scholars, have examined can be a very isolating frame. I can speak from experience that fat girls don't fit the beauty ideal in American culture, even though we are beautiful human beings.

I'm also an anarchist. Maybe you raised your brow at that, and wondered where the hell I am going with this and what does anarchism have to do with body size. Many people envision the stereotypical trope of what an anarchist

does and looks like—someone thought to defy all authority, dress in black attire, and smash the windows of retail establishments and department stores. Of course, these types of insurrectionary anarchists do exist and have their role in society and the anarchist movement. As representatives of the movement, however, insurrectionists are not a fair portrayal. Anarchists are—for the most part—organizers working together toward challenging and destabilizing hierarchies set up by oppressive political, economic, and social systems and structures. Anarchists are actively taking part both in social movements and in academia, highlighting the many places where the institutions that we live under are both exploitative and oppressive, and how living in a white supremacist, capitalist, heteronormative, patriarchy is detrimental to individuals as well as society as a whole. Anarchist thinker and activist Alexander Berkman (1929) said that anarchism is not about bombs, murder, chaos or robbery; "[I]t is not a return to barbarism or the wild state of man...Anarchism means that you should be free; that no one should enslave you, boss you, rob you, or impose on you" (p. 2). Anarchists work toward building a world that is free of hierarchies, exploitation and

oppression. We strive to live in a world that sees each and every one of us as equals. We are not just consumers or products; we are individuals who have a yearning to be free.

An auto-ethnographic study of my own evolution into being the person I have become is the skeleton of this case study and this paper. I have walked through life being ashamed of my size, and it has taken me years to get to the point where I am at today. No matter what your ‘difference’ is, if your body, personality, sexuality, and so forth fall outside mainstream categories of identity – the capitalist heteropatriarchy that we live in actively ‘others’ you. These are my words, I have found my voice, and this is my declaration of existence – as a fat, queer, anarcha-feminist. As Nomy Lamm (1995) discusses in her essay “It’s a Big Fat Revolution,” there is importance in telling your own story and expressing your experience. As my personal story as a fat girl has changed over the years and I have moved on to a place of acceptance – even if that acceptance ebbs and flows, I still scream into the darkness that I am valid, beautiful, intelligent and worthy of existing – on my own terms.

### **Anarchism against Body Oppression**

At its heart, anarchism is reaching for a new society that is equitable and just. For those new to anarchist ideology, this vision may be hard to fully understand and envision. But anarchists understand that these challenges result from the oppression that one experiences while living in a capitalist, white supremacist, heteropatriarchal system. Anarchism is staunchly anti-capitalist. And while an ultimate goal of anarchist practice and ideology is to dismantle capitalism, anarchists understand that this goal should not cause us to disregard other forms of oppression. “The political task according to contemporary anarchism is to attack all forms of oppression, not just the ‘main’ one, because without an attack on hierarchy itself, other forms of oppression, will not necessarily wither away after capitalism (or patriarchy or colonialism) is destroyed” (Olson, 2009, p. 37). Drawing from what Olson states about disrupting and attacking the hierarchies and oppressions we face (all of them—not just one), we can apply these ideas to a consideration of bodies, embodiment, and hierarchies established surrounding the social construction of the body.

I am particularly interested in the ways in which capitalism reinforces what bodies should look like, how they

should function, and what they should do. We see this push in capitalist society for the ideal body and what is deemed acceptable by standards set by those in power. Standards of beauty play an integral role in perpetuating inequalities. But because they are so taken for granted, the *standards* themselves are not always noticed as the source of many people's collective pain and anxiety. Regardless of gender, race, or class, the body is policed and also labeled as either "right" or "wrong." Corporations are making money off of our bodies, whether it is from our labor or spending/wasting our time trying to achieve an unattainable image that has been manufactured for us to idealize. While anarchists are not devoid of talking about bodies, it is largely from the aspect of gender and not size. Rethinking the way that capitalism has created a space of not only self-hatred, shame, oppression, and inequality, but also how it perpetuates these oppressions on a daily basis for us, as fat people, is very similar to the ways in which it oppresses us in all of the classical ways anarchists study—as laborers, through a gendered and racialized perspective, and of course, a class perspective. Fat acceptance is intertwined with class struggle.

In a capitalist society, we are all either products or consumers (sometimes both). We are all sold a false notion of what the "perfect size" is and then told that we must stop at nothing to reach this unattainable goal. In this endless stream of advertisements, we are not only shown what we should be; we buy into the idea of hating ourselves. The negative self-talk that comes from living in a capitalist society hell-bent on selling us something to change our bodies is beyond self-destructive. As Nomy Lamm (1995) argues in her essay, "It's a Big Fat Revolution," it is a revolutionary act to love and accept yourself in a society that labels you as an "Other" or an outsider. We must fight against systems of domination and oppression such as racism, ableism, heterosexism, sexism and also, fat oppression. Anarchism argues for the destruction of capitalist society and to build one not based on hierarchies. In place of these systems of hierarchy, anarchists propose a human community based on autonomy, solidarity and mutual aid (Daring, Rogue, Shannon & Volcano, 2013, p. 8). While we anarchists fight state oppression, we also struggle against all forms of oppression.

Fat individuals are dehumanized on a regular basis in capitalist society. They

are the subject of jokes, bullying, and ridicule on a regular basis—patterned inequality and abuse reinforced by socialization and the media as an acceptable way in which to treat people who do not have what is considered an “acceptable” body size. Life does not happen inside of a vacuum and we experience the world in very different ways based on our identities. As a fat woman, strangers suggest ways that I can become “healthier” when they know nothing of my health. It is an interesting dynamic being a fat woman who is also a sexual being, because I am usually either seen as completely asexual and devoid of any attractive markers, or I am fetishized and those who do find me attractive hide it for fear of the backlash they will receive. Fatness carries with it a social stigma of being unworthy, lazy, uneducated, ugly, unhealthy, and countless other negative, and largely false descriptors (Burgard, 2009). We are socialized to view fat individuals in this light. We live in a world that does not let fat people fit into it, whether we are speaking *literally* such as the desks in classrooms or airplane seats; *politically*, where politicians are policing our bodies, food intake, and shaming us; or *figuratively*, where corporations are rubbing their hands together hoping that we hate

ourselves enough to buy into the new fad diet.

### **Anarchism, Fat Feminism and Queer Theory**

Queer theory is, in part, based on the perspective of looking at identities that are non-normative or those that veer away from the standardized expectations associated with how people *should* act, what they *should* look like, and how they *should* live their lives. Simply put, queer theory looks at the world, as bell hooks (1984) puts it, “from margin to center.” Looking at adiposity, or fatness, from a queer perspective highlights the ways that people are marginalized and “othered” based on the size and shape of their body. Contemporary society thrives on binaries rather than on a spectrum when it comes to many identities and bodies. Within these binaries, we see what is labeled as either “normal” or “abnormal.” When society dictates what is “normal” rather than accepting and allowing for a variation, hierarchies emerge.

In “Fattening Queer History” (2009), Levy-Navarro speaks to queering and queer as an inclusive, non-normative/challenging normativity, including fat people. In her piece she references the need for a “historical

turn in fat studies” (p. 17) because history is used to debase the non-normative [LGBTQ and fat folk]. The need to queer fat history is to not only to give fat people a voice but also to acknowledge their right to existence and to understand the lives, the struggles, and the oppressions they have endured and continue to face. “Queer scholars readily acknowledge that it is the linear nature of modern time that makes the lesbian, the queer, the transgendered [and I’d add, the fat] an afterthought” (p. 17). For example, “modern linear time always sees lesbian identity as literally of in consequence because she is positioned outside this sequential ordering” (Levy-Navarro, 2009, p. 17). There has been a historical and also contemporary othering of anything and anyone that/who does not fit inside the constructed boxes and bodies that capitalist society has constructed for them. Therefore, when you do not fit inside that mold, you are merely an afterthought, never at the forefront of what society views as acceptable or even “normal.”

Research has shown that fatness is linked to socioeconomic status. “Poverty has been strongly linked to low-quality nutrition, which can result in weight gain because excess calories must be consumed to maintain

adequate intake of vital nutrients. Household income is highly correlated with diet quality” (Ernsberger, 2009, p. 26). Impoverished neighborhoods are much more likely to be “food deserts”—geographic spaces in which highly nutritious foods are scarce and, when present, are often more expensive than mass produced food. Ernsberger’s work speaks to the fact that fatness is actually impoverishing as many plus-sized people are discriminated against because of their size. This illustrates how fatness and class are related, but, beyond that, illustrates that they can both be seen as playing a role in causing and being caused by the other—they exhibit a quality social scientists refer to as “reciprocal effects.” This means that it is critically important to ask two questions at the same time: (1) Why are poor people more likely to be fat?, and (2) Why are fat people more likely to be poor? While many might understand some of the ways that poverty could play a role in causing fatness, fewer consider the ways that fatness can lead to poverty.

An astonishing longitudinal study of fat and thin teenagers that then followed up with the same individuals seven years later found very different circumstances: Ernsberger (2009) found that roughly one quarter of fat young

women were married after seven years compared to more than half of thin women. He found that fat young women only earned roughly two-thirds of the income that thin women did in the sample, and thus, were much more likely to live in poverty. This was partially accounted for by the fact that fat young women in the sample were dramatically less likely to obtain a college degree (p. 27). In the same study Ernsberger drew correlations between gender and class and found that the relationship between fatness and impoverishment was less pronounced among men in the study; but, fat men were in similar situations compared to thin men of the same study. Perhaps most telling, thin subjects were found to be in better socioeconomic situations than fat participants even after controlling for a variety of variables, including intelligence. Intelligence may have helped thin women and men get out of poverty, but intelligence did not work the same way for fat individuals. The study also controlled for self-esteem and ruled this variable out as being a factor explaining lower socioeconomic status. The study also examined fatness and health, asking if impoverishment was caused by chronic illness usually related to weight. They found that the young people were no

more likely than others to have chronic health conditions. “When they looked at young people who really did have chronic health problems like asthma, diabetes, or epilepsy, the rates of marriage and college completion and levels of income were completely unaffected” (Ernsberger, 2009, p. 27). What this means is that being fat had more of an affect on life options and life trajectories than did things like asthmas, diabetes, and epilepsy. In this study, impoverishment was not shown to stem from health conditions, but prejudice. People at the bottom of the social strata are far more likely to be overweight or fat than those in the upper class. And this issue is also gendered; women are more affected than are men.

### **A Paradox: Invisible and Hyper-visible**

Not only does fatness impact the socioeconomic status of individuals, but also their health, advocacy, and awareness. Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS) is an illness that impacts many plus size women and approximately between 6-10 percent of women could be diagnosed as having PCOS (Fisanick, 2009). Because many of the women with this endocrine disorder are also fat women, the illness



often goes undiagnosed and untreated for long periods of time. Christine Fisanick (2009) explains in “Fatness (In)visible: Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome and the Rhetoric of Normative Femininity” how this fact impacts women’s lives and forces them to challenge what femininity is and what it looks like. Some of the outward and social symptoms of PCOS are weight gain, hair loss on the head, excessive facial and body hair, and infertility. Sufferers of PCOS embody a different vision of what femininity is, and along with that, they can face discrimination and scrutiny.

In her work, Fisanick (2009) references the national non-profit started to raise awareness about PCOS and to put a face to the illness. Even though the woman chosen as the first spokesperson for PCOS did suffer from the illness—she also went to great lengths and had the access to medical care to seek treatment that does not work for all sufferers. Once she became the face of PCOS, it was clear that those in charge of the campaign were aiming to get an acceptable model for their cause, and not a “true face” of PCOS sufferers. The treatment that she endured, while helping her, removed many of the aspects that make the illness visible to others—rendering

what the syndrome *looks* like for most women who suffer with the condition invisible. This speaks volumes to the aspects of being both invisible and hyper-visible that women and plus size women endure on a daily basis, rendering many silent and invisible; their image being altered in order to be seen as acceptable for societal consumption. This again goes back to the socially acceptable notion of femininity, which is led, not only by constructed images that we see and enforce, but also by the capitalist endeavors that work solely in self-interest and for profit.

Even though PCSOA is a non-profit organization, they found a spokeswoman who would fit their mold of an ideal beautiful woman and bring in more monetary donations and interest to their cause. Plus size people should never be silenced or rendered invisible, perhaps most particularly not when they are the focus of the cause and task at hand. We see this same issue among models in the fashion industry as well where “plus size” models are very similar to average size models, in that they do not accurately represent the size of many actual plus size people. These aims are all focused around profit and capitalist gain, helping to produce the feeling that we do not fit

inside a mold, and not only that, but that we *should* fit inside and to which we *should* be constantly striving to conform. Thus, the rich continue to get richer and fat individuals are feeling the pressure to fit in and to try to change themselves while also being told that their bodies, their illnesses, and they themselves are not good enough to fight for or accept.

Using the fields of anarchism, fat studies and queer studies, this is an auto-ethnographic investigation of the intersections of these three interdisciplinary fields—a reflection on my own personal experience and its relevance to these intersections. By critically interrogating my own embodiment, I illustrate the value in examining these intersections in more detail. Throughout my life, I have had my gender questioned based on the size of my body and the way in which I dress. When I walk through life confident and with my head held high, people question where I get off being so self-centered and want to know how I can love this life as a fat woman. I experience a daily barrage of diet advertisements, unsolicited advice on my eating habits, and suggestions from both individual strangers and businesses on ways that I can force my body to conform to societal expectations. My

story is relevant, as are those of others. Looking at the life experience of fat individuals and how capitalism benefits from their exploitation is pivotal not only because the intersections of these fields are lacking, but also because, as an anarchist, it is my aim to work toward the liberation of everyone. The ever-inspiring words of bell hooks, as cited in her interview with Lowens (2011), ring through my head:

Dare to look at the intersectionalities. Dare to be holistic. Part of the heart of anarchy is, dare to go against the grain of conventional ways of thinking about our realities. Anarchists have always gone against the grain, and that's been a place of hope (p. 7).

Capitalism and institutions operating within a capitalist framework do not make room for fat individuals and therefore, we must make our voices heard through any means necessary. The beginning of the revolutionary act is accepting yourself and allowing yourself to be the person you are. I have witnessed the capitalist, heteropatriarchy feeling threatened—made uncomfortable by my own self-acceptance. As Halberstam (2013) explained in *Gaga Feminism*, this is a new way of being, seeing, and interacting with society, abandoning the norms and accepting and embracing all bodies. I

won't preach to anyone that they should love their body, because I know what it is like to have days in which your body has betrayed you, when you are in so much pain you can't see straight. However, I refuse to be silent as capitalism turns the body, your body, my body, into a commodity. I refuse to believe that we are not whole until we buy the latest and greatest item to achieve some unattainable goal of the ideal beauty.

### **Mapping my Method and Research**

Identifying as an anarchist and being a fat woman, I will say that even in practice the two do not always meet. The body positivity movement and the anarchist movement have not, as far as I can tell, joined forces. They do not necessarily see one another as allies in a common fight. While I have seen a shift toward changing attitudes in anarchist circles, it is just in the beginning stages. As anarchists we must work against the imagery of the past that has been ingrained in our culture to shame fat individuals as being greedy and equating them with "the capitalists." Further marginalizing individuals based on their body size and using derogatory language centered on fat shaming are examples of actively taking on the role that capitalist society plays in our lives.

By placing fat people in the abnormal category of an "other," we simply create more hierarchies that divide us from one another and create inequality. There are many instances where I have been present to hear fat jokes come from comrades. While this is hurtful to me personally, it also works as an agent to break apart the relationship of trust and group cohesion. When we accept aspects such as fat shaming from the dominant culture and do not question the ways in which our comrades are impacted by this oppression, we are leaving comrades behind and essentially saying that their fight does not matter as much as the other oppressions that we struggle against.

This work emerged and evolved from a place of darkness in which I was immersed. For nearly thirty years I have spent my time hating my body and buying into the subjective socialization that my body was wrong and that as a fat woman, I'd grown in the wrong direction. For me this has always been a place of rage in which I have to fight to claim my space, speak loudly and affirmatively to my right to take up space. It was faster for me realize the horrible realities of living in a capitalist system than it was for me to realize that I deserve respect, love, and kindness, even from myself. When I think of this

project, I often envision a map that has got me here. I have heard the lines, “You have such a pretty face, if you’d just lose some weight,” and I have broken down into tears, which led to depression and social anxiety because of literally and figuratively not fitting in. These are important markers on my map.

I’m not exactly sure when I made the decision to change the narrative in my head and actively challenge the social construction of the body ideal that surrounded me; but it feels like it started in Dr. LeSavoy’s Feminist Theory course in the spring of 2014. Putting my grievances down on paper for someone else to read added a reality to my struggle. Soon, I found myself actively seeking out fat feminist activists both locally and nationally. It is in the act of seeking my own liberation, whatever that looked like, that leads me to work toward the liberation of others. While I had self-identified as an anarchist and as queer for years before Feminist Theory, it wasn’t until then that I was able to find my own voice

among fat feminists. There is great merit in telling your own story and the importance behind having your voice heard is something that is intrinsically feminist. Audre Lorde (2013) spoke the truth at top volume when she said the struggle for black women does not end when they walk away from the picket line. There is a constant struggle that is endured and that we must actively challenge, as well as respect those who on a daily basis face oppression head-on and are never able to walk away from it.

When we are not given the opportunity to speak our own truth to those in power, we must create room and claim our own space. While the revolution may not come tomorrow and the white supremacist, capitalist, hetero-patriarchy may not be destroyed in one large swoop, it is our duty as radicals and revolutionaries to welcome and embrace marginalized groups and individuals in the community. We as human beings recognize that struggle changes everything and we, as anarchists, must remember that an injury to one is an injury to all.

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