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Anorexia and Bulimia: Anatomy of a Social Epidemic,
by Richard Gordon

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BOOK REVIEW

Never Too Thin. By Eva Szekely. Toronto: Women's Press, 1988, 176 pp., \$14.95.

Anorexia and Bulimia: Anatomy of a Social Epidemic. By Richard Gordon. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990, 216 pp., \$27.95 (cloth), \$17.95 (paper).

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The two books reviewed seek more than a medical or a psychological understanding of the recent increase in eating disorders. Clinical psychologist Richard Gordon (1990) titles his work *Anorexia and Bulimia: The Anatomy of a Social Epidemic* and uses anthropologist George Devereux's *eating disorder* concept as his primary analytic tool. In *Never Too Thin*, Eva Szekely, also a clinical psychologist, conveys a different understanding of the concept of *social*, which does not separate it from the concept of *individual*. She understands the individual and social as coconstituting each other through social relations embedded in individuals' bodies and shaped by individuals' actions. Although Szekely's work is chronologically prior to Gordon's, her critical analysis of the social relations of the pursuit of the never-too-thin body extends beyond his.

Several features of Gordon's work warrant special praise. Because eating disorder is defined as "a pattern that, because of its own dynamics, has come to express crucial contradictions and core anxieties of a society," (p. 7) it consistently directs him to examine the social and cultural context. In particular, the social position of the young women most commonly afflicted raises issues of gender relations and persistent power inequality. Gordon is also consistent in incorporating feminist literature throughout his discussion, even though he does not differentiate strands of feminism or examine them critically.

Gordon is most helpful to those unfamiliar with the general (now extensive) literature on eating disorders by summarizing the important research in the field, describing the history of the medical and psychological perspectives, and demonstrating changes in thought over time. For the reader already familiar with the literature, Gordon may provide overlooked references or information on specific issues. Although he does not offer profound insights to the already initiated, his emphasis on female developmental iden-

tity issues and on the similarity of eating disorders to Devereux's eating disorders is of interest.

The third chapter helpfully provides information from many studies done worldwide. Because Gordon's emphasis is on the relationship of culture to the pathologies of eating, this worldview is important to his case and particularly interesting for sociologists. Unfortunately, his lack of original empirical investigation into the genesis and treatment of eating disorders is disappointing, as is the absence of a theoretical advance over Devereux's original framework.

As promised, Gordon discusses social, cultural, and historical issues related to eating disorders, as well as individual and familial psychological dynamics. He is less successful at maintaining an analysis that intertwines the social and individual; he seems ultimately to see the social as acting on the individual. He also emphasizes the distinction between women who are labeled sick and those who are similar but not extreme enough to warrant a diagnosis. This focus divides women into opposed categories, maintaining the competitive and individualistic thinking that promotes anorexic and bulimic behaviors.

This issue illustrates nicely the difference between Gordon's and Szekely's approaches. Szekely interprets the same phenomenon (the similarities between the diagnosed and nondiagnosed in relation to eating) as evidence that these practices reflect social relations that are universally damaging and therefore require a collective response. She refuses to see women diagnosed with eating disorders as "other" or different. Rather, by reflexively analyzing her own relation to the "tyranny of slenderness," she acknowledges that the problem is not just sick or weak women; it is a potential danger in a capitalist, individualistic, competitive environment that objectifies women and demands high consumption and extreme thinness.

Szekely's discussion of the power of medical discourse to block certain avenues of questioning is excellent. She was made aware of the power of discourse by Dorothy Smith. Concepts such as eating disorders, anorexia nervosa, and bulimia are ideological because they hide the relations among the subjects being studied. They also place the researcher or observer outside the conditions that produced these practices (p. 15). Her commitment to avoiding medical labels in *Never Too Thin* demonstrates how questioning these concepts opens up fundamental themes. In this case, it allows Szekely to discuss the phenomena not as an individual pathology but as a collective response to the social relations of a specific political-economic situation.

Szekely's analysis is organized around five interviews with women suffering from the relentless pursuit of thinness. Although she works as a clinician with hospitalized women labeled anorexic and bulimic, Szekely chose nonhospitalized women for her interviews. She refers to Dorothy Smith's work and ideas as an influence on her decision to ground her analysis in the words and lives of women who live every day with food, body, and weight issues, yet she fails to describe a systematic methodology. For social scientists, this is problematic, but, for popular readers, this may not be a major difficulty. Her work benefits greatly from the women's stories. Each chapter tells a different story, combined with analysis utilizing extensive research and popular literature.

An index would improve Szekely's book; many of the topics covered and ideas discussed, such as the political economy's relationship to eating disorders and specific diet and fitness industry practices, are too important to be buried in nonspecifically labeled chapters. Although the "heavy hitting" theoretical implications of her findings are summarized in the final chapter, her summary overlooks many insights offered in earlier chapters. The theory chapter impressively blends phenomenological social psychology (particularly Merleau-Ponty and Vygotsky), critical theory (including Foucault, Waters, Probyn, and Fay) and various feminist theorists (such as Chernin, Smith, Haug, and Sayers) in a search for a theory that can adequately account for the body in society.

I have been perplexed by the absence of references to Szekely in recent literature covering social or political economic perspectives on eating disorders. Perhaps the methodology appears to be too weak for academics, but I believe the theoretical contributions outweigh the lack of rigorous methods. It is also possible that Szekely's focus is not of interest to psychologists because of her social policy and collective action emphasis. But for sociologists, it is precisely these features that offer ground for more research into the power of discourse to construct an issue and the potential power for collective action to address Szekely's guiding question: "How can we change social relations so that the pursuit of thinness becomes less likely to emerge?" (p 178).