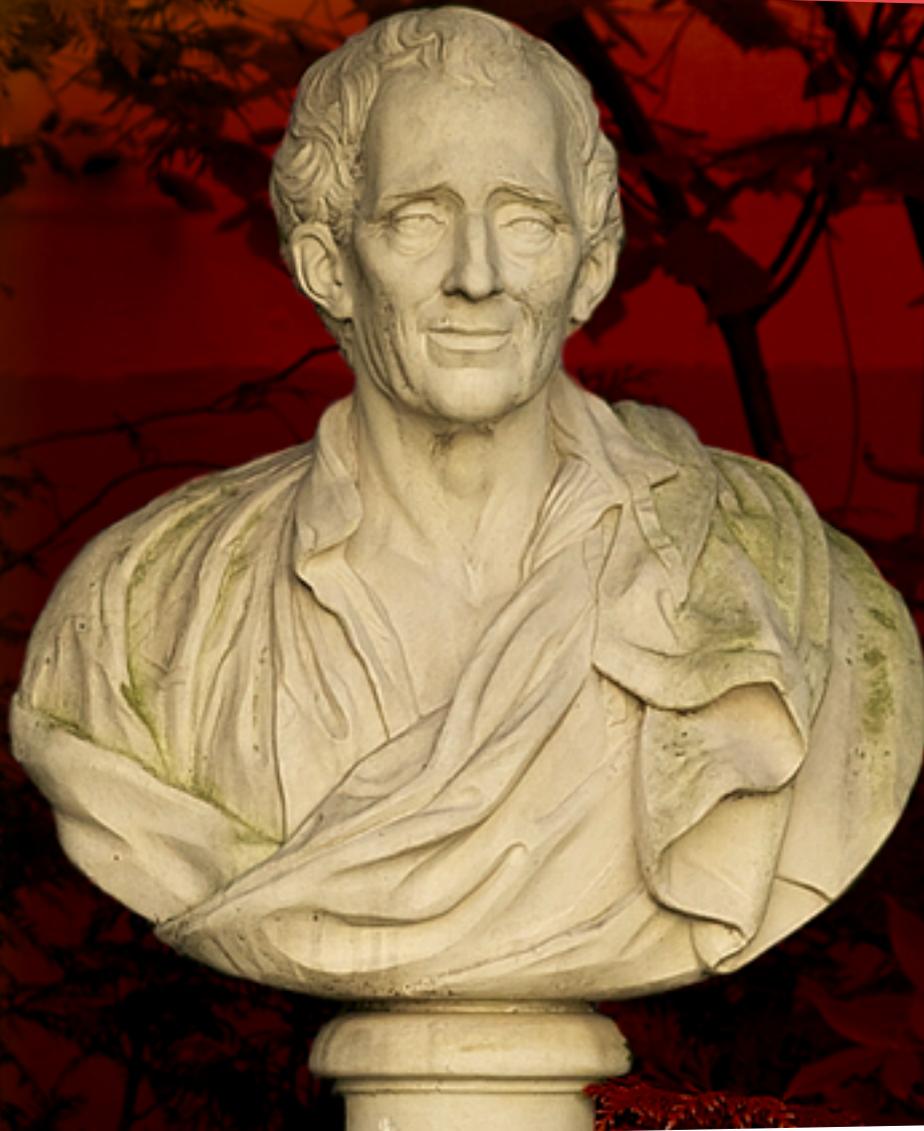


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Patrick Troude-Chastenet, Professeur of Political Science, Centre Montesquieu de Recherches Politiques, University of Bordeaux



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Of body (mis)perception in technical societies: thoughts on two amendments to France's health laws

Patrick Troude–Chastenet, Professor of Political Science, *Centre Montesquieu de Recherches Politiques*, University of Bordeaux

“These two behaviours, celebration and distrust or contempt of the body, are not contradictory: they work together. (...) Where seems to dominate his exaltation, one wonders whether his ‘liberation’ does not consist in the project to get rid by all means” (1).

“Tell me about 25% of young girls who are overweight, then we can talk about the 2% who are anorexic” (2). The Karl Lagerfeld pirouette to avoid answering a question on the amendments to France's health laws, criminalising incitement to thinness, would not deserve to be mentioned here if it did not point to a paradoxical situation that involves thinking about two antithetical phenomena together rather than separately. In our contemporary societies, it would appear that two contradictory rationales now clash. While consumer capitalism (3) produces a long line of overweight and obese people, the technical system strives to make them lose weight to the tune of an advertising jingle: *“Fitness, not fat!”*, which came about in the 1970s (4). More precisely, sociological propaganda (5), within the meaning of the term coined by Jacques Ellul, strives to impose on all its members the single ideal of the slim, and therefore efficient, body. A body honed to machine-like perfection, stylised and refined by advertising, the ubiquity of which should not hide its more conformist creative nature. In reality, society as a whole is expressed through the models – namely the supermodels – that it has chosen for itself. So society as a whole chooses to make being overweight the stigma of social inefficiency. The modern individual is thus subject to a double bind: while market capitalism invites the wealthy and privileged to enjoy the pleasures of good food whilst condemning the less fortunate to an industrial diet that is high in fat, sugar and salt, technical societies instill (ascetic) ethics and (puritanical) aesthetics in relation to fitness, based on the balance of a seductive and efficient body.

These trends ought, however, to be analysed as two sides of the same coin but also as two antithetical rationales that render the condition of the modern individual even more untenable, immersing it in a perfectly schizophrenic universe. They lead some to being overweight or obese, others into the senseless cult of thinness, pushed to its climax for some (young) women who become followers of the “thigh gap”. They condemn the vast majority of ordinary people to a relentless search for the efficient body demanded by the techno-capitalist system.

I. Excess weight and obesity as symptoms of consumer capitalism

Notwithstanding genetic factors which, moreover, are not to be taken alone but rather in conjunction with a multitude of variables including dietary practices and physical activity, excess weight and obesity should be analysed as social facts. The techno-capitalist system produces obese and overweight individuals through multiple factors which may combine to cause while causing a downward spiral of ill-effects. Its mode of production and consumption is essentially based on industrial food, junk food (bad fats and sugar at the expense of fruit and vegetables) on a large scale and low-quality frozen foods in every supermarket aisle. To food issues can be added

the lack of physical activity resulting from an addiction to screens and the systematic use of means of mechanized transport. These factors are to be understood in light of the different mechanisms of social exclusion. Food quality is closely related to social status and/or class. Dietetics, and organic food, is still the preserve of the upper classes, while the poor are condemned to cheap, poor-quality food. Similarly, the tendency to gain weight is directly related to the level of education and, therefore, income. The less qualified a person is, the more likely they are to be obese. People who undertake postgraduate studies are three times less likely to be obese than those who have not reached BEPC level (the BEPC is the certificate awarded by schools at the end of the first four years of general secondary education). We can legitimately speak of a double stigma because women from disadvantaged backgrounds are the main victims of obesity (*Haute autorité de santé*, 2011). So let us have no fear of words: in most cases in Europe, making fun of the big (women) is also to mock the poor!

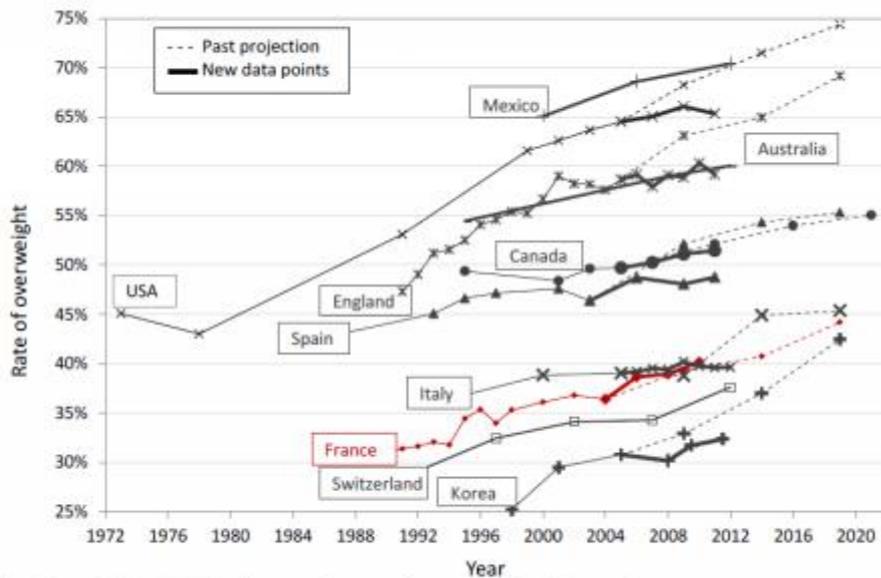
We will first examine the issue of being overweight in France before looking at it from a global perspective. In particular, we will attempt to discover whether there is greater social pressure on women and their bodies in France than in other countries.

I.1. Excess weight and obesity in France

The definition of excess weight and obesity is based here on WHO standards, namely a body mass index (BMI) equal to or greater than 25 for overweight individuals, calculated by dividing weight by the square of height; and a BMI of 30 or greater for obese individuals. Since 1997, in fact, the WHO has made the BMI its standard for measuring the health risks associated with excess body weight. The diagnosis of obesity or excess weight involves other factors, including the waist measurement midway between the last rib and the top of the iliac crest. Furthermore, these standards raise some concerns among social scientists (6). BMI only provides an indicator to be interpreted cautiously by correlating it with other parameters, and case by case, when it comes to preparing for a medical procedure, which is beyond the scope of this paper. In France, there were more than twice as many obese individuals amongst the poor (35%) than in the rest of the population (16–17%) in 2013 (over 30% of overweight individuals, according to the same survey conducted on 3 May 2014 for MGEN) against 11% of obese people in the world in 2008, according to WHO figures published in 2014. Several studies published in 2012 reveal that while in France, there is a certain prevalence of female obesity, beyond obesity in the strict sense men suffer more weight-related problems. Yet it is women who watch their diet. This is the case for eight out of ten women, knowing also that 6.7 out of ten women even go as far as dieting. But while human fatness is associated with power, in women it is a sign of disgrace.

In 2012, obesity affected 15% of the adult population, corresponding to just over 6.9 million obese individuals, about 3.3 million more than in 1997 (7). Excess body weight affects 53.1% of men (14.3% obese) and 42% of women (15.7 obese). But if we refer to OECD figures, we can begin by asking whether the French, especially women, see themselves as larger than they are. Even though they have risen steadily (Fig. 1), the rates of obesity and excess body weight in France are among the lowest in the OECD. Indeed, only one in eight people is obese in France, and 40% of the population is overweight (including obese individuals). In other words, along with the Swiss and the Koreans, the French are statistically the thinnest residents in OECD countries (8).

Figure 1. Évolution des prévalences de surpoids (y compris obésité) chez les adultes, projections et estimations récentes, quelques pays de l'OCDE

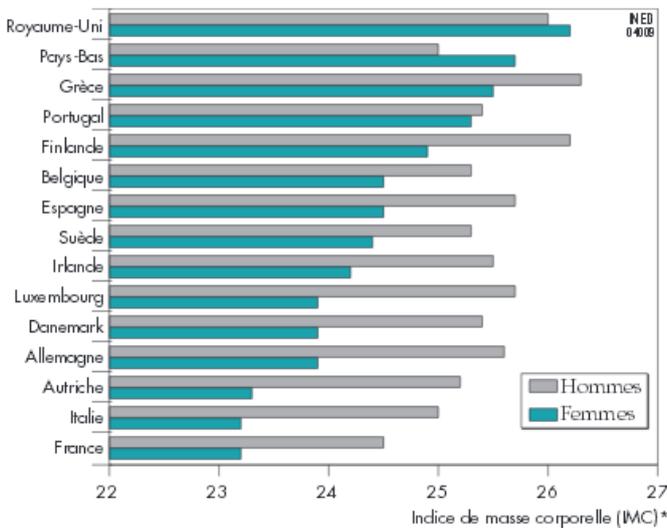


Source: Estimations de l'OCDE basées sur des enquêtes nationales de santé.

Note : Données de poids et de taille mesurées en Australie, Angleterre, Corée, États-Unis et Mexique ; auto-déclarées and les autres pays.

Furthermore, average corpulence in France is the lowest in Europe.

Figure 1 - Corpulence moyenne en Europe selon le sexe



* Définition et calcul de l'IMC : voir encadré 1.

Note : la corpulence moyenne des hommes en Europe est plus importante que celle des femmes, sauf au Royaume-Uni et aux Pays-Bas.

(T. de Saint Pol, *Population & Sociétés*, n° 455, Ined, avril 2009)

Source : Commission européenne, Eurobaromètre 59.0.

(1) Les pays pris en compte ici sont les 15 pays de l'Union européenne en 2003, pondérés par le poids de leur population respective.

* Laboratoire de sociologie quantitative (Insee) et Observatoire sociologique du changement (Sciences Po)

Despite this proven statistical fact, women in France continue to think they are too fat. Not only do half as many women consider their weight to be too low than those who are actually underweight (BMI under 18.5), but when they are objectively Europe's thinnest with a BMI of 23.2, they are still

unhappy with their weight since in their eyes the ideal BMI value would be 19.5%, the lowest in Europe (9). Should we interpret these figures in light of what Jacques Ellul called sociological propaganda? In any case, how can we not see the mark of a certain social pressure, the symptomatic result of media hype, seeking not “to get some idea of the woman but to make the woman an idea”, as one communication specialist put it (10)? But while in France, the USA and Canada, some thin women would literally kill themselves in their quest to lose weight in order to look more like their fashion icons, in the wider world the portly population continues to grow.

I.2. Overweight and Obesity in the world

According to the latest WHO report, between 1980 and 2014, the number of cases of obesity has more than doubled worldwide (11). Moreover, while the number of overweight adults was already 1.4 billion in 2013, this figure rose in 2014 to over 1.9 billion people including 600 million obese individuals, around 13 % of the adult population. While extreme poverty and hunger are on the decline, the pattern is the reverse for excess body weight.

Overweight weight and obesity are the leading risk factors for premature death worldwide and now concern all wealthy countries but also most middle-income countries. The WHO thus concurs with the findings of a study published in 2014 by a British think-tank noting the explosion of the phenomenon in developing nations (12). In those countries, the number of overweight people almost quadrupled between 1980 and 2008, rising from 250 million to 904 million people. More than in developed countries, where their number has increased by only 1.7. Lastly, the first synoptic study to gather all data available on this topic on the basis of a unified methodology goes in the same direction as, across all ages, it accounts for 2.1 billion overweight humans in 2013. Carried out by an international team covering 188 countries, it is summed up in this simple statement from its coordinator: *“the increase in obesity and excess weight was significant, generalised and fast”* (13).

However, in order to view it all its social and political aspects, this “health scourge” must also be analysed by taking into account the disparities between the sexes and between countries. In developed countries, obesity is a male phenomenon while the reverse is true in developing countries. In 2013, in developed countries, almost one child or young person in four was overweight. In developing countries, this was nearly one in eight, for both sexes. However, while being overweight is a sign of prosperity in developing countries and the number of obese people is steadily increasing in the four major emerging countries (BRIC) as well as in Mexico (14), Egypt and Pakistan; by contrast, in developed countries – especially among young women – the obsession is slimming diets; hence the French law of April 2015 to suppress any form of incitement to thinness on the internet and in fashion circles.

II. The obsession with thinness as a symptom of techno-capitalist organisation

In France, more than eight out of ten women (83%) would watch their diet to slim down (15). According to WHO standards, just over four in ten of them have good reason to do so. In developed countries, particularly in France and in Anglo-Saxon countries, the quest for thinness has at least three faces for many women: regular, medical, and extreme.

II.1. The regular quest for thinness: the powerful body

Where does the boundary between the normal and the pathological, between the legitimate desire to feel “in shape”, “good about our bodies” – according to the now-sacred terminology – and

submission to the dictates of fashion? What about the mental corset imposed mainly on women through communication–propaganda, or through media hype? In order to justify criminalising the glorification of thinness and filing its two “anti–anorexia amendments”, the *rapporteur* of the draft health bill, Olivier Veran, explained: “*We must give a halt the idea that to be beautiful a woman should virtually disappear*” (16).

To lose weight, people are implementing several strategies and due to some extreme behaviours (undernourishment to achieve the “thigh gap”), you could almost say that we go from mad diets to diet madness, if such a term were not improper to designate anorexia nervosa.

A study by doctors from the INSERM reveals that two out of three women and one in two men in France would lose weight (17). An observation deemed alarming by Serge Hercberg, coordinator of the study: “*The pressure of a certain body image in our society is such that even normal–weight subjects, neither obese, nor even overweight, go on diets (...). There really is a problem of body perception, of models conveyed by the media*”. In France, 67% of women and 39% of men surveyed had followed at least one diet in their lives. 30% of women had followed at least five. “*They start earlier, 36% of them had started between 15 and 25 years of age, as opposed to 18% of men*”.

After being suspended for a week for having prescribed Mediator to a patient wanting to lose weight, the famous Pierre Dukan was struck off France’s medical register in 2014 for having confused trade and medicine and stepping too lightly on the slippery slope of the eating habits of adolescents. In a book addressed to the President of the Republic, Dukan proposed nothing less than creating an “ideal weight” option at baccalaureate level. The idea is students gain points for remaining “in a normal weight range” between *première* and *terminale* (translator’s note: equivalent to lower and upper sixth forms in the UK, 11th and 12th grades in the US). Fortunately this “brilliant” idea was a resounding flop, with public authorities, the voluntary sector, and scientific and medical bodies. “*Corpulence is being made a symptom of social inefficiency and even of disease, since we are attempting “medicalise” aesthetics. It is a grotesque representation of weight gain, necessarily bad in itself*” (18).

This ordinary pursuit of thinness, mainly affecting women but also an entire population subjected to the ideal of the socially powerful body, broadcast by the communication devices of the techno–capitalist system, sometimes takes the medical route, with the complicity of the various public–health stakeholders.

II.2 When drugs replace diet (Mediator)

Our own work once led us to examine a health scandal generally analysed through the prism of conflicts of interest. However, while we wished to draw attention to a dimension all too often neglected by the various observers of the greatest public health scandal in France since the “dirty blood” case, namely the emblematic expression of the technological hold on the political decision–making process, it must not be forgotten that, at the root of this scandal, there is a tacit agreement between a laboratory wishing to make money and millions of people wanting to lose weight (19).

Indeed, this famous antidiabetic drug (benfluorex) sold in France from 1976 to 2009 that was originally – and officially always – intended only for overweight diabetics was deliberately misused, with the active and criminal complicity of the manufacturer, Les Laboratoires Servier, that of

prescribing physicians, and with the passive complicity of patients. In reality, Mediator was prescribed as an appetite suppressant in one in three cases and its sales had doubled soon after the ban on another Servier drug, Isomeride, belonging to the same family of fenfluramines, also an anorectic with very serious side effects. Among these was a rare and deadly disease: pulmonary arterial hypertension. In April 2013 an independent expert report commissioned by the Paris prosecutor's office said that this molecule was responsible, in France, for 220 to 300 deaths in the short term, 1300–1800 deaths in the long term and 3100–4200 hospitalisations. Prescribed as an appetite suppressant for hundreds of thousands of obese individuals in the US and Canada, the US laboratory that marketed Isomeride and Ponderal under Servier's license was ordered in 2001 to pay \$14 billion to victims.

In 2004, Mediator was the 36th best-selling drug in France, with an estimated 5 to more than 7 million users in France. How can we offer a different interpretation of these millions of off-label prescriptions to that issued by the famous nutritionist mentioned above, as so many requests for a slimmer body? Thinner in order to be more “beautiful”, admittedly, but above all “higher performance”, like a powerful vehicle, more efficient according to the dominant standard of the techno-capitalist society. A little in the way of this reified body, a form of “mechanical armour” that can be found in Le Corbusier's Modulor (20). Remember, moreover, that the search for efficiency is at the heart of the definition of technique adopted by one of his leading specialists (21).

II.3 The extreme pursuit of thinness: the thigh gap

Not only do young women, mostly teenage girls, take a small number of the elite supermodels as their role models, but it is only a part of their body that they erect as an absolute model. Since February 2013 in the US and June of the same year in France, the virtual community has registered a veritable torrent of photographs, depicting a specific part of the owners' bodies, the thighs, often accompanied by comments that exudes an almost mystical desire to achieve the *Magic Gap*. To be anecdotal on a statistical level (22), this phenomenon is also symptomatic of the mad race for thinness in a world that continues to grow. This “thigh gap” trend consists in obtaining the largest possible gap between the two thighs, standing feet together, the goal being that the thighs never touch, in the image of the great models idolised on the Web: Kate Moss, Victoria Beckham, Miley Cyrus.

While the thigh gap appears unashamedly on the catwalks, this morphology in fashion takes a decidedly pathological twist in a number of teenage girls. Nourished by idealised, often airbrushed, images in magazines, some girls combine the most extreme diets to achieve that Holy Grail. As noted on a medical website, some teenagers reduce their calorie intake to 600 calories a day, when they need at least four times that intake. “*This obsession with thinness grows to great privations, quickly triggering eating disorders, which can lead to serious deficiencies, and in extreme cases, lead to anorexia and depression*” (23). Even though, in the opinion of specialists like Professor Xavier Pommereau, “*anorexia cannot be caught on the internet, any more than it can from looking at models on the catwalk*”, the French legislature intended to punish incitement to excessive thinness as practiced both on the Web, via pro ana sites and in fashion circles. This question can thus be regarded as a public health problem involving eating disorders in adolescents, namely anorectic behaviour for some, usually girls, bulimia or compulsive behaviours (foods rich in sugar and bad fats) for others. It can also be considered as the last avatar of the techno-capitalist society, drawing out the direct consequences of increasingly totalitarian

commercial advertising (there is no longer a single space that is free of advertising, including the air; and advertising is inseparable from the Web) and taking the insidious form of true sociological propaganda, according to the meaning of the French philosopher Jacques Ellul. In this case, the very nature of adolescent use of social networks, the Internet and mobile telephony, the instant transfer of photos and videos, all contribute to the ripple effect of the phenomenon.

As reported in a survey published in an online magazine on popular networks among teens, the hashtag *#thinspiration* brings together pictures of models known for their beauty but especially for their puny silhouettes, like Kate Moss, known in France as “the Twig”. It emerges that while officially, the most popular recommendations are *How to Get a Thigh Gap*, which stresses the importance of exercise and reminds girls not to starve themselves, the reality is less reassuring. *“In fact, girls trade much more drastic recommendations: “never eat anything bigger than a cup”, “drink ice water to burn calories faster”, “swallow cotton balls so you don’t feel hungry”, posted on one forum. “I’ll be glad when I have my thigh gap. People will think I’m beautiful, slim and interesting. It finds me beautiful, slim and attractive. Everything will finally begin” was posted on another forum” (24).*

No need to be an expert in the fashion world to realise that the models there are getting younger and younger and thinner and thinner, and that anorexia is inextricably linked to it. Amongst others, the testimony of Georgina Wilkin (25) confirms this: *“My agent told me I was beautiful when I had not eaten for two days. At one point, I got to such a stage that I was hospitalised, and a few weeks later I got a job advertising Prada”*. And this is by no means an exceptional case. If one wishes to mention an extreme case, there is Isabelle Caro. This French former model and actress was 1.65m tall and weighed 25 kg. The photo showing her naked emaciated body, as part of a campaign against anorexia, sparked controversy in 2007. Three years later, the disease with which she had lived since the age of thirteen won. She was only 28 years old. Having to mobilize this naked model, and her truly skeletal body, to bring a sense of morality to the fashion industry and divert young girls from the cult of thinness speaks volumes about the seriousness of the phenomenon. The voluntary charter on body image and against anorexia of April 2008 has not yielded the desired results; in April 2015 the legislature intended to go one step further by punishing employment by an agency of an overly skinny model with a prison sentence of six months and a fine of €75,000. In reality it is not so much a case of protecting models as it is of protecting the girls who emulate them. The presentation states: *“The images of the human body rewarding excessive thinness or wasting and stigmatizing curves undeniably contribute to unhappiness, especially among many young girls. The appearance of some models helps to spread potentially dangerous stereotypes for fragile populations”*. While it is easy to understand the representatives of a society that is aware of the artificial nature of the world of fashion, or the dangerousness of the anorexic behaviours that it encourages, do not want to be accused of extending its exorbitant criteria to the entire French population, establishing it guarantor and custodian of the canons of feminine beauty, one cannot help but wonder about the relevance of repression.

For their part, experts working on eating disorders decided. They were hostile to the creation of a new offence under the Criminal Code and the legislature overrode that view. Following an extensive study on the impact of social networks on people affected by eating disorders, carried out from 2010 to 2014 by an interdisciplinary team, researchers and practitioners tried in vain to be heard by the Ministry of Health. In their own words, the punishment is not “only ineffective

(since it cannot curb the proliferation of controversial content) but also detrimental, as the authors and users of that content tend increasingly to retreat beyond all efforts of health professionals to reach them, to pass on information, to offer them support” (26).

Compared with other countries, France – which, as we have seen, is no exception in the rise of obesity in some segments of the population – appears to be affected by genuine “fat-phobia” pushing women, already the thinnest in the EU, to want to become even thinner. This finding is only a preliminary; there remains the matter of trying to understand all the reasons that other French exception, knowing what is unequivocal about our explanation based on the techno-capitalist organisation of modern society.

Notes

- (1) Patrick Baudru, *Le corps extrême. Approche sociologique des conduites à risque*, Paris, L'Harmattan, coll. Nouvelles Etudes Anthropologiques, 1991, pp. 30–36.
- (2) Catherine Mallaval, Emmanuèle Peyrey et Virginie Ballet, « L'anorexie, maladie au cœur d'un délit ? », *Libération*, 2 April 2015.
- (3) The political theoretician Benjamin Barber uses this concept in Issue n° 95, published in December 2010, of *En Question*, translated to French under the title « Comment le capitalisme consumériste dévore l'Amérique » in *Développement et civilisations*, n°391, February 2011.
- (4) A slogan made famous in France, *La forme, pas les formes !*, intended to vaunt the merits of a low-fat yoghurt, was among the various messages that could be found in the windows of France's pharmacies, encouraging us to "eliminate" our extra pounds, and preceded by several years the subsequent slogan *A fond la forme* (On top form), coined by Jacques Séguéla's advertising agency for Décathlon.
- (5) Jacques Ellul, *Propagandes*, Paris, Economica, 1990, p. 76 et s. (1962).
- (6) Thibault de Saint Pol, « Comment mesurer la corpulence et le poids idéal ? », Histoire, intérêts et limites de l'indice de masse corporelle », *Notes & Documents*, 2007–01, Paris, Sciences Po–CNRS.
- (7) Sources: *Étude Obépi 2012*, *Le Parisien*, *Le Figaro*, 16 octobre 2012. *Le Monde*, www.lemonde.fr/2012/10/16/les-donnees-sur-l-obesite-et-le-surpoids-en-france.html
- (8) www.oecd.org/france/Obesity-Update-2014-FRANCE_FR.pdf
- (9) The ideal BMI is 19.8 for women across the EU; Thibault de Saint Pol, « Surpoids, normes et jugements en matière de poids : comparaisons européennes », *Population & sociétés*, n°455, April 2009.
- (10) Jean-Paul Gavard-Perret, « L'idée du corps, l'image du moins » in *Communication et langages*, n°113, 3ème trimestre 1997. pp. 57–66.
- (11) WHO, *Obesity and Overweight*, Fact Sheet N°311, January 2015.
- (12) The Overseas Development Institute: <http://www.odi.org/future-diets>
- (13) Published in *The Lancet*.
- (14) Tracy Miller, “Mexico surpasses U.S. as world's fattest nation: report”, *NY Daily News*, 9 July 2013.
- (15) Survey conducted by *Top Santé* magazine from 12 to 18 June 2009 with a representative sample of the French population. Respondents were selected and managed in groups based on age, region, and social and professional category. « Les femmes et les régimes : *Les Françaises accros !* »
- (16) *Le Monde*, 16/03/2015
- (17) www.terrafemina.com/nutrition/regime-deux-femmes-sur-trois-veulent-maigrir.html

- (18) Jean-Pierre Corbeau, *Libération*, 4 January 2012.
- (19) Patrick Troude-Chastenet, « From the 'Contaminated Blood Affair' to the Mediator Scandal: Public Health, Political Responsibility, and Democracy » in H.M. Jeronimo, José Luis Garcia, Carl Mitcham. (eds.), *Jacques Ellul and the Technological Society in the 21st Century*, Philosophy of Engineering and Technology 13, Springer Science, 2013, pp. 145-158.
- (20) On this subject cf. Marc Perelman, *Le Corbusier. Une froide vision du monde*, Paris, Michalon, coll. Document, 2015 et « Les conceptions du corps et du sport chez Le Corbusier » in *Quel Corps ?*, Paris, n°26/27, May 1985.
- (21) "The technical phenomenon is therefore the concern of the majority of men of our times: to find absolutely the most efficient method in all things" in Jacques Ellul, *La technique ou l'enjeu du siècle*, Paris, Armand Colin, « coll. Sciences politiques », 1954, p. 19.
- (22) While it seems difficult to claim to give exact figures for followers of the "thigh gap" around the world, it should be noted that the presentation of the amendment banning "pro-ana" websites and that directly targeting modelling circles, state that France has 30,000 to 40,000 persons suffering from anorexia nervosa and that in 2008, it affected 0.5% of young women. Approximately 20% of young women will restrict their food intake or not eat at some point in their lives. These figures have been challenged by researchers working on eating disorders (which include anorexia, bulimia and binge eating disorder), who put forward a total of approximately 600,000 cases.
- (23) www.allodocteurs.fr/actualite-sante-thigh-gap-phenomene-de-mode-ou-derive-anorexique
- (24) *Slate.fr*, 28/06/13
- (25) Article published on the *Huffington Post* website by Emeline Ametis « Anorexie : Une ex mannequin, Georgina Wilkin, se confie sur son combat sur la maladie », October 2013. www.huffingtonpost.fr/anorexie-mannequin-georgina-wilkin-confie-combat-maladie.html
- (26) Paola Tubaro, Fred Pailler, Lise Mounier, Pierre-Antoine Chardel, Antonio A. Casilli, « Un amendement qui met en danger les malades », *Libération*, 2/04/ 2015. Cf. également, Antonio A. Casilli, Fred Pailler & Paola Tubaro, « Le phénomène pro-ana : panique morale et effets paradoxaux de la censure », *Le Monde*, 16/11/2012.