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## **Spartan Mirages: Fat, Masculinity, and “Softness”**

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# Spartan Mirages. Fat, Masculinity, and "Softness"

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## **Abstract**

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Building upon previous research on structural tensions between the male body and certain features of ‘modernity’ as well as more recent inquiries into fat and gender in the West, this cross-disciplinary ‘thought piece’ argues that fatness and certain ‘masculine’ ideals have existed in a state of tension since ancient times, and that recurring references to the therapeutic violence of ‘Spartan’ techniques reflect the extent to which such ideas continue to circulate in the present. The first section shows that this tension is most clearly illuminated when we consider how the qualities of fat – as well as the act of fattening – have related to classical ideals about masculinity. The second offers examples of how references to Spartan ‘hardness’ have been cited since the eighteenth century as methods of restoring otherwise ‘soft’ males to a more appropriately vigorous mental and bodily state. Without arguing for an unbroken or unproblematic continuity between ancient and modern culture, it suggests that classical references represent what Pierre Bourdieu sees as ‘the product of an incessant (and thus historical) work of reproduction’.

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**Keywords:** fat, spartan, body

# Espejismos Espartanos. Gordura, Masculinidad, y "Debilidad"

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## Abstract

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Sobre la base de investigaciones previas alrededor de las tensiones estructurales entre el cuerpo masculino y ciertas características de la "modernidad", así como las investigaciones más recientes sobre la gordura y el género en Occidente, esta interdisciplinar "forma de pensamiento" argumenta que la gordura y ciertos ideales masculinos han existido en continua tensión desde la antigüedad, y que las referencias recurrentes a la violencia terapéutica de las técnicas "Espartanas" reflejan el grado en que tales ideas siguen circulando en el presente. La primera sección muestra que esta tensión se observa más claramente cuando consideramos cómo las cualidades de la gordura -, así como el acto de engorde - se han relacionado con los ideales clásicos acerca de la masculinidad. La segunda sección ofrece ejemplos de cómo las referencias a la "dureza" Espartana ha existido desde el siglo XVIII como método de recuperación de los hombres "blandos" a un estado mental y corporal más vigoroso. Sin abogar por una continuidad ininterrumpida o libre de problemas entre la cultura antigua y moderna, en esta sección se sugiere que las referencias clásicas representan lo que Pierre Bourdieu ve como «el producto de una constante (y por tanto histórico) trabajo de reproducción».

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**Palabras clave:** gordura, espartano, cuerpo

If people remember anything from the action film *300* (2006), quite often it's the abs. Based on Frank Miller's 1999 graphic novel, *300* offers a stylized dramatization of the Battle of Thermopylae (480 BCE) in which a small band of Spartan warriors heroically fail to prevent the much larger Persian army from invading Greece. The superior virtue of the Spartans is vividly displayed in their bodies, whose hardness and muscularity pose a stark contrast to their Persian enemies, who display nearly every imaginable form of monstrosity, deformity and perversity. Despite the questionable politics of a film that, when viewed against the backdrop of tensions in the Middle East, could seem to contrast the hardness of freedom-loving 'American' troops against the 'Oriental' perversity of Iran (present-day Persia) (Stevens, 2007; Fotherington, 2012; Nisbet, 2012), moviegoers marvelled at the spectacle of abdominal muscles seemingly shrink-wrapped in skin. Reviewer after reviewer noted the 'phalanx of washboard-stomached Spartans' (O'Connell, 2007) who 'look more like underwear models than warriors' (Andrade, 2007). One predicted that women who see the film will 'swoon over the hundreds of ripped abs and statuesc [sic] bare bodies posed and on display throughout the movie' (Tyler, 2007), while another called it 'the gayest thing I've ever seen. . . . if you like pecs and abs then this is definitely the movie to see' (Dobres, 2007).

After much speculation that those washboard abs were generated by computers rather than exercise, fitness devotees were introduced to the '300 Spartan Workout' which was developed to help the actors get into shape before shooting. Featured on the cable sports channel ESPN and in the pages of *Men's Health* magazine before making its way to YouTube and local gyms, the workout itself has nothing to do with the Spartans. In fact the '300' in the name simply refers to the number of reps a person would need to achieve after weeks of training (Doheney, n.d.). Naturally this tough workout is not recommended for most people, but for an elite few and those who like to think of themselves that way.

However one assesses the political and homoerotic subtexts of *300*, the mobilization of 'Spartan' techniques in our current 'war on obesity' seems well-timed and perhaps inevitable. In fact criticisms of fat have often looked backwards to the idealized physiques of classical antiquity, sometimes with admiration for the harsh measures practiced by the

Spartans. What is sometimes called ‘Laconophilia’, an admiration for the warrior people whose city state was located in the Greek region of Laconia, has a long history in the West, notably among those lamenting a perceived decline of tough and physically fit masculinity under the ‘softer’ and refined conditions of more complex social conditions. Stories of how the Spartans refused to tolerate excess body fat have been a recurring feature of this mystique. According to Plutarch (1934), who criticized the ‘effeminate’ luxury of his first-century Roman contemporaries, the greatest innovation of the Spartan statesman Lysurgus was the creation of common messes in which freemen dined together rather than in the comfortable seclusion of their homes. Corrupting softness could find no foothold in bodies that were prevented from ‘reclining on costly couches at costly tables, delivering themselves into the hands of servants and cooks to be fattened in the dark, like voracious animals, and ruining not only their characters but also their bodies by surrendering them to every desire and all sorts of surfeit’ (p. 234). Every ten days young men were required to present themselves naked before civic leaders who scrutinized their physiques for signs of slack effeminacy, which was most evident in ‘a corpulence that made [one’s] belly prominent’. On one occasion a certain Nauclides was hauled before the Spartan assembly because ‘his body was overlaid with excessive flesh, having become obese through luxurious indulgence’. Condemned as a ‘wanton profligate’, Nauclides was threatened with banishment if he failed to reform his life (Athenaeus, 1933, p. 495-7). The enslaved population of Helots supposedly had it much worse. It was reported that they could be killed if they became too fat and their masters punished for allowing it to happen.

Since much of what we know about Sparta was produced by critics and admirers living outside the city state, reports like these form part of what classicists call the ‘Spartan mirage’ (Ollier, 1933), a haze of myths, half-truths, and misunderstandings that has generated polarized accounts of what life was really like in that warrior state and, more crucially, whether any of it could or should be adopted by non-Spartans. Even if we cannot verify these tales of Spartan hardness, the fact that they have been retold many times over the centuries reveals an almost institutionalized insistence in the West that measured doses of discomfort, discipline and pain are potentially beneficial experiences

that shield people – and men in particular – from the ‘softening’ potential of material pleasure and wellbeing (Forth, 2008).

Of course pleasure and pain are complex and intertwined psychosomatic experiences, especially when it comes to fitness regimens (Crossley, 2006), which is why the ubiquitous gym slogan ‘No pain, no gain’ need not indicate a pathologically negative stance towards the body. Yet despite the expansion and endorsement of consumer pleasure since the eighteenth century, there remains in Western culture a peculiarly ‘masculinist’ fetishization of pain and violence that, when not connected to overtly ‘fascist’ political agendas that self-consciously invoke the harshness of Sparta (Theweleit, 1987; Losemann, 2012; Roche, 2012), often takes aim at fat as a form of ‘feminine’ softness and even ‘rot’ that needs to be eradicated from the personal body if not from the body politic more generally. Thus if a t-shirt for the US Marines Corps (currently available on Amazon.com) allows latter-day Spartans to proclaim to friends, family and passers-by that ‘Pain is weakness leaving the body’, similar slogans proliferate on those fields on which the ‘war on obesity’ is waged. After all, according to the fitness slogan one may find on posters and t-shirts in Britain and North America, ‘Sweat is fat crying’. This is an example of what sociologist Lee Monaghan (2008) calls ‘obesity warmongering’ taking aim at a maligned and ‘feminized body tissue’ (p. 2) that, when present in certain quantities or in the wrong place, is ‘routinely discredited as female or feminizing filth’ (p. 68). But what does it mean for a bodily substance to be gendered in this way? And what can classical antiquity teach us about this on-going cultural tendency to denigrate fat in such terms?

This article offers a preliminary and cross-disciplinary approach to questions that require more careful and extended research in order to be adequately understood. It is thus more of a ‘think piece’ cast in a broadly historical vein. Building upon previous research on structural tensions between the male body and certain features of ‘modernity’ (Forth, 2008) as well as more recent inquiries into fat and gender in the West, it argues that fatness and certain ‘masculine’ ideals have existed in state of tension since ancient times, and that recurring references to the therapeutic violence of ‘Spartan’ techniques reflect the extent to which such ideas continue to circulate in the present. The first section shows

that this tension is most clearly illuminated when we look beyond matters of appearance to consider how the qualities of fat – as well as the act of fattening – have related to classical ideals about masculinity. The second section offers select examples of how references to Spartan ‘hardness’ have been frequently cited as methods of restoring otherwise ‘soft’ males to a more appropriately vigorous mental and bodily state. Without arguing for an unbroken or unproblematic continuity between ancient and modern culture, it suggests that classical references represent what Bourdieu (1998, p. 40) sees as *‘the product of an incessant (and thus historical) work of reproduction’* (emphasis in original). This historical dialectic of continuity and novelty must be a central challenge when approaching the relationship between deeply entrenched warrior images of ‘masculinity’ and the prospect of social change that might bring about the conditions of possibility for fundamentally different realities.

### Looking beyond appearances

With few exceptions (Gilman, 2004; Hill, 2011) historical approaches to fat place such emphasis on corpulence as a matter of appearance that they sometimes insist that our current obsessions reflect a purely ‘modern’ development, as if very fat bodies had been largely unproblematic in earlier times (Rogers, 2010; Farrell, 2011). Levy-Navarro (2008) even describes the entire premodern era as a ‘time before fat’, claiming that ‘fat does not signify’ prior to the focus on appearances that emerged around the sixteenth century (p. 37). Grounding itself in the assumption that ‘modern’ fat stereotypes revolve mainly around aesthetics, much critical work on fat understandably emphasizes the burden that girls and women have been made to bear (Chernin, 1981; Hartley, 2001).

While not entirely incorrect, of course, such claims for the largely ‘modern’ and gynocentric nature of fat stereotyping warrant some qualification when viewed across a longer time line. While it is indeed true that fat bodies in earlier periods were never scrutinized and condemned as they are today, it is incorrect to assume that ‘excessive’ fatness was therefore accepted without reservation.

Claims that, unlike today, fat bodies were revered in the past simply do not stand up to historical scrutiny (Fischler, 1987; Stearns, 1997; Vigarello, 2010). Moreover, insofar as it has historically been considered more appropriate for men to act rather than be seen, it is true that men's relationship to the cult of appearances has left them greater latitude when it comes to body size and shape. Yet there is compelling historical and contemporary evidence that males have also been adversely affected by negative ideas about fat (Gilman, 2004; Bell and McNaughton, 2007; Monaghan, 2008; Pyle and Loewy, 2009; Hill, 2011). This section examines some of the tensions that have historically existed between fatness and masculinity by considering a few examples from antiquity. To do this it approaches fat less with reference to appearance than to the qualities of the substance itself and the fraught nature of the act of fattening itself.

To look beyond appearances means considering fat less in terms of its morphological effects on the body (that is, 'corpulence') than its qualities as a substance that alters the size and shape of the body while also motivating a host of other cultural responses. After all, disgust – the emotion most often linked to perceptions of fat today – is not primarily linked to visual stimuli, but is more 'closely connected to all three of the senses that the philosophical tradition regards as "tactile" senses. . . touch, smell, and taste, rather than sight or hearing' (Nussbaum, 2004, p. 92). Capable of shifting between solid and liquid states, fat is an ambiguous material that mobilizes a wide range of sensory, symbolic and metaphoric associations. Connected in a number of cultures to ideas about fertility, vitality, increase, or transformation, fat participates in the ambivalence that often attends such concepts. As such it is capable of eliciting feelings of pleasure as well as disgust, depending upon context and circumstance (Forth, *in press*). Thus when Hill (2011) probed the status of fatness in antiquity she did not discover unequivocally 'positive' responses to corpulence. Rather she found an unstable idea that 'spills over conceptual binary boundaries and functions much like a cultural trickster, connecting with both life and death' (p. 13). So whereas male corpulence was to some extent a matter of appearances, it was unstable enough to be aligned both with the monumental physiques of the rich and powerful (Smith, 1997; Varner, 2004) as well as the



‘grotesque’ bodies and characters of slaves (Weiler, 2002). The perhaps irreducible ambiguity of fat as a substance arguably offers the material preconditions for a host of ambivalent responses. The ambiguous gender implications of fat come into focus when we consider the links between fatness and recurring gendered concepts of ‘softness’. While the encounter with soft things is certainly capable of eliciting positive responses – indeed ‘softness’ offers a welcome relief from tension and its yielding and insulating tendencies may be comforting and reassuring – Braziel (2001) shows how in the Western intellectual tradition the porous, weak, and yielding have been consistently employed as negative markers of the feminine. An unstable hierarchy of substances and textures thus exists in the West, subtly inflecting the ways in which bodies are experienced and represented. Aspects of this may be detected in some modern ways of explaining disgust. Claiming that ‘the tactile impression of flabbiness, sliminess, pastiness, and indeed of *everything soft*, should count among the disgusting [emphasis added]’, the phenomenologist Kolnai (2004) cites ‘the feel of a flabby body’ (alongside ‘a putrid smell’ and ‘a belly ripped open’) as a sensation that particularly elicits disgust. This is less of a reaction to fat per se than to its location within (and perhaps its capacity to signify) what he sees as a wider pool of potentially – but, he insists, not necessarily – repulsive or contemptible qualities: ‘everything soft’ (pp. 49-50).

Flabbiness and softness thus seem to link up with the feminine in important and culturally durable ways, and to some extent this link between the tactile experience of fat and a more generalized ‘softness’ reinforces Bordo’s (1993) proposal that anorexia crystallizes the long-standing Western philosophical denigration of a ‘feminized’ body in favour of a concept of mind that has been historically gendered as ‘masculine’. Clinical experience complements Bordo’s point by revealing the gendered typology of textures that affects how many anorexic women relate to their bodies. Many of the women studied by Heywood (1996) registered extreme misgivings about ‘soft’ body fat that seemed to reinforce traditional ideas about the ‘feminine’. This is why she claims that ‘Femininity is interchangeable with softness; softness is represented by bodily fat; and all of these things – femininity, softness, and fat – are “disgusting.”’ The reason for the symbology of

this anorexic's language is no mystery. Anorexia is a reaction to pervasive cultural symbols related to femininity' (p. 68).

Even if ideas about softness and the feminine are frequently interwoven, however, the former remains an expansive quality that points beyond femininity per se. The reasons for this make sense when we recall that fat is a substance that cannot be reduced to the human body, but has historically been located in agricultural products as well as in the earth itself. This is one reason that it has offered such potent ways of thinking about vitality and increase as well as excess and decay (Forth, *in press*). Thus Kolnai's (2004) analysis of the 'feel of a flabby body' does not refer explicitly to femininity, but derives from what he sees as a more basic response to organic putrefaction or 'corruption' in general, what he calls 'the soft gushing type of life which resists all solid formations' (p. 71). Insofar as fat also refers to a soft substance capable of manifesting certain unsettling properties redolent of organic decay and contamination, perhaps deep-seated cultural associations between softness and femininity also rest on a more basic (and perhaps especially masculinist?) response to decay and mortality that has been frequently connected to women since antiquity (Bynum, 1995; Miller, 1997). Thus if women in numerous cultures become 'vehicles for the expression of male loathing of the physical and the potentially decaying' (Nussbaum, 2004, p. 113; see also Belkin, 2012), then – in addition to being 'a feminist issue' (Orbach, 1978) – negative responses to fatness raise serious questions about the 'masculine' imaginary that constructs fat as being so abjectly 'feminine' and 'filthy' in the first place. In this expansive cultural sense misgivings about fat and fatness may illuminate a particularly 'masculine' issue.

Space limitations do not permit a full consideration of this issue, but select examples from antiquity show how 'soft' fat was often treated as a 'feminized' and potentially 'rotten' bodily substance. Medically speaking, moisture and fatness were among the most conspicuous signs of the 'cold' female body (Dean-Jones, 1994; Soranus, 1991). If male physiques were said to be naturally more slender, it was because their innate heat and greater activity tended to 'melt' away much of their fat. But fatness had other possible connotations, for the tactile properties of the substance beneath the skin played an important role in constructing the moral category of 'softness' as well as the gendered distinctions that

it enabled. The classical discourse of muscularity that arose at some point between the Hippocratic and Galenic periods reinforced this cultural validation of the hard and taut, establishing a connection between muscles and willpower that has arguably shaped our Western sense of the self ever since. Kuriyama (1999) proposes a fundamental emphasis in Greek medical thought on well-articulated muscles and joints that defined the virtues of (primarily male) willpower over against that which seemed flabby, ill-defined, and ‘womanish’ in other peoples. In fact certain non-Greek peoples were often criticized for the ‘softness’ of character that was sometimes related to the moisture and fleshiness of their bodies and, as in the oft-cited case of the Scythians, was linked to the fatness and ‘effeminacy’ wrought by custom and climate (Hippocrates, 1957; Forth, in press). This tendency to align flabbiness on the side of effeminate ‘others’ persisted in the Roman world, where tales of immensely fat ‘Asiatic’ monarchs were designed to illustrate and reinforce the morally soft and softening aspects of Eastern lifestyles (Athenaeus, 1933; Aelian, 1997).

If ‘softness’ thus implied certain ‘feminine’ qualities, it was implicitly connected to organic, moral and physical decay. This slippage between excessive fecundity and rottenness is a common feature of the ‘softness’ that flesh has generally manifested in Western culture (Bynum, 1995; Tétart, 2004). Less often acknowledged are the subtle but durable links between such images and cultural anxieties relating to consumption, but these too have roots in organic concepts. The now obscure term *luxuriance* denotes superabundant growth or development with origins that are clearly agricultural. While the luxuriant could also refer to flesh that had grown to excess (and not necessarily in a negative or unhealthy way), it is also the etymological root of the *luxuria* despised by ancient moralists (Gowers, 1996). Luxury was what happened when the unchecked quest for physical pleasures and comforts followed its natural course from overripeness to decay. The menace of luxury was most problematic when observed in the bodies and characters of men who, it was widely assumed, had been rendered so ‘soft’ or ‘effeminate’ by pleasures that they possessed no courage, could endure no pain, and would be unable to defend the city from attack (Berry, 1994). Given the military image of masculinity that was implicit to classical republican thought, anxieties about the ‘softening’ effects of luxury combined

archaic ideas about organic decay with the closely related concerns about effeminacy.

Whether occurring in fields or bodies, corruption and decay represented the furthest reaches of abundance. That decay of this sort could have implications for warrior manhood was certainly operative during the Middle Ages, when the troubadour Bertran de Born expressed contempt for any king who, by failing to engage personally in battle, ‘relaxes and fattens up’ and thus ‘becomes fat and rotten’ (quoted in Pfeffer, 1997, p. 56). This gender deviation was not fully reducible to a collapse into femininity, and traditional connections between excessive fatness and putrefaction were renewed and accentuated from the early modern era onward. By the late eighteenth century bourgeois notions of cleanliness were targeting sweat, grime and fat (both inside and outside of the body) as forms of ‘filth’ that interfered with health, beauty and morality (Forth, 2012a) and were projected onto more ‘primitive’ groups both within the West and in other parts of the world (Forth, 2012b). This is one reason that Kolnai (2004) claims that disgust about ‘softness’ refers to organic processes that have exceeded the bounds of ripeness. Insofar as disgust is a violent reaction to ‘*life in the wrong place* [emphasis in original]’ (p. 62), Kolnai maintains ‘that all living material that as such makes itself too conspicuous only too easily becomes suspected of beginning a process of putrefaction’ (p. 71).

Related to such concerns about ‘effeminate’ softness and decay were misgivings about the kinds of power relationship that were implied by the act of fattening. From an agricultural perspective the acts of eating and fattening have historically implied a spectrum of ‘lesser’ life forms that seem docile or unintelligent (as in the case of domesticated animals) or those whose apparent *raison d’être* is to be ‘consumed’, whether figuratively in the case of women (sexual desire has been described since antiquity as a form of ‘hunger’ just as females have been metaphorically likened to ‘food’) or literally as in the case of domesticated or hunted animals. After all, the bounty that fat fields and fattened animals could provide for humans was grounded in the fact that plants and animals were meant to be consumed or devoured, and thus necessarily must have been mastered on some level, whether by being gathered, harvested, hunted, or slaughtered. Hence the tradition of seeing large elite bodies as evidence of wealth, status, and happiness,

but also the popular tendency to describe certain individuals or groups as fearsome predators who ‘devour’ or ‘grow fat’ off of others (Montanari, 1999).

According to ancient models of appetite the act of consumption could easily drift from the moderate enjoyment of sensual pleasures to excesses reflecting a ‘slavish’ submission to one’s desires (Davidson, 1997). Moreover, situations in which one’s control over the process of consumption might be called into question – as revealed in the case of ‘fattened’ animals – could imply very different traits. Domesticated male animals, as every farmer knew, tended to grow fatter once they had been castrated, with the result being that their flesh became more tender and palatable while their dispositions were said to grow softer (Vialles, 1994). The same held true for any kind of animal fattened for consumption, which necessarily placed them in a position of weakness vis-à-vis their human keepers. Indeed, fattened animals were also burdened by the physical presence of their corpulence, which functioned as a second-order form of subjection. The Roman farming authority Varro (1934) had no doubt of the subordination that fat entailed for barnyard fowls: ‘These are shut into a warm, narrow, darkened place, because movement on their part and light free them from the slavery of fat’ (pp. 481-2). To be fattened signified a loss of agency reinforced by the material constraints of the substance itself.

Ancient moralists registered contempt for those who seemed to emulate the more placid of beasts, as if elite males – often imagined as predators capable of ‘devouring’ others – instead allowed themselves to be consumed by their own appetites and to become easy prey for more powerful men. Plato (1980) wondered what people would be like in society that freely provided basic necessities and eliminated the need for vigorous effort to obtain them: ‘is each of them to live out his life getting fattened up, like a cow?’ In his view such people had fattened themselves for the kill by stronger and harder types: ‘it’s appropriate that an idle, soft-spirited, and fattened animal usually is ravaged by one of those other animals who have been worn very hard with courage and labors’ (pp. 196-7). The Stoics extended these ideas in their sharp criticisms of luxuries that threatened to reduce men to the level of the most ignoble of beasts. Seneca (1979) described how dissolute fat who keep late hours and get no exercise are like birds

being fattened for the slaughter, except that such men are personally responsible for the fact that ‘their idle bodies are overwhelmed with flesh’ (pp. 412-3). And, as Plutarch (1934) claimed, the contempt that the Spartans felt for luxury partly sprang from seeing males whose idle pleasure-seeking reduced them to docile beasts being ‘fattened in the dark’ (p. 234) for their eventual slaughter.

Male corpulence thus functioned as an ambiguous sign of social privilege that could celebrate or denigrate, depending on the status and conduct of the individual involved. To be fattened by someone else, in the manner of a pig or goat, suggested mindless passivity and a resemblance to livestock destined for the chop. To grow fat through good living could signify agency, status and enjoyment. It could even indicate a predatory role in which a person or group might ‘devour’ others in a manner commensurate with their power. But this impression of agency remained haunted by another possible interpretation: that such a man had abdicated self-mastery by succumbing to more powerful appetites, thus bringing about an internal reversal of power relations resulting in a sort of self-fattening that could be condemned as ignoble and demeaning. When combined with the idea that fatness signified degree of effeminacy and even rottenness, all of these scenarios involved some degree of ‘softness’ that could be seen as contemptible.

### **Spartan moments**

Fantasies about Spartan hardness as an antidote to the ‘softening’ potential of fat reflect the extent to which some of these ideas have been ingrained in Western culture since antiquity. Obviously it would be anachronistic to suggest that ancient ideas have circulated in a continuous manner through Western culture. While the conduits through which classical ideas were transmitted to medieval and modern culture are too complex to be properly discussed at the moment (Cadden, 1993), the modern West has indeed retained and reimagined a number of ancient ideas about the tense relationship between fat and masculinity that have been crystallized in periodic references to the warrior virtues of Sparta. More research is needed on this subject, and since space limitations do not allow more than a



cursory glance at the ways in Spartan images recur in the anti-fat discourses of the modern West, a few examples will need to suffice.

If the concept of luxury was often vilified by classical republicans it underwent a profound transformation by the eighteenth century. It was during this period that Anglo-American societies began to embrace the idea of 'comfort' as a physically pleasing relationship between the body and its immediate physical environment, a development that encouraged the search for consumer goods that would help to enhance these pleasurable experiences (Crowley, 2001). Related to this development was the formal 'demoralization' of the concept of luxury which, at least when moderately pursued, was increasingly defended as a spur to industry that produced the 'opulence' and 'ease of body' that Adam Smith saw as proof of a positive social condition. Smith and others insisted that the 'martial spirit' that drove masculine bellicosity need not be diminished by this softening of everyday life (Berry, 1994).

Yet despite the apparent endorsement of moderate luxury, Western perceptions of masculinity have not fully shrugged off assumptions that sedentary lifestyles and excessive consumption can render men's bodies and characters 'soft', womanish, and incapable of those most central of traditional male deeds, physical exertion and combat. Ever since the eighteenth century numerous moralists and reformers have expressed concern that overly 'civilized' men in the West had such easy lives that they were growing 'soft' in ways that weakened their bodies as much as they corrupted their morals and willpower. Hence the vigorous measures that would be gradually adopted in a variety of European countries to counteract the negative effects of a pleasure society, from the nationalistic gymnastics developed in German-speaking cultures and the team sports perfected in Great Britain to the even more intense sports that became the rage across the West from the late nineteenth century onward (Forth, 2008). Through such strenuous and sometimes painful practices, it was widely held, males would be able to 'inoculate' (Bederman, 1995) themselves against the softening/feminizing potential of their own cerebral and sedentary society. When dispensed in measured doses, pain and violence have thus continued to be valued for the prophylactic and therapeutic potential they may exercise on the minds and bodies of males. Thus, despite this apparent endorsement of

material pleasures since the eighteenth century, echoes of an idealized warrior past continue to haunt Western images of masculinity, constituting what may be seen as a structural tension within Western perceptions of the male body (Forth, 2008).

It was against this backdrop of increasingly comfortable and sedentary conditions – as well as a resurgence of interest in classical antiquity – that the Spartan mirage arose once more in Europe. This was especially so during the eighteenth century, which is also when debates about luxury raged in many European countries (Mason, 2012). In France one of the most outspoken and prolific Laconophiles to write for the *Encyclopédie*, the chevalier Louis de Jaucourt (1765b) declared that the very name ‘Sparta’ called to mind ‘the greatest virtues’ of all Greek city-states (p. 428). For reasons that are not entirely clear, in his article on ‘obesity’ Jaucourt (1765a) informed readers that the ancient Spartans ‘could not suffer such massive embonpoint’ among the young and imposed strict regimens to keep them fit. This appreciation for corporeal and mental ‘hardness’ was even built into the *Encyclopédie*’s article on ‘cowardice’. Given that the French word for coward, ‘lâche’, is semantically linked to a generalized moral and physical lâcheté (looseness, slackness, softness), one contributor (Anonymous, 1765) wrote that *lâche* can denote flabby stomachs while being ‘synonymous with the abject and shameful’ (p. 165). Here too we see a slippage from the softness of the male body – exemplified partly through fatness – to the more troubling prospect of shameful cowardice.

The socially meliorist and proto-eugenic proposals of some French physicians encouraged a fascination with reforming and, if need be, eradicating unfit bodies. Antoine le Camus (1754) had railed against excessive fatness in his campaign to reform the bodies and minds of the his countrymen, condemning it as a source of ‘disgust’ as well as a symptom of weakness, stupidity, and even barrenness. Although stopping short of recommending such measures himself, Le Camus (1753) admired how, this wise nation’ Sparta would punish fat men because they were suspected of having ‘little prudence or understanding’ (pp. 14-5). Others, like Joseph-Adrien Lelarge de Lignac (1774), suggested that a man who was ‘flabby, soft, and covered in fat’ was not really capable of reproducing anyway: ‘too weak for extracting his subsistence from the bosom of the earth, too weak for daring



attempt to serve his country with warlike weapons in his hands, who is a bad labourer and a bad soldier, can [such a man] be a good spouse?’ (p. 60). Blaming the emergence of such flabby fellows on the comforts and conveniences of modern civilization – ‘Moral depravation! Luxury! Softness [*mollesse*]! behold your work!’ (p. 59) – Lelarge de Lignac proposed that fat men might eventually be eliminated through selective breeding practices (p. 61).

These examples are symptomatic of a wider phenomenon. Weaving in and out of discourses about fat, consumerism and softness, Sparta functioned as a prototype of the warrior hardness that European men often liked to imagine in themselves. These harsh verdicts on fat weaklings were delivered against the background of a hardening of attitudes toward non-Western peoples. Of course many Europeans did become fat, but when discussed in a global context this was often explained with reference to personal deviations from the norm rather than any cultural acceptance of fat. Such distinctions were sharpened in the early nineteenth century to form a regular, albeit highly unstable, series of distinctions between ‘Europe’ and its ‘others’. In Western eyes both the fact of corpulence and admiration for fat bodies formed part of a wider cluster of ‘soft’ qualities attributed to non-Western peoples, a tangible example of the moral looseness, sensuality, indolence, effeminacy, and other defects that were often cited as the inverse of modern, civilized, culture. Corpulence provided a lens through which Europeans could emphasize their own difference with reference to cultures that perversely confused ‘deformity’ for female beauty and ‘obesity’ for male power, especially in Africa, India, and China (Forth, 2012b).

Overseas examples figured prominently in French and British medical discussions of fat, notably after 1815 and often with Spartan references thrown in to reinforce impressions of European hardness. Adding Egypt to the list of cultures that, in his view, foolishly admired fat without understanding that it prevented intelligence, agility, and strength, the influential physician Julien-Joseph Virey (1815) felt the need to explain that this is ‘why the Spartans would punish fat soldiers’ and monitor the feeding of children (p. 509). Decades later a similar gesture appeared in another medical dictionary. Explaining that ‘In China a man held in dignity regards

embonpoint and even obesity as one of the requirements of his rank', a custom that contrasted sharply with European gender ideals, J.-P. Beaudé (1849) described how the Chinese generally perceive in great corpulence evidence of superiority linked to soft lifestyles and rich food. For no apparent reason Beaudé then explained how in 'certain republics of antiquity obesity, far from being an honor, was regarded as a vice. In Sparta they would beat the soldier who, having an overly pronounced embonpoint, seemed to prefer the softness of a succulent life to the rough profession of arms' (p. 529-30). Ideas like this cropped up in a number of related discourses, many of which called attention to a Chinese appreciation of fatness as proof of a hopelessly 'soft' masculinity. Thus Davis (1837, p. 254) deemed the Chinese notion of male 'power' to be laughable since it referred to great folds of fat rather than the hard muscularity that supposedly defined English manhood.

The British experience in India offered multiple opportunities to allege the defective manhood of its colonial subjects (Sinha, 1995; Streets, 2004), a key symptom of which was the propensity of well-to-do Indians to deliberately become fat (Forth, 2012b). Dispelling suspicions that normally vegetarian Brahmins might have been eating meat to achieve such ample proportions, Johnson (1818) revealed that 'all is accomplished by *ghee* [clarified butter] and indolence!' (p. 391). Physicians like Cornish (1864) cited, in addition to *ghee*, rice consumption as the key to the problem, maintaining that it makes Indians weak and cowardly as well as 'fat, bloated, and incapable of much exertion' (p. 68). This is supposedly how carnivorous Britons were able to subdue the Indians so easily, for 'every people who have ever conquered the lowlands of India, have acquired their chief sustenance from food superior in nutritive value to rice' (p. 70). Dietary factors notwithstanding, Indian fat was especially linked to allegations of native weakness, cowardice and, above all, 'indolence', which, according to *The Imperial Dictionary* (Ogilvie, 1859), referred to 'Habitual idleness; indisposition to labour; laziness; inaction or want of exertion of body or mind, proceeding from love of ease or aversion to toil . . . a constitutional or habitual love of ease' (p. 1000). If some Britons recommended team sports as a way of using controlled violence as a means of 'curing' Indians of their softness, others praised more

overtly punitive measures. in 1872 the *Times of India* reported that a ‘very distinguished and very fat Sikh officer of a cavalry regiment has been removed from the service on the ground of undue obesity’, the Anglophone *Indian Daily News* (Anonymous, 1872) responded approvingly, claiming that ‘they are but reverting to the system pursued in olden days. Spartans who presumed to get fat were soundly whipped’ (pp. 138-9).

Such flirtations with therapeutic violence as a method of creating men continued into the twentieth century as critiques that had been levelled against native people were turned on the colonizers themselves. *The Strand Magazine* (Anonymous, 1906) asked a number of eminent physicians to answer a series of questions about improving British health. Question number nine concerns us: ‘Are the youth of the age too softly treated, and would a more Spartan regimen be advantageous?’ (p. 297). Of course the editors weren’t asking whether doctors recommended beating children who failed to exercise and eat moderately, but whether harsher measures generally should be taken to instil in them dietetic principles and healthy choices. While several felt that such methods were unnecessary, with one observing that many children played so hard that they were already ‘outdoing Sparta itself’ (p. 303), many responded affirmatively. ‘Most assuredly our youth are too softly treated, pampered, and over-indulged’, responded one expert, adding that ‘Discipline is sadly lacking, and a more Spartan regimen is what is they require to make men of them’ (p. 298). ‘A more Spartan regimen would be advantageous’, agreed another (p. 300) while still others recommended more ‘manly sports’ and walking, while all warned against the perils of overeating.

Such examples may be multiplied throughout the twentieth century as classical exemplars became ubiquitous in Western perceptions of the ideal male body (Carden-Coyne, 2009). For a final example we turn to the United States, where psychologist William H. Sheldon’s (1940) famous division of male bodies into wispy ‘ectomorphs’, fat ‘endomorphs’ and splendid ‘mesomorphs’ was warmly received by the general public and physical education teachers (Vertinsky, 2002). Seeking to demonstrate connections between character and physique, Sheldon linked the endomorphic body type to the ‘viscerotonic’ temperament, which consisted of such traits as a love of food, comfort,

and sociability, an aversion to pain and effort, a tendency toward emotional display, and an 'untempered characteristic'. The latter trait revealed itself by 'a certain flabbiness or lack of intensity in the mental and moral outlook...a dull, vegetable-like quality [and] lack of purpose beyond the elementary biological purposes'. Rather than demonstrating action and solidity such a man 'gives off the general impression of soft metal' (Sheldon, 1944, pp. 43-44) and, in extreme cases, may end up being beyond treatment, 'hopelessly bogged in the marshes of viscerosis' (pp. 119-120, 356).

To illustrate his claims, Sheldon described a 'case of extreme viscerotonia', a twenty-two year old named Aubrey. Everything about Sheldon's description of Aubrey evoked the gendered tactile impressions implied by the idea of softness. His facial expression is flaccid, his hands 'hang like a seal's flippers', and watching him sit down is like 'resting a loosely filled sack of beans on a chair' (p. 98). Emotionally speaking Aubrey was devoid of heat and vitality: 'There is no temper in him, no fire, no intensity. He gives the impression of utter flabbiness of mental and emotional fiber'. Evidently wallowing in merely animal functions, this was not a man committed to anything beyond mere biological life: 'There appears to be no purpose beyond the elementary purposes of existence and comfort. If people were metals, Aubrey would be lead'. All one had to do was to shake the man's hand to gain access to this inner malleability: 'At handshake his hand seems as cold and nerveless as a piece of fat pork' (p. 100). And, as one might expect, Aubrey scored quite low when it came to what Sheldon called a '*Spartan Indifference to Pain*' [emphasis in original]. Sheldon found 'No trace of this trait. If anything he is oversensitive to pain. He has always been a crybaby' (p. 102). There was only one kind of world in which a man like this might be improved: 'it is possible that such person as Aubrey would make a better adaptation in a more disciplined society, where he made his way under sterner conditions' (p. 120).

While not exactly a man without qualities, the traits that Aubrey possessed were inconsistent with the masculine ideals that Sheldon and, no doubt many other Americans, believed should be encapsulated in a certain physique and temperament. Thanks to the efforts of Sheldon and others, the idea that fat boys displayed 'inadequate

masculine physique’ (Schonfeld, 1950) and a ‘feminine’ character was well established by the mid-twentieth century. This is not the place to trace such ideas as they have resurfaced periodically since that time, but suffice it to say that, during the Cold War, the Soviet Union was sometimes depicted as an austere and hardy Sparta that – while tyrannical and warlike – remained uncorrupted by the rampant consumerism that had overtaken Americans. This prompted politician Adlai Stevenson to warn that ‘If in our fat, dumb, happy complacent way we are sure we can’t lose, we might recall that in the case of Athens vs. Sparta a much superior culture went down...We might get licked’ (quoted in Hodkinson, 2012, p. 347).

### Conclusion

As this brief historical overview suggests, Laconophilia never seems to go out of style for long in the modern West. Although often lampooned on YouTube (Nisbet, 2012) and in spoof films like *Meet the Spartans* (2008), the feverish images of 300 tap into many contemporary anxieties, from the related crises of masculinity and American national identity to the ‘war on obesity’ and the War on Terror. As Hoberman (1984) has observed, as an athletic and sportive ideal “‘hardness” is ambiguous in that it may be directed inward or outward; that is to say, that its demands may be inflicted on the self or others’ (p. 102). Insofar as this implicitly ‘masculine’ hardness is also expected of girls and women, we latter-day Spartans admire the commitment and discipline required to pull off fantastic feats of heroic self-transformation, applauding time and again the application of hardness against ‘soft’ flesh or character. Yet a key distinction between Spartan and neo-Spartan contempt for fat is the latter’s erasure of any serious connection between form and function. If Spartan bodies were made for war, neo-Spartan physiques seem to be built mainly for looks.

Even if our everyday contempt for fat echoes that of Sparta, we have not yet gotten to the point of banishing fat members of the underclass. Nevertheless calls for the application of hardness on others continue to surface from time to time. When Greg Critser (2003) laments the proliferation of elastic waistbands and ‘relaxed fit’ trousers he is promoting the value of discomfort as a potential therapy for bodies

gone soft, specifically in the sensation of a firm resistance to expanding bellies and hips. In a much attenuated form he is recommending something quite ancient. Yet more overtly punitive measures have also been implemented. In 2008 the Japanese government required that state offices and companies begin measuring employee waistlines to ensure adherence to federal standards of health and, implicitly, appearance. State employees who allow their waists to become too wide (33.5 inches for men, 35.4 for women) now stand to lose their jobs (Onishi, 2008). Whether or not the Spartan lawmaker Lycurgus would have approved of such banishment from the workplace, such measures endorse the widespread assumption that becoming fat springs from an overly ‘soft’ stance in relation to the body.

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