BOOK REVIEWS

Hunger Strike

Susie Orbach

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Susie Orbach, and the Women's Therapy Centre she helped set up in London, are to be congratulated for returning to Freud's original therapeutic project in founding psychoanalysis – an aspect of psychoanalysis often ignored in the current vogue for its theory. Feminist wariness about psychoanalytic

therapy stems largely from its failure adequately to take account of the way women's neurotic symptoms are shaped by their social subordination. Orbach seeks to overcome this problem by situating anorexia, the subject matter of *Hunger Strike*, in social and historical context.

In the past, she argues, women resorted to hysterical exaggeration of femininity when they had no option but feminine domesticity. Now, by contrast, the anorexic 'defeminizes' her body, obliterating its feminine curves and menstrual function at a time when women's only options outside the home are in a public arena that is essentially 'masculinist' in character.

Today's escalating consumerism, claims Orbach, also increasingly alienates women from themselves. The use value of commodities in satisfying bodily need is more and more lost to sight, so important to profits is their exchange value. And this process is exacerbated by the attempt to rehumanize and sexualize commodities through marketing them in association with women's bodies. For this results in women being presented to themselves from the external and alien perspective of advertising.

The ground for this self-alienation, argues Orbach, is laid in infancy by the way mothers then

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fail adequately to meet and validate their daughters' bodily needs (cf. Freud's observation on women's bitterness at being 'undeservedly cut short' in infancy by their mothers). Previously, says Orbach, this might have led to women becoming obsessional or frigid. Now it is more likely to cause them eating disorders, so much has consumerism replaced sex by food as that which is most alluring and dangerous for women. Anorexia is an attempt to do away with this need – a project doomed to failure in that it exacerbates the very need it seeks to control.

Orbach aims to treat the mind-body split of the anorexic by establishing, through free association, the meaning that food and the body have for her. She thereby hopes to enable the anorexic to become conscious of the needs her food avoidance is intended to satisfy so that these needs might be met more effectively. This involves working against the anorexic's resistance which, like her symptoms, she erects in defence against the danger of rejection she believes to be inherent in her needs being expressed – a belief sustained by society's ubiquitous messages to this effect. This can be reversed, says Orbach, only by the therapist supporting, meeting and containing without rebuff the anorexic's expression of her needs.

Orbach's clinical perspective is the object relations theory of Fairbairn and Winnicott. In *Hunger Strike*, she clearly demonstrates the relevance of this theory to anorexia. But it is also limited in regard both to anorexia and feminism.

It has little to say, for instance, about the handling of the anorexic's self-hatred as expressed in therapy. All too often therapists retaliate against its expression, in sullen or triumphant defiance, by coercing the anorexic into eating. Orbach rightly condemns this punitive and controlling response. But she offers little in its place. One possibility is

to articulate and interpret, as Klein did, the hatred (as well as love) people express in therapy. Orbach's not mentioning this possibility is consistent with object relations theory. For, in reacting against Klein's focus on the negative and destructive aspects of the transference, this theory instead emphasizes its positive and supportive aspects. This is also consistent with feminism. For it too tends to overlook women's negative and destructive feelings, so associated are these feelings with masculinity in male-dominated society.

While feminism includes repudiation of masculinity, anorexia includes repudiation of femininity – a point Orbach notes but does not expand. Focusing on the anorexic's negation of herself (of her body and its needs), Orbach does not elaborate on how this includes negation of the self as female. Again this is in keeping with her adherence to object relations theory. For this theory is more concerned with self-identity, understood as originating in the early mother-child relationship, than with sexed identity, which Freud showed to be formed through the child's construction of bodily sex difference in the context of its triadic relation with its mother and father. Orbach accordingly pays no attention to the father's role in anorexia. Yet he clearly plays a role, at least in those cases where he values his daughter only for her mind while holding her bodily and emotional vulnerability at nought. The illusion of anorexia is that by obliterating the corporeal marks of sexual difference and inequality, whereby the mind and body are associated with masculinity and femininity respectively, starvation thereby resolves the conflicts produced by this inequality – conflicts that can, in fact, only be resolved in the long term through the kinds of social change sought by feminism.

Although Orbach's account of anorexia is thus limited by her object relations approach, she also

correctly goes beyond this theory in situating anorexia historically and socially. But this raises further problems. For, by starting with the broad question of sex inequality, Orbach at once explains both too much and too little: too much, in suggesting that our sexually unequal society makes all women anorexic; too little, in failing adequately to describe the specific biographical factors that drove the individuals she describes to become anorexic.

An alternative approach is to begin with the specifics of women's individual experience. This was the method adopted by Freud in having women free associate to their symptoms – a method that led him, albeit unwillingly and even then only rudimentarily, to recognize the way women's symptoms are determined

by their social subordination as signified by bodily sex difference. Women's individual distress is likewise the starting point of feminism, of women's collective struggle to redress the social causes of their discontents. It is also the starting point adopted by Orbach in therapy. It is a pity she does not adopt the same stance in writing about her clinical work. She would then further help women to go beyond the generality with which she ends her present book, indicating specifically how 'the scope of women's lives and avenues of self-expression' might effectively and actually be extended and transformed without recourse to the self-defeating illusion of improving it through anorexic hunger strike.

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