

The Tyranny of Corporate Slenderness:
'Corporate Anorexia' as a Metaphor for Our Age

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Abstract

This paper reflects on the organizational pursuit of leanness as a corporate aesthetic. In contrast to more mainstream accounts of downsizing techniques and practices, its primary concern is with the symbolic and aesthetic aspects of downsizing. It focuses particularly on 'corporate anorexia', emphasizing the ways in which this managerial metaphor serves to detract critical attention away from the perpetuation of a dieting norm in organizational life more generally. It begins with a review of recent work on food, the 'civilising of appetite' (Mennell, 1991) and eating disorders in social and cultural theory. It then applies sociological perspectives on eating disorders, particularly those that connect anorexia as a 'metaphor for our age' (Orbach, 1986) to corporeal ideals perpetuated by the mass media, to a critique of corporate anorexia. It concludes by arguing that discursive presence of corporate anorexia serves to underplay the organizational pursuit of a thin ideal more generally, one that results in something of a 'tyranny of slenderness' (Chernin, 1981) for those subject to it.

Introduction

... Anorexia nervosa has become a symbol and leitmotif of the cultural forces in our society ... a character style ... accentuating control and mastery, with the central theme being the realization of an ideal body (Sours, 1980: 1).

Our discussion here relates sociological analyses of eating disorders to managerial discourses on downsizing. Focusing particularly on ‘corporate anorexia’, it considers the ways in which this managerial metaphor conceals the pursuit of a thin ideal in contemporary organizational life more generally. Our contention is that managerial discourses on downsizing, leanness and particularly on corporate anorexia serve to reify organizations, imbuing them with anthropomorphic qualities and locating them in the same ontological space as those subject to them, at the same time as de-humanizing the latter, reducing them to ‘corporate fat’ (Cameron et al, 1991). In doing so, such discourses effectively detract from the structural logic and imperatives of contemporary capitalism by drawing critical attention towards pathological or extreme manifestations of the pursuit of leanness. In contrast to this managerial focus on corporate anorexia as an organizational pathology, our more sociological reading, one that emphasizes the broader social and cultural context of such practices, draws attention to the corporate pursuit of a thin ideal more generally. In doing so, it locates corporate anorexia and related phenomena such as the pursuit of leanness, in the performative, instrumental logic of capitalism, and in the corporate/corporeal norms of an ‘aesthetic economy’ (Böhme, 2003) in which looks are everything. Although the pursuit of the thin ideal clearly extends to a whole range of social realms and disciplinary regimes (diet, fitness, media culture and fashion being perhaps the more obvious examples), the focus of this paper will be on the tyranny of *corporate* slenderness and the prevalence of the thin ideal in the processes and imperatives of contemporary work organizations. If, as the maxim goes, you can never be too rich or too thin, so it seems corporations in the aesthetic economy can never be too profitable or too lean.

The pursuit of the thin ideal, and of adherence to the aesthetic norms of corporate capitalism more generally, means that in the last two decades or so, both ‘wellness’ and ‘leanness’ have become powerful discursive influences on market societies. As Du Gay (2000) has emphasized in his defence of bureaucracy, much of the managerial critique of bureaucratic modes of organization, particularly those associated with the public sector, has been premised on a juxtaposition of bureaucracy with entrepreneurialism, associating the latter with leanness and the former with a lack of vitality and health, with ‘bloat’ (see Tomasko, 1987 and Cameron et al, 1991 for notable examples). Hence, many restructuring programmes have been underpinned by the pursuit of what Hales (2002) has termed ‘bureaucracy-lite’; a concept that carries with it connotations of health and wellness.

The changing discourse of health means that being ‘well’ no longer refers simply to a bio-medical state defined primarily as the absence of illness, but is now taken to mean a more holistic state of spiritual (secular) well-being. Related to this discursive shift, and as

part of the broader socio-cultural processes through which ethics have come to be conflated with 'surface' aesthetics (Welsch, 1997), *looking* well is often taken to mean *being* well, as the body is expected to function not merely as a material signifier of an 'inner' self, but as concomitant with that self. Wellness, then, seems to have taken on the burden of symbolizing health, fitness, goodness, beauty, hygiene, control, discipline and order and crucially, to paraphrase Douglas (1966), the absence of illness, ugliness, dirt, chaos and disorder, and this applies as much at the level of the organization as it does to the individual.

This being the case, although it was made over twenty five years ago now, Sours' observation that anorexia constitutes a symbol of contemporary cultural forces – 'a character style' - seems perhaps even more pertinent now than it did then, highlighting as it does the relationship between culture, style, control, mastery and the pursuit of an ideal bodily form. In the intervening period, organization theorists and particularly those concerned with organizational symbolism and processes of corporate aestheticization have begun to emphasize the role of organizations in shaping and managing this relationship, often with reference to culture management and ideologies of enterprise, structural reconfiguration, technological change, global market competition and the increasing emphasis on 'total quality' customer service as driving forces underpinning contemporary managerial interest in both the materiality of workers' bodies, and the pursuit of a 'lean' corporate body. What continues to be relatively neglected, however, to a lesser extent in social and cultural theory than in organization studies, are the symbolic aspects of diet, eating and embodiment, and how these intersect with organizational concerns with the control of style, culture and aesthetics, and particularly with the organizational mastery of corporeal ideals.

Indeed, food and eating are so fundamental, so basic – both materially and symbolically - perhaps more so than say emotion or sexuality (although there is obviously a close symbolic relationship here) that their relative neglect in work and organization studies is somewhat puzzling. Whether it's stipulating the time and duration of lunch breaks, or supporting 'healthy eating' campaigns, food certainly seems to be a mechanism of control in many work organizations. Of course, food can also figure as a mode of (individual and/or collective) resistance to organizational attempts to discipline mind and body. Indeed, it could be argued that employer provision and/or subsidisation of food is part of a panoply of what in Foucauldian terms might be understood as 'pastoral' attempts by employers to create communities of practice by taking control of bodily functions and interactions. These include, for instance, the provision of health facilities, restaurants and gymnasias, and certainly suggest that employers are conscious of the extent to which food is a mechanism for social connection; that what we eat, with whom, even where and when, all play a crucial role in sustaining and defining social (and hence, organizational) relationships. Clearly, both symbolically and literally food is also closely related to (self) control and this is illustrated perhaps most obviously in the development of eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia.

Anorexia nervosa is characterized by self-starvation underpinned by the refusal to maintain a minimum body weight. Bulimia is marked by repeated episodes of binge

eating followed by compensatory behaviours such as self-induced vomiting, over-use of laxatives and diuretics or other medication, fasting or excessive exercise. An inaccurate and unhealthy self-perception of body shape and size seems to be a defining feature of both conditions. Feminists such as photographic artist Priscilla A. Smith, whose images include 'Selves Portrayal', have drawn critical attention to this particular aspect of eating disorders. This image depicts a naked woman standing against a wall casting a shadow that is much larger than her actual body, the contours of which are dramatically accentuated (reproduced in Weiss, 1999: 88). By far the majority (90-95% in Europe, Australasia and the US, for instance) of those who experience an eating disorder are women, although the number of male anorexics and bulimics appears to be steadily increasing, and this has been attributed variously to changes in the labour market, media culture and gendered power relations (see Giddens, 1991 and Shilling, 2003). As Orbach (1986: 13) put it two decades ago now, 'anorexia has become a growth industry'; indeed, eating disorders are still relatively fashionable topics in social science disciplines such as psychology and sociology with a steady stream of conference papers, journal articles and monographs appearing at regular intervals. Many of these fall within what we might term the 'self-help' or 'self-actualization' genre; others develop a more analytical interest in the subject and focus variously on eating disorders as manifestations of a 'somatic society' replete with cultural contradiction (Turner, 1996), on anorexia as a consequence of the abjection of women's bodies (Weiss, 1999), on disordered eating as an outcome of the accumulation imperatives of consumer society (Falk, 1994) and on anorexia as a 'pathology of reflexive self-control' in late modernity (Giddens, 1991).

In the last few years the business press has also begun to take a (metaphorical) interest in eating disorders, specifically in relation to the concept of corporate anorexia. As noted above, this is a reifying term coined to describe not anorexia *within* but *of* those organizations that engage in excessive cost-cutting measures such as extreme downsizing, BPR and so on (see Legge, 2000, Wilkinson 2005). Much of the latter, however, has been underpinned by a clear performance imperative and a concern with organizational control, so that the primary focus has been to utilize anorexia as a (largely bio-medical) metaphor for understanding (and rectifying) what is regarded as organizationally dysfunctional, obsessive behaviour. The approach developed here is a more analytical (largely sociological) one that aims to reflect on the symbolism of eating disorders, highlighting the extent to which what has come to be known as corporate anorexia represents merely one extreme of the more pervasive organizational pursuit of a thin ideal and the perpetuation of a 'dieting norm' (Bordo, 1993, 1996), an imperative that attempts to fashion an ideal, corporate self both at the individual and organizational level. Writing in the late 1980s and articulating this preoccupation with the corporate body beautiful (or what she describes as the 'corporate athlete'), Kanter (1989: 361, emphasis added), argued that

Our new heroic model should be the athlete who can manage the amazing feat of doing more with less, who can juggle the need to both conserve resources and pursue growth opportunities ... *Business athletes need to be intense, lean and limber, able to stretch, good at teamwork, and in shape all the time.*

Here Kanter is clearly speaking metaphorically; that is, she is mapping one conceptual domain onto another. In their review of the various metaphors underlying the managerial literature on corporate downsizing, Dunford and Palmer (1996) identify three such metaphors in the language and images evoked: militaristic, medical and horticultural. While a review of the various uses of metaphor in organizational analysis is clearly beyond the scope of our discussion here (see Inns 2002 for a review), it is important to note that the field is complex. Interest in metaphor in organizational analysis has grown considerably in the last decade or so, largely as a result of the influence of work by Morgan (1986), and by Grant and Oswick (1996). Our primary concern here is to reflect on a recurring theme within the health metaphor that Dunford and Palmer (1996) identify; namely that of ‘corporate anorexia’, and to consider the ways in which this metaphor operates in framing dominant perceptions of corporate/corporeal norms. In this sense, following Inns (2002), our approach is premised on a distinction between critical, analytical accounts of metaphor as a hegemonic tool (see Höpfl and Maddrell, 1996, and Keenoy and Anthony, 1992), and more normative, utilitarian approaches that advocate the use of metaphor as a mechanism for enhancing organizational performance. As Inns (2002: 314) puts it, ‘the latter strand is more likely to see both the interpretation of metaphor and the link between a metaphor and a specific action as unproblematic’. In contrast, more critical perspectives seek to reflect on the ways in which certain metaphoric expressions become hegemonic, suppressing alternative understandings of particular phenomena, in what amounts to an organizational appropriation of meaning and perception. It is the way in which ‘corporate anorexia’ functions as a managerial metaphor in this respect that is our primary concern here.

Social and Cultural Perspectives on Eating and Eating Disorders

As anthropologists, sociologists and social psychologists have long since noted, eating is obviously not just a mechanism for satisfying a biological necessity. It is also a profoundly social activity; diet is one of the defining features of a community, as are the many rites and rituals based on the shared preparation and consumption of food. The sharing of food is also a fundamental part of organizational life, constituting a way of binding people together who might not otherwise identify as a community. Contract negotiations were reputedly concluded in Ancient Rome, for instance, *com pani* – with the breaking and sharing of bread (to symbolise the alignment of different groups and interests for the purposes of exchange relations).

As well as the ‘communal’ ethos of eating, social and cultural theorists have also noted what Mennell (1991), following Elias, terms the ‘civilizing of appetite’ as a fundamental aspect of the modernization process. Hence, by the mid-eighteenth century gluttony was considered not simply as a deadly sin, but crucially as something of a social *faux pas*, and the primary marker of culinary ‘distinction’ (Bourdieu, 1984) became not quantity but quality (and variety) of food consumed. In this respect, of course, the transition from feudalism to capitalism witnessed a transformation not only in the relationship of humanity to nature, but also in social relations. Power, wealth and status, previously regarded as occupying a fixed place in a God-given, pre-social hierarchy, came to be understood as the results of individual endeavour (Weber, 1989 [1904]), ‘civilization’

(Elias, 1978) and self-discipline (Foucault, 1977, 1979). Hence, mastery of nature in the form of bodily self-control became, simultaneously, a socio-economic and moral imperative.

The development of modern capitalism can therefore be understood, at least in bodily terms, as a transformation of the open ‘body as process’ (Bakhtin, 1968) – as a material expression of nature, to the closed ‘body as machine’ – as the mechanism through which the self masters and controls nature. The modern body therefore came to be understood as an individual, discrete and relatively ‘closed’ sphere, but one that required the existence of its Other to maintain itself as such. Social and cultural theorists have noted, then, that maintaining bodily self-control and subjective integrity is dependent upon the successful management of abjection (Kristeva, 1982). In this respect, Hughes (2000) has noted how, as western societies have become more and more body conscious, the moral, healthy subject has been increasingly linked to the individual entrepreneur who cares for him or herself – what Hughes (2000: 17) terms ‘the vigilant body’. For Turner (1996: xix), developing Rose’s (1989) earlier contention that we are urged to govern ourselves through bodily self-discipline and the maintenance of embodied boundaries, this modern (rationalized) body is governed according to a ‘doctrine of obligation’, one that requires us to continually re-invest in our individual bodily capital, at the same time as maintaining our bodies as discrete, closed and controlled entities. Hence, in contrast to the celebrated banquets and peasant feasts of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance depicted in literature by Rabelais and in visual art by Jordaens, Veronese, Machaut and particularly Brueghel, themes of bodily moderation and restraint came to characterize the modern era of market capitalism – themes that have continued to shape the relationship between food, appetite, bodily size and shape and the production of vigilant, bounded, *organized* subjects.

Susie Orbach (1978, 1986) and Kim Chernin (1981) are among the most prominent feminist writers to have charted the development of the thin ideal and its impact on women’s relationship to their bodies and in the case of the former particularly, to have tentatively argued that organizational processes are often implicated if seldom acknowledged, in this respect. They have both argued that since the 1950s, the ideal female form has been getting slimmer and that this has coincided with women’s increasing entry into paid work and particularly the development of service economies. Arguing that ‘fat is a feminist issue’, Orbach (1978) particularly focuses in her analysis on compulsive eating as a consequence of women’s social oppression, maintaining that the relatively restricted labour market opportunities available to women are one of the main forces that distort women’s bodily development causing women to regard themselves as commodities whose value is based solely on appearance and self-presentation.

Whilst tending to naturalize the categories ‘fat’ and ‘thin’, and so perpetuate the cultural norms that define thin as an aesthetic ideal, Orbach and Chernin’s respective accounts emphasize how social pressures can be internalised, to find expression in dieting and in an alienating sense of self that is the outcome of being forced into a largely aesthetic competition with one another. To the degree that a popular awareness of this exists,

however, sociologists such as Bordo (1996: 85) argue that it tends to have been focused primarily on what seems to be the pathological or extreme - on those for whom dieting becomes obsessive:

Television talk shows feature tales of disasters caused by stomach stapling, gastric bubbles, gastrointestinal bypass operations, liquid diets, compulsive exercising. Magazines warn of the dangers of fat reduction surgery and liposuction. Books and articles about bulimia and anorexia proliferate. The portrayal of eating disorders by the popular media is often lurid and sensational; audiences gasp at pictures of skeletal bodies or at item-by-item descriptions of the volumes of food eaten during an average binge.

These ‘freak shows’, Bordo argues, reinforce the representation and thus perception of those involved as pathological and abnormal and hence detract from a much more pervasive and in many ways insidious, dieting norm. Of course, as Bordo (1996: 85) also notes, many of these behaviours and practices *are* outside of the norm ‘if only because of the financial resources and planning they require’. But a preoccupation with the image of the body, with diet and slenderness, and the pursuit of unrealisable (and undesirable) bodily ideals, is not. On the contrary, as Bordo’s (1993, 1996) approach emphasizes, this preoccupation functions as one of the most powerful normalizing strategies and sources of the reproduction of self-disciplining, docile bodies. Through this process of self-discipline, women’s bodies especially, seem to become habituated to self-improvement in the service of adhering to social norms and aesthetic ideals. In this respect, the media *pathologization* of eating disorders serves to obscure not only the normalizing function of the technologies of diet and body maintenance, but also the interests which are served by the perpetuation of a thin ideal more generally; a theme that, we would argue, applies equally to the pathologization of ‘corporate anorexia’ in the business press.

Downsizing and Corporate Anorexia: “Does My ‘Bottom Line’ Look Big in This?”

Underpinned by an ethos of leanness (Womack et al, 1990; Womack and Jones, 1996), downsizing has been a widely practised if contentious corporate strategy since the 1980s. Indeed, recent research on downsizing in the US (Baumol et al, 2003), the UK and Japan (Ahmakjian and Robinson, 2001), and Australia (Innes and Littler, 2004), suggests that downsizing continues to be regarded by management as one of the preferred routes to turning around declining organizations by cutting costs and improving organizational performance (Mellahi and Wilkinson, 2007).

The pursuit of leanness remains controversial, however, with many commentators being particularly critical of the ways in which downsizing exercises have been communicated to key stakeholders (Pfeil et al, 2004). Critics have also drawn attention to the neglect of union opposition to downsizing in the managerial literature (Moody, 1997), and to the extent to which downsizing has been pursued at the same time as senior managers, the so-called ‘fat cats’, have been awarded large performance-related bonuses (Gordon, 1996). More ethnographic studies of lean production, such as Kamata’s (1982: vii-viii) classic *Japan in the Passing Lane* have drawn attention to the grim working conditions of

industrial workers in lean manufacturing plants, emphasizing as he puts it, ‘the boredom, monotony, and incessant work demands, ... the inhumanity of it all’. Delbridge’s (1998) account of lean production similarly emphasizes the ‘rationalization, standardization and intensification’ that characterises factory work that is organized and managed in accordance with a ‘Japanese’ model of leanness. More recently, Mehri’s (2006) reflections on worker experiences of the Toyota production system emphasizes what he calls ‘the darker side of lean’, drawing attention to worker isolation and harassment, dangerous working conditions, excessive working hours, and poor quality of life for workers.

Other critics have argued that downsizing may not be as widespread as popular management writers suggest, and that many firms who pursue leanness don’t necessarily have the capacity or indeed intention of reducing in size, but rather strive to give the impression that they are lean; that is, to manage their corporate aesthetics and narratives in accordance with the norms of a thin ideal (see Froud et al, 2006). Rejecting the idea that widespread downsizing is a myth, arguing instead that it is a complex and dynamic phenomenon, the ‘paradox of managerial downsizing’, Littler and Innes (2003, 2004) argue is that despite its widespread promotion as an organizational strategy, the number and ratio of managers appears to have grown in recent years. In this sense their account also suggests that, at least in part, it is with the pursuit of the thin ideal as a corporate aesthetic - with a culture rather than simply a structure of leanness - that many corporations have become preoccupied; a culture that, as indicated by the likes of Kamata and Delbridge, engenders something of a ‘tyranny of slenderness’ for those subject to it.

An important element in sustaining this widespread culture of leanness is that much of the managerial discourse, particularly in the business press and in popular management literature, frames the excessive (or simply unsuccessful) pursuit of downsizing, delayering and related strategies to the point of ‘corporate anorexia’ largely as an individual, organizational pathology. Excessively thin (anorexic) or fat (obese) organizations are framed as the Other of the ideal corporate body; that is, they are positioned as the antithesis of the slim, lean organization. Drawing on Bordo’s (1990, 1993) analysis of the cultural representation of eating disorders, and of their simultaneous pathologization and perpetuation by the mass media, we might argue that this discursive emphasis on the pathological or obsessive means that critical attention is drawn away from the relentless pursuit of a dieting norm within organizational life generally, and therefore from a preoccupation with an intensification in the exploitation of human resources. Hence the need to understand organizations anorexically, that is, to critically reflect on the ways in which corporate anorexia as a managerial metaphor both frames particular ways of thinking about contemporary organizations, and closes down others.

Critical Reflections in the Age of the Anorexic Organization

As outlined above, the dominant disciplinary approaches to understanding eating disorders seem to be very much bio-medical and psychological and within the parameters of this bi-disciplinary hegemony a distinct, pathologizing discourse on eating disorders, and particularly their treatment can be discerned. This bio-medical, psychological

discourse appears to find expression in much of the business and management literature on corporate anorexia. Hence, the focus of the latter is very much on understanding the dysfunctional problems of individual corporations, identifying anorexia as an outcome of mis-management, particularly in the form of extreme or obsessive downsizing, and requiring individual or group ‘therapy’ often in the form of management consultancy (Corrigan, 1997). Stein describes what might be regarded as a tyranny of corporate slenderness (to borrow from Chernin, 1981) in this sense:

In our current zeal to ‘delayer’ and ‘horizontally flatten’ workplaces (a paradoxically vertical act), and to brand those ‘cut’ as non-essential ‘fat’, we forget that in the 1970s and 1980s we regarded increasing administrative, managerial vertical layers as solutions rather than problems. We once believed in the ‘fat’ we now disdain, cut and discard. They were to be our organizational police (external superego), to help the corporation economize better. Now ‘bloating’ is our enemy, and ‘leanness’ our salvation (Stein, 1996: 3).

As noted above, the tyranny of corporate slenderness ‘... engendered by downsizing corporations, changing career patterns and changing employment relations’ has perhaps been most obvious in the US and the UK, as well as Europe and Australasia (Garsten and Grey, 1997: 214). Indeed, business reports suggest that many organizations in both the public and the private sectors across the European, Australasian and US economies seek to cut costs by reducing staff numbers on a yearly basis: ‘the preoccupation with cost-cutting has instilled into the business mind the belief that the slimmer the organization, the better: *thin is in, thin is good, thin is beautiful*’ (Corrigan, 1997: 97, emphasis added). Hence, the corporate ideal seems to be the pursuit and maintenance of lean and well-honed, fit and healthy bodies – aesthetically, at least (on both an individual and an organizational level) that have both the stamina and the agility, as well as the looks, to cope with the rigours and flexible demands of a competitive market economy.

In contrast to the dominant performative emphasis on downsizing as an economic necessity and a bio-medical imperative in this literature, to borrow from both Bordo and Chernin, we might argue that downsizing simultaneously reflects and constitutes something of a culture of tyranny in the workplace, one that is underpinned by the pursuit of a thin, corporate ideal. This ideal means that organizations are preoccupied with the pursuit and maintenance of lean and well-honed, fit and healthy corporate bodies – aesthetically, at least (on both an individual and an organizational level) that have both the stamina and the agility, as well as the looks, to cope with the rigours and flexible demands of a competitive market economy. In this sense, the conflation of aesthetics and ethics in wellness discourse is important to understanding the pursuit of the thin ideal through strategies such as downsizing; the appearance of a fit and healthy (organizational) body indicates that the organization is motivated, disciplined and under control as participation in the tyranny of slenderness (much like dieting and fitness regimes more generally) is deemed to symbolize dynamism and agility, as well as dedication and endurance (qualities that many of the most influential management writers currently espouse). Discipline in staffing levels is therefore taken to symbolize self-control in all aspects of an organization, therefore, in much the same way as self-control

over health, fitness and diet is taken to signify a disciplined lifestyle at an individual level. This is important given that, as several commentators have noted, image, aesthetics and embodiment are increasingly significant components of organizational life (Linstead and Höpfl, 2002; Strati and de Montoux, 2002; Carr and Hancock, 2003; Witz et al, 2003). In this respect, the phrase ‘corporate anorexia’ suggests that organizations that fail to maintain bodily vigilance, or which become obsessive in their pursuit of the thin ideal inspire not only strategic concern but also aesthetic distaste. In other words, it is what untrimmed fat at one extreme, or exposed skeletons and failing organs at the other, *symbolize* that seems to be of considerable significance – abject, fleshy, alien, ‘open’, feminine, out of control Otherness that constantly threatens to bulge into the world of the bottom line.

Much like dieting, the discourse of downsizing includes an entire vocabulary of seemingly objective processes (cost-cutting, calorie counting and so on) that are commonly assumed to result (at least aesthetically) in an ethos of self-control. Through downsizing, those unnecessary for the performance of particular functions or for the pursuit of the ideal corporate bodily form (the ‘fat’) are simply trimmed away, a process that, it has been argued here, requires us to reflect on the extent to which the material context and consequences of downsizing are clearly fundamental, but so too are its symbolic connotations – people become corporate fat; alien, abject and above all waste(ful). The pursuit of this dieting norm to the point of a tyranny of corporate slenderness means that, just as the corporate itself comes to be imbued with human characteristics, so ‘people become things, extensions of other’s wills, disposable producers, extensions of spread-sheets, not real, whole, fleshy people’ (Stein, 1996: 9).

Despite increasing academic interest in the management of the body, and the recognition that the body constitutes a metaphor for understanding many aspects of organizational life, relatively little attention has been paid to developing a critical analysis of the prevalence of a dieting norm within contemporary corporate life. The aim here then has been to explore the pursuit of the thin ideal in order to reflect critically on certain aspects of contemporary organizational practices and imperatives that may result in what could be understood as a tyranny of corporate slenderness, one that the discursive focus on ‘corporate anorexia’ particularly within the business press seemingly obscures. These practices and imperatives often include aspects of organizational life that institutionalize the thin ideal and engender a tyranny of corporate slenderness, materialised in organizational bodies (Hancock and Tyler, 2000), and pursued at a broader, organisational level, through so-called lean production techniques such as BPR and JIT and perhaps most notably, downsizing.

In sum, our aim here has been to develop a sociological critique of ‘corporate anorexia’ as a managerial metaphor and to emphasize instead, the prevalence of a dieting norm (Bordo, 1993) underpinning the organizational pursuit of the thin ideal. Whereas more business-orientated accounts have tended to adopt a largely bio-medical, psychological model of eating disorders, focusing on the ways in which individual problems internal to particular organizations can be addressed through appropriate remedies often highlighting the dysfunctional effects of corporate anorexia on organizational performance, the approach developed here has attempted to tease out the reifying and anthropomorphic

aspects of this discourse, and to emphasize the ways in which a managerial concern with corporate anorexia normalizes an exploitative set of social relations which are, by implication, perpetuated as aesthetically desirable and healthy.

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