Fat History: Bodies and Beauty in the Modern West. by Peter N. Stearns
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preceding text, and thus this epic tale concludes on a jarring, discordant note.

At its heart, *Big Trouble* is not a story about the meaning of class in American life. The approximately 90 percent of American working people who did not then belong to unions never appear in the book, nor do most of those relatively few who did. Radicals dot these pages, from immigrant Jews in New York to Debs, Daniel DeLeon of the Socialist Labor party, and many others; but, with the exception of a short two-page discussion, the reader never learns of working people who distrusted the defendants’ claim to innocence. Despite having consulted more than fifty historians (this reviewer included) of the now-old “new” labor and social history, Lukas persisted in writing as if Haywood and his clique can usefully stand for the American working class in this era. Given Lukas’s commanding presence among the nation’s most serious writers, this is perhaps an accurate gauge of the impact these new approaches have made in the broader public culture. Lukas was widely read in the literature, immersed in archival sources, and a persistent questioner of professional historians; yet he too found working people qua workers uninteresting, not relevant to the story about class and American life he wanted to tell. Leaders’ predominate in this book, and, in a wonderful twist redolent of some of the most misleading aspects of both the “old” and the “new” labor historiography, the more conservative leaders of labor become “labor’s saviors,” a phrase dripping with images of Tammany Hall’s corrupt practices.

J. Anthony Lukas was a far better analyst than his last book indicates. The strained quality of the text suggests that his very search for an epic might well have undermined his effort. How to follow *Common Ground* could not have been an easy burden. But more is at issue here than a professional search for a sequel. *Big Trouble* simply never fulfills the promise of its introduction. It neither examines the complexity of class feeling among working people nor explores how race and class might be “inextricably intertwined.” In this reviewer’s opinion, the problem with the book lies in its very premise: class has simply never occupied the dominant position that race has in the national consciousness. That is why *Common Ground*, a profound and enduring classic, was an apt vehicle for Lukas’s brilliance. *Big Trouble*, on the other hand, seeks the majestic but runs aground on the shoals of a far more prosaic reality.

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In nineteenth-century America, images of the beautiful body varied from the frail, waiflike slenderness associated with antebellum gentility and spirituality to the voluptuous woman and the stout man celebrated in the decades after the Civil War. In fact, from the 1860s until the 1890s—in popular thought as well as in medical ideology—the thin body was synonymous with awkwardness, poverty, and disease, while fleshiness was associated with social grace, prosperity, and health. By the turn of the century, however, a new ideal body type emerged, along with an obsessive concern with weight loss, which has singularly dominated the American imagination throughout the twentieth century: the plump woman and the hefty man were replaced by a thin, athletic image for both sexes.

The publication of books explaining, and decrying, the modern preoccupation with thinness has nearly kept pace with the number of those touting the latest weight-reduction formulas. While some authors have provided valuable insights into the social and economic forces that have shaped shifts in fashion, ideals of beauty, and images of the body, much of what has been written has been driven by thinly veiled political agendas that have trivialized the topic. Drawing on commercialization or medicalization models, most have portrayed the new celebration of thinness as the creation of fashion designers, unscrupulous businessmen, and greedy physicians. In his latest book, _Fat History_, Peter N. Stearns weighs in on this subject and provides an innovative explanation of the modern preoccupation with dieting that fun-
damentally revises our understanding of the timing, intensity, and significance of the emergence of the modern American culture of weight loss.

To begin with, Stearns argues that the new desire to be thin was not imposed upon a gullible public by clothing designers, magazine editors, diet faddists, and physicians. While they all had a hand in shaping this new attitude toward the body, popular antipathy toward fat, which had its origins in the United States in the 1890s, preceded the commercialization of weight loss. He writes that instead the modern anxiety about fat grew out of changes in the sensibilities—the emotions, desires, and everyday experiences—of middle-class Americans in the twentieth century. Anxious over the hedonism and materialism unleashed by modern consumerism, they sought new ways to maintain moral boundaries and assuage the guilt incurred by indulging in formerly proscribed pleasures. That is, as new desires were legitimized and unleashed, weight control emerged as a compensating form of self-discipline responsible for maintaining a sense of moral equilibrium in a culture of abundance. Charged with intense emotions as well as a new ethical significance, excess weight came to symbolize bad character and moral weakness: fat people were not just unattractive or unhealthy, they were evil.

One of the best demonstrations of Stearns’s argument can be found in his analysis of a “misogynist phase” (1920s–1950s) in the development of the nation’s attitude toward fat. As a consequence of the erosion of Victorian gender distinctions by the 1920s—both men and women were encouraged to enjoy sex and control the expression of intense emotions, such as anger, jealousy, guilt, and fear—the new “weight morality” fell especially hard on women. While Stearns is quick to point out that the new diet culture had an impact on men as well, he argues that, in popular and medical literature, overweight women were uniquely stigmatized as lazy, self-indulgent, and immoral. Dieting, then, became a way of “monitoring” middle-class women who, by the 1920s, had gained a degree of political autonomy, sexual freedom, and greater access to the pleasures of work and leisure promised by the consumer marketplace. In the new moral equation, weight control replaced passionlessness as a sign of feminine virtue.

To illustrate the distinctive cultural sources of American attitudes toward the body, Stearns provides a fascinating comparison of French and American diet cultures. They share some common ground. The structural, intellectual, and aesthetic shifts that accompanied the development of the new code of weight loss in the United States occurred in France as well. But there are substantial differences. The French and the Americans, for example, have distinctive culinary traditions. Also, while the French discipline their children’s eating habits, the Americans, ever anxious that their children “clean their plates,” are unwilling to do this. Moreover, while there are similarities in the social backgrounds of those most likely to subscribe to the new diet culture—the wealthy, the well-educated middle class, urban professionals—there is greater homogeneity in French acceptance of modern weight-control standards. In France, unlike the United States, weight is not a symbol of class distinction, and there are no minority subcultures clinging to older body images. Finally, while both have adhered to a common image of the beautiful body as thin, firm, and youthful, the French have never viewed fat as a symbol of moral decay. Their pursuit of thinness was driven by aesthetic rather than ethical concerns. While Americans have associated dieting with life-changing, disciplined patterns of behavior, the French have not subscribed to radical regimens of self-denial and have been more receptive to nondietary means of weight loss.

Stearns concludes by noting that modern American attitudes toward the body have had unintended consequences. Even though more and more Americans are on diets, they, unlike the French, have consistently gained weight throughout the twentieth century. Because Americans have envisioned the dieting process as a religious struggle between sin and redemption, their war against fat has relieved them from one form of anxiety only to replace it with another. The rigorous dietary regimes they pursue often lead to binges of extreme indulgence. Further, while successful weight management can create a sense of moral well-being, failure produces shame, self-loathing, and, ironically, overeating. This insight leads to much more
than a new prescription for effective weight loss. More important, it demonstrates the complexity of modern consumer culture. Here, as well as in his recent work on the history of the emotions, Stearns argues that the demise of the “repressive” culture of Victorian America did not signal a new freedom from the moral restrictions of the past. While they may have accepted a new acquisitiveness and a freer sexuality, Americans compensated for this “liberation” by placing new restrictions on the body and its appetites. Victorian moral restraints were reformulated, not abandoned. By linking the preoccupation with weight loss to “widely felt anxieties about meaning in modern life,” Stearns’s imaginative and intriguing study thus adds new depth to our understanding of the cultural forces that have shaped our views of the body as well as our bodies themselves and provides a nuanced view of the impact of modern consumerism on the emotional lives of middle-class Americans in the twentieth century.

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Nature, writes William Cronon, is dynamic rather than balance seeking, historical rather than timeless, constructed rather than essential. In other words, nature is messy, is “not nearly so natural as it seems. Instead, it is a profoundly human construction.” In Uncommon Ground, fifteen scholars who met for a semester-long seminar at the University of California at Irvine provide rich elaborations on the tangled relations among humans and a world of things we have not made and cannot fully understand but are nonetheless implicated in and accountable to.

Anthologies are seldom important books. Uncommon Ground is important, for scholarly and political reasons. The contributors include some of the best-known names in environmental history: Cronon, Donna Haraway, Carolyn Merchant, Richard White. They also include persons from outside the field of history who have much to teach historians, notably the ecologist Michael Barbour, the geographer James Proctor, and Candace Slater, a professor of Spanish and Portuguese. The book also features the promising junior scholars Giovanna di Chiro and Jennifer Price. All the contributors have brought to their collective task a combination of wide erudition and serious purpose. Their essays illuminate not only the ways in which people have narrated and manipulated and treasured and consumed nature but also the ways in which humans understand themselves in “natural” terms.

Uncommon Ground questions a cherished environmentalist notion: that nature is a self-maintaining, self-evident system to which we can appeal for moral and practical guidance. The contributors insist that both clear thinking and good environmental politics demand such questioning. They ask how a “more self-critical understanding of what we mean by nature” might “enhance our efforts to protect the environment in ways that are both sustainable and humane.” Environmentalist ideology, these authors agree, generally assumes a “natural” conflict between human life and the sanctity of the nonhuman. They insist that environmentalists cannot claim to speak transparently for nature because, inevitably, environmentalists and exploiters alike map their all-too-human stories onto other earthly things. Environmentalism errs, too, in seeing humans as an undifferentiated species. A useful environmental politics would admit that humans differ among themselves and construct nature in social terms. Having shaped nature, people ought to ask how they did and do so and to what ends, and what the varying and unintended consequences might be.

These ideas do not strike me as either dangerous or very surprising, but when Uncommon Ground first appeared, the book elicited a torrent of vitriol from the Earth First! wing of the environmental movement. Cronon and his colleagues were denounced as pointy-headed city slickers who had betrayed the movement by handing The Enemy a potent argument: if nature isn’t “natural,” why not carry on the process of invention by clear-cutting, mining, paving, and polluting? Cronon, clearly stung by his critics’ rage, hastened to defend his own environmentalist credentials, and he wrote a