

The body, the power and the people -New perspectives of body politics

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Alan Petersen 2007: *The Body in Question. A Socio-Cultural Approach*. London & New York: Routledge.

John Holten-Andersen 2007: *Vanvid og virkelighed. En økologisk omtænkning*. Højbjerg: Hovedland.

What is the political challenge of the human body? Two books from Great Britain and Denmark hint into very different directions. Individualization, medicalization, and commodification are the main trends in current body politics. This is the picture which the British sociologist Alan Petersen, professor at the University of Plymouth, unfolds. His book aims at presenting “an invaluable introduction for those seeking to understand the social, cultural and political significance of ‘the body’ in contemporary society”. It raises three main questions: why there is currently such strong academic and popular interest in ‘the body’ - what factors shape our conceptions of the body, its naturalness, health and normality - and what the mind-body dualism is and why it should matter.

In the connection of body culture, one may expect that sport is an item. However, when looking through the register the keyword “sport” does not pop up. One single reference to “sportsmen” hints to the connection of sport and warfare. Sport is also mentioned at some few other places, but rather marginal to the main argument - except one introductory case, which is about doping.

“The body in question”

Petersen’s main argument is about how the body in current culture is treated by new technologies. Or more precisely: how this treatment is told about and predicted by British media. A typical case is Britain’s oldest mother who recently became pregnant at the age of 63. Cases like this illustrate, according to the author, what is happening “in many contemporary societies” - which in sociological perspective may appear somewhat indistinct.

In order to set cases of this type into a larger connection, the study refers to recent “theoretical contributions” of Mike Featherstone, Chris Shilling, and Bryan S. Turner and has generally a strong Anglo bias. But there are also references to Norbert Elias and to Jean Baudrillard, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault and Bruno Latour.

“People have become consumers of their own bodies” (p. 5 after Baudrillard). The book criticizes the popular science-fiction writing of media about “not-yet” achieved scientific-technological interventions like genetic therapies, but cultivates itself an undertone of all-is-new.

“We live in a period dominated by scientific expertise and beliefs in scientific ‘fixes’. Science has to a large extent supplanted religion as the basis for authority on and explanation of our natural and social worlds” (p. 12).

The “we” remains as diffuse as “our society”, which is talked about - and as the used concepts of “science” and “religion”. (Maybe science functions rather as religion than supplanting it?)

Chapter 2 details the technological argument by telling about neuroscience and embryonic stem-cell research, while chapter 3 shows the efforts to reshape and to perfect the body by beauty industry. These interventions include facelifts, breast implants, penile enlargements and other cosmetic surgery, sexual enhancement technologies like Viagra, anti-ageing creams, treatments for short stature, body decoration and body piercing, body building and the like. But the author also names initiatives, which are oppositional to the strategies of normalization, as the

National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA). Chapter 4 describes the classification of bodies, and how the growing consumerism in health care tends to cross the border between the normal and the pathological, between illness and health. Not only the sick body is treated, but healthy normality is bettered, as in the case of Viagra. The medicalization of social phenomena gives allusions to the Orwellian surveillance society.

Medicalization has provoked reactions, but the opposition is not free from problems either. Chapter 5 describes the holistic alternatives against the medical mainstream. Now it is “the powers of the mind” that count. Healing and self-care unfold a large field of *Complementary and Alternative Medicines* (CAM). They oppose the Cartesian mind-body dualism, and promote a bio-psycho-social approach. The growing market of CAM may, however, as Petersen shows, also contribute to reinforce individualization and consumerism. The oppositional drive is colonized by the idea of empowering the individual - constructing the same lonely individual as in normal capitalism. A quasi-religious tone colors the market of CAM-mainstreaming, and single gurus like Ken Dychtwald may build their corporate empire on this basis.

Chapter 6 summarizes and discusses the main themes, especially genetics, nano-medicine and neuroscience in relation to business interests and policy making. Are we on the way towards a post-human cyborg society? Petersen finally demands a “democratization of science”, which sounds fine, but after the many words about people’s consumerism is not quite convincing: Who could be the people, the demos, of this democratization? Two cases mark the end: Spain becomes the destination of choice for fertility tourists from Britain. And UK transplant patients go to China for organs from executed prisoners.

The body under “rapid transformation” ?

Petersen’s analysis delivers a lot of valuable cases and observations. On the level of theory, however, one meets some weak points (which are not unknown from academic writing in Scandinavia either).

(1.) “The body” of this book is a *static body* - a body of shape and health. What is missing is not only sport, but the moving body more generally.

(2.) The investigation follows - though critically - the scientist-technological fiction of a *body without feelings*.¹ (Though the “discovery” of feelings by sociology is mentioned as part of the recent holistic wave.) The body appears as an isolated individual skin bag - without the inter-bodily dimensions, which have been treated in details by philosophy.² In other words, this sociological body is cognitively divided in half (*epistemologisch halbiertes Körper*).

(3.) In spite of its critique of science, media and market power, the study follows and reproduces the *top-down perspective* of these agents. But what does the mediated narrative about genetic manipulation, nano-science and “rapid transformation” mean for real people’s real practice in real everyday life? For millions of people suffering of traditional illnesses or more and more of specific “civilization diseases” - people having problems to get quite elementary medical treatment (in the Third World, in non-welfare America, but not at least in sections of the Nordic populations) - people living in unhealthy milieus, trained to drink sugar water and to eat sweets - single-mothers, obese children, ethnic under-class people... And if some of these real folk use biotechnology or beauty-shops, don’t they use this according to traditional habits - new technology in old social patterns? Here it may be difficult to find the mentioned “rapid transformation”, and the sociologist meets rather complex contradictions, which should be in the focus of body studies.

(4.) As already mentioned, the book has a strong preference for the unspecified “we in contemporary society” instead of describing sociologically, which concrete subject or class the analysis is about. The class-perspective of Pierre Bourdieu and his concept of the social habitus is, indeed, mentioned, but it is without further empirical or theoretical argumentation brushed aside as “Bourdieu’s view”, which appears just as one among other “views” - in a post-modern way where anything goes. The reader is told that the “old class categories” are finally “broken down” or “eroded”, which in this simplicity does not fit to many well-documented empirical findings from social research, among others about sports participation in Denmark. And it leaves the question open, how to describe the *new* class categories under the aspect of the body.

(5.) Systematically, the study presents “the body” and *body culture in singular*, instead of systematically asking for and describing body cultures in plural. Though some neo-colonial dispersions of the Western body ideals among African, Asian and Hispanic people are mentioned as well as the confrontation between Western obesity and hunger in other parts of the world, the discourse remains mono-cultural. However,

it matters analytically whether the sociologist talks about an Indonesian village, a suburb of Stockholm, an African metropolis or a slum in Los Angeles, when talking about “the contemporary society”. And the used phrase “societies/races/cultures” discloses by the oblique a theoretical confusion - if not a racist misunderstanding.

(6.) By setting “*individualization*” side by side with consumerism and medicalization, the study postulates the social reality of this term, which, however, is a problematical construction. The study presents no closer empirical investigation or deeper theoretical analysis, which would justify this assumption as more than a fashionable market slogan: You are what you buy, You are the architect of your own fortune. References to Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck, the prophets of “late-modern individualization”, do not make the thesis more convincing. Punctually, the book articulates the impression that “the individual” could, indeed, be a concept of selling and advertising. In this case, it would be possible to interpret “the individual” as a specific form of capitalist socialization. But nonetheless, the concept of “individualization” remains a central thesis of the book.³

More generally, it is difficult to see theoretical strain in the text, which is jumping from one “view” to the other: X explains... as Y notes... as Z argues... (X, Y and Z being authors of secondary rank). Authority quotations have a much too high status. This weakness of style as well as the before-mentioned limitations are regrettable as they shadow the interesting cases of recent body history, which the authors has collected, and the critical intention of the study. *The Body in Question* is not the “invaluable introduction” to the body in contemporary society, which was promised, but an interesting contribution to some selected aspects.

The body in opposition

That the body in the framework of critical theory can be approached in another way is shown by the book of John Holten-Andersen. In contrast to top-down perspective, Holten-Andersen looks bottom-up. Originally a civil engineer, the author has worked through many years in the Danish Ministry of Environment. He was the secretary of the *Danish Council of Nature Politics* until 2001, when this highly recognized scientific institution was closed down - together with larger sections of ecological politics in general - by the right-wing government. Afterwards, Holten-Andersen taught at the Danish Technological University and edited the left-wing review SALT. His book is not a scientific study like Petersen’s sociology. It belongs rather to the genre of what in Denmark is called *folkelig oplysning*, popular enlightenment - somewhere between popular-philosophical narrative, humanist study and - in a broader sense - political reflection.

In a risky way, the book runs through the history of philosophy from ancient times, connecting people-power relations with body-word relations. It begins by questioning the phrase: “In the beginning was the Word.” Another beginning can, indeed, be seen in human bodily existence and bodily practice.

This materialistic approach includes the recognition of the myth. The *mythos* was a narrative of the human bodily world, before it was transformed to *logos*, the word creating an anthropocentric universe. Techniques of writing around 700 BC and new class distinctions sharpened this contradiction, which found its expression in the juxtaposition of Apollonian vs. Dionysian rituals. From the conflicts between the Sophists, masters of the powerful written word, on one hand and Socrates, the subversive proponent of the bodily “living word”, on the other, rose the metaphysical idealism of Platon. Its elitist character played together with the rise of the ancient power states - Greek tyrannies, Hellenistic Macedonia, Roman Empire.

There were further oppositional movements. Jesus, a barefoot healer from Nazareth in Palestine, launched the message of a god of the oppressed body and people. His parables told in living pictures what it meant to be like children, not to be master but servant - the empire being with the poor - not to serve the Mammon, to love your enemy, not to judge your neighbor for not to be judged yourself, the first finally being the last... Also this message was, however, soon transformed into a non-bodily system, a religion of the Logos and the power. Jesus was renamed Christos, and what had been uproar became a church, a state religion, and a machine of war against pagan people.

Other impulses to influence the relation between the power of the word and the popular body comes with the New Science of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

“Knowledge is power” (Bacon) - “to make ourselves masters of the world” (Descartes) - “*savoir pour prévoir pour pouvoir*” (Comte). Newton’s reductionist mathematical science excluded color, sound and smell from the world of knowing. “I

think, therefore I am” - modern identity was established as monolog, not in dialogue with other beings. Kant excluded body and feelings from the quest of truth.

The abstraction of the bodiless so-called individual, being the master over the nature and its own body, made its career parallel to the centralization of power in Absolutist society. The state principle in the age of Louis XIV abolished local self-determination. The revolution of 1789 was a reaction, but split soon between the popular *sansculottes* and *enragés* on one side and the Jacobins on the other. The Jacobins, the bourgeois-intellectual party of the Word, of Enlightenment and *l'Être Suprême*, took power and gave birth to *le terreur*.

In spite of the triumph of power over the body, nineteenth century's democracy was built up from below, by farmers and workers. But it was from the very beginning colonized by social elites, by the right of private property and the abstract power of money, of capital. The workers' movement, too, was split between a bodily-popular opposition against the world of power and abstraction (expressed by Karl Marx in theory and by the machine-assaulters in practice) - and a new construction of the productive individual as final reference.

The body under globalization - and in laughter

Nordic *folkestyre* (democracy) and “popular enlightenment” obtained their special profile by being based on farmers' movement, workers' movement and cooperative self-organization. What came out of this was democracy as life-form, correcting or countering the narrow practice of parliamentary democracy as represented by an enlightened bourgeois elite. This contradiction was expressed by writers like Grundtvig, Jeppe Aakjær, Martin Andersen Nexø, and Hal Koch.

Current tendencies of globalization challenge the popular-democratic model. New contradictions arise between people's bodily existence and the capital without borders, without limits - the logo-world of the “creative class”. Word-power dominates over body-people. This is also the background of the ecological crisis. The power tends not to recognize the right of nature, of the things, of the body. At this point, the philosophy of Holten-Andersen meets with the “post-modern” body-cyborg as Petersen has described it. Abstraction creates a hierarchy between numbers and things.

“The discourse of language is coercion, which we exert against the things” (Michel Foucault) - “The abstract concept violates the concrete reality” (Theodor W. Adorno) - “We think too much and feel too little” (Charlie Chaplin in “The Great Dictator”).

“The less we are, the more we have”, this is how Karl Marx once has characterized alienation. By the dramatic increase of obesity in our days, alienation is expressed on a new level: After all, people have to be professor in nutrition in order to prepare a “correct” meal.

Alienation is a matter of concrete experience, which gives rise to new efforts “back to reality”, back to the body - and these can indeed be based on resources in people's life. Holten-Andersen mentions music, song, games, and poetry as oppositional expressions against the canonization of the abstract word and number. Nobody has “the last word”. There is smile and pain, laughter and care in human life, also at this point of modernity. Love is and remains a subversive resource. The human being can speak with the birds - and the Nordic Sami people began singing their traditional magic *joik* again when entering into the 1970's revolt for their land rights. World revolution is possible when connecting the faces of Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama with ecological production in the countryside, with the squatter town Christiania in Copenhagen and the anti-war movement. Speaking one's mother tongue is part of international solidarity. The struggle of trade unions and contagious popular laughter has a common denominator - it is the relation to human bodily existence. The ecological movement turns against Western subject-centrism, by rethinking the environment - not as *omverden* but as *verden*, not as surrounding of the so-called individual but as the world itself.

This turn “back to the body” in Holten-Andersen's political philosophy may sound somewhat naïve, and it is here that the critical analysis of Petersen has its value. The commodification of the body in broader popular thinking and practice makes it more and more difficult to argue along the opposition between the body and the word.⁴ One will also find some simplifications in the philosophical narration - and some mistakes of etymological character in detail. The appeal to rehabilitate the body against the dictatorship of thinking contradicts, furthermore, the author's philosophical project itself, which bears *omtænkning*, “rethinking”, in its under-title. It is, thus, by rethinking - i.e. thinking - that the body should be set in its rights - isn't this a paradoxical strategy? And also in this case, the body of

sports does not get the attention, which it deserves - as a contradictory bodily practice, as popular and power-subjected at the same time.

The interesting point is, however, Holten-Andersen's attempt to connect the philosophy of power and people with the history of the body in Western society and thinking. Civil society has a bodily basis. This is expressed here in a very Danish style and atmosphere.

The “return of the body” historically differentiated

The narrative of the Danish grassroots philosopher continues, thus, where the British sociologist ceased - and both projects do supplement each other. Top-down perspective of bio-power, sociological critique of the medicalization and commodification of the body there - and bottom-up view, philosophical critique of power, understanding for the multiplicity of cultures and the ecological nexus there. The story of the body and the story of the people are in both cases connected, though in different ways. The body is the common denominator - the body as medicalized and commodified flesh in the sociology of Alan Petersen and the body as basis and oppositional resource in the ecology of John Holten-Andersen.

These two approaches encourage to review the academic “return to the body” as it has happened during recent times.

(1.) When the “return of the body” became a new academic wave during the 1970s it showed traits from alternative culture and hippie movement. New games of Californian type spread in practice, and so-called Somatics tried a theoretical superstructure in the spirit of New Age. In the context of counter-culture, the critique of sports as a “prison of measured time” (Jean-Marie Brohm) developed and was enlarged towards a discourse of body culture. A further body discourse was about sexuality and gender, which had its basis in the feminist movement. This opened up for the awareness of another type of societal contradictions, contesting the industrial patriarchy. In other words, the new approach to body culture saw the body as oppositional and as a field of contradictions. Body culture was a term of resistance.

(2.) Soon however, ‘post-modernism’ entered the field. Sharing the critique of system thinking and functionalism, proponents of ‘post-modernism’ joined the discourse of body culture and contributed by an increased attention to the multiplicity and diversity of body cultures in plural. Postulating the death of the great narratives, however, post-modernism itself produced a new ideology, now under the heading of that all was fragmented, coincidental and erratic - just bricolage. Bodily existence was seen as a world of tastes, group differentiations, and individual dispositions where anything goes. The body became a matter of choice and construction.

This superstructure of constructing-the-body expressed how market and health systems had occupied the terrain. On one hand, the fashionable body discourse was mainly about body shape and body image, about decoration and dressing, about tattoos and beauty surgery - the body we can buy. This corresponded to the current state of consumerism and merchandise, telling about the commodification of the body. On the other hand, the body discourse became largely colonized by questions of health and illness, curing and hygiene. Recently, overweight, obesity and nurture have received alarmed the political world. This mirrored deeper changes in the world of capitalist production, reproduction and alienation.

In other words, the post-modern and constructionist approach to body-culture referred to the body as resource. Body culture was a world of normalization - and at the same time a supermarket where the human being chooses according to its individual inclinations.

(3.) Surely, the body as resistance and the body as resource will not be the last word. The two reviewed books can be understood as a reflection of the two previous periods of societal understanding - and as steps beyond. The sociology of Petersen is marked by the “post-modern” perspective and the focus on the body as resource, but takes at the same time a critical distance. The philosophy of Holten-Andersen takes some topics up from the earlier “oppositional body”, but goes one step further towards the recognition of the right of the nature and of cultural diversity of the people.

Sport illustrates this double aspect. Sport is, on one hand, a field of medicalization and doping, of alienation. And on the other, games are a manifestation of popular self-determination, of identity. There is the dialectical tension between the two narratives, which calls for a third. What both books put on the agenda is the question of bodily democracy.

Literature

¹ A contrast: Mike McNamee 2002: "Hubris, humility, and humiliation: Vice and virtue in sporting communities." In: *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 29, 1: 38-53. – The same 2003: "Schadenfreude in sport: Envy, justice and self-esteem." In: *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 30, 1: 1-16. – The same 2006: "Suffering in and for sport: Some philosophical remarks on a painful emotion." In: Sigmund Loland, Berit Skirstad & Ivan Waddington (eds.) *Pain and Injury in Sport. Social and Ethical Analysis*. New York & London: Routledge, 229-245.

² Peter Sloterdijk 1998: *Sphären. Plurale Sphärologie*. Vol.1. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.

³ For a critique of this un-sociological concept see Henning Eichberg 2007: "Glem det 'enkelte individ' – glem Giddens! Om en stor fortælling i effektiviseringssamfundet." In: *Dansk Sociologi*, 18, 3:88-104, in press.

⁴ A warning against the idea of turning "back to the body" could already be found in Max Horkheimer & Theodor W. Adorno 1947: *Dialektik der Aufklärung. Philosophische Fragmente*. Frankfurt/M.: Fischer 1971. English 1997: *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. London: Verso.