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# COMMODIFICATION OF THE BODY IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETIES: HAVING A BODY AND BEING A BODY

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## ABSTRACT

The paper addresses the relatively recent theorizing of the body that highlights how in contemporary societies the body can be regarded as a consumer commodity. Between a structuralist approach of the body, that treats the body as the outcome or the effect of changes in social structures and a phenomenology of the lived body that accentuates the processes of self-identity in the experience of the body, the paper addresses the meaning of a diversity of behaviors that may be regarded as the inscription of consumption choices upon the body. The paper also addresses how the process of commodification of the body in western societies brings together discourses of health, sports, aesthetics and food and how that can be understood as a field where both discipline and control are physically expressed.

## INTRODUCTION

First of all I would like to thank the organizers for inviting me to this conference. I must say I felt very humbled by the invitation, especially because I had never pictured myself among specialists in Sociology of Sports. Soon after I accepted the invitation I realized I had to figure out what could I bring to this conference that could add value to a debate about health, sports and the environment. And that I must admit was not something I could grasp immediately. My presentation addresses the general topic of the body and although the word «body» is not contained in the title of this conference, I thought it could be a relevant topic to bring to this forum given it is the privileged site for the three words that compose that same title: health, sports and environment. In fact, the debate about the body that has emerged in recent years as a key problematic in the social sciences has been developing to a large extent hand in hand with those three elements:

- Sociology of Health has been paying attention for a long time to discourses about the healthy body, the disciplined and regulated body; from the explored bodies of the renaissance to the genetically manipulated bodies of contemporary societies, the medical discourse and the discourse on health has been largely a discourse on the body;

- Sociology of Sports, on the other hand, addresses all those activities that are performed by the body, where the body excels itself and through which the self can create and recreate his body and in a way his own identity; but Sports is also part of the universe of mechanisms of regulation of the body, in the sense that it defines the desirable body, the perfect and healthy body and, by exclusion, the «inadequate body»;

- And then we have the environment, which is conceptually defined by reference to the body in the sense that it is what surrounds the body; debates about the environment are also debates about the boundaries of the body and how those boundaries are defined, managed and sometimes violated.

I should start by telling you that my interest in the body as a research object appeared as a by product of my research on ageing related issues. More specifically, when I was analyzing dynamics of care provision to elderly people in institutional settings and among home-care workers, I came across the problematic of the decaying body and was completely struck by the importance the physical body actually had as the site where much of the «looking after the old person» took place. I was aware that looking after an old disabled person implied touching, cleaning, dressing, feeding the body of that person. But, like Shilling [18] when he alluded to the *absent present* body in Sociology, also to me the body of the old dependent person was an absent present body: it was there but was not acknowledged as an active participating actor in the overall picture. And in fact, the more I became involved in the analysis of the relationships between carers and those they assist, the more I became aware of the blurred boundaries between the physical bodies and the social interactions that were built on the bodies.

My observations of the dynamics of caring after dependent elderly by then led me to explore the literature about the body and about the place of the body in contemporary societies. Particularly influential was all the literature about the «civilized bodies», the bodies which are increasingly individualized and private, where the «natural» functions of the body are removed from public view and offend against our sensibilities [16]. Contemporary societies are societies of civilized bodies, and those individuals whose bodies are «unbounded» appear more

disentangled from their carers [13]. When analyzing the discourses of the professional carers I came to realize that they showed a behavior that suggested a loss of sense of self on the person they attend. The body, a decaying body that is not longer controlled by its owner becomes an element of definition of the identity of the dependent person and often becomes a problem in the relationship between carers and cared after. The carers must directly attend bodies and deal with body functions that have become non-dignifying for individuals. Boundaries are broken, which represents a problem both for the carer and the cared after. And strategies are developed, on both sides, to manage and negotiate these social boundaries. In that negotiation, there are struggles over power and the body often becomes the site for those struggles.

But this is not the topic of my talk today and rather some brief introduction to the context of my encounter with the body as an object for sociological research which I felt was important to share with so that you know where I am coming from.

The title of my conference is the commodification of the body in contemporary societies, a topic that has been addressed as an important dimension of post-modern societies - the societies where consumer culture has incorporated the body as an object of cult. The paper addresses how the body as an object with market value can be seen, simultaneously, as a site of construction of the self and as a site where social control and discipline are materialized and where the structuring elements of the social space are displayed. On one hand, I will try to discuss how the projects the individual develops for his body can be understood as part of a project of creation and recreation of the self. On the other hand, I will try to discuss how the body gives visible expression to the place of the individual in the social space and to social relations, in a way materializing society itself.

There is a whole line of theorizing of the body that has highlighted the way the body, in contemporary societies, can be thought of as a consumer commodity which must be managed to achieve maximum market value. Commodification designates a process through which something acquires an exchange value and therefore can be negotiated in the market. But, commodities often are not simply things-in-and-of-them-

selves, or object whose value is confined merely to their exchange value. Rather, as Mauss [15] argued, exchange goods are frequently entangled in a host of meanings framed by sociopolitical concerns, and thus they are symbolically charged by their sociality as well as by their links to hierarchy and power. This is to say that when we talk about the commodification of the body we are not talking about the objectification of the body. Although these two notions are related, objectification implies the separation from the self, while commodification involves not only a value for the object but a use as well.

The commodified body in that sense means that the physical body is not an isolated objectified body possessed by its owner. Our corporality is part of what we are and in that sense we all have a body. However, that body is a body that is displayed in public spaces, that interacts with others, to be judged according to shared norms and values and that has its market value defined by the qualities it displays and that fit what is socially defined as the desired qualities of the body.

Talking about the commodified body is hardly a novelty. In fact, the body either as a whole or fragmented in parts has long been an object of economic, social, and symbolic use in a host of societies. My interest in this conference is to discuss how the body, in contemporary societies, regarded as a consumer commodity can help understand a myriad of behaviors and how the structuralism and post-structuralism approaches to the body can offer interesting insights to discuss the different dimensions of a diversity of behaviors related to the body that can be regarded as the inscription of consumer's choices upon the body. Along the lines of that discussion it will be demonstrated how the process of commodification of the body in western societies brings together discourses of health, sports, aesthetics and food and how that can be understood as a field where both discipline and control are physically expressed.

#### THE BODY AND THE SELF: I AM WHAT I DO WITH MY BODY

Our bodies are an obvious concern in how we manage impressions of ourselves. That statement has become self-evident in contemporary societies such as the centrality of our body in the definition of who

we are. Post-modernists argue that the consumption of commodities has become central to how people define themselves in reflexive societies since consumer goods are the locus of cultural meanings, that have replaced other forms of identity formation, namely those related to religion and production [1]. By the purchase and consumption of commodities individuals create a personal universe of goods which reflects their own experience and vision of the world. In reflexive societies the individual is embedded in the assumption that one can achieve self fulfilment alongside the space for self-expression and personal growth. Individuals can have and do have projects for their own identities in the quest for that self fulfilment. One of the projects in which individuals are encouraged to make significant investments is the body as part of a project of construction of their own self.

In contemporary societies, the market value of the body is based in certain qualities (youth, health, fitness and beauty) and the more the body shows those qualities the higher its value in the market. The politics of the body is about the body immersed in cultural meanings that define the *do's* and the *don'ts* and that limit and regulate the body as Foucault and his followers have so bluntly put it [10]. The rise of the commodity culture has meant that the appearance of the body has become central to notions of self-identity. And if the body represents oneself, then it is imperative to ensure that the appearance of the body is attractive and conforming to accepted norms as much as possible.

Along this perspective, the widespread impetus to maximize fitness and avoid obesity is not necessarily related to the desire for health but more associated to a desire to conform to a certain body shape and image. In fact, the discourse about the healthy life style becomes entangled in this search for the perfect body. The industries that support health and fitness activities are entirely based in these anxieties people develop to sculpt their bodies and achieve physical attractiveness. Physical appearance, as an expression of identity, is modified in ways that become regarded as routine and normative (e.g., shaving; cosmetics; waxing/electrolysis; hair styling; tanning; orthodontic correction; body sculpting, ranging from dieting and body building to breast

modification, plastic surgery and liposuction). For example, research into women's reasons for undertaking often risky and painful cosmetic surgery procedures demonstrates that the intervention is experienced as an intervention into identity, that enables women to reduce the gap between how they perceive themselves and the way others see them [9].

In a TV show that described how selected applicants went through heavy cosmetic surgery and body transformations, one of the participants, a middle-aged woman, explained her motivations as «... to make the outside match what I felt inside...» suggesting that the intervention on the body was something that was beyond the physical body and instead was part of a process of definition of the woman's identity, an identity that was being misrepresented by a body that was not conveying the message its owner wanted to convey.

Other contributions come from the research done on some specific sports activities. One example is the research on body building by Mansfield and McGinn [14]. The expression used for this particular type of fitness activity, body building, is self-revealing. Like the two authors have demonstrated, for some men and women the activity of body-building represents an opportunity to reshape one's given body dramatically as part of a continuous never finished project. Like Shilling [18] puts it, the body becomes a project that is continually in a state of *unfinishedness*, a project that should be worked at and accomplished as part of the individual's self identity. Creating and maintaining a healthy, fit, young and beautiful body is an increasingly common type of body project for most of us.

But like in all other projects we have to balance the paradox between what we desire and what we actually manage to achieve. This balance, like Craib so well puts it, can be hard and even painful [7]. At least for some of us it can be.

The rise of the commodity culture in western societies has also resulted in the emergence of new forms of social exclusion, the exclusion of those who cannot consume. The body as a commodity is also the source of exclusion, namely when it does not display the qualities that make it a valuable commodity. And very easily it can become a liability. This type of argument is particularly relevant to

understand the place of the ageing body and the disabled body in contemporary societies and how they have become sources of great distress.

The relationship of individuals with the ageing body and the process of identity formation are particularly interesting. In this process there is often a negotiated relativity between age-in-years and age-in-appearance. People do not necessarily 'look their age'. Some research has been showing how the negotiation of appearance relative to age has become a rather obsessive concern in popular culture lifestyle magazines, websites and television shows. Not only do these discourses sensitize us repeatedly to 'how we look for our age', they problematise the 'look' of ageing and offer 'solutions' of different sorts to the problems they identify [6].

A body that does not function normally or that does not look normal is out of place, visually and conceptually, and mirrors the inability of its owner to look after it. Discourses on weight are particularly revealing. An overweight body is a body that reflects the lack of discipline and will required for body maintenance. Being overweight is something that triggers a moral judgment. Slenderness and firmness of the body are strongly linked with moral control, self-discipline and 'caring about yourself'. The industries that have emerged around cosmetics, fashion, fitness, sport, leisure, bodily cleanliness or diet rely upon this discourse that insists that normality and social acceptability derive from a certain body image and those who do not achieve that body image are deformed, not only in their bodies but in their identities.

When Turner conceptualized the Regulated Bodies, a great deal following the path inaugurated by Foucault and his writings on normalization and surveillance of the body, he examined the ways in which bodies are controlled within society. Society's reactions to the physical body have an impact on the lived body. The body becomes the archetypal subject of power and political control with power relations operating through it and inscribed on it and that ultimately regulate the body [19].

There is a great deal of research, specially on Sociology of Health, that shows there is an overlap of discourses on the healthy body, the sports body, the thin and the lean body: the self disciplined body

that should be directed to achieving the best possible self by enduring an on-going project of construction and re-construction. For the contemporary self the body and the owner are one; there is an insolvable link between self-identity and embodiment: a bad body is anomalous and incurs on the social condemnation of someone that should not allow the body to deteriorate.

Some researchers have also highlighted the impacts identity focused on the body can have in other dimensions. Gender is one of those dimensions. Masculinity and femininity are almost always thought to proceed from men's and women's bodies. Gendered identity focused on the body can be ruptured if the body is hindered in the characteristics it should have to reflect the gendered identity. Feminist scholars have contributed a lot to the analysis of the specific way the regulation of bodies affects women, reflecting their asymmetric position in society and their disempowerment. Studies on the medical encounter and the invasion of the female's body by modern medicine are very interesting discussions on how this disempowerment takes place. There a considerable wealth of studies on women's experiences of their bodies that touch issues such as the ideals of female beauty portrayed by magazines or issues related to anorectic behavior and food disorders.

The relation between the body and food is particularly interesting to unravel under the readings of the commodification of the body. In fact, the act of incorporation of foodstuffs may be regarded as the peak of consumption choices upon the body: skin tone, weight, strength of bones, condition of hair and nails, etc. are all said to be related to what we eat. Bodily obsessions in commodified settings largely revolve around what foodstuffs are allowed to enter the body. The inducements of health, fitness, physical desirability and youth often merge in ads for food products. Certain products are presented and have been incorporated in commercial practices as aids to physical perfection and preservation of a youthful appearance. On this topic, feminist scholars have triggered extensive debate, a debate about the meanings and role of food for women living in wealthy western cultures, where, as already said, the thin body is considered desirable. Charles and Kerr

[5] ran a study among British women and found that they experienced a constant struggle between depriving themselves and feeding their families, with very few women expressing a positive image of the body.

#### THE BODY IN THE SOCIAL SPACE: I DO WITH MY BODY WHAT I AM

All that has been said so far is subsidiary of a phenomenological approach to the meanings of the body that focus on the relationship between the body and the self, the individual identity. This is the dominant approach promoted by some postmodern theorists that contend that we become what we consume. In that sense the body is seen as saturated with cultural signs with no fixed referents and, as a consequence, a body that can produce multiple, shifting identities [12, 2]. However, given that access to cultural resources for identity construction is not equally available to everybody in consumer society, reflexive self-fashioning like Giddens [11] says can be more problematic for some than for others.

In many of the post-modern approaches, class is not a determining factor of one's status in a consumer culture and as a result the body is not constrained by collective groups unless the individual identifies himself, reflexively, with those groups. The self becomes dependent of the processes of construction of identity he commands and is not fixed on symbols of class or hierarchical status.

The structural approaches to the body and embodiment offer a slightly different perspective. I would like to talk about that a bit.

Bourdieu's theory of «body capital» is an obvious reference for this line of reasoning and offers interesting insights as it points to the fact that certain physical assets can operate as capital that can be exchanged in the market of social relations. Quoting Bourdieu...

*«...the body is the most indisputable materialization of class taste, which it manifests in several ways. It does this first in seemingly most natural features of the body, the different dimensions (volume, height, weight) and shapes (round or square, straight or curved) of its visible forms, which express in countless ways a whole relation to the body, i.e., a way of treating it, caring for it, feeding it, maintaining it... It is in fact through preferences with*

regard to food which may be perpetuated beyond their social conditions of production (as, in other areas, an accent, a walk, etc.) and also, of course, through the uses of the body in work and leisure which are bound up with them, that the class distribution of bodily properties are determined» [4: p. 190].

The term physical capital is used to refer to cultural capital that is embodied through social practice and any form of physical attribute such as athletic skill, beauty, deportment or physical strength which can be converted into other forms of capital. The shape, size, use and adornment of the body carry particular meanings just as ways of walking, sitting, gesturing and taking part in social life are saturated with social and cultural meaning. In particular social settings, these constitute a valuable form of capital that can be converted into more powerful forms such as the economic capital of wages.

Bourdieu argues that not only is culture imprinted on the body but that the body itself is the central element through which culture is produced and reproduced. The shape, size and deportment of bodies, the ways they are positioned in relation to each other and their occupation of space all communicate powerful meanings. Bourdieu [3, 4] contends that such bodily discourse operates implicitly at subconscious levels to mark the bearer with cultural and social meaning that is constantly and unconsciously communicated. As Bourdieu notes, "The principles embodied in this way are placed beyond the grasp of consciousness and, hence cannot be touched by voluntary, deliberate transformation, cannot even be made explicit" [3: p. 94].

Approaches more centred on the individual capacity to decide beyond social structures would contend that, in fact, the consumer is an active agent that can manage his/her public body in a consumer culture and adorn itself with commodities that radiate the image of beauty, health, fitness and youth and build an identity that goes beyond the identity of the group.

Bourdieu's work on the contrary suggests that, not only are peoples' bodies inscribed with culture, but that the body's engagement in social and cultural practice also profoundly shapes the individual's entire disposition and set of tastes that structure

behavior, social action and access to resources. Bourdieu's notion of the *habitus*, or the pattern of unconscious preferences, classificatory schemes and taken-for-granted choices which differs between groups and classes and distinguishes them one from the other, is relevant to understand how individuals experience their bodies. These aspects of discussing bodily deportment have been neglected by Foucault and post-structuralists in general. Bourdieu theorizes that if one belongs to a certain group and identifies with that group, then one will make choices as a consumer which will reflect the *habitus* of that group. And most of the times, if not always, those choices will be made under the belief that they are «natural» choices and that they are deeply embedded in what the individual is as a unique person. In line with this, for example, research has shown that the obsession with body maintenance is more important among the middle classes, where it is more clearly identified a discourse around health and the body that revolves around self-control, self-discipline, self-denial and will power. Following Bourdieu's approach, the working-class *habitus* produces a taste for cheap, filling and fatty foods naturalized by the «eat well and let yourself go» philosophy, while the middle class *habitus* is characterized by dietary restraint, bodily fitness and slimness [8]. Shilling [17] suggests a broader concept of physical capital than Bourdieu does but develops the idea, alongside Bourdieu's writings, that the physical body can contribute to the reproduction of social inequalities. He analyses the specific relationship between the body and sports and claims that the production of physical capital – that is, the shaping of the body through sport, food, etiquette, among others – varies according to social class. Working class people, Shilling argues, have a more instrumental orientation to their bodies; for example, they are likely to have a more functional view of illness and thus the body is treated as a means to an end. The middle classes, by contrast, treat the body as an end in itself; for example, they may participate in sports not so much to get fit as for the intrinsic value that might be derived from such activities [17]. Shilling suggests that the idea of physical capital is easily grasped by thinking of the ways in which sportsmen and women convert physical ability into

income or the way that models, or even prostitutes for that matter, use their bodies for material gain [17]. While these are indeed explicit examples of physical capital, less explicit cultural capital is embodied in through the everyday use of the body. Everyday actions communicate important social and cultural meaning to both enable and restrain social action and access to resources. And in that respect, the body is simultaneously the site where what I am in the social space shows and that clarifies what my place is in that same social space.

### CONCLUSION

To conclude, as I see it, the body is not only a very relevant and absorbing part of our existence as individuals and as societies, but it is also, because of that centrality in the dynamics of societies, a central object in several domains of social research, among which those that are joining here today researchers with a myriad of different research interests. Among the readings of the body as an object for social research we find those that unravel the logics of commodification of the body, particularly relevant in contemporary societies and offering a very rich theoretical framework to studies on sports and health behavior.

Body modification, by means of dieting, sport activity, cirurgical intervention or others has experienced expanded expression and appropriation, leading some to claim that we have included our body as part of a consumer inventory. A relevant line of arguments on the meanings of the body in contemporary societies, consumer societies where the individual is defined by what he or she consumes, the body becomes a central instrument of identity formation. It operates as a canvas where the individual can paint his own narrative, a reflexive story that represents the story he chooses to tell. That choice is not free from all boundaries. Contemporary societies are as normative as always, as regulating as always. The norms and the regulations though are expressed in standards of purchase of commodities in a consumer culture. We are what we consume, and our poor choices as consumers will be subject to moral judgment.

An alternative line of thought contends that consumer choices are inscribed on the body and there-

fore make it a site for social and especially class differences. We are not what we consume in the sense that we can reflexively build our identity by purchasing commodities. We consume according to what we are and as such our body will be the material expression of our place in the social space.

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