

THE BODY AS REFERENT

David Harvey

Discourses in the academy and in the movements that engage in identity politics have increasingly framed identity in terms of the body as the basis for understanding and values. Opposite this micro-level “body talk,” another key discourse has emerged around a macro-level issue, the globalization of the market economy. These two discourses seldom overlap and little attempt has been made to integrate them, David Harvey argues, in part because the body has been conceptualized in individual terms and as an irreducible given. Drawing on insights from Marx, he links the two discourses, describing how the body is deeply affected by the conditions under which people work and how conversely the globalization process has changed these conditions for massive numbers of people. Recognizing the role of labor on the body makes it possible to conceive of the body not simply in individual terms but also as a referent for collective identities, drawing together those similarly situated in the labor process. Harvey briefly traces the rise of interest in the body and argues that it is not an irreducible referent but is itself shaped by the social forces that operate upon it.

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THE EXTRAORDINARY EFFLORESCENCE of interest in “the body” as a grounding for all sorts of theoretical inquiries over the last two decades has a dual origin. In the first place, the questions raised particularly through what is known as “second-wave feminism” could not be answered without close attention to the “nature-nurture” problem, making it inevitable that the status and understanding of “the body” would become central to theoretical debate. Questions of gender, sexuality, the power of symbolic orders, and the significance of psychoanalysis also repositioned the body as both subject and object of discussion and debate. And to the degree that all of this opened up a terrain of inquiry that was well beyond traditional conceptual apparatuses (such as that contained in Marx), so an extensive and original theorizing of the body became essential to progressive and emancipatory politics (this was particularly the case with respect to feminist and queer theory). And there is indeed much that has been both innovative and profoundly progressive within this movement.

The second impulse to return to the body arose out of the movements of poststructuralism in general and deconstruction in particular. The effect of these movements was to generate a loss of confidence in all previously established categories (such as those proposed by Marx) for understanding the world. This in turn provoked a return to the body as the irreducible basis for understanding. Lowe argues that:

There still remains one referent apart from all the other destabilized referents, whose presence cannot be denied, and that is the body referent, our very own lived body. This body referent is in fact the referent of all referents, in the sense that ultimately all signifieds, values, or meanings refer to the delineation and satisfaction of the needs of the body. Precisely because all other referents are now destabilized, the body referent, our own body, has emerged as a problem.¹

¹ David M. Lowe, *The Body in Late-Capitalist USA* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995) 14.

The convergence of these two broad movements has refocused attention upon the body as the basis for understanding and, in certain circles at least, as the privileged site of political resistance and emancipatory politics.

Viewing the body as the irreducible locus for the determination of all values, meanings, and significations is not new. It was fundamental to many strains of pre-Socratic philosophy, and the idea that “man” or “the body” is “the measure of all things” has had an extraordinarily long and interesting history. The contemporary return to “the body” as “the measure of all things” provides, therefore, an opportunity to reassert the bases (epistemological and ontological) of all forms of inquiry. The *manner* of this return is crucial to determining how values and meanings are to be constructed and understood and how politics can be imagined. Foucault, for one, strove to shift our political horizons away from monolithic categories such as class and hence away from class politics to embrace the micro-politics of the body as an alternative site for radical politics. Foucault writes:

This work done at the limits of ourselves must, on the one hand, open up a realm of historical inquiry and, on the other, put itself to the test of reality, of contemporary reality, both to grasp the points where change is possible and desirable, and to determine the precise form this change should take. This means that the historical ontology of ourselves must turn away from all projects that claim to be global or radical. In fact we know from experience that the claim to escape from the system of contemporary reality so as to produce the overall programs of another society, of another way of thinking, another culture, another vision of the world, has led only to the return of the most dangerous traditions.²

The warning is salutary and deserves to be taken seriously. But the

² Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984) 46.

turning away from all projects that claim to be global is, in my view, deeply damaging. It leads Foucault to prefer projects that are “always partial and local” and to hope these realize generality in a different way. It drives a wedge between the discourses of “globalization” and “the body” so as to conform to Foucault’s other view on the inherent heterogeneity, radical pluralism, and incompatibility of multiple discourses.

While not everyone has followed Foucault into such a political position, it is undeniable that much of the recent discourse about the body has been constructed as an antidote to discourses about class and has played an important role in generating a massive discursive shift away from interest in Marx. And it has, *pari passu*, made it not only undesirable but seemingly impossible to try to link discourses about globalization and the body in any systematic way. Yet there is something odd about how this has occurred for there is much in the contemporary literature on the body that is perfectly consistent with the fundamentals of Marx’s argument.

Consider, for example, the two fundamental themes that dominate the recent literature. Writers as diverse as Elias, Bourdieu, Stafford, Haraway, Butler, Diprose, Grosz, and Martin, agree that the body is an unfinished project, historically and geographically malleable in certain ways.³ It may not be infinitely or even easily malleable, and certain of its inherent (“natural”) qualities cannot be erased. But the body is evolving and changing in ways that reflect both an internal

³ See Norbert Elias, *The Civilising Process: The History of Manners and State Formation and Civilisation*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978); Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Routledge, 1984); Barbara Maria Stafford, *Body Criticism: Imaging the Unseen in Enlightenment Art and Medicine* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991); Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1991); Judith P. Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Rosalyn Diprose, *The Bodies of Women: Ethics, Embodiment and Sexual Difference* (London: Routledge, 1994); Elizabeth Grosz, “Bodies-Cities,” *Sexuality and Space*, ed. Beatriz Colomina (Princeton, NJ: Princeton School of Architecture Press, 1994) 241-253; Emily Martin, *Flexible Bodies: Tracking Immunity in American Culture—From the Days of Polio to the Age of AIDS* (Boston: Beacon, 1994).

transformative dynamics (often the focus of psychoanalytic work) and external processes (most often invoked in social constructionist approaches). This idea is powerfully present in Gramsci's analysis of Fordism and can be traced back, as I have shown elsewhere, to the very core of Marx's work from *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* to *Capital*.⁴

The second theme, broadly consistent with (if not implicitly contained in) the first, is that the body is not a closed and sealed entity, but a relational "thing" that is created, bounded, sustained, and ultimately dissolved in a spatio-temporal flow of multiple processes. This entails a relational-dialectical view (most clearly articulated in queer theory) in which the body (construed as a thing-like entity endowed with transformative powers) internalizes the effects of the processes that create, support, sustain, and dissolve it. Here, too, an argument can be made that a relational dialectical reading of Marx's work is entirely compatible with such a view.⁵ The body which we inhabit and which is supposedly the irreducible measure of all things is not itself irreducible. There is far more agreement between, say, Marx and Foucault on this point than there is fundamental difference. Much of what Foucault has to say, particularly in his early works such as *Discipline and Punish*, is prefigured in Marx's chapters in *Capital* on "The Working Day" and "Primitive Accumulation." Conversely, there is much in Foucault that can be read as a friendly and thoughtful extension of Marx's concerns rather than as a rejection and rebuttal.

But here we encounter a conundrum. On the one hand, to return to the human body as the fount of all experience is presently regarded as a means (now increasingly privileged) to challenge the whole network of abstractions (scientific, social, political-economic)

4 See David Harvey, "The Body as an Accumulation Strategy," *Society and Space* (forthcoming).

5 See David Harvey, *Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Difference* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

through which social relations, power retaliations, institutions, and material practices get defined, represented, and regulated. But on the other hand, no human body is outside of the social processes of determination. To return to it is, therefore, to instantiate the very social processes being purportedly rebelled against. If, for example, workers are transformed (as Marx suggests in *Capital*) into appendages of capital in both the work place and the consumption sphere (or, as Foucault prefers it, bodies are made over into *docile bodies* by the rise of a powerful disciplinary apparatus from the eighteenth century onwards), then how can their bodies be a measure, sign, or receiver of anything outside of the circulation of capital or of the various mechanisms that discipline them? To take a more contemporary version of the same argument, if we are all now *cyborgs* (as Haraway in her celebrated manifesto on the topic suggests),⁶ then how can we measure anything outside of that deadly embrace of the machine as an extension of our own body and the body as an extension of the machine?

So while returning to the body as the site of a more authentic (epistemological and ontological) grounding of the theoretical abstractions that have for too long ruled purely as abstractions may be justified (and provide a proper grounding, as in the cases of feminism and queer theory, for an emancipatory and progressive politics), that return cannot in and of itself guarantee anything except either the production of a narcissistic self-referentiality or the sacrifice of any sense of collective political possibilities. So whose body is it that is to be the measure of all things? Exactly how and what is it in a position to measure? And what politics might flow therefrom? Such questions cannot be answered without a prior understanding of exactly how bodies are socially produced.

⁶ See Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1991).