

Politics of Body: Enabling and Ennobling Our Embodied Selves

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Abstract: Thanks to critical scholars we have come to discover the cultural underpinnings of our bodies in our societies. Indeed many have shown how the representation of the body is a means of status and control of gender and ethnicity and of nature and culture. Thus body politics is anchored in the most basic experiences of being in a body.

The present study will strive to understand and trace how body has been thought of down the ages. We shall mainly focus our reflection on the western tradition. Next, we shall attempt to propose a possible rehabilitation of our bodily life with a special attention to the somatic theology of St. Paul.

Our study reveals that our social conditionings determine our perception of our body. The privileging of the racist white body, the consumerist fit body, strong male body, sattvic bhramanical body, and the rational body or even the violent body of the terrorist is a social construction. We have come to a conclusion that we can tackle this disembodiment of our body through the creation of the 'counterpublics' that will spring forth a sustained discourse that will dignify our biological dynamism. In this task the deep insights and values from our Christian tradition are indeed highly resourceful. We have attempted to present some of the teachings of St. Paul and to show how they can ennoble our embodied life.

Keywords: Body, politics of body, embodied selves, disabling body, enabling body, ennobling body.

Body is being radically rethought in both science and philosophy. Body is not merely a natural object but is also an object of cultural representation. Some point out that body is a means of encoding society's values through its shape, size and ornamental attributes.

The way of bringing up our babies through rites of initiations into our communities and acceptance of their adolescence as well as their introduction into the circumstances of adult life has important bodily dimensions. The values embedded in our socialization strategies shape all our everyday experiences: sleep and waking, rest and physical activity, hygiene, eating and drinking, reproduction, consumption, entertainment and creativity. Traditionally many cultures have constructed body in demeaning terms and death is often celebrated as freedom from the bondage of body.

Thanks to critical scholars we have come to discover the cultural underpinnings of our bodies in our societies. Indeed many have shown how the representation of the body is a means of status and control of gender and ethnicity and of nature and culture. Thus body politics is anchored in the most basic experiences of being in a body.

We are confronted with all kinds of modified bodies in all kinds of contexts. Extensively tattooed and body-pierced individuals are visible on the streets. TV guides now routinely contain advertisement for clinics offering breast implants, liposuction and other forms of cosmetic adaptations. Many somatic boundaries are falling apart due to the present developments

Body is also materially restructured by science through practices such as genetic engineering and artificial insemination and cyborgization. Today various parts of our anatomy can be disassembled and rebuilt through scientific interventions like cosmetic surgery, genetic engineering, performance enhancing implants etc. Robotics threatens to replace our body with robots that can perform efficiently many of the tasks that are associated with our bodies. Science and technology through the industrial and postindustrial revolutions have successfully introduced into the social space replicas of human body in the form of more and more complex tools, such as electronic systems of information technology and communication which both complement and mirror human abilities.

The present study will strive to understand and trace how body has been thought of down the ages. We shall mainly focus our reflection on the western tradition. Next, we shall attempt to propose a possible rehabilitation of our bodily life with a special attention to the somatic theology of St. Paul.

What is a Body?

Our culture teaches us to ignore our bodies. Many trace its roots to the Platonic degradation of our bodies in favour of our spiritual souls. We in India are also bound by the vision of *Moksha* as freedom from the bondage of the bodies. Bodies are real and have materiality but at the same time they are socially constructed. The understanding of bodies as social assists us to view power, knowledge and our relationships in a new light.

Body evokes a bewildering variety of meanings. Often it is equivocal, sometimes ambiguous, at times evasive and always contested by those who wish to understand its meaning more fully.[1] This seemingly simple question 'WHAT IS A BODY?' has not been sufficiently problematized and attentively studied. Bryan Turner [2] admits that at the end of his book, *The Body and Society*, he was even more amazed by the "crassly obvious" question "what is the body?" than when he began.

Elizabeth Grosz [3] who for a number of years has researched embodiment, claims:

By body I understand a concrete, material, animate organization of flesh, organs, nerves, muscles, and skeletal structure which are given a unity, cohesiveness, and organization only through their psychical and social inscription as the surface and raw materials of an integrated and cohesive totality ... The body becomes a human body, a body which coincides with the 'shape' and space of a psyche, a body whose epidermic surface bounds a psychical unity, a body which thereby defines the limits of experience and subjectivity, in psychoanalytic terms through the intervention of the (m)other, and ultimately, the Other or Symbolic order (language and rule-governed social order). [4]

There is a considerable academic disabling of the body due to the operation of the body-mind dualism in our society. The Cartesian dualism considers the body as other to the mind. It functions as a lesser category to the mind which is associated with public space, rationality and objectivity.[5] This dualism is not only conceptualized in the western knowledge system but is conceptually and historically sexualized. The mind has been seen as rational and masculine and

the body has been perceived as reason's underside. The body is thus othered, disembodied, sexualized and disciplined.

Of course both men and women have bodies. But men are thought to be able to transcend their bodies and speak a universal language unencumbered by the material body placed in the material context of everyday life while women are widely thought to be bound to the fleshy desires of their material bodies. This othering of the body could be also traced as underpinning the racist white bodies, the rational disembodied observer of modern science or the so called the sattvic constitution of the bhramanical bodies. This disembodiment of the body sanctions and renders normal the racist as well as the casteist domination in the west and India respectively. In India we can even find the divine body broken to legitimize casteist oppression. Positivism and scientism also depend on the disembodied observer detached from the subject under study. Nothing that is tainted by the corporeality of the knower qualifies to be recognized as knowledge. Moreover, the body being the chief locus of violence, we might see how the dualistic disembodiment of the bodily dimension can lead to unscrupulous brutalization of the bodies of the victims. The paradox is that this disembodiment of the body is only a social construction as body is always present and functions as a backdrop to all these multiple practices of incorporation or de-recognition of the body.

Thanks to the developments in body studies, corporeality is steadily accepted as a vital dimension of human life. Although body still functions as the other of the mind in many ways, there are noticeable attempts to embody the social representation of our body. Some of these attempts to put back the bodily dimensions with all their pure intentions suffer a drawback as it attempts to put back only the able-bodied male, racist white bodies/ casteist sattvic bhramanical bodies or even consumerist bodies leading to the same slavery of masculinism. Hence, we need a deeper look at the politics of the body.

Politics of Body

Although the body is material, it is politically and socially encoded. Hence, we attempt to draw our attention to the social

production of our bodies. We strive to examine the politics of omission of the body in our discursive and material practices. The omission of the body becomes an important requisite of the social disembodiment of our body. The absent presence of the bodily dimension foregrounds the rationalist, white, brhmanical, consumerist, male bias that operates as an unmarked norm from which everything else that deviates is seen as unbecoming. This racialization, sexualization, cosumerization or brhmanization of the body is deeply embedded in the dynamics of our society. This dynamics runs on the wheels of the exclusion of the body. Body is looked upon as irrational, messy and passionate. But the white, the brhmanical, male, consumerist bodies somehow can disembody and relate to the ordered, stable, essential normal, natural and universal and at the same time derive the right to establish order, stability and normalcy everywhere. This might explain how humans have fallen prey to untold brutalization of socially constructed and inferiorized bodies.

The theorization of the politics of Body has an important political as well as ethical dimension. The politics of silence that forbids the discussion of the bodies has been broken by numerous theorists in the 1990s who were influenced by the postmodern thinkers such as Judith Butler (1990, 1993), Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1983, 1986), and Michel Foucault (1979, 1980). Yet Scholars like Robyn Longhurst points out that these laudable attempts are still guilty of bracketing the materiality of the body. The body that breaks its boundaries- urinates, bleeds, vomits, farts, gets sick and diseased, becomes both subject and object of sexual desire, ejaculates and gives birth remains largely un-discussed. The messiness of bodies is often conceptualised and totalized as feminised, and as such is Othered. But the ignoring of the materiality of the body is not a harmless omission, rather, it contains a political imperative that helps to keep masculinism intact in our society. [6]

The material biological body is the site of potential disruption of the order of the 'same' and at best totalized as other that is inferior. The politics of exclusion of the body is only a social construction. This awareness is indeed important and it can allow us to understand how a flesh-less, incorporeal, rationalized body underpins and

produces our discursive and material practices. Therefore, this exclusion of the body cannot be trivialized and brushed aside for it has several costs. Otherwise the regimes of hegemony grounded in the body will remain invisible. Hence, our locatedness, situatedness or embodiedness becomes deeply significant.

Disabling Bodies

Clothing and make-up modify our bodies temporally. Permanent modification arises from workouts in gymnasium, tattooing, and plastic surgery. Even, subtle modification takes place as a result of socialization. The social conditioning is significantly responsible in producing proper, clean, decent, law abiding bodies. Julia Kristeva teaches that our subjectivity is constituted through a process by which a person comes to see himself or herself as a separate being with his or her own borders between self and other. Kristeva holds that our first experience is a realm of plenitude, of oneness with the environment and of the semiotic chora. This means the infant comes into the world without any borders. It is psychoanalytic theory that illumines us about the formation of the borders and the formation of 'I'. Jaques Lacan teaches that subjectivity arises when an infant at some point between six and eighteen months of age catches a glimpse of himself or herself in front of a mirror and takes the image to be himself. Kristeva admits that mirror stage can bring a sense of unity, but points out that an infant develops this sense much before it through the process she christens as abjection. 'Abject is what one spits out, rejects, almost violently excludes from the oneself: sour milk, excrement and even mother's embrace.' [7] What is abjected is radically excluded but never totally banished. It hovers at the edge of one's existence constantly challenging ones own tenuous boundaries. Indeed that which is abjected remains a constant threat to one's own clean and proper self. This means abjection remains a constant companion in our whole life.

The rituals that we can trace in all cultures are mechanisms that humans have developed to deal with abjection. Kristeva suggests that religions have also served such purposes by setting up ways to cleanse or purify our selves. Within this dynamism of abjection, we can understand the process that we have described as disembodiment

our bodies. One can notice the expelling of that which is considered as not part of the clean and pure self. This expelling of the 'impure' is very much part and parcel of the process of exclusion of the dynamism of our body. It might be characterized as forgetting our biology or forgetting to live from an embodied place. We pay the cost of the clean and decent bodies through abjection which rejects the frailty, passion, irrationality, messiness and sets the boundary of the self as rational, orderly, clean and pure. Those people whose bodies are understood to be messy and/or out of control - the disabled, pregnant, lactating, dirty, queer, fat, elderly, poor - are often marginalised as illegitimate, abnormal even inhuman. This othering of the so-called tainted bodies grounds the white, male, consumerist and brhmanical body and justifies the exploitation, oppression of the marginalized person

Therefore, the attention to the materiality of our socio-biological self is important as it can dismantle the raceological, casteiest, purely otherworldly worldviews generating oppression and exploitation. This recognition is important as we can understand the social production of the disembodying of our bodies and initiate a process that will attempt to restore the dignity of our body. The social production of the exclusion of the body becomes powerfully exposed through the work of Michael Foucault. Foucault illumines the discursive production of 'the individual'. In his essay 'the Subject and Power' (1982), he specially addresses this question. He holds that subject is an effect of power-knowledge configurations. Subject, thus, is not the source of meaning, power or action but is discursively produced. That is, power does not act over and against an already free subject, but rather it produces it. Moreover, power operates through the body; its productive effects are bodily.

Foucault in his essay 'Why Study Power: The Question of Subject', says that his work has dealt with the modes of objectification which transform human beings into subjects, 'dividing practices' or the disciplinary powers and techniques of normalization by which subjects are divided internally and from others and the techniques of self, the way a human being turns himself/herself into a subject. All these modes coexist in a complex interconnection. [8]

The modes of objectification are seen as the practices of power-knowledge. The disciplinary power works by means of surveillance,

'the eye power' 'the eyes that must see without being seen.' [9] These powers are exercised through the body of the individual: certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires, come to be identified and constituted as individual; individuals are not points of application of power, but vehicles of power. [10] Thus, we can see panopticism has been interiorized and the individual sees himself or herself as an object of gaze, exercising surveillance over self.

Foucault points out that the 'dividing practices' discursively produce difference (otherness) in relation to the sameness. His analyses of the differentiation between the sane and the mad, the healthy and the sick, the good and the criminal, the sexually normal and the sexually deviant, reveal that it is discursive practices of normalization that function through the opposition between normal and abnormal (that are to be understood in the context of the critical questioning of this opposition of western knowledge between Same and Other) are the sites where the subjects are divided internally and from others. [11]

Foucault presents 'the government of individualization.' [12] He speaks of struggles against the form of power in everyday life, a form of power which makes individuals subjects. The term subject is used by him in a double sense: subject to someone else and tied to self, to identity or self-knowledge. [13] He holds that they assert the right to be different. They attack that which separates the individual, forces him/her back on himself/herself tying him/her to an identity. In the quest for self-sameness the subjects struggle with otherness. Thus, Foucault points out that to be a subject means to be objectified which also includes the subject taking self as an object. That is why he asserts that the 'the target now-a-days is not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are' [14] which could be reformulated as 'what we are made'.

This means that the discursive practices also produce our material practices (behaviour). We can see how our discursive practices produce our subjectivity which in its turn will influence and produce our material practices. It is by redefining our discursive practices that we can influence our material practices. Hence, within this discursive formation we can trace the power to arrest and transform the social construction of the disembodying of our bodies.

Enabling our Bodies

The disembodiment of our bodies has its roots both in our biology and sociology. But we can overcome it by dismantling the social determinants that generate our discursive practices. Christian tradition with its focus on the incarnation and resurrection of the body can provide a potential stimulus to bring about an inversion in our discursive practices and assist in bringing about a change in our material practices that will dignify our embodied life. The theology of the body taught by Pope John Paul II of blessed memory is indeed an important step in this direction. George Weigel in his biography of John Paul II has already greeted it as a theological time-bomb.

In the context of the present study, we wish to draw our attention to the rich resources that that we can draw from the writings of St. Paul that has the power to bring about a sea change in the understanding of our bodied experience of life. Christianity is deeply influenced by Jewish tradition and the Jews had a holistic notion of self. It is taught that the word *Nefesh* often translated as soul also meant body. Scholars like Vito Evola point out that the semantic shift that seem to exclude the bodily dimension occurred due to the St. Paul (<http://209.85.175.104/search?q=cache>) Others accuse him that he has inherited the Greek body-soul dualism. The ancient Greeks had two words that spoke of the body: *sarx* and *soma*. They were roughly translated as flesh and body respectively. *Sarx* got polysemically nuanced and as time passed the connotation shifted to a more negative side. Paul also capitalizes on this semantic shift and uses it to denote the rebel human nature that is not wanting to accept Christ. He further uses the term *soma* 91 times generally to speak about the body of Christ. The analogy of the body is beautifully used to describe the communion of the church and our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul forcefully uses this image of the body of Christ as a communion of faithful with special charisms and talents which build up the church.

Paul addressed many problems in the early Christian community like divisions in the community, abuse of the body, the position of the weak and strong, disorder in the worshiping assembly with his teachings on the Eucharist. Thus we notice that Paul teaches that the Corinthians profane and devalue the Lord's Supper because of

their unbecoming behaviour (1Cor 11). The saving death and resurrection of Jesus is presented as a definitive event that transforms the baptized into a new creation and are invited to live out the future life as an eschatological community by the power of the Holy Spirit in the present age until its final consummation at second coming of our Lord.

In his 2003 encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, Pope John Paul II wove Paul's teaching throughout his meditation on the Eucharist:

The words of the Apostle Paul bring us back to the dramatic setting in which the Eucharist was born...The Apostle Paul, for his part, says that it is 'unworthy' of a Christian community to partake of the Lord's Supper amid division and indifference to the poor (cf. 1 Cor 11:17-22, 27-34). Proclaiming the death of the Lord 'until he comes' (1 Cor 11:26) entails that all who take part in the Eucharist be committed to changing their lives and making them in a certain way completely 'Eucharistic.' [20]

Ennobling our Bodies

We can use the creative hermeneutics of St. Paul to understand the politics of disembodiment of our bodies. Just as St. Paul made use of the Greek *Sarx* to portray the attitude of rejection of Christ, we can find in Paul the same resources to invert the exclusion of our biology. We have already seen that the disembodiment of our body is a social construction and hence a sustained campaign to generate a positive acceptance of our true biological self can truly set us free from a slavery to the white racist, healthy, fit, consumerist, sattvic bhraminical, orderly rational male bodies. Paul's theology of the salvific death of our Lord Jesus Christ, the theology of baptism, the theology of the Eucharist and the theology of the church provide great resources that we can explore to find means and ways to dignify the body. This exercise is needed as the violence to our body is growing with terrorism and technology like genetic engineering and NIBIC convergence. The Christian understanding of the effects of baptism is also a powerful resource as it has deep biological bearings and ennoble us holistically.

The holistic anthropology evolving from Christian tradition can be an antidote to the question of the body that we have discussed. It

is up to us to bring this influence into the social process that would dismantle the hegemony of the white, consumerist, bhraminical and rational body. One might suggest that a sustained effort to introduce the biological dynamism in a positive light in our public sphere might contract and shrink the public space already occupied by the hegemony who actively promote the disembodiment of our body.

The development of the theory of 'the public sphere' that has its roots in the Frankfurt School of social research might be of some help in achieving our goal of affirming our biological self. Jürgen Habermas is responsible for developing the contours of the theory of 'public sphere'. According to him: "By the 'public sphere' we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which the private individuals assemble to form a public body....with the guarantee of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions." [15] Many scholars improved on Habermasian views. Thus for instance, Nancy Fraser adds that the oppressed need a place from where the oppressed "invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs." [16] Thus we can see how the creation of these 'counterpublics' can become a powerful tool to respond to the rhetoric and the ideologies of the main-stream that is hell bent on the exclusion of our biological dynamism. Such 'counterpublics' can become new sites from where we can creatively deconstruct the social construction of our bodies and reconceptualize the marginalized biological dynamism, and thus influence our discursive and material practices.

Conclusion

Our study reveals that our social conditionings determine our perception of our body. The privileging of the racist white body, the consumerist fit body, strong male body, sattvic bhramanical body, and the rational body or even the violent body of the terrorist is a social construction. We have come to a conclusion that we can tackle this disembodiment of our body through the creation of the 'counterpublics' that will spring forth a sustained discourse that will dignify our biological dynamism. In this task the deep insights and

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Notes

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