

Contemporary sociology and the body

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abstract Although classical sociology was not always oblivious or indifferent to the embodied dimensions of social relations, contemporary sociology has developed new perspectives and frameworks for understanding the body as a social and cultural construct and as a fundamental element in material and symbolic processes of power and conviviality. The present article sketches the development of sociological approaches to the body, with key contributions coming from diverse schools of thought, from Elias and Bourdieu to contemporary feminist, Foucauldian post-structuralism and queer theories.

keywords bodies ♦ contemporary sociologies ♦ corporeality ♦ culture ♦ sexualities

Introduction

Classical sociology was largely bound to the theorization of 'public sphere' aspects of modernity (Felski, 1995) and perhaps initially, to a legacy in social/political theory and philosophy that promoted rational and disembodied concepts of being in the world. Although sociology soon moved beyond Cartesian-inspired Enlightenment thinking and its paradigmatic bias, the embodied and emotional dimensions of human existence and social relations did not share centre-stage with the many other phenomena or issues considered as defining the concerns of an emergent discipline.

Yet sociology was also born of concerns with widening the scope of modern social thought. Max Weber realized that modern society's privileged 'rational action' was circumscribed in time and space and Simmel drew attention to the new 'sensorial experiences' of modern urban life. Karl Marx (1964) – who, as Stuart Hall (1972) has argued, was responsible for bestowing a new historicity upon the (Enlightenment) subject – can be recognized as perceiving the corporeal dimensions of social relations, evident in his view of how 'capital' imposed its punishments on the flesh and blood, the embodied existence of the working classes. Although Emile Durkheim (1967, 1986) may seem to have had little to say regarding the embodied character of 'social

facts', his sociological imagination, fired by perceptions of the different relations that 'tribal' and modern societies had to the emotional and symbolic, led him to devote attention to embodied forms of emotional expression among 'tribal' societies, which he understood as social and collective forms of constructing and asserting bonds of belonging. And to Marcel Mauss (1934), deeply influenced by Durkheim, we owe a major classical contribution. His essay on the 'techniques of the body', posits a clear recognition of the forms through which different cultures and societies make use of the body, moulding and 'educating' it in ways that become fundamental to social relations. Although Mauss did not go beyond dualist conceptions insofar as he conceived of the body as 'man's [*sic*] first instrument' or 'technical object', he did draw attention to the complexity of the 'techniques of the body' that particular societies develop, paying heed to the way societies inculcate different embodied abilities and dexterities along the lines of what today we study as gender/ed constructions. Thus, girls become 'girls' – and later 'women' – as they are taught their culture's embodied prescriptions; boys are taught how to be boys who then become men with culturally appropriate embodied demeanour and skills.

In the mid-twentieth century, an outstanding contribution to understanding the corporeal nature of

social relations was made by Norbert Elias (1982, 1983, 1991). His landmark work of historical sociology, *The Civilizing Process* (1982), published initially in 1939, stands out for its emphasis on social and political processes that unfold through and upon *the body*. With his view of the genesis of modern forms of regulation of postures, gestures, demeanour, actions and emotions, he anticipated Foucault's (1963, 1976) theory of a disciplining 'biopower'.

Contemporary sociology has moved forward considerably in 'bringing the body back in'. Kevin White (1995: 188) points to changes in twentieth-century social life that to his mind have stimulated the sociological imagination to look at the body: 'The aging structure in late capitalist societies and the declining death rate in Third World countries had literally made the number of bodies problematic. The body as a consumer of commodities and lifestyles has highlighted its social shaping, and developments in medical technology – around body parts – have problematized what were once taken-for-granted events, namely death and the inviolability of organs within the human organism.'

New sensibilities blossomed in the post-Second World War period and came to a head in the 'turbulent sixties', urging critical disengagement from the Cartesian rationalism that was so deeply rooted in modernism. As Sally Banes (1993) has demonstrated, the performative counter-cultural politics of art and youth revolt placed the disciplined, domesticated, 'repressed' body of bourgeois culture at the centre of all it sought to reject, transcend and transform. Embodied politics fed, directly and indirectly, into scholarly work to effect a veritable revolution in the humanities and social sciences, bringing about new understandings of power, daily life and social change.

Thus, in the latter decades of the twentieth century, a field of research that we can refer to as the 'sociology of the body' emerged. Yet studies on the body – and the empirical reality of bodies themselves – have presented a challenge to knowledge boundaries, drawing insights from a wide range of disciplines that provide diverse approaches to corporeal practices and power relations. Not surprisingly then, while this new field has often manifested close kinship to post-structuralist perspectives that emphasize 'discursivity' – through or in relation to cultural *discourse* – there has also been a certain tension between this 'cultural turn' and a more classical sociological approach demanding a concern for bodies that foregrounds their shaping through the material and institutional dimensions of life that forge particular forms of social relations.

This article discusses some of the theoretical and historical processes which break through an initial

philosophical silencing of bodies and embodiment and then focuses on contemporary developments, placing emphasis on the diverse types of rethinking that have been encouraged and the complex, dynamic research agenda that has unfolded. We will also devote attention to some particularly significant interfaces with 'subfields' such as the sociology of medicine and health, sex and gender, sport and leisure and sexuality.

Furthermore, although contemporary perspectives are still mired in the struggle to break with the 'Eurocentrism' of classical disciplines, it is important to keep in mind that the very mind/body split that so deeply shaped Western thought may be much less decisive or omnipresent in the social thought of 'the South'. Feminist and post-colonial theories have emphasized the ideological link between the suppression of bodily experience and Western construction of its 'Others'. Sociologies of the global South (Connell, 2007) may offer unique theoretical and methodological contributions to build upon.

Body, society, culture – key theoretical perspectives

The writings of Louis Dumont (1967) and Norbert Elias (1982, 1983, 1991) provide a fruitful starting point for our understanding of the historical processes that gave birth to modern individualist cultures and the knowledge systems they have produced. Initially, such cultures not only built up an artificial 'mind/body' split but constructed the body as a bounded container separating (and protecting) 'individuals' from one another (Bordo, 1987). Personhood, when defined from this perspective, denoted or attempted to focus on that which supposedly separated the human so distinctly from other species (a prime concern of Enlightenment and evolutionist thought) or from 'pre-modern' (or non-Western) sexual, sensual cultures. Norbert Elias (1991) pointed clearly to the fact that the disciplining and controlling of one's own body and impulses – an ethic of bourgeois self-discipline – could be seen as inextricably linked to the way power was exercised over the (minds and) bodies of others and, most importantly, how this new modern form of discipline, in the context of modern 'democratizing' society, relied much more on the development of internal forms of policing and self-control than on overt (and/or violent) forms of external coercion. The Brazilian thinker Gilberto Freyre (1933) showed how, on the margins of the Western world, the process of colonization made control over virtually everybody's body the prerogative of the 'master'. Freyre's research on plantation sociability included

phenomena such as menstruation, eating and perspiration, thus suggesting a social science that would be able to capture crucial bodily minutiae of everyday life (Freyre, 1998 [1933]).

Bringing together theoretical insights derived from Norbert Elias (1982), Mikhail Bakhtin (1970) and Foucault, Bryan S Turner (2008: 39), points out that 'The transition from the Renaissance to the modern world thus involves a transition from the "open body" linked to the public world through ritual and carnival to the "closed body" of individualized consumer society.' He provides a compelling argument for a sociology of the body that is 'not sociobiology or sociophysiology. ... [It] is the study of the problem of social order and it can be organized around four issues. These are the reproduction and regulation of populations in time and space, and the restraint and representation of the body as a vehicle of the self' (Turner, 2008: 42). He recognizes that in modern discourse and culture, the body has been a dichotomously gendered one and 'the sociology of the body' is also an 'analysis of how certain cultural polarities are politically enforced through the institutions of sex, family and patriarchy' (Turner, 2008: 42).

David Le Breton makes a strong case for the need to break with dichotomous forms of thinking that have relegated the body to something less than (rational) 'human essence'. He argues that 'Without a body to give him a face, man [*sic*] is nothing. In living, the world is continually reduced to his body, through the symbolics that it embodies' (2002: 7; our translation).

Modern feminist theory, from its earliest engagements with psychoanalysis and phenomenology, has been dedicated to the deconstruction of Enlightenment myths of embodied, sexual, emotional females, occupying a position of notable inferiority vis-a-vis the 'rational' male, who is graced by an inherently greater ability to control impulse, desire and other human beings. Contemporary feminist theorists have reconstructed a perspective that considers all human beings as simultaneously rational, emotional and embodied subjects. This argument originated, perhaps, with Simone de Beauvoir's (1949) pioneering work and its argument that modern culture and society had characteristically associated women with the body. De Beauvoir wrote that while 'the woman' 'becomes the body' and 'the sex' in which she is (seen as) imprisoned, 'man' chooses to forget that his anatomy also has hormones and testicles; he takes on a disembodied, transcendental essence best signified by reason (de Beauvoir, 2010 [1949]: 12).

De Beauvoir's work inspired 'second wave' feminist scholars such as Germaine Greer (2001), Gayle

Rubin (2006) and Susan Brownmiller (1984), who argued that the social organization of relations between women and men constituted a *sui generis* form of power unfolding through historical forms of male control over, and shaping of women's bodies. Brownmiller's book *Femininity* (1986) is organized into chapters such as 'Body', 'Hair', 'Clothes', 'Voice', 'Skin' and 'Movement', representing different dimensions of the cultural construction of limitation, since as she put it 'biological femaleness is not enough' (Brownmiller, 1986: 15). Femininity implies *learning* restrictions: bodily, behavioural, emotional and cognitive (Kehl, 1998).

Contemporary feminist theorizing on gender, self and body has unfolded through intense and enriching dialogue with Foucauldian theory and, in particular, with Foucault's notion of 'biopower'. Italian theorist and semiotician Teresa de Lauretis (1987), for example, reworks the Foucauldian concept of 'technologies of the self' and argues for its gendered dimension, that is, technologies which act upon an *embodied subject*, producing subjects who are women and men (who should therefore perform in correspondingly feminine and masculine ways). These *embodied* ways of being seem most frequently to correspond to hegemonic norms, yet pose the question of *how* and *to what extent*, while also raising the issue of the possibility/probability of forms of transgression or contestation.

Over the course of several decades, a plethora of feminist texts on gender, culture and bodies have come into being, ranging from more theoretical attempts – such as that of de Lauretis – to understand normative and transgressive constructions of female bodies, to works providing empirical enquiries into such phenomena. One of the many works of this sort in the English language is a volume edited by Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina and Sarah Stanbury (1997), which brings together landmark texts by noted feminist theorists such as Emily Martin, Susan Bordo, bell hooks and Sandra Lee Bartky. The field's indebtedness to de Beauvoir is summarized in the editors' introduction.

As feminist authors and critical race theorists have insisted, in modern societies, bodies are continuously produced and constructed as both 'raced' and 'gendered'. Historically speaking, both women and people marked as 'racial others' have been associated with the body (rather than with the 'higher values' of white, upper-class males' 'cultured rationality') (see Said, 1978). Masculinity studies such as those produced by the Australian theorist Raewyn Connell (2007) and the North American Michael Kimmel (2008) shed light on the differently constructed bodies of males in terms of historical intersections of class, race and gender. During the 1990s, Ann Laura

Stoler (1995) extended the Foucauldian history of sexuality to argue that the bourgeois Western sexual regime included specific gendered and racial mechanisms (controlling the racialized body/sex, to ensure symbolic and material superiority of whiteness); other feminist social theorists such as bell hooks (1997) and Patricia Hill Collins (1990) have looked at how gender and race come together in constructing embodied subjectivities within the context of a historical legacy of oppressive social hierarchies. From a British perspective, Kobena Mercer (1994) deals among other things with racialized representations of bodies in art, media and culture, and George Yancey (2008) uses a phenomenological approach that cuts into the issue of the lived experience of race as it has been hegemonically defined by a binary scheme that attempts to place people into discrete categories of embodied difference. The 'power of the white gaze to make Black bodies inferior' (Westmoreland, 2010: 112) and the power of the male gaze to define and objectify the female body are extremely powerful social forces that nonetheless tend to be naturalized in common societal schemes of perception, to the extent that, as hooks (1997) has argued in the case of a film made by a popular Black male film director, many people were not able to recognize the reduction of a Black woman's person to some of the cruellest tropes of Western culture's representations of those who are, in this sense, 'doubly-othered'.

Theoretical movements dealing with the body have allowed themselves to draw on literary or other not-strictly-sociological sources. Thus, authors who write on race and the body derive ideas from contemporary fiction, say, the works of Black feminist writers such as Audre Lorde (1982, 1984) or Alice Walker (2000). Discursive exchange and experimentation sometimes take a new turn, as in the work of the Portuguese thinker Miguel Vale de Almeida. Almeida, known for his ethnographic work, recently wrote 'O manifesto do corpo' [The body manifesto] (2004) – a semi-literary treatise that uses the first person for imaginary subjects through whom sociological reflections on the body are produced. Another innovative approach that proposes new narratives and sensibilities to bodies can be found in the work of the Canadian scholar Arthur Frank (2000). Listening attentively to people's memories of illness and informed by readings of symbolic interactionism, Louis Althusser (1976) and Jürgen Habermas (1994), Frank transforms personal discourses of bodily experience and biographies into complex sociological insights.

New themes include bringing 'the marginal' to centre-stage. Contemporary examples are studies that focus on 'queer bodies', drawing attention to

processes that construct particular bodies as abject, pathological or strange. Butler (1990, 1993) combines social interactionist methods with feminist and Foucauldian insights on the social processes that construct 'intelligible' (hetero)normatively embodied subjects and their corresponding 'abject others'. Her work has stirred debate and become a fundamental reference throughout a wide range of disciplines, where she is frequently cited for her post-structuralist attention to the ways in which gender is hegemonically 'performed' in culturally intelligible ways that either provide people with a social existence that is recognized – or denied (Butler, 1990). In her second major work, Butler argues (1993: xi), 'we might suggest that bodies only appear, only endure, only live within the productive constraints of certain highly gendered regulatory schemes'. Influenced also by Louis Althusser's (1976) notion of the subject as constructed by and through ideology, her notion of embodied performances of gender moves forward from earlier feminist discussions of femininity, gender, parody and masquerade: there are neither 'originals' nor 'copies' to be had, nor a pre-discursive, biological, binary 'sex' that serves as the basic substrate upon which a sociocultural construct is built; there is, however, a naturalized, compulsory notion of dimorphic, heterosexual bodies which attempts to force all bodies to fit within its dichotomous framework. The work of contemporary queer theorists such as Judith/Jack Halberstam (2005) and Beatriz/Beto Preciado (1994, 2008) brings into focus the lives of those who lie beyond the pale of (heteronormative) cultural intelligibility, and also helps us move beyond the bias of the 'minority studies' of an earlier period in the history of our discipline. Preciado (1994) offers the concept of 'queer multitudes' and Brazilian queer theorist/sociologist Richard Miskolci (2009) reaffirms the potential of an 'analytics of normalization' that the sociological tradition promises and which this contemporary perspective brings to fruition.

There is little in contemporary sociology which has not, to some extent, devoted attention to issues such as the intersection of class, race and gender and their embodied dimensions, or the theoretical issue of how the self is socially constructed as body, emotion *and* cognition. Thus, we see that as major schools of sociologists engage in critical debate, their arguments must now acknowledge the embodied dimensions of social existence and social action. One good example of this methodological shift can be found by examining the tension that runs through the debate between followers of Pierre Bourdieu (1982, 1991) and Anthony Giddens (1990, 1991, 1992). While the Bourdieusian focus on the contemporary world has provided a rich analysis of *habitus*

and the diverse types of 'capital' which reproduce forms of domination, Giddens and his followers emphasize the unique ways in which modernity becomes reflexive and engages people as agents in processes of social change. For Bourdieu (1982) and his followers, the body is a prime site where social relations of power and domination are reproduced; for Giddens (1991), it is part of the modern 'reflexive project of the self' – from its 'plastic sexuality' to therapies and surgeries, hobbies, fashions and bodily subcultures that are incorporated as identity, the 'body projects' built by subjects for whom they may simultaneously represent and produce pleasure and pain, alienation and resistance.

In consonance with Giddens' perspective, Cas Wouters' *Informalization* (2007) suggests a reversal in the trend that Elias portrayed as a constitutive element in the genesis of modernity, that is the moves 'from detailed and stricter regimes of manners and emotions to other less formal and rigid regimes of emotions and manners lived out in corporeal and attitudinal terms' (Wouters, 2007: 167). Langman's (2008; Braun and Langman, 2011) work on the phenomenon of *carnivalization*, providing insights into the deployment and construction of bodies within the postmodern moment, may help to complete the picture. Langman's approach combines the alienation theory of critical Frankfurtian lineage with cultural studies' sensibilities to issues of identity, experience and how people struggle to build meaning in their lives. He advances the thesis that we may now be witnessing a veritable carnivalization of culture and society, that the boundaries which once kept the transgressive space of the carnival at a distance from everyday life have imploded. Previously circumscribed carnivalesque attitudes and practices spill out into society, fuelled by the instigations of consumerism and media yet linked also – or at times – to the building of subcultures as forms of resistance. Carnivalization, or 'the return of the unrepressed' (Braun and Langman, 2011: x) is ludic and transgressive in spirit and involves, first and foremost, embodied forms of pleasure, rule-breaking and enjoyment of socially prohibited desires. Carnivalization, at its best, offers channels for building meaning, identity, participation, agency and dignity for those who tend to be deprived of it, in the mindset and definitions of 'normal society'.

Although carnivalized practices remain, in Langman's view, a poor and distracting substitute form of expression for more coherent and systematic social and ideological critique, they are nonetheless a part of the current cultural scenario that must be reckoned with. Thus, the concept of carnivalization and analysis of the multiple symbolic struggles that are played out in the body may be seen as a fertile

tool for rethinking the way we live in and through our bodies today.

Finally, social constructionist and post-structural perspectives promote seemingly divergent positions on the fundamental 'materiality' or 'discursivity' of the body. While post-structuralists such as Judith Butler (1990) argue that a discursive focus in no way negates the 'matter' of bodies, 'critical realists' such as Simon Williams (2003) contend that we must distinguish 'between ontological and epistemological levels', which means recognizing a difference between 'metaphor and reality', the materiality of the body and the discursive approach that we take in order to speak of it. Thus, rather than what Williams (2003: 6–7) sees as a more conventional constructionist defence of the sociocultural making of bodies which opposes the latter to biological materiality, he recommends a 'weaker form of constructionism' that allows us to conceive of the biological in more 'balanced' terms, not solely or simply as a constraint but also as an 'enabling set of powers and capacities. ... Biology ... conceived in these more "open" terms, equips us for life in society, including the capacity for learning, sociality and control.' He argues that a 'sociological notion of the "body" viewed in these mindful, lived, experiential and expressive terms, involves three interrelated social processes of embodiment, enselfment and emplacement in time and space, which do indeed incorporate the biological in non-reductionist, non-dualist terms' (Williams, 2003: 9).

Feminist biologists would agree with Williams' argument for dynamic, interconnected, historical and non-dichotomous ways of understanding the relationship between what we define as 'biology' and as 'culture'. Birke and Vines (1987), for example, proposed new ways of understanding biology as 'but a part' of developmental processes. Furthermore, if we re-examine the contenders of current debates, it may very well be that what brings them together is just as significant as that which purportedly distinguishes one perspective from another.

Empirical work

As noted above, it is evident that a new sociology of the body has taken shape over the last few decades. Woven from diverse strands, it is nonetheless marked by a shared project of deconstructing facile dichotomies and understanding human subjectivity as embodied and forged through social relations that have profoundly corporeal dimensions. In this context, singling out particular works from the plethora of studies as focal points for discussion becomes a Herculean task. Perhaps the best illustration of the

scope and vigour of the field can be found in the texts published in the most significant international periodical on the sociology of the body today, *Body and Society*. Articles cut across disciplinary boundaries and range from the philosophical and methodological to the empirical and ethnographic, focusing on embodied social and cultural phenomena from different corners of the globe (although primarily from English-speaking countries, thus making it harder to access and compare this work with what is being produced within other linguistic and cultural contexts).

Nonetheless, research on the body has converged with a broad and highly creative project of revision of research methodologies in the social sciences. Exemplary in this regard is the work of anthropologist Emily Martin (1996). Inspired by earlier ethnographic work in China, she went on to rethink the ways in which modern Western science creates its particular 'cosmologies'. Her research in the United States has, among other things, looked at how women themselves see their passage through different 'biologically' and 'culturally' marked stages of the life cycle, such as menarche, maternity and menopause, in relation to women's position vis-a-vis society's hegemonic discourse on these moments (medical discourse in particular). In her preface to the revised edition of *The Woman in the Body* (Martin, 2001), Martin raises the possibility of new metaphors for conceiving the body (and thereby, embodied selves): perhaps, she suggests, we could move from the body as machine view that has been the basis of medical discourse and common sense in modern societies, to the 'chaos model' put forth by complexity theory and incorporating its notion of 'non-linear dynamics'. If we allow ourselves to think, for example, that 'the periodical regularities of the female hormonal and bleeding cycles between puberty and menopause have been overemphasized just as the regularities of the heartbeat have been' (Martin, 2001: xii) our research may very arguably acquire a different starting point, in which power relations and human agency meet a much more open, less deterministic and less pathologizing notion of the biological.

Furthermore, this 'chaos model' may also prove fruitful for the study of the range of postmodern realities in which bodies increasingly emerge as 'objects' to be worked on through a gamut of new technologies which are, in turn, produced through biomedical institutions, cultural discourses and people's overt attempts to 'defy' or transform the limitations of embodied reality. Research and debate of this type is often indebted to Donna Haraway's provocative *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1991). Her bold approach was precursor to a wide range of studies

breaking with conventional humanist ways of thinking about human beings and human bodies, and in particular, the boundaries they have drawn around (between) the human and non-human, and human and machine (cf. Wilson, 1995). Spanish scholar Beatriz/Beto Preciado offers an uncanny contribution to new debates on what bodies become through her recent book *Testo Yonqui* [Testo Junkie] (2008). Her text is singularly constructed through chapters that alternate between theoretical discussions of the current 'pharmaco-pornographic era' with its post-industrial 'somato-power' (expressing the vicissitudes of historical power regimes identified by Foucault) and her diary of self-transformation through testosterone application. This experiment, she explains, does *not* aim *to transform herself into a man* but, as she puts it, 'to betray what society has wanted to make of me ... to feel a form of pleasure that is post-pornographic, to add a molecular prostheses to my low-tech transgendered identity' (Preciado, 2008: 12; our translation).

A recent edited volume, *Somatechnics: Queering the Technologisation of Bodies* (Sullivan and Murray, 2009), examines different experiences of body modification within frameworks consistent with Preciado's notion of new regimes of power that act on bodies and produce subjectivities. Somatechnics, 'a critical neologism that attempts to clarify the double and interdependent process of "incorporation" of technologies and the technologization of embodied subjectivities' (Miskolci, 2011: 649), is a concept that has enabled editors Sullivan and Murray (2009) to bring together a number of recent studies on contemporary technologized forms of producing and/or resisting the embodied politics of normalizing regimes, from editor/contributor Murray's own experiences with gastric banding to queer theorist Kane Race's deconstruction of common approaches to drug (ab)use, based on empirical research with gay male users of Crystal Meth. In a somewhat similar vein, Pitts' (2003) ethnographic dialogues with body modifiers suggest ways of thinking about such practices that challenge sensationalist stereotypes qualifying them as 'self-mutilation'. She proposes to look at procedures such as tattooing, piercing, branding, scarification, stretching, suspension, surgical transformation by subdermal implants (Pitts, 2003) rather as David Le Breton suggested (2002) when he interpreted body art as public discourse that problematizes normalizing regimes.

If, as alluded to above, many early contributions to a sociology of the body were born of a feminist literature employing diverse strategies and methodologies to discuss embodied battles around the meanings of womanhood, there is considerable ongoing research in this domain, including many

works which adopt a primary or secondary focus on the media as key cultural forces in the contemporary world. Susan Bordo's (1997, 2004) work has provided some exemplary and thought-provoking discussions on how image-based technologies become a part of the construction of bodies and subjectivities and to a large extent continue to promote – in perhaps even stronger or engulfing ways – debilitating notions of what a woman is. From another one of the many contexts wherein women live their bodies as embattled terrain, several young French writers narrate their battles poised both against external demands, standards and strictures and against the contradictions within themselves (Battarel et al., 2005). They create new feelings of and languages for self-worth, body image and bodily pleasure, simultaneously exploring and creating such possibilities. Yet Lisa Beljuli Brown (2011), writing at a distance from Euro-American realities, paints a picture in more tragic tones. Her ethnography of poor *favela* or slum dwelling women in the Brazilian northeast, portrays women's 'embodied subjectivities' as they emerge in a context of social exclusion and male dominance that, from the author's psychoanalytically influenced perspective, reduces their social value to the sum of specific body parts (vagina, womb, back) and respective 'functions' – thus reconstructing a much less encouraging scenario that is repeated, as Brown herself argues, in many different parts of our 'Planet Slum'.

Martin's 'chaos model' may also prove pertinent – in its open, undetermined thrust – to the growing field of literature and research on constructions that defy gender binaries. The wide range of constructions of differently gendered bodies and subjectivities that we can roughly place under the rubric of 'transgender' are generating an ever-expanding field of literature – including Preciado's aforementioned contribution. Halberstam's (1998) courageous pioneering *Female Masculinity*, about 'women who feel themselves to be more masculine than feminine' is a contemporary incursion into experiences that begin to shake themselves free of a long history of silence and stigma. Yet the cultural bias she addresses at the end of the 1990s – 'why ... we seem to take so little interest in female masculinity yet pay a considerable amount of attention to male femininity' (1998: xi) – has not been sufficiently undone or redressed, as our easier access to sociological and anthropological studies of 'feminine/feminized men' reveals. Certainly, among the many works that represent this latter trend, there is a veritable wealth of original research to be read and enjoyed. Rupp and Taylor's (2003) study of drag queens describes in great detail the embodied performances that 'make a man a drag queen'; sociological studies of transsexuals have

perhaps been customarily eclipsed by popular media accounts, reflecting a veritable fascination, in Brazil at least (and apparently in other parts of the world) for male to female transitioning. Cultural differences have also come to the forefront in contemporary research, enabling us to appreciate the wide range of meanings and possibilities for sexed/gendered forms of embodiment. Through his English language ethnography of Brazilian *travestis*, Swedish anthropologist Don Kulick's (1998) study brought attention to this particular construct as one which defies easy translation into other contexts – and even into the English language – evoking a reality that is not a cultural equivalent of 'cross dresser' or 'transsexual'. As the large and ever-growing body of ethnographic studies by Brazilian researchers (Duque, 2011; Pelucio, 2009) show, *travesti* is a particular transgender, male to female experience linked to class, race and, most frequently, to lives channelled towards the sex market. And as studies from many other parts of the world also show (Leung, 2006; Winter, 2002), transgender experiences are eloquently illustrative of some fundamental contradictions of our times, insofar as those whose lives and 'embodied selves' run against the grain of notions of the necessarily 'dimorphic nature' of embodied human beings so often seem to corroborate or at least reaffirm their continued cultural significance and the persistent moral imperative that is attached to them.

Many of the accounts we find within the literature on women's sporting practices could be seen as following along the lines of what Jane Ussher (1997) suggests regarding a methodology for understanding the different ways in which women construct their *embodied subjectivities*. In looking at women's relationships to social and cultural 'fantasies of femininity', Ussher identifies three patterns ('being girl', 'doing girl', 'resisting girl') for understanding how women negotiate societal norms and expectations, as they seek 'to find a fit between what they want ... and what they are supposed to be' (Ussher, 1997: 355). Key issues in women's sport could be framed in terms of Ussher's patterns, and the concerns for the unique yet contradictory opportunities that this arena of social practice offers for 'resisting girl', that is, constructing 'ways of being women' which, in terms of *embodied subjectivities*, are at odds with key aspects of normative femininity while clearly consonant with these women's desires, choices and possibilities (see Adelman, 2010). Continuing important discussions of the 1990s (Birrell and Cole, 1994; Hargreaves, 1994; Tomlinson, 1997), a recent edited volume (O'Reilly and Cahn, 2007) on women in sport in the United States brings together historical and contemporary research on embodied experiences and politics of gender within the field. The title of

the second section of the volume is telling: 'Negotiating masculinity and femininity: The female athlete as oxymoron', reflecting the editors' argument that there is 'a central paradox of women in sport' – 'if sport is masculine, does the athletic woman become masculine, or less feminine, through her very participation?' (O'Reilly and Cahn, 2007: xx). Thus, underlying women's struggles to gain greater access to the sporting world is a 'tension between prohibition and possibility', 'between male prerogative and female interest' (O'Reilly and Cahn, 2007: xii) that makes research into specific sporting experiences all the more urgent – a need the volume addresses in a timely manner, illuminating practices such as women's use of steroids and experiences of sport-related physical injury, eating disorders among gymnasts and Latina women 'breaking cultural traditions' through sporting participation.

One extremely influential piece of recent sociological work that also looks at the body as it is constructed and transformed through sporting practice type is Wacquant's (2004) ethnography *Body and Soul*, which probes deeply into the intersectional (classed, raced, gendered) dynamics of embodiment. Disciple of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, Wacquant eloquently recreates the life conditions, struggles and subjectivities/corporealities of young Black men who frequent a gym where they train as boxers. Returning, in this venture, to his mentor's creative transformation of the (no longer) Marxian concept of 'capital(s)', Wacquant contributes to an understanding of how a particular type of 'body capital' may be developed and deployed by those to whom class, race/ethnicity and gender positions have denied access to other sources of power, status and prestige – and which, however creatively employed, tends to reinforce the way a dominant culture has defined them *as* the body. Wacquant's work has inspired others to study sporting masculinities as embodied subjectivities (see Bridges, 2009; Spencer, 2009) and probe the processes whereby constructions of gender/sexual difference persist as perhaps the most fundamental organizing principles of bodies within the realm of sport. Other issues, such as pleasure and pain in athletic practice, the emergence of high performance sport and human limitations, and the contribution of sport to contemporary notions of the 'perfectible body', bring out the connection between sporting and other social institutions, such as medicine and education, and other industries, such as fashion and health and fitness (Lupton, 2003).

Just as control and perfectibility have been high on the modern agenda from the days in which the human body and its limits brought considerable unease (and fear) to positivist-inspired projects, so all

that poses a threat to ultimate control – the spectre of death, disease, illness and 'ugliness' – has haunted the modern Western imaginary. In societies in which the management of health and illness has fallen within the dominion of Western biomedicine, studies on the body have often turned their gaze to the medical institution and its apparatuses. Taking a critical turn on the path that classical sociologist Talcott Parsons initiated through his concept of the 'sick role' (1951), numerous researchers have fruitfully explored the sociocultural, bodily and subjective dimensions of experiences of illness. Carol Thomas (2010) has contributed to methodological and epistemological discussions on how to work with illness narratives (Atkinson, 2010; Bochner, 2010; Frank, 2010) through her summary of the contrasting interpretations of 'story analysts' and 'storytellers'. The subjective narratives of bodily experiences given by the ill acquire not only centrality but also a new status as 'legitimate knowledge'. In a similar vein, empirical research on surgical practices (Doyle and Roen, 2008), blood donation (Copeman, 2009), human organ traffic and medically motivated migration (Roberts and Scheper-Hughes, 2011) and assisted human reproduction (Martin, 2010; Tamanini, 2009) has made a major contribution to academic knowledge that problematizes the body in medicine today. Approaches that consider the experiences of lay people, patients and medical professionals involved in these processes as well as the scientific and media representations or 'discursive constructions' of these issues and problems come to the forefront, drawing urgent attention to these ever-expanding, pervasive and invasive arenas of contemporary social practice and discourse.

Research that aims at rethinking the historically established 'superiority' of Western medicine has emerged from examinations of the power relations that spring from biomedical knowledge and institutions. From Foucauldian-inspired and post-colonial perspectives, new approaches to the health, illness and processes of 'cure' have emerged. Meneses (2004), for example, has carried out research in Mozambique that illustrates the close link between Western colonialism and biomedicine, as shown in state licensing of practitioners. Feminist work such as the classic history of women healers by Ehrenreich and English (1976) and that of Scheper-Hughes (1993) illuminating the cultural contexts of physical and mental illness as well as understandings of motherhood and infant mortality, show there are other forms of knowledge and understandings of the body and its processes that Western colonialist institutions have silenced or de-legitimated. There are other rationalities that should be understood in their own light and in their contribution to the constitution of

hybrid knowledge and practices. The term *intermed-icine* has been coined to give theoretical and empirical space to the engagement strategies of persons with hybrid or multiple therapeutic cosmologies. Thus, new forms of understanding and placing value on 'non-Western', non-Cartesian understandings of the body are increasingly articulated from the perspectives and pens of those working and/or living in the Global South (Cruz, 2007; Meneses, 2004; Pereira, 2008).

Gilman (2001) provides a suggestive link between cultural discussions on the rise and proliferation of contemporary beauty cultures and medical sociology, through his study of the emergence of cosmetic surgery as an effort to erase or normalize markers of racial/ethnic difference. Furthermore, other types of bodies have also become the object of a new field, *disability studies*. Here, researchers propose the concept of *abilism*, or *disabilism*, to address the societal disqualification and cultural abjection of people who have disabilities. Research has targeted such matters as the non-inclusive patterns of urban architecture, communication and uses of public space as violations of human rights and how people struggle to live with them, as social rather than personal issues. The movement of the disabled argues pertinently: *Disabled by what? By society* (Altman, 2001; Barnes and Mercer, 2005; Corker and Shakespeare, 2002; Pereira, 2008; Thomas, 2010). Furthermore, disability studies, in interface with medical sociology, the sociology of health and illness and social theorizing on the body, has highlighted the power of biomedical institutions in naming and correcting disabilities. But as people labelled as disabled increasingly become key actors both in social movements and directing the concerns and processes of social research on these matters, changes are effected, as can be seen, for example, in the current reclassification of the deaf as a 'linguistic minority' (Sacks, 1989).

The exposition above should make it quite evident that what we offer here can be little more than a humble sketch of the some of the major routes being taken by today's diverse – and sometimes divergent – research in the highly dynamic and heterogeneous field of the sociology of the body, contemporary corporealities and embodied subjectivities.

Future research agenda

There is much research to be done within the broad arena of the 'sociology of the body'. We can look forward to new studies within a wide thematic range and from numerous subfields, including work on

body and image in contemporary culture, in light of the power of diverse contemporary media; on the shifting boundaries of social criteria of bodily normality, sexuality and 'gender performance'; and on still scantily explored questions such as globalization and immigration from the perspective of embodied experiences and representations. We can also expect to see more work focusing on virtual realities, new technologies and 'disembodiment', which may reveal how boundaries shift and how what has been 'disembodied' may later become 're-embodied' through different forms of social and sexual encounters – as in Sharif Mowlabucos's recent *Gaydar Culture* (2010). A further area for research is comparative bodies/embodiments, encouraging not only the circulation of work by sociologists and social scientists from Africa, Asia and Latin America, but also theoretical and methodological reflection on perspectives that may in fact have some significant differences in terms of their sociocultural points of departure.

As the re-launching review of the Sage journal *Body and Society* (Blackman and Featherstone, 2010: 5) suggests, contemporary research can be expected both to incorporate and go beyond an earlier focus on the 'disciplining, normalizing, regulating techniques' to a new concentration on 'the relational dimensions of corporeality (what bodies can do, for example)'. Furthermore, there remains the challenge of working out methodologies that enable us to go beyond dichotomies (nature/culture, embodied/disembodied, mind/body, etc.), calling for more research, for example, on embodied subjectivities – forms of embodiment linked to subjectivity, desire, ways of seeing and acting in the world – particularly within less explored social and cultural contexts and toward the comparative.

Annotated further reading

Bordo S (2004) *Unbearable Weight*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press.

In her reflection on anorexia nervosa, Susan Bordo locates the body within a specific contemporary cultural context. Arguing against interpretations of anorexia that place emphasis on medical and psychological 'causes', she uses feminist theory to probe women's (often pathological) relationship with their bodies. She relates the cult of thinness to ways in which girls and women have been socially denied power or control over other aspects of their lives, suggesting that thinness seems to be a thing (perhaps the only thing) over which they 'have control' and which can guarantee them some degree of social status, value or appreciation (symbolic capital, as it were).

Le Breton D (1999) *L'Adieu au Corps*. Paris: Editions Métailié.

David Le Breton is a major theoretician on the body in the social sciences. In *L'Adieu au Corps* he investigates the body in contemporary 'extreme' culture, that is, within body art, medicine, new reproductive technologies, the Genome Project, cyber eroticism and artificial intelligence. He argues that the body is increasingly perceived as a supernumerary that can be done away with, tracing the will to supersede the human body back to religious representations of 'sinful' matter and scientific concepts of the body machine.

Sutton B (2010) *Bodies in Crisis: Culture, Violence and Women's Resistance in Neo-liberal Argentina*.

Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press. Argentine-born and raised, sociologist Barbara Sutton provides a unique account of the social and political conjuncture in her country at the beginning of the twenty-first century, theorizing women's lives and struggles by bringing the body clearly 'back' into the picture. She provides readers with a well-researched narrative in which women from different class and racial backgrounds come to life as embodied (and rational/reflective and emotional) subjects of history and social and political crises within the context of a contemporary Latin American society. Issues such as abortion rights, sexual diversity, domestic violence, women's bodies as workers and as objects of the male gaze, and bodies thrown on the front line of political struggles come together in a poignant discussion of women's oppression and resistance.

Wacquant L (2004) *Body and Soul: Ethnographic Notebooks of an Apprentice-Boxer*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Wacquant spent three years as an apprentice boxer at a gym in a poor African American neighbourhood on Chicago's South Side. He saw this ethnographic approach as a sort of 'carnal sociology', since it involved Wacquant's 'body and soul', not only as researcher but within his career as an apprentice-boxer. Taking inspiration from the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, Wacquant developed the useful concept of 'body capital', which signals the existence of a 'currency' or symbolic measure of the value of bodily attributes, such as strength and beauty.

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résumé Bien que la sociologie classique n'a pas toujours été inconsciente ou indifférente à la dimension corporifiée des relations sociales, c'est la sociologie contemporaine qui a développé des cadres théoriques pour la compréhension du corps comme une construction sociale et culturelle et élément fondamentale dans les processus matériels et symboliques du pouvoir et de la convivialité. Le présent article esquisse le développement actuel d'approches sociologiques sur le corps, des Elias et Bourdieu à la théorie féministe contemporaine, le post-structuralisme d'inspiration foucaultienne et des actuelles théories 'queer'.

mots-clés corporéité ♦ corps ♦ culture ♦ sexualités ♦ sociologies contemporaines

resumen Aunque no se pueda afirmar que la sociología clásica haya siempre tratado la dimensión corporificada de las relaciones sociales con descaso, seguramente es la sociología moderna que nos ha contribuido con perspectivas ricas en matices y marcos para la comprensión del cuerpo como una construcción social y cultural. El presente artículo esboza el desarrollo de enfoques sociológicos sobre el cuerpo, con importantes contribuciones provenientes de una diversidad de escuelas que van desde Elias y Bourdieu hasta la teoría feminista contemporánea, el post-estructuralismo de inspiración foucaultiana y la teoría 'queer'.

palabras clave corporeidad ♦ cuerpos ♦ cultura ♦ sexualidades ♦ sociologías contemporáneas