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The study of body culture : observing practice

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ANTROPOLOGIA A KULTURA CIAŁA / ANTHROPOLOGY & BODY CULTURE

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Body and movement constitute fundamental conditions of human existence. They can be the starting point for a new understanding of what is the 'material basis' in social and cultural theory. Based on three decades of comparative studies in body cultures, some methodological and theoretical observations are concluded. They propose directions for a future phenomenology, history, and anthropology of practice. Body culture studies open perspectives for a new way of thinking dialectically and for a humanistic materialism. They contribute to inter-bodily democracy.

1. The body as a material base

The body is the material base of our existence as a human being. The body tells our story: Who am I, who are we?

On one hand, the body is a part of human existence, which the individual is not free just to choose freely. On the other hand, the body is not determined from the very beginning. Between the given body on one hand and intentional body management on the other, body culture develops in a process, which is historical and collective. The study of body culture casts light on this process and its contradictions between 'just doing' and 'trying to steer'.

People 'make' their own body, but they do not make it of their own individual will.

Body culture shows the different levels of what we call 'culture' in human life. Body culture ranges side by side with spiritual culture, which consists of the ideas, symbols and meanings of societal life. And body culture ranges side by side with the 'material culture', which is the world of human-made things, instruments and technology.

The body tells an underground story, which is passing underneath the well-known history of civilization.

2. Bodily movement

Since the 1970/80s, the body has received a new attention. The accelerated entrance of 'the body' into academic research is, however, far from innocent. And it is more than accumulative, more than producing just 'more' knowledge. The boom of body research reflects a practical body craze. The body has become a 'resource' in the world of capitalistic production and a problem of new type under the conditions of industrial use and alienation.

Under this aspect, the focus of the fashionable body discourse is mainly on decoration, tattoo, clothing, sexuality, health, and illness. All this is illustrative, but as such too narrow. The static body attracts a one-sided attention, while the dynamic body in motion is neglected. Attention is primarily directed towards the shape of the body – the body as merchandise in a world of production. And towards the body as a field of reaction: bodily reproduction, curing, hygiene etc.

What is neglected is the body as a field of human interaction, of movement. In movement, human subjectivity develops through bodily dialogue.

The body is not only a certain substance or materiality. Nor is it just a sign or construction, as recent theories of constructivism make believe. Bodily existence is a third: movement.

Bodies in movement, this is what the study of movement culture is about.

3. The dialogical body – relativity of the body

There is nothing elementary or simple in bodily movement, neither in running, jumping or throwing nor in pull or tug. The body is not at all simple, but a field of tensions.

Body knowledge is especially marked by the tension between the objective and the subjective dimensions of bodily existence. Objective is – or seems to be – what we can talk about or handle: the It-body. Subjective is what we experience and do: the I-body. There is, however, a third dimension, which is the dialogical body, the relation body-to-body: the You-body.

Bodily learning does not primarily mean to apply some general and explicit rules to a particular practical situation. Foremost, we learn by mimetic flow from body to body. Side by side with explicit learning – and before all – there is implicit learning. Tacit knowledge is mediated from face to face and from body to body. Bodily learning is a dialogical process between the master's movement and the apprentice's movement. (And the master-apprentice relation, far from being hierarchic, can and will turn around any moment, the master being the apprentice and vice versa.)

The living body is neither sufficiently described by objective nor by subjective understanding. It includes a third: the relational. The relation makes human body knowledge fundamentally relative.

4. Sociality inside the body

When analysing the cultural relativity of the body, we discover the sociality inside the body. Human social existence is not only to be found somewhere outside, nor high above the individual body, but in the inner of bodily practice itself.

By this anthropological approach, the study of body culture gets in touch with the deep psychology of the body. We are able to discover and describe society inside the movement of the body. And the social is inside the embodied soul. Society can be found inside personal experience and action, inside human feelings, emotions and affects.

Also in this respect, the paradox of the index finger is true: When pointing towards something outside, three fingers will point back to oneself. When pointing to the other as object, it will tell about one's own subjectivity. If analysing society outside, three fingers point to the societal pattern inside one's own bodily practice.

5. Bodies in plural, inter-body, and inter-humanism

At a closer look, the human body is always related to bodies in plural. The study of movement culture reveals – like the human navel – that the human being is not alone in the world.

In this respect, 'the body' is an abstraction. 'The body' in singular is reductive in the same way as 'the individual' is. Bodily existence consists of bodies in plural, of inter-bodily relations. The body is an inter-body.

This is the existential humanistic place of gender. If the discourse is about 'the body', gender answers by the critical question: Which body? Female? Male? A third one? – If the tale is about 'the human being', gender asks: Which human being? Female? Male? Or a third one? – 'The truth begins between two' (Martin Buber).

This contradicts the Western tradition to think the body in an individualistic way. The epistemological solipsism treats the human being as if it was primarily alone in the world – and only secondarily 'socialized'. First the human being, and then society – this is the logic of methodological individualism. It reflects the alienation in industrial capitalist society.

The assumption that the centre of what is human is placed inside the 'skin bag' of the individual, is challenged by the discovery that the core of the human existence is to be found *among* other bodies, *between* body and body. The human body acts together *with* other body, and always *also*, joining the others who have been there before.

Through its ex-centric bodily position, the human being is an Among and a Between, a With and an Also. Human bodily existence is ex-centric.

If we understand the bodies in plural as the material base of human existence, humanism reveals as inter-humanism.

6. The body as a field of contradiction

Bodies in plural and variety – this does not only mean harmony, but also conflict and contradiction. Body culture does not only promote integration and social inclusion, but also rebellion and subversion.

The study of body culture is political. The modern production of results by sport is open towards totalitarian anthropomaximology, which produces freak circus plus pedagogy, mortal engines and the prosthesis body of the future. The ‘productive body’ provokes a quest of alternatives. Body culture confronts with political choice.

And: Popular games are not only forerunners of sports nor its sidepieces. Games are neither marginal relics, nor just smart supplements, but also alternatives to sport. There is contradiction in the field of body cultural practice and sport.

The attention to conflict stands in the tradition of dialectical awareness. Nothing is simple, all contains inner contradictions.

Dialectical thinking has, however, often lead to a dualistic concept of antagonism. The idea of thesis and antithesis was caught in the dichotomous trap of a ‘main contradiction’, demanding an either/or. This was not prevented by the Hegelian postulate of a synthesis as solution.

If the dualistic misunderstanding of the dialectical process shall be avoided, attention has to be directed towards the third. There is always a third position outside the ‘main contradiction’, which sets the conflict into perspective. The dialectical relation between mass sport and elite sport shows how movement culture, at closer examination, reveals a trialectical contradiction.

The hegemonic model of Western modern body culture is achievement sport, translating movement into records. Sportive competition follows the logic of productivity by bodily strain and forms a pyramid with elite sports placed at the top. Through sportive movement, people display a theatre of production.

A contrasting model inside modern body culture is delivered by mass sport. In gymnastics and fitness sport, the body is disciplined by subjecting it to certain rules of ‘scientific’, social geometrical or aesthetic order. By rhythmic repetition and formal homogenization, the individual bodies are integrated into a larger whole, which is recommended in terms of reproduction, as being healthy and educative. Through fitness sport, people absolve a ritual of reproductive integration.

There is, however, a third model present in festivity, dance and play – it is popular encounter. In carnival and folk sport, people meet people by festive movement. This encounter is what gives life to the arrangements of both productive achievement sport and reproductive fitness sport. But the body experience of popular festivity, dance, play and game is aproductive in itself – it is relation in movement.

The trialectical relation between achievement production, disciplining integration and festive encounter tells a bodily story about the logics of market, state and civil society. Body culture displays the existing tensions between free profit, equal distribution and association in solidarity. Trialectical analysis relativises and politicises the hegemonic body culture.

7. Reification of the body, critical theory and the narrative

The study of body culture is challenged by the colonization of the body. The hegemonic body culture is oriented towards achievement – centimetres, grams, seconds, points – as well as towards disciplinary rules and alleged ‘functions’. All this tends to reify the dialogical interactions between body and body.

State logic subjects the body to power, control, ‘evaluation’, and training of ‘competences’. This is the reification of ‘management’.

Market logic subjects the body to instrumental use of production and makes it a target for the appeal of consumption. This is the reification of the ware.

The techno-logic of sport and other forms of discipline call for a critical theory. Critique is not only a negation, but also creative. It turns attention to otherness. Alterity can be found in the new alternative body cultures as well as in traditional movement cultures and popular games. But there are also the inner contradictions of the ‘mainstream’ itself, producing ‘otherness inside’.

Human beings have always used a very practical countering to reification: the narrative. Narrative makes 'solid' things flowing and gliding. The narrative is poetical and mythical, creative of living pictures. Alternative discourse begins by thick descriptions of bodily life and movement. The body narratives exist in plural and diversity. The narrative is the movement of the discourse.

Surely, the tale of the body can be distorted by the power of 'legitimate interpreters'. These authorities are the priests of Olympism, the media experts, and the pedagogues of correctness. But even through the discourses of power, even through the heroic tales of Olympic sports, the narratives are living their diverse, contradictory and subversive life.

8. Comparative method – bodily otherness

'Culture' in singular is an abstraction. The study of body culture is always a study of body cultures in plural. Body cultures are human life in variety and differences, assimilation and distinction, conflicts and contradictions. This demands a comparative approach to otherness.

Otherness is not only something to be accepted as 'deviating' from a given standard. 'The other' is a fundamental condition of knowledge. Without the attention to other identities, the observer is unable to discern her or his own identity. By the comparative method, observation oscillates between identity and alterity.

The comparative study of body cultures contributes to intercultural understanding.

9. Historical relativity – bodily change

Another quest of alterity goes along the time axis: Historical observation helps to a deeper understanding of actual normality.

History is often misunderstood as a quest of the 'origin'. Or as a reconstruction of the 'tradition', which is leading from 'forerunners' to the actual patterns. Or as a representation of a 'development', whose earlier phases point forward to out actual status, but are 'not yet' fully unfolded. History is, however, more and other than that.

History is awareness of fundamental change. The historicity of the body lies in the change of body culture. History makes us meet otherness in time – there is bodily alterity 'before' and 'after'. Historical change means that any actual situation is historically relative.

If body culture is studied under the aspect of change, sport appears neither as universal, nor has it a fixed essence. Sport is culturally specific and relative. What has developed historically, can also disappear again.

In this understanding, history is fundamentally knowledge of revolution.

10. Space and place of the body

Bodily display and movement always create space – socio-psychical space. Bodily activities may be related to indoor or outdoor milieus, they may require specialized facilities or rise in a bodily opposition against existing standardized facilities, against the 'sportscape'. In movement, straight lines are confronted by mazes and labyrinthine structures, by patterns of fractal geometry.

The 'nature' of body culture – of outdoor life, naturism and green movement – can be a world of liberation and opposition. But it can also be a way of colonization and simulation, forming a 'second nature'. Or it can even be a world, which is simulating simulation, a 'third nature'.

The study of body culture has always a dimension of cultural ecology.

In our everyday language, 'space' and 'place' are often mingled. In contrast to this mixture, the cultural ecology of movement leads to a distinction between space and place.

Spatial structures can be described in coordinates and by choreographies. They can be standardized and transferred from place to place. This is the case with the spatial facilities of sports and their standardization.

The place, in contrast, is unique – it is only here or there. Locality is related to identity. We play on a certain place – we create the place by play and game. We play the place, and the place plays with us.

Space and place may clash in societal practice. And the intermediary space is a third dimension.

11. Configurations and qualities of movement

Though bodily movement may be experienced as a whole, it is the pattern, which reveals the inner tensions and contradictions. That is why the study of body culture has to focus on the configurations of movement in time and space, the energy of movement, its interpersonal relations and objectivation, the superstructure of which are the institutions and ideas of body culture.

The time of movement is marked by contradictions between cyclical, progressing and situational time. The space of movement has contradictory elements of the straight line and the labyrinth, of geometrical space, identity place and intermediary space. The energy of movement can be described by a multiplicity of different atmospheres, attunements, radiations, and moods. The interpersonal relations in movement tell about power and gender, about the You and We in motion. The objectification of movement develops in the tension between process and result, between production, reproduction and aproduction by bodily activity.

What is resulting from these diverse configurations is not *one* sport, as the hegemonic imagination of Western society makes believe. It is a multiplicity of movement cultures, also inside 'one culture'.

This diversity can also be described by the qualities of movement culture: play and game, fight and confrontation, dance and rhythm, concentration and meditative movement, nature and outdoor life. Each of these qualities implies an own psychology of movement

The different qualities are integrated inside any particular activity, and the educational challenge is to make this multiplicity explicit and living. However, the qualities of movement are in the different activities mixed in different ways. This makes that different body cultures are living their life side by side – and may live in conflict. This habitus conflict is a basic condition of class struggle.

12. The people and bodily democracy

The body is related to what is called the people. Play and game, dance and festivity, competition and fight are fundamental for popular culture. In movement culture, people develop identity and the question of nostrification: Who are we?

The body in movement is an *identical*. Like one's name and one's life history, the body tells about 'who we are'.

This questions the dominating assumptions about, who 'the people' are, the folk. Like the concept of 'the body', the term of 'the people' has become colonized by hegemonic theories, mainly by substantialism and constructivism.

Traditionally, one has tried to define a given people by a certain substance, treating it like a material object. The 'people' was objectified by means of language, historical origin, territory, religion, customs, national character and inner psychic disposition, state and constitution, common economy, community of communication or whatever. This is the substantialist view.

The view of the folk was opposed by interpretations of the 'people' as an idea. The 'people' is nothing but a construction, created by the propagandistic actions of some leaders or intellectuals. This had typically elitist connotations: The people does not exist in itself nor does it find itself, it is made from above – as an 'imagined community', an 'invented tradition' or even a 'false consciousness'. This is the constructivist view.

The concept of movement breaks this dual pattern. 'We are the people!' is the ground word of democracy. It means: We are in motion! While 'population' exists in stasis, 'people' means people in movement.

People in movement and popular movements (in plural), identity, nostrification and the recognition of otherness are preconditions of living democracy. The inter-folk relation, people meeting people (in Danish *mellempøkelig*), is a test of what is popular (in Danish *folkelig*) in a given culture.

The study of variety and of cultural relativity creates openness towards the recognition of alterity. The strategy of knowledge is not independent of political attitude. Some body cultures are strongly non-democratic or anti-democratic, uniforming the people, hierarchizing, repressing, torturing and exterminating. Strategies of homogeneity try to extirpate the heterogeneous life. Recognition of the heterogeneous otherness makes out bodily democracy. The right of difference is a basis for democracy as life form – democracy from below.

The study of body cultures, thus, contributes to the culture of democracy. Movement culture is a field where the right of self-determination and the right of free expression are tested and unfolded in socio-bodily practice.

13. Towards a squinting theory

What we need for the understanding of body culture is a squint-eyed view. Squinting means: to focus on two points at the same time.

We focus on the historical and on the place: All is change, all is particular, all is local – all is relative in space and time.

And we focus on the anthropological, existential and universal: All is related to human existence, to the existence of human beings in plural, to inter-human life in inter-bodily processes.

All what human beings do – also the most exceptional and even the ‘inhuman’ action – witnesses of what the human being is able to do. This potential is universal. However, what the human being actually does, is particular. It is often statistically improbable. Human culture may be improbable, but it is real.

When squinting with our eyes, we do not produce the wholeness of one consistent picture. There is overlap, and this will sometimes make us dizzy. What was clear before, becomes blurred. However, the pictures of the Magic Eye, the great craze of the 1990s, have shown that squinting can be an art of looking behind the surface of things. Configurations step forth, which our naïve gaze would not be able to catch. By training our eye, we are able to see something third.

In this respect, the study of body culture has a shaman dimension.

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Słowa kluczowe: kultura ruchu, antropologia, baza materialna, dialektyka, cielsna demokracja

STRESZCZENIE

Ciało i ruch tworzą fundamentalne uwarunkowania życia ludzkiego. Mogą być traktowane jako punkt wyjściowy do nowego rozumienia, czym jest „baza materialna” w teorii społecznej i kulturowej. Zawarte poniżej wnioski o charakterze metodologicznym i teoretycznym zostały oparte na trzydziestoletnich studiach porównawczych w zakresie kultury ciała. Zawierają one propozycje kierunków dla przyszłej fenomenologii, historii i antropologii działania. Studia kultury ciała otwierają perspektywy nowego sposobu myślenia dialektycznego oraz – humanistycznego materializmu. Przyczyniają się do „wewnętrzniejszej demokracji”.

(oprac. R. R.)