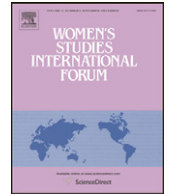


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## Embodied contradictions: Capitalism, social reproduction and body formation



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### SYNOPSIS

This paper argues that Marxist feminism offers a powerful approach to body formation theory. Building on social reproduction theory's key innovations, as well as its recognition that Marx's 'critique' of political economy is unfinished business, I develop my argument through a constructive critique of three manifestations of the fetishism of wage form, respectively problematizing the distinction between labor and labor power, the limits of the concept of labor within production-centered approach, and the embodied nature of labor power. In recovering the centrality of the body for critical social theory, social reproduction theory sheds new light into our understanding of the complex processes by which the contradictions of capital are displaced and ultimately embodied in specific ways, and therefore offers a powerful approach attentive to the ways in which the physical body shapes, and is shaped by, social and material forces.

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### Introduction

Implicitly or explicitly, feminist praxis and theory have always been about the body. The first wave of liberal feminists struggled to make women's bodies visible in the 'public sphere' through their social inclusion and participation in the formal structures of political and economic life. With the emergence of the second wave in the 1960s, questions pertaining to sexuality, reproductive rights and normative heterosexuality were raised. Targeting both patriarchy and capitalism and distinguishing between gender, sexuality and race, from the second wave also emerged a powerful critique by Black and postcolonial feminists pushing against both the discursive and actual marginalization of their lives and struggles under the false universality of white Western feminism and Eurocentric discourses. They asked whose bodies were included in 'Western feminist' scholarship, thus calling for a truly common political project attending to power differences and situated knowledge. Informed by postcolonial and postmodernist thinking, the third wave of feminism brought with it a strong reaction against systemic, universalizing and totalizing discourses and knowledge. Through a radical deconstruction and destabilization

of normative categories and concepts, it reengaged the body through anti-essentialist claims about the plasticity and mutability of identities, as well as the ephemeral and transient nature of social relations. It emphasized the performative—and therefore repetitive—nature of identity and reaffirmed the social, cultural and discursive construction of gender, sex and desire.

Despite its discursive obsession with the body, however, postmodernist theory has relentlessly banished the real human body from its purview (Bruff, 2013; Callard, 1998; Fracchia, 2005; McNally, 2001). The ghost-like existence of the physical body haunts postmodernist discourse, its spectral presence continuously running against its physical absence. This is not to deny the importance of discursive practices, but, as David McNally (2001, p. 10) has argued, a reminder 'that we ought to think about language *through the body*'. In the same way that Marx had criticized 'German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth', McNally notes the failure of this new form of idealism to grasp 'the phantoms formed in the human brain' through embodied human activities and social/material life-processes. In a world plagued by hunger, homelessness, exploitation, disease and violence, to recover the

physical materiality of the body is one of the most banal yet politically charged theoretical openings. Theories of body formation must start from real human bodies, highlighting both the historical geography and power relations underpinning corporal processes and dynamics, but also the extent to which the body is a biological entity with essential physical needs, including the need for companionship, physical contact and corporal and cognitive stimulus, the need to be loved and to be seen and recognized for who we are, and the need for protection, shelter and appropriate nourishment.

This special issue offers a unique opportunity to revisit the idea of body formation from a Marxist feminist perspective. Although it does not address this issue systematically, this paper contends that social reproduction theory (SRT), or social reproduction feminism (SRF), offers a particularly vibrant framework to develop this idea further. Its insistence that Marx's 'critique' of political economy is unfinished business, as well as its commitment to defetishization, makes it a powerful approach attentive to the ways in which the physical body shapes, and is shaped by, social and material forces. In order to do so, I develop my argument through a critique of three manifestations of the fetishism of the wage form in as many sections. The 'first cut' at body formation theory highlights the importance of Marx's distinction between labor and labor power, and constitutes the basis upon which SRF simultaneously preserves and sublates Marxism into a thoroughly feminist historical materialism (FHM). Through a radical expansion of the concept of labor, the 'second cut' highlights the necessity to move beyond states and markets when accounting for social reality and historical development. Finally, the 'third cut' at body formation theory returns critically to the notion of labor power, arguing that its corporal form has important implications for how we conceptualize race, gender, sexuality and class as overlapping elements of one and the same system of capitalist exploitation.

### Fetishism of the wage form 1: Marx, capital and the body

The first manifestation of the wage form is contained in Marx's crucial distinction between labor and labor power. As early as in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, Marx contended that the crucial importance and enduring contribution of Quesnay's physiocratic doctrine were its recovery of the 'subjective essence of wealth', further noting that with the Physiocrats 'the necessary step forward has been made in revealing the *general nature* of wealth and hence in the raising of *labor* in its total absoluteness (i.e., its abstraction) as the *principle*' (Marx, 2001, pp. 130–1). It prefigured Adam Smith's recognition of the general character of labor as the source of all wealth. What Marx came to realize was that labor, as an abstract category, represented the key to all hitherto human history or active life-processes of the species: 'the entire so-called history of the world is nothing but the creation of man [sic] through human labor' (Marx, 2001, p. 145). The condition of all hitherto human life, the universal condition of life itself, is labor. 'Indeed, labor, *life-activity*, *productive life* itself, appears in the first place merely as a *means* of satisfying a need—the need to maintain physical existence. Yet the productive life is the life of the species. It is life-engendering life' (Marx, 2001, p. 113). What distinguishes humans is that their life-activity

is *conscious*, the activity of laboring itself being an object of consciousness.

As every serious reader of Marx knows, the body is everywhere in his writing, both historical and theoretical. Indeed, Marx was particularly attentive to the ways in which capital is inscribed on the bodies and in the flesh of laborers, documenting as he did how long hours of work, unregulated environment, and dangerous working conditions produced tired, diseased, maimed, unhealthy, overworked, stunted and injured bodies. On this basis, Joseph Fracchia has argued that we need to grasp Marx's method by its 'corporeal roots' and recognize that human corporeal organization is the 'first fact' of historical materialism: 'the corporeal capacities that are essential to the making of history and the needs, wants, limits and constraints that establish the outer boundaries of possible human histories' (Fracchia, 2005, pp. 56–7). The physical materiality of the body is the most concrete and irreducible aspect of the human being and constitutes the fundamental premise of historical materialism (Rioux, 2009, pp. 592–601).

Since we are dealing with the Germans, who are devoid of premises, we must begin by stating the first premise of all human existence and, therefore, of all history, the premise, namely, that men [sic] must be in a position to live in order to be able to "make history." But life involves before everything else eating and drinking, housing, clothing and various other things. The first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself. And indeed this is an historical act, a fundamental condition of all history, which today, as thousands of years ago, must daily and hourly be fulfilled merely in order to sustain human life. (Marx & Engels, 1998, p. 47)

Fracchia's important contribution helps us to shed light on Reecia Orzeck's (2007) argument that there are two bodies in historical materialism. The *natural body* refers to our biological and physiological condition. Not only do we have bodily capacities, but also basic, non-negotiable human needs that must be met to survive. The maintenance of our physical integrity indeed passes through our ability to secure the satisfaction of certain foundational human needs. That is not to say that human needs are fixed and unchanging, but simply to point out, following Ian Bruff (2011), that at this level of abstraction the natural body constitutes a 'foundational materialism' positing foundational needs. 'We may admire the power of culture to elevate mind over body,' Joseph Fracchia (2005, p. 51) notes, 'but we should not forget that rejection of food because of cultural taboos will ultimately lead to the pyrrhic victory of the body over mind — death.' This, in a nutshell, is Marx's devastating critique of idealism and anti-foundationalism.

The importance of the natural body lies precisely in its foundational, transhistorical character. It constitutes the unwavering 'opening', the scene upon which the acts and daily performances of social life are played. And it suggests, too, that not everything is reducible to a social or discursive construction, and that the plasticity of identity is itself dependent upon the very existence of a body made of bones, flesh, organs, blood, muscles, sinews and nerves. At

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