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## Bodies of Knowledge: Considerations of Science, Exercise, Food and Body Politics

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Ben Agger

## **Bodies of Knowledge:**

Considerations of Science, Exercise,  
Food and Body Politics

Images of the alienated body abound, in advertising, entertainment, even science. Empiricists often plow their narrow fields within 'bodies of knowledge,' to which they make their small contributions. This derives from an alienated body politics, which, according to early Marx, lies at the heart of the logic of capital and its manifestation in the wage relationship. For him, capitalism alienated bodies, labor, community, nature, even (the Frankfurt School [Horkheimer and Adorno 1972] adds) science. In this sense, I am interested in how positivism, a moment of alienated body politics, produces body sciences, including exercise physiology and nutrition, that are themselves alienations, perpetuating the duality of self and body that is paradigmatic of all alienation. I also work toward a critical theory of bodies in motion, including bodies of knowledge, that moves beyond critique.

Positivism is an alienation that borrows from the discourse of embodiment—e.g., the term body of knowledge referring to what Thomas Kuhn (1964) called normal science. This body hangs together skeletally, according to the literature-review sections that begin standard empirical journal articles, through the artifice of the author, who claims, through parenthetical string citations, that there is already consensus on fundamental findings. The rhetorical art of the lit-review section is at once to compose the body (of findings) and to propose the novelty of one's own research, hence allowing the body to

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grow, evolve, adapt. Only by accomplishing this sleight of hand, can the busy article author seek tenure and promotion, or even the first academic job.

I (Agger 1989) have written about how this approach to science necessarily narrows knowledge, hence contributing to the decline of discourse, theory, books themselves. This approach to the positivist body of knowledge belongs to a larger category of what I call 'alienated body politics' that stretches from the male gaze distorting women's bodies to considerations about food and exercise. Positivism, a theory of knowledge, is only one manifestation of alienated body politics. These alienations begin with capitalism (when alienation of labor first emerges as labor, and hence the body, is commodified) but predate capitalism, especially where religious traditions put a hex on the sinful body and then, with Descartes, split it from the elevating mind.

I seek a way of talking about (a "discourse" of) the relationship between the body and the world that reverses (dis-alienates) the body. Instead of bodies of knowledge, I seek knowledge of bodies, but not simply an objectivist knowledge reduced to quantitative indicators (e.g., weight, blood pressure). This is self-knowledge, the kind gained through a unified/unifying mind-body that experiences its own metabolism with the world and nature. I contend that this unified/unifying experience of the self is the organon of dis-alienation, of embodied freedom. It is a utopian moment at a time when utopia has been suppressed (Jacoby 2005).

This is risky because exercise and food quickly become occasions of self-absorption for yuppies who care little about alienation and who thrive within capitalism. Literature about running, spanning the first (1970s-1980s) running 'revolution' to the present 'second' revolution segues from the edgy and even political (Sheehan, Henderson [2004], early *Runner's World*) to the current conformist and commodified version of the magazine. Henderson no longer writes for the magazine, and it recently featured a celebratory spread about Sarah Palin. Body talk can easily lose sight of 'intersubjectivity,' awash in its own expressive subjectivity, a topic treated by Jacoby (1975) in his discussion of the 'politics of subjectivity.' Within a 'culture of narcissism' (Lasch 1979), bodies can seemingly be healed without a general healing (a therapeutic synonym for socialism, perhaps).

I do not think it is that simple, although change has to start somewhere—change here referring to a dis-alienated body politics. Small steps: exercise (as play), grow and eat healthy food, build like-minded community, and eschew fast-capitalist fixes such as drug-oriented medicine, crash diets, stiletto heels, steroids, plastic surgery.

Without using metaphors that unintentionally narrow, running might be an example of the playful subject-object (unified mind-body) who develops knowledge of the body that is at once self-knowledge. When one is in motion (and it doesn't have to be running), one attains a state of unified subjectivity/objectivity that refuses to—or simply cannot—distinguish between the mind and the body. They are one. To be sure, this happens rarely for me, and I've been running for over 30 years! Much of the time I am not in 'the zone,' which is just the moment of unification I have been talking about. Regularly, the body feels like a drag on me: it might be sore, the motion feeling like work. With age, one can be fit and still experience the body this way. But one runs for moments of unity, of 'flow,' that afford clarity about the unified 'self.' This is perhaps what utopia feels like.

This is the kind of thing George Sheehan was talking about in his running books, including (1978) *Running & Being*. Sheehan was lampooned for investing too much

philosophically in running. But a careful reading reveals that he was talking about these issues of mind-body unity as a reversal of an alienated body politics. His progressive politics were often overlooked by yuppie runners who pretend that exercise is value-free, a version of bodies in motion that draws heavily from positivist assumptions about how the self is outside the world and can be known it-self only from the outside.

Self-knowledge is derived from bodies in motion. Gunnar Borg (1998) demonstrates that ratings of perceived exertion correlate strongly with actual exertion. If it feels difficult, it is difficult, ascending that hill or sprinting in the last half-mile of a race.

Exercise is related to food as motion is to fuel. Carbohydrates and even fat produce energy—sugar converted into glycogen with the aid of inhaled oxygen. Aerobic exercise has enough oxygen to effect this conversion, and anaerobic exercise lacks adequate oxygen. One might observe that both are necessary for self-knowledge.

Michael Pollan (2008) argues, against 'nutritionism,' that food cannot be known only from the outside, or working in from outside to inside by tallying the nutrients, vitamins and calories in food. So-called primitive cultures knew what was good for them, which was usually equivalent to what they could find in their native environments. These were diets heavy on complex carbs, plants, lean meat or no meat. Most of these people, such as the Mexican Tarahumara, walked and ran long distances for their food, enhancing their 'fitness,' as we term it, by chasing their food ("persistence hunting"). In these cultures, mind and body go undivided; they are pre-Cartesian cultures, which may be another way of describing them as pre-modern. In (Agger 2004) *Speeding Up Fast Capitalism*, I blend the non-alienated moments of "primitive" premodern cultures (also see Diamond 1974) with post-modern disalienation that I term the slowmodern—an *Aufhebung* (negation-preservation-transcendence) of our fast capitalism.

#### Theses

1. Capitalism makes us sick and then attempts to heal us with commodified fixes such as weight-loss diets, supplements, gymnasium memberships, even plastic surgery. Capitalism harms us and then tries to heal us because alienation affects bodies.
2. Earlier, bodies under Fordism and of course before Fordism labored under cruel conditions.
3. Now, bodies under post-Fordism don't labor enough but are squeezed into cubicles and school desks.
4. Diets grounded in processed food and high-fructose corn syrup (Fordism applied in agribusiness) contribute to coronary artery disease, high blood pressure, weight gain, atrophying of the joints and connective tissues.
5. Positivism, which is an instance of an overall alienated body politics, pretends that we can study the body objectively, from the outside, using various health indicators measured at the annual physical exam. These indicators, such as Body Mass Index (BMI), are almost always quantitative.
6. The BMI ignores percentage of body fat and hence discriminates against athletes, thus rewarding people who are sedentary.
7. What Pollan calls 'nutritionism' examines food in terms of its chemical and nutritional constituents and then 'enriches' food that has already been processed.

There is little evidence that processed food, once enriched, is equivalent in healthfulness to the original unprocessed food.

8. The mainstream indicators of health revolve around weight, which is grounded in versions of acceptable femininity and masculinity. There is little evidence (see Oliver's [2006] *Fat Politics*) that obesity can kill, but rather obesity is one of the side-effects of the fat-laden standard American diet, eaten by largely sedentary people. Other more dangerous side effects include high cholesterol and hypertension.
9. Weight is a convenient positivist obsession because it is a single number, because the diet industry is lucrative, and because it rewards women for starving themselves, only adding to their low self-esteem.
10. A nation that exercises necessarily reduces time spent in paid labor and in productive consumption.
11. To be healthy one must be fit (Emerson's 'good animal'), but fit people can be unhealthy if they become alienated from their bodies and food.

Science is not a body (of findings) but an embodiment, a mode of being in the world. Blending Freud, Marx and Heidegger, Marcuse (1969) speculated about a "new" science and technology that would emerge from the play impulse. This dis-alienated version of science suggests science as play and praxis, like painting a picture or going for a run. A Cartesian version of science splits off science from the world ('body of knowledge') where science is already in the world and cannot escape the gravitational pull of time, place, body. First Einstein and then Derrida jettison Newton's physics, which pretended to stand outside of history, the world, the body, especially using the distancing technologies of mathematics. This was positivism's only apparent escape from the prison house of language, and it fails because science is itself rhetoric—a way of making an argument, even, no especially, where it is secret writing (the author disguised under the heavy layers of 'objectivity').

It is no wonder that we probe bodies in reducing 'health' to various indicators such as BMI and cholesterol count, just as the literature review describing bodies of knowledge flows into the quantitative segment of social-science journal articles. In these ways, bodies are alienated, of the scientist and the citizen who play, respectively, with ideas and bodies.

Bodies, reduced to inert lifelessness, cannot be bypassed by Cartesians. Embodiment is not to be shunned but embraced, even as bodies age and slow. Bodies (of science and in motion) make themselves available to be known, and improved, through a deep self-knowledge that does not rely on the distancing techniques of method to keep perspective, passion and politics at bay. To note that language is a prison in which meaning is incarcerated does not condemn language but requires that truth—truths—are possible within writing, but not of the kind that pretends merely to describe. Even description advocates, the more it appears not to take sides. By the same token, we cannot summarize health in body indicators. Instead, we must eat and run like the Tarahumara—swift and enduring utopians.

McDougall's (2009) *Born to Run* chronicles the running lives of the Tarahuma who, in his telling, meet and compete with leading American ultramarathon runners. It is clear from his account that the Tarahumara run as a form of play now that they don't stalk their prey. But his tale reveals that ultrarunners (i.e., in races longer than the 26.2 mile

marathon) are our utopians: They inhabit a cooperative community in which runners help each other and they run to express themselves and explore their limits.

Turning toward the body might be seen as a departure from politics. Indeed, for many of us who grew up during the sixties, this is precisely what happened as we experienced the right-wing retrenchment of Nixon, Hoover, Reagan and the Bushes.

Not only did I leave the U.S. I decamped the sixties, along with many other foot soldiers of the New Left. I retreated from politics to 'theory'—an academic life—and running, along with other personal pursuits, including love and eventually family. Was I running away? Or toward? I theorized running as a non-Cartesian merger of mind and body, a connection to mother earth. I was looking for America. My texts were Robert Pirsig's (1974) *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, a book everyone read. And a less well-known classic called *Meditations from the Breakdown Lane*, James Shapiro's (1982) chronicle of his solo run across the country. A totally apolitical book written by an ex-radical was really very political: like me, Shapiro was looking for 'home' within, an existentialist reaction to the end of the movement. Shapiro's final words:

"The bear went over the mountain to see what he could see. And what did he learn? That everywhere there is sky, everywhere there is ground. At every moment, everywhere, we are home."

Feminism developed its personal politics by addressing home, family, body, sexuality. I developed mine through exercise. Mark Wetmore, the University of Colorado track and distance coach, borrowing from Tom Wolfe, talks of an Edge City of extreme physical exertion—running not into oblivion but into meaning. Few young people seek Edge City these days, whether in running or working. They are not to blame; Edge City—another name for utopia—has been malled over. We of the sixties still search for community, albeit in ways and places uncharted during those original times.

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