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*The Transformative Capacity of
Embodiment*

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The Transformative Capacity of Embodiment.

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Abstract:

Recently, literature around the issue of embodiment has burgeoned. Too often, however, the concept is underdeveloped and insufficiently sociological. Furthermore, there has been a tendency for the sociology of the body to become a specialist sub-field whose insights are neglected in ‘mainstream’ sociology. In this paper we interrogate the concept of embodiment focussing on the ‘transformative capacity’ of embodied action: how various social agents use their bodies to resist and, crucially, to transform power structures by subverting the physical and symbolic bodily order that such structures create and require in order to exist. Our concept of the ‘Transformative Capacity of Embodiment’ (TCE) emerges from five separate pieces of empirical research, carried out independently, which exhibit commonality in charting the complex interplay between the processes of embodiment and the co-constitution of social structures. Taken together our work helps reappraise the boundary between nature and the social, leading to the destabilisation of major discourses, such as the medical discourse, gender/sex identity formation, the established conventional connections between age and sport and, central to our argument, how the body is integral to social reproduction and resistance.

Key Words: Embodiment, Resistance, Power, Agency, Transformative Capacity

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Introduction

The sociology of the body is now a firmly established ‘sub-field’ which draws attention to the importance of the body and, more recently, embodiment, when comprehending the social. In many respects, this has reinvigorated the sociological imagination and added theoretical richness to many debates. Many authors have argued that the sociology of the body has wider implications for sociological enquiry (notably Frank (1990), Porter (1992), Turner (1989), Shilling (1993) and more recently Howson and Inglis (2001) and Williams (2006)). This literature has tended to explain the body in two polarized ways: either as incorporating systemic features and structural effects (Bourdieu, Foucault, Feminism) or as an actor’s process of adaptation by which social activity gets constituted (Goffman, Symbolic Interactionism, Douglas). The body, in other words, is seen either as passively incorporating the social or as an active agent of social construction with little relation to the macro-social environment.

Either way, there has been a general lack of understanding around the dynamics in which individuals embody social structures in an active way. In particular, very little attention has been given to how the dynamics of embodiment actively transform the social. This paper seeks to redress this lacuna by developing the concept of, what we term, the ‘Transformative Capacity of Embodiment’ (TCE). This concept focuses on how various social agents use their bodies, *qua* embodiment, both to resist and potentially *transform* power structures by subverting the physical and symbolic bodily order that such structures create and require in order to exist. Our concept of TCE emerges from five separate pieces of empirical research, carried out independently of each other, but which exhibit commonality in charting the complex interplay between processes of embodiment and the co-constitution of social structures.

The case studies we discuss illuminate particular relationships between embodiment and structures. All of them demonstrate TCE, albeit in different facets – these facets link each of

our work into the main argument at different levels. At the level of ontology and epistemology some of these case studies show how our bodies are actively constructed collectively and thus ‘known’ socially (for instance, Haddow and Rafanell). At the level of power dynamics, the separate pieces of research by Gorringe and Yuill clearly exemplify how domination and resistance are fundamentally embedded in the corporeal. The more micro-level of individual agency is clearly exemplified by Tulle’s work that shows best how bodies can be at the forefront of practices engaged in changing the local systems of rules. All our present case studies highlight the individual and subjective level of corporeality and how this impinges on collective social dynamics.

The differences between each case study are of degree and not kind, and we distinguish them purely for illustrative purposes. We argue that they all illustrate the totality of our position: the remarkable transformative capacity of embodiment. That is, bodies have the potential to transform structures as well as perpetuating them. Of course, a number of studies have highlighted the fact that the body is implicated in social dynamics. Our contribution is to take this premise further by presenting specific and varied empirical material that allows insights into *how* the dialectics between the body and society are manifested. In doing so we are aware that we go further than the main theme of the paper although, due to space constraints, we can only touch upon the wider analytical aspects relating to structure and action, agency and resistance, and permanence and change.

Our argument will begin by reviewing some of the sociological work on the body, especially on the point offered by Howson and Inglis (2001) that the sociology of the body needs to approach itself in a more *critical* fashion. We will also take up points raised by Sayer (1997) and the allied debate between Newton (2003) and Williams (2003) concerning the extent to which we accept the biology and the physicality of the body. The sociology of the body has a long history which we can only briefly touch upon. In this paper, therefore, we have chosen to concentrate specifically on the debate generated by the above authors in relation to the

dialectics between structure and action. Thus we take up the challenge laid down by Crossley that “we must learn to see structures in agency and agents in social structures” (2001a: 321). Having discussed the extant literature on the body, we then turn to the empirical research which we have drawn together to generate our concept of TCE, before developing this concept further through (1) highlighting some of the ontological consequences of this debate in relation to the body, (2) exposing how our empirical research highlights the mutually constitutive relationship between the body and structure, and (3) finally, and crucially, demonstrating the transformative impact embodied action has on social reality.

The Body and Sociology

Shilling (1993) argues that early sociological activity ignored the body because of the pervasive anxiety to establish its own intellectual credentials as a science of the *social*, thereby abandoning the body to the biological sciences. ‘Every individual drinks, sleeps, eats, or employs his (sic) reason, and society has every interest in seeing that these functions are regularly exercised’, as Durkheim noted. He went on, however, to argue that if ‘these facts were social ones, sociology would possess no subject matter peculiarly its own, and its domain would be confused with that of biology and psychology’ (1968: 1). As this quote amply illustrates and, as Shilling and others have noted (cf. Porter 1992), beneath the surface of concern for social phenomena the body was always, already there. It is perceptible for example, in the work of Marx, Durkheim, Simmel, later in Mauss and finally Goffman (cf. Freund 1988, Sayer 1991).

In these formative stages of sociological enquiry, however, the attention given to the body was restricted to certain perspectives. For example, it was only implicitly acknowledged as bearing the marks of labour and its social division. Alternatively it was apprehended as reflecting social and emotional states, but without further elucidation. Or it was recognised for the part it played in the inter-dynamics of presentation of self and collective sanctioning. Clearly the body was not explicitly included in the study of social processes, as a significant

agent in the shaping of societies or the mapping of power relations. Nor was the body differentiated – its gender or age dimensions were left largely unexamined. As Shilling (1993: 10) argues in an oft quoted phrase, the body was ‘an absent presence’.

Contemporary sociological theorists, notably Bourdieu (1995) Foucault (1979) and Elias (1978), have been influential in highlighting the embodied forms of social life, placing the body at the centre of their analysis. Philosophically, Merleau-Ponty (1962) is central to the phenomenological understanding of the embodiment of perception and of course, sociologists are indebted to second wave feminists for bringing to the fore the body as being profoundly implicated in power dynamics (Millet (1971) being a case in point). In Britain a new sociology of the body has emerged (Turner (1989), Shilling (1993), Frank (1990), Featherstone et al. (1991), which has emphasised the importance of focussing on the body in order to better understand social change and historically contextualized social and scientific narratives.

Whilst the body manifests itself in every aspect of our social lives, however, the body is itself difficult to apprehend (Shilling 2005a). The literature is now replete with reflections on the ways in which the body can inform social processes and particularly deal with the structure/agency dualism. This is partly reflected in conceptual creativity where the body, bodies, corporeality, embodiment and carnality all vie for attention as effective ways of ‘talking about bodies’. Including the body into Sociology has contributed to the development of new insights into the constitution of society but also into social action itself.

The sociological take on the body is *via* embodiment, understood both as a person’s experience of their body and their understanding of it. Turner (1989) thus breaks with Cartesian dualism to suggest that people “*have*” and “*are*” bodies at the same time. The point is that our bodies are experienced both phenomenologically and cognitively by ourselves and by others. Furthermore, the organisation of society shapes bodies, giving primacy to socially

valued bodies or damaging bodies in ways that, at the very least, reflect the prevailing social and economic hierarchy. This has been well demonstrated by Bourdieu in his discussion of the embodied dimension of habitus and by Foucault in his analysis of power in the modern institutions of the prison, the schools and hospitals. We also know, particularly via the work of postmodern feminism, that there is an intimate relationship between embodied experiences and identity (Butler (1993) and Grosz (1994)).

Recently, Howson and Inglis (2001) have argued that we need to review the dichotomy between social action and social structure, in particular to avoid what they see as the prevalent forms of determinism found in sociological theorising (2001: 313). Hence, it is our attempt in this paper to take up this prescription and restate the need to reaffirm the identity of sociology as a critical endeavour in particular by emphasising the central role of the body in power dynamics. We do so by proposing modalities of embodiment that transgress established power relations and boundaries with the potential to redraw the latter. Irrespective of whether one regards sociology to be a critical endeavour or not, the sociology of the body should lead to conceptual tools that are empirically and theoretically richer. If 'embodiment' is to be meaningful as a sociological concept and area of study, it must transcend the limited depictions of bodily praxis that dominate in the sociological literature and uncover the mechanisms and processes through which the social is etched into the corporeal and, conversely, how bodily action continually constitutes and reconstitutes the social (cf. Shilling 2005a&b).

We believe that with our analytical notion of TCE we advance answers to the following questions: Can bodies be more than mere objects of power? Can specific forms of embodiment lead to fundamental challenges to structures of domination? Can bodily practices challenge established social and scientific discourses and narratives? In other words can the body be an agent of change and if so, in what ways? Importantly, what are the specific empirical conditions in which the transformative capacity of embodiment emerges?

Bodies of Change

As stated, the present study emerges from the confluence of five independent (and disparate) research projects hailing from differing sub-disciplines (sociology of development, medical sociology, sociological theory etc), methods (interviews, participant observation, case notes), regions (Spain, Scotland, India and Northern Ireland) and populations (children, Dalits, bereaved families, aged runners and prisoners). Despite variations in methodology and theoretical orientations the studies converge in placing the body at the crux of their analyses. A chance meeting at the BSA conference in 2004 offered us the opportunity to reflect on the wider implications of our own work and to consider whether the combination of our various findings offered any conclusions of sociological significance.

The unforeseen possibility to engage in cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural comparisons introduced an unusual degree of reflexivity into our work and offered the chance to read each study as an exercise in a wider project of triangulation. Of interest in what follows, therefore, is less the specificities of each case (details of which are published elsewhere) as much as what our combined efforts can add to the sociology of embodiment. Our work represents an attempt to identify precisely how the body, or rather, embodiment, can lead to resistant modalities of agency (our so-called 'transformative capacity of embodiment'). It can also help us to reappraise the boundary between nature and the social, leading to the destabilisation of major discourses, such as the medical discourse (Haddow), gender/sex identity formation (Rafanell), the established conventional connections between age and sport (Tulle) and, central to our argument, how the body is integral to resistance practices to dominant powers and social hierarchies (Gorringe and Yuill). We turn now to the presentation of the specific case studies which illustrate the above statements.

Sanctioning mechanisms and the gendering of bodies: a bio-politics of pride and shame

Rafanell's work (2004) examines the mechanisms through which bodies acquire social status within a contextualized collective. This work touches on the ontological dimension of our argument in that it presents a basis for understanding the emergence macro-social phenomena - in this case of gender and sexual categories and practices - as resulting from the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in relation to collectively held notions of embodiment of gender identity.

Rafanell's research draws on data from participant observation research in secondary schools in Edinburgh and Barcelona which revealed an array of gendering practices and highlighted the ubiquitous existence of affective sanctioning mechanisms operating in all face-to-face interactions. Pride and shame markers were found to be at the centre of sanctioning dynamics. In particular, 'honouring' and 'dishonouring' discourses and practices were seen as constituting the collectively recognised, gendered sexual categories. The findings emphasised that group categories are in continuous formation in that, despite forceful mechanisms to encourage the alignment of individual practices, there were multiple instances of resistance to the standards of the group. These often used the body as a symbolic carrier of dissent.

Sanctioning has been highlighted in the sociological literature since Durkheim (1982) noted its social role, but its intrinsic role to the stabilizing of collective behaviour (Goffman (1956), (1959); Scheff (1990)) and its centrality to resistance activity against group norms is underdeveloped (Butler 1997). Rafanell's research highlights the significance of local face-to-face interaction for the formation social phenomena by drawing attention to the micro-dynamics of affective sanctioning - and the 'honouring' and 'stigmatising' of bodies in particular - in constituting social categories and group boundaries.

Rafanell's empirical data highlights how the corporeal underpins the formation of localized social phenomena. By examining the embodiment of the micro-dynamics of individuals conforming to, and resisting against, the standards of the group, this work reveals the centrality of the body to the constitution and transformation of social life.

The fluidity of dualistic and holistic embodiment

If Rafanell offers an ideal starting point to the discussion about the fundamental role of corporeal micro-activity in the formation of macro-phenomena, Haddow's work (2005) offers the ideal following point by problematising our very understanding of embodiment. In particular, Haddow's research raises searching questions about the phenomenology of the self in relation to how it is embedded in the physicality of humans. Haddow's research with bereaved families who had been approached to donate the organs of the deceased demonstrates that the process of dis/embodiment can challenge the dominance of the medical model of humanness which relies on the mind/body dualism. Post death practices such as organ transplantation, post-mortem and autopsies are dependent on a view of the corpse as purely a material 'thing' - akin to a car where the 'spare parts' can be salvaged. Indeed, most of Haddow's respondents held this view at one point during the donation process. Nonetheless, another view also emerged that stressed a "holistic" view of the dead body.

For some families the body was still coterminous with the living person. It was not the case that these families were 'denying death'; on the contrary the majority of families in this study had a personal realisation of death prior to the medical confirmation of it. However, those that held a 'holistic' embodiment view initially refused to donate, then raised concerns about mutilation of the body and tended to refuse to donate certain organs, such as the eyes, that were believed to be closely associated with personhood. Thus the representations of embodiment in the donor family accounts were fluid, interchangeable and complemented the solid and durable nature of the social bonds that the bereaved had, and continued to have, with

the deceased. Haddow's research allows us to perceive that attempts to 'reify the body as a thing-in-itself' (Shilling 2005b: 762), are misguided. Ideas of what the 'self' is are profoundly embedded in the physicality of the body. Indeed, by questioning the dualism between mind and body the donors challenge a fundamental discourse in western culture dominating medical science: that of the body and the self being separated ontological entities.

Master runners and bodily ageing

Tulle's work (2003a&b) reinforces Haddow's insights in highlighting how the body is placed at the very core of individual practices which challenge accepted sets of institutional rules – in this particular case within the athletic community. Tulle notes that bodily ageing poses challenges for the accumulation and retention of various forms of capital, including cultural and physical, which dominates prevalent discourses on the ageing of bodies. This is informed largely by the medicalisation of ageing and the association of the latter with wholesale inevitable decline. This research also highlights how embodied practices are linked to the conscious formation of specific social identities: the ageing runner. The literature proposes modalities of agency that mask or deny bodily ageing thereby legitimising the association of bodily decline with marginalisation. Life history work with Master runners, that is runners aged 35 and over, points to more challenging forms of ageing embodiment and agency, especially amongst the oldest age groups.

Tulle's work is particularly significant in highlighting the way in which embodied practices not only challenge prevalent structures, but help to constitute new ways of being, cognitive templates and institutions: running in later life means taking part in and nurturing structures (Master athletics) which normalise changes brought on by ageing. It requires embedding the entire lifeworld into the demands of athletic pursuit rather than in the prevention of illness or dependency. It offers opportunities for involvement in dynamic social networks, fostering 'corporeal solidarity' (Mellor and Shilling 1997). It allows for imaginings of ageing bodies and of ageing agents as bodies in space, not confined bodies. Crucially, the pursuit of athletic

competence in later life allows for the normalisation of the fluctuations in mind and body competence made manifest during high level performance irrespective of age. Therefore agency no longer lies in the transcendence of bodily ageing, with the risk of normative agelessness it contains, but in the normalisation of the apparent contradiction between ageing and the pursuit of an athletic identity.

Hierarchical habitus? Untouchable, caste bodies

Gorrings's (2005) research on Dalit (formerly Untouchable) movements in South India follows nicely here. He shows that whilst caste is a social construct, it shapes people's lifeworlds. One of the most durable aspects of caste is the physical embodiment of hierarchical values. Caste differentiation is evident at the corporeal level where bodily comportment, mannerisms and ways of speaking and thinking signal caste status (cf. Gorrings and Rafanell, forthcoming). Assertions of equality and demands for respect are contradicted by actions and postures that indicate inferiority. Challenging caste prejudice, therefore, necessitates a 'politics of the body'. Submissive poses, drilled into sub-consciousness by pervasive sanctioning mechanisms, were ridiculed in the process of social protest and consciously altered. Social activists 'walked tall', developed insolent stares, spoke forcefully and self-consciously parodied their former selves in exhorting fellow Dalits to renounce their 'slavish instincts' and become 'human'.

When the clasped hands and stooped backs of Dalit villagers are replaced by clenched fists and raised chests, then untouchability is transparently revealed to be an ideological rather than natural condition. Crossley's (2003: 44) reworking of habitus hinges on the recognition that 'innovative actions by embodied agents can both modify existing structures and create new ones'. Gorrings's empirical work has shown that caste identities (and bodies) are not immutable, but are constructed and lived, and may consequently be transcended; thus foregrounding the political dimension of embodied practices. The formation of durable social identities is embedded in the corporeal, as numerous life-story accounts of 'becoming

untouchable' revealed, but so too are political and ideological acts of resistance. Embodied practices, thus, are imbricated both in the stabilisation of the social, and in its reconstitution.

Hunger strike: The body as weapon

The embodied capacity of people to challenge social forms is starkly evident in Yuill's final example (in print). In the process of challenging forms of social control, Yuill shows how the body can be used as a resource of resistance by marginalised groups to challenge techno-militarily dominant political structures. With particular reference to the 1981 Hunger Strike and the 'battlefield' of the H-block prisons (Clarke, 1987; English, 2003) in Northern Ireland, Yuill's work highlights how the body was the Republican prisoners' weapon of choice in resisting British power. As one of the hunger strikers reported, 'from the moment we hit the H-block we had used our bodies as a protest weapon' (quoted in Feldman, 1991: 179).

The Hunger Strike arose out of an attempt by the British government to recast the symbolic order of the Republican movement by removing its claims to be a legitimate political movement and recasting it as a criminal conspiracy. In practice this entailed enforcing a new regulatory regime over the Republican prisoners' bodies – to deny the self-organisation that they had hitherto enjoyed as prisoners and to remove the right to wear civilian clothes. The mode of resistance chosen by Bobby Sands and his comrades was thoroughly embodied, politically 'weaponising' the body by willing its demise, going naked to resist the symbolic defeat of wearing prison clothing and using their bodily waste to symbolise what they thought of the British regime. The powerful capacity of the body to become a political weapon and effect political transformation could not be better exemplified than in Yuill's compelling research.

Theorising the Transformative Capacity of Embodiment.

Drawing together the disparate strands of our research we will now explicate what we mean by our term the ‘Transformative Capacity of Embodiment’ (TCE), by examining the ontological implications present in the above accounts regarding the social status of the body. This leads on to a discussion about the relationship of these bodies and modalities of embodiment to social structures, before concluding with how the body is moved to transform power structures.

It is important to explore the social ontology of the body as this has implications when examining how embodiment can be endowed with a transformative capacity. Within the sociology of the body there are different tensions over the ontological status of the body as being a material (Turner 1989, for instance) or a discursive entity (notably Butler, 1993). The materialist or idealist approach to the social construction of the body is an extremely contentious area that is well summarized elsewhere (Crossley, 2001b; Freund, 1988; Shilling, 1993). However we wish to emphasise that our empirical case studies offer an ideal opportunity to question the dichotomy between the social and the natural when it comes to understanding the social construction of embodied practices.

Our case studies show how bodies have an irreducibly *biological* aspect whereby natural processes are at play that are, in many ways, extra-discursive and ‘beyond’ social construction. The finitude of the body is manifest and not socially changeable. That is, the bodies of the Master runners are subject to the natural process of ageing: the facticity of biological change is undeniable (nor do the runners themselves seek to deny it). In the case of organ donation biological considerations are self-evident: organs are vital to the functioning of the human body. For the purposes of protest, hunger strikers utilise the fact that death follows from a lack of bodily nourishment.

Whilst the biological body is inescapable in our data, however, we wish to introduce a strong caveat about the status of the biological, both epistemologically and in sociological analysis. The biological is only one dimension of the body and care is required when acknowledging its role in explaining what are, in fact, social processes, to recognise how the biological and the social are imbricated. This caveat is necessary to avoid committing a 'naturalistic' fallacy where explanatory primacy is given to the biological at the expense of the social. However, caution must be taken not to fall into radical constructivist views where the natural body appears solely as a discursive text floating free of any biological considerations. It is our position that the biological body does not 'disappear' when embedded in social, cultural, and ideological discourses; on the contrary these same discourses confer to it the ontological status that a particular collective will construct around it. This means for us that a body does not come to *exist* socially until it is named, used, trained, disciplined, sanctioned and so on in specific ways as practised by a collective.

So, we follow Sayer (1997: 479) who notes that, 'acknowledgement of a biological (and other physical) substratum of social life need not be seen as denying variety and agency at the social level'. We see the body in our case studies as emerging dialectically from the biological and the social - the biological level is necessary for the social to exist, but the social aspects exert a *fundamental* influence over biology. For example, the hunger strikers' actions were so powerful precisely because of the human body's essential need for food. In refusing sustenance, the strikers revealed the social and agentic context of embodiment and provide a useful case in point of social agency controlling and instrumentalising a vital biological impulse, that of eating. In so doing the strikers' generated a new social ontology out of a biological matter: that of the body as weapon of political resistance.

Indeed, if such fundamental biological bases did not exist then the potential power of embodied practices to challenge the social world would not be as forceful and effective. Sayer (1997: 477-8) also underscores the necessity of accepting a biological presence within

sociology in relation to oppression. He makes the highly apposite point that there must be *something* there to be oppressed and *something* there that suffers and experiences physical and emotional pain. Despite Constitutional guarantees of freedom, for example, Dalit protest is galvanised by the immediacy of the suffering body in caste atrocities because it renders persistent inequalities and oppressive actions transparent. Sayer invokes Nussbaum (1992) in arguing that, ‘if social science is to be critical of oppression, it must be essentialist insofar as it has to invoke common, extra-discursive human capacities for suffering’ (1997: 478).

We acknowledge the above point that human capacity for physical suffering appears to be very much at the centre of acts of resistance in particular, and social life in general. Reflecting on our case studies, however, we would assert that, further to Sayer’s argument, must be the recognition that the social body (even in extremis) is never *‘just’* a body. Understanding the multiplicity of social processes that shape (and are shaped by) the way in which we experience, interpret, understand and use our bodies, gives us a better insight into the interplay between the micro and macro components of social existence. Why, for example, do some injuries trigger a transformative response? What are the conditions in which we take cognizance of this injury and decide to act upon it? Embodiment, it is clear, does not occur in a social vacuum but is imbricated in processes of social production and reproduction.

In our empirical studies bodies are made ‘uncomfortable’ (embarrassed bodies), are viewed as ‘empty’ (without selfhood after death), are denied a particular practice (running) or are oppressed (Dalits and Hunger Strikers). These are clearly powerful barriers that do impinge on the capacity of individuals to exercise choice, but all our empirical case studies show that those barriers cannot be taken as an over-determining social structure. Rather, our data demonstrate that individuals are actively engaged – in a more or less conscious fashion - in negotiating and re-negotiating prevalent social structures. It is of particular interest for the kind of social constructionist approach we wish to take forward that the specific barriers our

informants deal with are prominently located in the physical realm. A social 'barrier' then should be understood as 'constraining', in the Durkheimian sense, of mechanisms by which members achieve consensus on collective patterns of practice and beliefs.

What our empirical studies clearly illustrate is that social 'barriers' are not only limiting - in shaping actions - they possess a positive dynamic too: in that the same constraining tendencies act as a spur to activity by those who come up against, and wish to overcome, those barriers. This echoes one of Foucault's key insights that power may be 'productive' as well as 'repressive' (Foucault, 1984: 92). Indeed, Foucault emphasises that in studying the effects of power we need to identify how bodies are *disciplined* and rendered 'docile' (1979: 135-170). However, the very plasticity which enables the enfolding of bodies in, and their moulding to, particular norms of behaviour also makes them amenable to different forms of engagement with the world around them. Our research shows that at some point the bodies of gendered children, bereaved families, runners, Dalits and those of Republican prisoners engage in forms of rebellion and control of the social by generating effective transforming practices allowed by their physical corporeality. They do so mostly in local face-to-face interactions within the context of macro-phenomena.

The critical modality of resistance in our discussion that forms this 'palette of transformative action' is the manipulation and symbolic reordering of prevailing societal norms via the body. When people take embodied action it destabilises discourses about the way that bodies exist in a certain way. Society states how our bodies 'should be' but that does not mean we accept this unquestioningly. Rather, we constantly engage in negotiation of these normative standards, either by conforming to - or challenging - them. In any case, corporeal activity is central to the constitution of those collectively accepted embodied forms. Thus, it follows that corporeal activity and action is a privileged space to effect challenges to society - they go on hunger strike, they don't give organs; they run, they challenge embarrassing remarks or they reformulate the incorporated history of submissive physical bearings. By transgressing

and attempting to subvert corporeal norms an engagement with the existing power structures takes place. This challenges both the symbolic order of power in how one uses one's body and, more fundamentally, it challenges the deeper ontological presuppositions and security of that power.

Rather than the stable and durable 'habitus' of the Bourdieusian framework, it is the mutable nature of individuals' practices which emerges from our work. Dalits (considered untouchable and permanently impure by others in society) and hunger strikers (naked captives in a high security prison) emphasise the transformative capacity of even the most powerless and degraded bodies. The gendering of school children highlights the social processes underpinning the production of gendered bodies and the study of ageing bodies that 'defy their age' displays the enduring capacity to confound existing structures and institute alternate ways of being. Finally debates over organ donation indicate the centrality of the body to dominant discourses, even as they signal individuals' capacity to disrupt the asymmetry of power relations by proposing an alternate reading of the body.

What our various studies add to the burgeoning literature on resistance and agency is a sustained recognition of the embodied nature of agency. Further to this, though, so as to break with past studies and limitations of work on the body, we need to pause at this juncture and respond to Shilling's injunction to cast some light on what 'we are referring to when we talk of the body and embodiment' (2005b: 767). If our various areas of interest serve only to highlight the capacity for individual agency then our efforts, whilst interesting, are of limited significance. What the convergence of five diverse studies offers, however, is the opportunity to reflect on the deeper significance of our findings and steer a course through 'the plurality and diversity of body studies' (Shilling 2005b: 767).

The body, as we understand it, is a physical entity with the capacity for action, emotion and feeling. When we speak of embodiment, therefore, we are articulating the very real, visible

and experiential fact that human beings take bodily form. This is not just a body that *exists* however; it has values and beliefs as well. It is an amalgam of complex social process that invest different bodies with differential meanings and capacities – it is, in other words, inescapably social. How we understand, treat and relate to our bodies changes from culture to culture and over time. The body is not, in this sense, merely our ‘vehicle of being in the world’, as Merleau-Ponty (1962: 82) described it. Rather, we can conceive of it more like an earthenware pot which alters with each use – absorbing flavours, showing scorch-marks and suffering from each successive scouring – so that it is never the same ‘vehicle’ but a ‘vehicle-in-process’ – in its own lifetime but also over historical time.

The formation of social identities, thus, must be an embodied process in which the world is quite literally made flesh because identities are performed in the process of constructing and reproducing meaning. Embodiment, as a process, is central to social order and disorder: it is the means by which social structures, as conditions of possibility, are constituted, reproduced and challenged. The body, understood like this, is the site for contesting conceptions of the social, and is the means by which social change can be accomplished. The body may be used as a weapon, as with the Hunger Strikers, but this does not mean that it is just a tool to be employed at will by dissenting radicals - what we see here is clearly an embodied performance. Likewise in challenging the repressive constraints of gender socialisation agents must adopt an embodied course of action that resists, subverts or parodies the norm as a means of rendering power visible. It is in these very acts that they transgress the logic of a sex/age/caste based ordering of society which dictates what differentiated bodies can and *should* do.

Conclusion

The possibilities opened up by the opportunity to collate the findings of five divergent and contrasting studies allow us both the space and the impetus to reintegrate the body into sociology. It reminds us that sociology is concerned both with structures and with the

meaningful action of individuals, rendering it essential to transcend Bourdieu's pre-reflexive understanding of embodiment. As authors, we conceive of the body as both the object and subject of the mechanisms of power, viewing it as pivotal to the durability and contestation of social structures. The 'Sociology of the Body' ceases to be a specialist subset if we view corporeal manifestations of social structures as fundamental to an understanding of social reproduction both in terms of the embodiment of durable features, and the 'transformative capacity of embodiment'.

The theoretical tensions that the sociology of the body brings to the fore means it has more profound implications for wider sociological enquiry. As Frank (1990) points out, a sociological theory of the body profoundly influences the theoretical frameworks that have traditionally supported sociology. The body is seen as a reshaping force that offers a new way of 'doing sociology', which produces a shift from more macro-structural accounts to a more interpretative micro-structural notion of social life. Crucially, *our empirical case studies illustrate that the body, embodied practices and the physicality of agency are at the very core of a critical account of social life*. The mutually constitutive dialectic between social structures and embodied agents enable us, in the words of C. Wright-Mills "to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society" (Wright-Mills 1959: 6). The sociology of the body, we suggest, allows social scientists to further Mills' prescription by introducing the embodied dynamics in the history and biography of individuals. Specifically, individuals negotiating, re-negotiating and challenging existing embodied practices are, and must be, at the basis of a better understanding of the dynamics of power. The sociology of the body is, we contend, intimately linked to theories of power. Authors, such as Bourdieu and Foucault explicitly highlight the embodied forms of power that help to redefine notions of power as operating in and through the physical materiality of individuals. We take this premise further and show that the corporeality of humans is intimately implicated in resisting, transforming and re-defining social phenomena.

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