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Beyond the Unquestioned Body: Some New Corporeal Nuances

A Comparative Review of Two Ethnographies of the Body

by Agathe Faure

MSc Programme Social Anthropology

Abstract

This article questions the Cartesian mind/body dichotomy followed by most Western academia. It compares and contrasts two ethnographies of the body that entail different theoretical conceptions of the body, casting doubt on the 'Cogito ergo sum' which reduces the body to this 'common thing' on which the authority of a superior private mind is exerted. The first ethnography - 'The Body of One Color: Indian Wrestling, the Indian State, and Utopian Somatics' by Alter (1993) - seems to follow, at first, this tradition, defending the Foucauldian image of an inanimate and politically benign body inhabited by a multiplicity of external force relations called 'power'. However, in his conclusion Alter (1993) questions the Foucauldian framework stating that the Indian wrestler does not express his protest rationally, but fundamentally embodies his opposition to state domination. The second ethnography - 'Words from the Holy People: a case study in cultural phenomenology' by Thomas Csordas (1994) - introduces his concept of 'embodiment' as the way bodies are inhabited in the world prior to all abstract objectifications of it. I conclude with Lambek's original argument (1998) that the discussed mind/body problem arises from the human capacity of self-reflection and needs to be understood in its specific Western socio-historical context.

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At first, the body can appear relatively unproblematic. “No one ever says, Here I am, and I have brought my body with me” (Whitehead, 1938: 156). This ‘unquestionability’ of the body (Wittengstein, 1969) is particularly effective in the Cartesian logic in which Western academia is embedded. Considered as the basis of all Western dichotomies, ‘Cogito ergo sum’ (‘I think therefore I am’) develops the existence of two distinct and opposite classes of substance which together constitute the human: the palpable body and the intangible mind (Lock and Scheper-Hughes, 1987: 9). The body is reduced to this “most common thing (...), the body we touch and we see” (Descartes, 2005: 31), which can gain true understanding and reality only through our conception (Descartes, 2005). The body tends to be erased: “I am therefore (...) *only* a thing which thinks; that is to say a mind, understanding, or reason” (Descartes, 2005: 29, my emphasis).

However, this conception of the body is being denigrated by most anthropological schools. A quest for ethnographies that question its founding principles has begun, asking about the intrinsic nature of the distinction between the body and the mind to human experience. In this existential search, the form of ethnography chosen often reveals (or betrays?) a particular anthropological project. This essay will compare and contrast two ethnographies of the body. *The Body of One Color: Indian Wrestling, the Indian State, and Utopian Somatics* by Alter (1993) is, following a Foucauldian tradition, mainly an ethnography of the body that regards the body as a medium of expression for society. *Words from the Holy People: a case study in cultural phenomenology* by Thomas Csordas (1994) is a more phenomenological ethnography, i.e. it follows a methodology that emphasises the immediate lived experience of how phenomena appear and are constituted by consciousness prior to all scientific abstraction. It departs *from* the body and treats it as a positive subject in society. My argument will be based on these detailed ethnographies in order to explore broader theoretical thoughts and influences.

‘The body of one colour’ as active site of resistance

In the social field, the particular dualist conception of the human is divided between behaviour, based on material bodies that can be coerced and on which an external power can be inscribed; and consciousness, relating to the private mind that can be persuaded (Mitchell, 1990). The first section – constructed on the ethnography of Alter (1993) – starts with this dual image: it presents authority as able to control the docile body quite easily, conceiving the latter as an inanimate and politically benign object inhabited by the intellect, which decides whether or not to subdue (Alter, 1993).

This section will examine the subjective experience of power, tracing its effects on bodies, in the particular context of resistance from *pahalwan*, wrestlers in the northern Indian city of Banaras who, by their specific psychosomatic identity, form a veritable ‘somatic protest’ in a context of a mind-body synthesis based on precise ‘discipline mechanisms’. The regulations over the wrestler’s body are fundamentally political since their aim is to create a new “moral, ethical and partisan”

citizen within the Indian state (Alter, 1993: 51). Indeed, wrestling in India is more than a sport: it is a way of life that takes place through a regimen of mind-body discipline in the *akhara* (gymnasium) – a veritable world in itself (Alter, 1993). There, the body gets in touch with a particular matrix of natural elements that serve to orient the body properly to the world (Alter, 1993: 53).

The “body of one colour” is regulated in terms of micro-physical control: not only are the features of training specific, but every aspect of biological life is regulated in an elaborated set of rules. For instance, the dietetics follow a very detailed programme. In addition to their normal diet, the wrestlers have to consume significant quantities of milk (at least two liters per day), *ghi*, a clarified butter commonly used in South Asia (half a liter per day), and almonds (at least one kilogramme per day). Diet rich in fat is seen as essential for physical and mental development, and also as entailing a cooling *sattva* function, which helps to “render peaceful a body that has been heated and agitated through exercise” (Alter, 1993: 56). Furthermore, these elements tend to be associated with semen. Here, the semen is seen as the core of the wrestler’s strength and character: to consume these particular elements prevents him from losing semen and becoming weak and immoral since they help “to protect one’s store of semen by cooling the heat of passion” (Alter, 1993: 56). Indeed, in wrestling thought, “moral failings are (...) visibly embodied” (Alter, 1993: 56). Conversely, “the physique of the wrestler is taken as a prototype for embodied virtue” if the wrestler manages to combine these primary physical dimensions with a particular moral lifestyle in order to create “a body of one colour” (Alter, 1993: 56).

Many wrestlers accuse the Indian government’s public welfare policy of failing to protect the moral values of the body from modern public life. The state-mandated way of life delivered by a corrupted Indian government, especially generating the “tacit erosion of public health” (Alter, 1993: 57), is perceived as penetrating and dominating the citizen’s body, thus undermining its integrity. Alter (1993: 58) provides the example of the particular suspicion towards government-licensed liquor stores since the use of alcohol is not only considered immoral by the wrestlers but also as a danger to the very core of the male body, burning up semen and placing men in a situation of emotional vulnerability to sensual passion. Although the complaints are not limited to the wrestlers’ community, the latter takes particularly seriously the government’s intentions to transform the citizen’s (male) body into a purely self-referential, individuated object (Alter, 1993). Consequently, wrestlers seem to understand “the micro-physics of power” wherein a novel domination is experienced, on the level of semen loss for instance (Alter, 1993: 59). As Foucault (cited in Alter, 1993: 56) claims: “an awareness of one’s own body can be acquired only through the effect of an investment of power in the body”. Indeed, power is tolerable only on the condition that it masks a substantial part of itself (Foucault, 1978). The wrestler here experiences this new power as a visible and harmful force imposed on his body. Resisting the various apparatuses of power that attempt to separate the body and the mind and trying to defend a unitary mind/body synthesis, Indian wrestlers construct a political discourse and political regimen within the *akhara* against the modern state.

Indeed, nowadays, many contemporary wrestlers are nostalgic for a golden age when royal patrons recruited and took care of them. Before Indian independence, there was a “political symmetry” between wealthy landlords and famous wrestlers: “the patron *raja* as a powerful ruler and the wrestler as a physically fit icon of the princely state” (Alter, 1993: 60). The wrestler was created as a ‘muscular metaphor’ of the royal authority (Alter, 1993: 60). The disciplinary mechanism attributed

to the wrestler's way of life found its legitimacy in this particular power relation. "Among other things, this helped to establish, in the minds of the wrestlers at least, an unambiguous connection between state power, public health, and the integrity of those who were subject to princely rule" (Alter, 1993: 60).

Through the medium of his body, the wrestler now protests and resists, trying to preserve the health values he embodies facing this elusive force, the impersonal authority that is the New Indian Republic. The meaning of the wrestler's body, dependent on a very specific form of power, is now threatened: "In this climate, with no central, absolute power remaining to hold it in place, the wrestler's body succumbed to a similar fate and began to disintegrate" (Alter, 1993: 62).

The Indian wrestler experiences a new context of power relations inscribed on his body. Here, we have to clarify with Foucault (1982) that far from being reducible to any concentrated institution or a supplementary structure above society, power relations are deeply rooted in the social nexus. Power is the name of the multiplicity of force relations, the complex strategic situation, immanent in the particular social sphere in which they operate and which constitute their organisation (Foucault, 1978). Power becomes "a social subject in everyday life" Aretaxaga (2003: 393). Power is not exercised merely as an obligation on those who "do not have it" but rather invests them, and is transmitted by them and through them (Foucault, 1979). Power over bodies is established in the depth of society, following a specific mechanism and modality (Foucault, 1979). The 'body politic' is a set of material elements and techniques that serve as defence and communication tools, and support the power that invests human bodies and subjugates them (Foucault, 1979: 28).

This 'political anatomy' takes different forms in different historical contexts. Therefore, techniques of punishment have undergone many changes in the history of this 'body politic' (Foucault, 1979: 28-29). For instance, while under the *raja* the wrestler was 'energetically emblematic' of the royal power, he becomes relatively vulnerable under democracy which creates a new situation of power and control (Alter, 1993: 63).

Power has then a specific contextualised relationship with the body. The body is figured as an instrument on which specific cultural meanings of power are inscribed (Butler, 1990: 6). Different mechanisms of discipline will be chosen to affect it. Butler (1990) proposes that in patriarchal society the body is a platform onto which gender stereotypes are superimposed. For instance, concerning strip searches of female detainees in Northern Irish prisons, Artexaga (2001) argues that the penetration of these detainees' bodies is an obvious attempt to penetrate their political identities, to reconfigure their subjectivity transforming them from political and rebellious to conforming, subordinate women fixed by their sex (Artexaga, 2001).

Power is then the way in which certain actions modify other actions: power actions force the body to act, bend, or break (Foucault, 1982: 220). It is more a question of "government" than of direct confrontation: to govern is to structure the possible field of action of others (Foucault, 1982: 221). However, power is exercised only over free subjects and only insofar as they are free. In this way, the individual or collective subject faces a field of possibilities in which several ways of behaving are made available, and several reactions and diverse comportments may be realised (Foucault, 1982). Freedom and the possibility of insubordination, the availability of the means to escape appear as the condition for the exercise of power (Foucault, 1982). If the mechanisms of power allow one to

direct the conduct of others, they ask for a frontier, a line of strategic reaction or struggle. There is a “reciprocal appeal...a perpetual linking and perpetual reversal” between power and resistance (Foucault, 1982: 226). The antagonism of strategies is indeed a chemical catalyst that can be used to shed light on power relations, locate their position, their point of application and the methods used. If the form of power applies itself to immediate everyday life, categorising and marking the individual, attaching him or her to the own identity, imposing on him or her a law of truth that has to be recognised by him/herself and others, the subject becomes the one that is subjugated and the one that is conscious of the possibilities of insubordination (Foucault, 1982: 211). There are irreducible opposites: “Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (Foucault, 1978: 95).

Demello (1993) illustrates Foucault’s view on the resistant body through his study of prison tattoos, crucial in creating the convict’s sense of identity. Indeed, here, the tattoo makes the body culturally and politically visible: the convict, locked, stripped of everything he used to own, sees the tattoo as a sign of self-respect--he plays by his own rules (Demello, 1993). The process of tattooing creates the ‘convict body’ (Demello, 1993). Then, the prison tattoo is a ‘subversive bodily act’ since it re-establishes the convict’s authority over his own body and challenges the political system which attempts to control it (Demello, 1993). “The convict body is itself counter-hegemonic in that it incorporates both the system (prison) and the challenge (tattoos)” (Demello, 1993: 13). Seemingly, as a consciously oppositional project, wrestling seeks to reanimate and invigorate the docile, subject citizen, trying to stop the state’s penetration and control by making physical fitness a form of political protest and civic form (Alter, 1993: 65).

However, both the convict and the wrestler seem to go beyond the Foucauldian image of the body. Power in bodies appears to become embodied powers, the linchpin for creative struggle, political projects and identity. We touch here on the question of re-appropriation of the body, going beyond the question asked by Foucault of “what kind of bodies does society want and need?” to invert it: “What kind of society does the body need, wish and dream?” (Scheper-Hughes, 1994: 232). In Foucault’s theory, the body is still ‘devoid of subjectivity’, of “the existential experience of the practical and practicing human subject” (Scheper-Hughes, 1994: 231). All projects considered are self-defeating without the “lived experience of the body-self” (Scheper-Hughes, 1994: 232). According to Ortner (1995), the adequate representation of subjects in power relations is not the result of providing better fixed portraits of them in and of themselves, but of drawing the projects they construct and enact since it is through these projects that they become and transform who they are and sustain or transform their social and cultural universe.

Here, Alter (1993: 66-67) himself in his conclusion goes beyond Foucault’s framework, arguing that the wrestler does not protest rationally but fundamentally embodies his opposition to the state domination: “Through the disciplined construction of iconic individuality, the state is resisted and reformed by systematically conflating reason and biology to develop an integrated political identity”.

The case study of Dan: a phenomenological ethnography of embodiment

In his ethnographic account *Words from the Holy People: a case study in cultural phenomenology*, Thomas Csordas attempts to re-empower the body, defending the concept of embodiment. Embodiment implies that the body is something else other than, or added to, the physical body

itself. It is concerned with the ways in which people “inhabit” their bodies so that these become ‘habitated’ (Scheper-Hughes, 1994). It is partly based on Mauss’ notion of ‘habitus’, i.e. “all the acquired habits and somatic tactics that represent the cultural arts of using and being in the body (and in the world)” (Scheper-Hughes, 1994: 232).

Csordas (1994) applies this theoretical concept to the study of Dan, a thirty-year-old Navajo cancer patient, from the year after the onset of his illness to about a year before he died. Dan, an English-speaking former welder, comes from an acculturated bicultural family; his mother is a schoolteacher and his father a ceremonial leader (or ‘road man’) in the Native American Church (Csordas, 1994: 270-271). Divorced since the onset of his illness, Dan was cared for by his own family (Csordas, 1994: 271). Dan was diagnosed with Grade II astrocytoma, a brain tumour (Csordas, 1994). After his tumour was removed, he received chemotherapy and radiation therapy and was maintained on medications. He had to deal with many post-operation effects, both physical (such as chronic headache) and psychiatric (such as “difficulty in expressing his thoughts”, “rambling speech”, “preoccupation with mixed strategies for a plan of life”) (Csordas, 1994: 271). While Dan’s status was dominated by the impairment of his linguistic ability and the frustration that “I can’t say my thoughts”, he gradually recovered English spoken language (Csordas, 1994: 271). Written language was recovered more slowly and the moderate Navajo he knew was completely lost (Csordas, 1994: 271).

He declined recommended psychotherapy and vocational rehabilitation, preferring his own rehabilitative strategies such as relearning vocabulary with puzzle books, veritable “self-motivated form of linguistic therapy and cognitive rehabilitation” (Csordas, 1994: 272). His own, preferred solution for reconstructing his life, focused on his existential struggle for language, was globally to “follow the Navajo way” and learn to be “the kind of person that helps people”, i.e. ‘a medicine man’ (Csordas, 1994: 272). Dan chose this strategy when the Navajo deities or ‘Holy People’ inspired him with words of prayer (Csordas, 1994: 272). After this long auditory experience, Dan had the compulsion to talk and to pray, actions that relieved his recurrent headache pain, leaving him with a “happy and good feeling” (Csordas, 1994: 272).

Destined for a successful career as a ‘medicine man’ by his relatives, he gave utterance to the elders during a *peyote* meeting in order to get their confirmation. These long meetings, during which participants ingest *peyote* (a substance made from a cactus of the same name, known for its psychoactive effects), sing and take turns uttering spontaneous and inspired prayers, include intervals of quiet conversation which incite encouragement and exhortation of patients (Csordas, 1994: 274). Dan’s speech provoked criticism: not only did his severe linguistic impairment affect the understanding of his utterance but he defended an innovative message made of “brand new” words for the elders, “a new, contemporary synthesis of traditional Navajo philosophy in a young person” (Csordas, 1994: 273). However, he managed to convince them eventually arguing that the specificity of his speech was to be credited to spiritual help from earlier *peyote* meetings. His healing and his resistance to severe vomiting characteristic of the consumption of *peyote* suggested divine approval (Csordas, 1994: 275). Moreover, he was not deterred by his inability to speak the Navajo language since he had been requested by the ‘Holy People’ to translate ceremonial proceedings in English to the young people who wanted help from Navajo tradition but couldn’t understand the Navajo language (Csordas, 1994: 276).

For Dan, the actuality of language becomes a mode of engagement in the world since “having the project of becoming a medicine man was the rationale that grounded the return of language, and peyotist spirituality defined the moral horizon of his discourse as a global horizon” (Csordas, 1994: 278). Consequently, Dan schematised and objectified his embodied experience of language, “his inability to find the right word”, his recurrent headache pain if he refused to listen to his internal drives and give inspired speeches, into a life plan in conformity with cultural and religious meaning (Csordas, 1994). This is not because religious experience is reducible to neurological explanations “but because it is a strategy of the self in need of a powerful idiom for orientation in the world” (Csordas, 1994: 280-287).

Csordas (1994: 287) suggests that Dan’s struggle for correct utterance is, far from being only an answer to his neuroanatomical handicap and his cultural influences, “an adaptive strategy that spontaneously emerges from a pre-objective bodily synthesis”. Following Haraway’s words, Csordas (1994: 288) argues that bodies are not objective canvases but active agents with their “own global and corporal existential significance”.

To properly understand Csordas’ embodiment concept, it is worthwhile to consider another writing of the same author, *Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology* (1990). In this article, Csordas (1990: 5) announces that “the body is not an object that takes on cultural form but is, in fact, the subject of culture, its ‘existential ground.’” Being here constructed as a unitary concept, the body collapses the usual dualities of subject/object (Strathern, 1996). Here indeed, “the body is the mindful body”, a veritable mind-body totality (Strathern, 1996).

Csordas bases his theory mainly on two authors. The first one is Merleau-Ponty who claims that objects do not have any sense *a priori* since they are the end products of our perception (Strathern, 1996). He captures the beginning of perception as ‘pre-objective’, referring to pre-abstract everyday modes of behaviour which can be specified in bodily terms (Strathern, 1996: 179). Additionally, Csordas adds Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*, which he explains as a mediator that reveals how practices come about. The example of Pentecostalism in North America (Csordas, 1990) illustrates his approach. Csordas (1990) studies the evil spirits or demons which transgress the body’s boundaries and cause possession. In the pre-objective world, persons feel that their bodily behaviour is out of their control (Csordas, 1990). This pre-objective perception is objectified by the healer as a case of demonic intrusion, just like Western biomedicine diagnoses illness or disease (Csordas, 1990). The process of healing depends on the habitus since it is based on the particular cultural bodily image of expelling the evil spirit (Strathern, 1996: 179). The participants accept these diagnoses because of their specific habitus that sees the physical self as the creation of God rather than a socially informed body (Csordas, 1990: 23). Consequently, the lived body is the existential ground of a particular culture and era; the body is the existential substrate of culture.

Csordas is also inspired by the work of Hallowell in *The Self in Its Behavioral Environment*, where the latter claims that the auto-objectivation process is based on a prior pre-objective state, which enables the individual to become aware of himself as a socialised object (1955, cited in Csordas 1990: 6). For instance, demons are the precise cultural objects that correspond to an abstract conception: what is revealed through the experience of possession is based on the transgression of an emotional, intellectual or behavioural order, pre-determined by culture and orchestrated through habitus (Csordas, 1990). The conscious and pre-objective experience of possession will take

place through somatic effects, bodily expressions, integrated as bodily techniques, as unconscious structure, characteristic of religious images and rules (Csordas, 1990). This experience can even take unstructured form. Csordas (1990) gives the example of *glossolalia* - a series of syllables devoid of sense, used in prayer. *Glossolalia* forms utterances that create the space for the intercession of the divine. The existential reality of the body through this gestural sense of the language is obvious here.

Conclusion

This paper has studied two ethnographies and has used them as a linchpin for the theoretical exploration of two different anthropological visions of the body. Alter (1993) follows Foucault's vision of the body as inscribed with social and cultural disciplinary rules and value. Although he expands his argument in his conclusion, this ethnography remains an 'ethnography of the body' where the body is still object. Csordas (1994) follows a more phenomenological approach to the body that takes root in the body itself and makes the body subject. The concept of embodiment infuses mind and body with the idea of a 'pre-objective' world, i.e. the pre-abstraction of bodily sensations in the environment.

I would like to conclude this essay with the idea of Lambek (1998: 425) that body/mind or body/person are distinctions widespread and universal. According to him, people need more than one term to talk about the domains covered by their referents (Lambek, 1998). These domains take on different culture-dependent forms, as for instance the Cartesian dualism (Lambek, 1998). What we call the 'mind/body problem' can be seen as one particular historical expression of the universal existential debate of the human capacity of self-reflection. Within this debate ethnographies are used to argue for and reinforce concepts that do not hold true outside of their socio-historical context.

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