

## Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

**BRIAN PRONGER, *Body Fascism: Salvation in the Technology of Physical Fitness*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 2002, xvi + 247 p. \$27.50 cloth, \$60.00 paper.**

During the final decades of the 20th century one view of the human body, its possibilities, limitations and systems of signification, has both proliferated and intensified in modern western societies, with severe implications for our relations to self, others, and environment. "Technologies of physical fitness" is Pronger's name for the discursive fields that promulgate the notion of the body as a primarily bio-technical, instrumental entity. Fusing Heidegger and Foucault's comments on modernity with analytical concerns from Drucilla Cornell and Jacques Derrida, Pronger shows how the texts and practices of fitness assemble embodiment through a sweeping cultural "phys-ed" program that shapes modern bodies and desires.

His analysis works at the intersection of modernity's diffusion of power through the bodies of individuals and populations, epistemological displacement of sovereignty from the divine to humans and development of capitalist economy. The momentous occasion of the modern period, Pronger writes, is the deposing of "the theocentric dominion of the Judeo-Christian God [by] the anthropocentric dominion of (European) humanity (160). The body, however, betrays the fallacy of this attitude. Because death and decay trump human mastery, they (and their indices, like illness, aging, or fat) become the abject in modern body projects. Modernity thus organizes bodily comportment in terms of risk management. As Pronger puts it, "The energy of risk management is the power of fear. The widespread promotion of exercise and fitness reasserts the cultural logic of fear and domination in the face of the profound failure of modernity to deliver on its promise of control" (178).

Exercise technologies act as a retrofit to this promise. As an intertextual ensemble these simultaneously establish and authorize an ontology of the body as a barrier to be overcome through rigorous management regimes. This recalls the Christian perception of the "inherent fallen nature of 'man,' who can be saved only by divine intervention" (157). Technologies of fitness represent the modern divinity and take on an evangelical character, perpetually invoking decay to shape human desires and providing the corollary bounty of goods, services and concepts to shape human bodies. Redemption occurs in putting these to work, literally, "working out" the body (189).

Following Heidegger's comments on modern technology as invasive to the intrinsic meaningfulness of humanity, Pronger argues that modern technology and capitalist ideology force bodies into appearance within an ontology of reserve force: as resources for purposes external to them (58). What cannot be re-sourced in this way is construed as waste Pronger maps this distinction between what a body is and what it might be onto Deleuze and Guattari's discussion of *puissance* and *pouvoir*. The puissant body represents the fundamental freedom of Being; *pouvoir*, conversely, appropriates puissant energies to insinuate particular meanings into individual bodies. Puissant pleasure and desire are pressed into service of the imperatives of capitalist economics, which code subjection through a colonization of bodily *puissance*. The product is a fascist mode of desire, commodifying forms of experience that produce acceptable embodiments. Re-sourced as objects pliant to extrinsic social projects, people are precluded from appreciating the intrinsic value of Being, and are profoundly constrained in our capacity to imagine alternative relations to ourselves and to others.

Pronger argues that although this textual ensemble seeks to inscribe the lived body in its totality, it paradoxically produces some bodies that are less readily invested with the fascist discourses of fitness. Where marginal embodiments remain inassimilable to the textual *logos*, they are relatively free of the organizing imperatives of body technocracy. These embodiments afford opportunities for political intervention: "modernity's waste may well become postmodernity's source of resistance ... celebrating and pursuing the 'wasteful' life on the margins of productivity" (113). This moves Pronger to develop a critical pedagogy of physical education, linking Buddhist teachings on emptiness as infinite connectivity to an ethical engagement with alterity. The moving body resists conceptual fixity; it becomes "transpersonal" and returns individuals to a kind of community of flesh. For Pronger this community is "freer than discourse ... by moving in emptiness...we can learn the meaning of our immersion in the flesh and thus apprehend the meanings of Being/becoming as more than a subjective, personal self-grounded experience" (98).

This is precisely the point on which I part company with Pronger. He evokes a mode of embodiment beyond the grasp of power and a nostalgic longing for a fullness of bodily Being uncorrupted by self-work. However, the desire for such a mode is itself an aspect of self-work, and ensuing practices equally inextricable from technologies of self-development. Disciplinary though they may be, modern body practices are no less sensuous and intimate than the desire for release from them, but his emphasis on a 'true' freedom overlooks the utter materiality of discursive practices.

This crucially neglects the potential for resistance that inheres in every instance of power relations. He finds that in attending to "the excrement of the technology of physical fitness [which] in modernity has precisely the status of playing with shit ... one can transcend its dominating power" (235). There are real people forced to live in the "excremental" bodies of

modernity. This feels as though a certain class of person is loaded with all the emancipatory potential of humanity, while those "fixed" in transgressive bodies become pedagogical objects for interrupting the *logos* that produces them. And here, the very subject-object relationship that Pronger hopes to subvert is actually reconstituted as its very subversion.

These objections aside, *Body Fascism* remains a successful project and a substantial contribution to embodiment studies. Pronger distinguishes himself from other accounts of bodily rationalization in his comprehensive tracing of government through the technologies of physical fitness. His critique of these is excellent; rigorous and thoroughly nuanced. His discussion of the 'intertextual ensemble' of fitness, its conceptual scaffoldings and modes of articulation (121-224), are particularly strong. Critical scholars in psychology, risk theory, physical education, philosophy, queer theory, and science and technology should find this a helpful text; I for one will return to it often.

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