

Gendered Bodies. Notes on Embodiment and Gender

Cuerpos genéricos. Notas sobre la corporeidad y el género

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Abstract

Gendered bodies are increasingly important objects of sociological investigations. We have come to understand that bodies have histories, and their experiences vary across epochs and cultures, while social action is not simply a cognitive operation: it is situated in time and space, incarnated, and importantly codified through gender. Gender and embodiment are therefore two fundamental elements of contemporary sociological understanding of subjectivity. Gender in fact illuminates embodiment and helps us understand how society, through interaction, institutions and culture shapes the way we inhabit, feel, and manage our bodies. A perspective on gender can be particularly pregnant to understand the way embodiment takes place in daily life. In this paper I retrace some of the most fertile tracks in contemporary classics such as Goffman and Bourdieu for the sociological understanding of embodied subjectivity and hint at the way they have addressed gender as a fundamental dimension of embodiment. Gendered embodiment is revealed at the foundation of the gender differences which are commanded by the gender order, underscoring its relevance to understand today's reality.

Key words: Embodiment; Gender; Sociology of the Body; Goffman; Bourdieu

Resumen

Los cuerpos generizados son objetos cada vez más importantes de las investigaciones sociológicas. Hemos llegado a comprender que los cuerpos tienen historias y sus experiencias varían según las épocas y las culturas, mientras que la acción social no es simplemente una operación cognitiva: se sitúa en el tiempo y el espacio, se encarna y, lo que es más importante, se codifica a través del género. El género y la corporeidad son, por tanto, dos elementos fundamentales de la comprensión sociológica contemporánea de la subjetividad. De hecho, el género ilumina la encarnación y nos ayuda a comprender cómo la sociedad, a través de la interacción, las instituciones y la cultura, da forma a la forma en que habitamos, sentimos y manejamos nuestros cuerpos. Una perspectiva de género puede ser particularmente rica para comprender la forma en que la corporeidad se lleva a cabo en la vida cotidiana. En este artículo repaso algunas de las pistas más fértiles de los clásicos contemporáneos como Goffman y Bourdieu para la comprensión sociológica de la subjetividad encarnada y apunto la forma en que han abordado el género como una dimensión fundamental de la encarnación. La corporeidad de género se revela en la base de las diferencias de género que ordena el orden de género, subrayando su relevancia para comprender la realidad actual.

Palabras Claves: Encarnación; Género; Sociología del Cuerpo; Goffman; Bourdieu

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The body and gender have become important objects of sociological investigation, both because sociology has shown how through interaction, institutions and culture the boundary of the “natural” is being constructed, and because social action is increasingly thought of as situated in time and space and therefore incarnated and codified on the basis of gender. Embodiment, that is, the constitution of embodied subjectivity through social processes and relationships, is now increasingly taken into account in the ways we understand social processes. A perspective on gender, in turn, can be particularly pregnant to understand the way embodiment takes place in daily life. In this paper I retrace some of the most fertile tracks in contemporary classics such as Goffman and Bourdieu for the sociological understanding of embodied subjectivity and hint at the way they have addressed gender as a fundamental dimension of and embodiment. In so doing, I will cast a critical, materialist, phenomenological eye on embodiment and gendered bodies to better understand what a constructivist approach to bodies and gender may entail.

Gender and embodiment as social processes

In a recent small but valuable book, Shilling (2016) has put emphasis on six phenomena that have given relevance to embodiment. Firstly, feminism, especially in its second wave, which put its finger on the inequalities that are realised through male and female bodies, and the objectification of the female body. The interest in inequalities that pass through the body then extended to other social identities that are related to other aspects of embodiment such as race, age, and class. Secondly, the growth of alternative lifestyles and a critique of the way capitalism has enacted economic progress, with issues such as environmental sustainability bringing attention to the

limits of human existence on this planet. Thirdly, the process of population ageing which has highlighted the inequalities that unfold through age and their different relevance to different populations, especially in relation to the stigmatisation of old age and the myriad social practices through which individuals try to keep their bodies young. Fourthly, the fact that the body has become, in the Global West, an important object around which processes of consumption are articulated, and that it is valued by countless practices that seek to modify it, beautify it, satisfy, and guide its needs. Fifthly, the intensification of control over the body by political institutions, following the increasing pressure of migration, especially after the attack on the Twin Towers. Sixth, scientific and technological developments that have facilitated unprecedented control over aspects of our corporeality that previously seemed unavailable. This last theme is associated with the fact that a rapprochement is taking place between the social sciences and the biological sciences. Obviously not everyone agrees, but in an important contribution Nicholas Rose (2013) has drawn attention to trans-disciplinarity. The latter becomes possible and timely because, in what he calls the Century of biology, the biological sciences and neurology are changing. The brain is proving to be a plastic element modified by the social world, for example pointing out that the automatic response to danger (attack or flee) varies in different cultures and especially in relation to gender socialization which triggers different physiological reactions. Epigenetics, or the study of how changes in gene expression occur, highlights the role of environmental and social factors. The body is no longer seen as an ultimate frontier but is made up of cells, informed by genes, animated by endocrinological responses, and all this, for many hard scientists, in relation to the surrounding environment which we know is socially organized by interaction, institutions, and culture. Characteristics

acquired in the course of socialization, through family relationships for example, are transferred to subsequent generations.

It is therefore necessary to start from bodies as material and symbolic matters that possess characteristics that change throughout history and contexts, while through them subjects take their place in society and are influenced by interaction, institutions and culture; this allows us to better focus on gender distinctions. One of the fundamental ways in which we learn who we are, relate to others, and understand them is by relating to gender, bearing on our bodies the visible marks of a belonging that we feel is so fundamental that it guides us in most social situations and defines our position in the world. The gendered body is a strategic vantage point on the world when we want to understand the workings of social facts (Ghigi and Sasstelli 2018). However, for the sociologist, rather than a property of bodies or individual psychological characteristic, gender is a social structure, and in particular a structure of relationships. In order to understand gender, Connell (2002) suggests, the fundamental step is to shift the focus “from difference to relations”: relations between subjects endowed with bodies that are in different positions in the “reproductive arena”, and relations of these subjects with their own bodies. Everything that has to do with the so-called “reproductive arena” and that “bring reproductive distinctions between bodies into social processes” acts as a background to gender positioning. What is important here, is that the set of these relations comes to define an order, the “gender order”, which establishes a network of possibilities and courses of action, that despite the growth of fluidity and the variety of gender positions, still (paradoxically) predominantly organizes itself around the male/female duality (Lorber, 2021). It thereby typically gives rise to a situation of “conflictual cooperation” between women and men as Sen (1990) writes, and as Goffman (1977) proposes an “arrangement” of their actions that makes them often appear essentially different. Now it is important to stress that the very fact of treating the differences between men and women and their relations through a single term responds to the need to give weight to what is socially and culturally constructed in the practices that define masculinity, femininity, and relations between the sexes. But, as suggested, the gender order goes beyond relations between men and women: it includes difference and dichotomy but also other relations, especially in the Global West where we can detect hierarchies among men as well as among women, often related to other intersectional positioning (Carastathis, 2016). As mentioned, the

subject’s relationship with his or her body contributes to the definition of gender in a decisive way and results from a slow mimetic process of embodiment. The subject is neither totally determined nor absolutely instrumental with respect to gender: rather, it is a fundamental dimension of subjectivity that is continuously realized in different ways in different contexts depending on social organization. Different social contexts for example may stress the male/female dichotomy and even “mythicize” it such as in clothing or advertising, but they can also downplay or deny it such as in schools or certain work contexts (Connell, 2002).

While it is true that societies all share some distinction between male and female (and in some cases other third or multiple categories) that encompasses corporeality, they perceive this distinction, bodies, and their capacities differently, and shape corporeality in a variety of ways. The biological make-up, in short, is itself socially moulded, and not only by discourses (medical and otherwise) but also by practices and institutions. Sociology today recognizes that there are a variety of institutional frames, realized in thought as well as in practice as realized resources. These frames may be more or less sophisticated, and through them our being men or women is carried out as a natural and normal fact. Take, for example, the still widely adopted sexual segregation of public toilets: it clearly alludes to the functioning of different sexual organs and is dictated by a particular declination of modesty that is organized around sexual difference, rather than emphasizing the elimination of similar substances in a similar way, and in so doing contributes to emphasizing and naturalizing the differences between men and women, excluding identities that lie between the two categories, and stigmatizing the disabled as having no sex. Contemporary sociology has therefore increasingly espoused the idea that it is the ways in which our social life is organised and our experience of it that allow, not so much the “expression” of natural differences, as the “production” of these same differences (Goffman, 1977; West and Zimmerman, 1987). Even where biological differences between the two sexes seem to emerge (in body strength or physical dimensions) it can be demonstrated, Goffman insisted with his notion of “institutional reflexivity”, that the effectiveness of gender differences, and it may be added their working as inequalities, is ensured by social organization and its institutions. With institutional reflexivity, Goffman (1977) indicates all those features of social organization that have the effect of confirming our gender stereotypes and validating the prevailing orientation in relations

between the sexes. What need to be explained, then it is not the social consequences of supposed innate differences between the sexes, but rather the way in which such differences are posited to guarantee our social arrangements and how the institutional activity of social arrangements – in interaction, institutions, and culture - ensures that this explanation seems obvious to us.

The posture of a critical, materialist, phenomenological sociology is not to argue that there is no material bodily reality, but rather to show that we have access to such reality only through our social being, and that is society inevitably and finely entrenched into it. Interaction, institutions and culture intervene on bodies and are conversely shaped by social practices conducted by embodied subjects. Different subjects are asked to show emotions in different ways depending on the situation, may or may not to adhere to different roles that require different bodily controls, may decode images of bodies according to differentiated codes. The many ways of embodiment make some processes significant and others irrelevant, some experiences harbingers of difference and others indistinguishable and taken for granted. The material datum, for the human species, is never immediate or inert. From a phenomenological point of view, it exists and is activated to the extent that we understand and feel it, but our understanding and feeling are entangled in social practice. For human beings, body and society are constructed together: corporeality is an inescapable fact, but it is not a natural and unchangeable attribute, any more than society is a tacked-on artificial entity. As Merleau-Ponty (2013) writes, the anatomical organization of the body leaves open a great number of possibilities, the way the body is used is never determined once and for all, its meanings and reactions are always to be interpreted: we should not imagine a natural layer overlaid by a fabricated spiritual and cultural world because in the human species everything is *both* “fabricated” and “natural”. We could say that the different uses of the body are, at the same time, natural - since they are made possible by physiological devices - and social - since they are arbitrary and conventional. Only by thinking of the body as a finished, closed, static entity - a photograph, a biomedical value - can we somehow bring the nature/culture ridge into focus. But as soon as we approach this body of ours, we see that it is in continuous becoming, elusive if not through a prism of tools and perspectives that construct it through their history, their codes, and their angles. Contemporary social-theoretical reflections, in fact, has moved beyond the generic idea that the body is an important object of study in itself as it is socially

constructed, to consider that the social actor around which countless models of analysis had been founded is, to all intents and purposes, an embodied subject, situated in time and space. In other words, they put to work the idea of embodiment as a social process and explore the many practical ways in which it takes place in different social contexts.

Considering some characteristics of embodiment as a social process we see that it is circular, active, incessant, contested and scalar. Circular, because, as human beings, we are induced to assume in our bodies the differences promoted by interaction, institutions, and culture and then act on these same differences from our incorporated feelings. Active, because we are fully subject of such embodiment, and therefore not only subject to the power of classifications and social organization, but also capable of making ourselves subjects of our work on our bodies by reproducing, modifying, challenging what society tacitly suggests or imperiously imposes on us. Incessant, because not only do we continually build our bodies for ourselves and for others, but also because they cannot be truly silent: they will speak about us even when we seem to say nothing. Contested, because our ways of experiencing the body are fundamental, albeit often implicit, ways of experiencing our identities and those differences which, through interaction, institutions, and culture, become inequalities, are fixed in hierarchies, and are quite often fought over. Finally, it is a scalar process, a process that operates on several scales, at the level of populations or individual bodies, of the body as a whole or of parts or functions of the body, and even of elements or constituents of the body such as the nervous system or DNA.

Bodies that make a difference

A constructivist, yet materialist and phenomenological, perspective starts from the ways in which we approach bodies in everyday life. In the Global West we tend to understand the world either as the result of “natural” events or, alternatively, as a “social” phenomenon, linked to the wills, actions and interactions of subjects. That is, we find two broad, fundamental perspectives or “frames” that are realized both in the mind and in symbols, and in the material resources and organizational rules of institutions (Goffman, 1974). These are two basic frames through which we understand and manage ourselves, act and feel in everyday life: “natural” frames and “social” frames. The “natural” frames attribute events and characteristics entirely to natural

and therefore purely “physical” factors, neither intentional nor animated, while the “social” frames identify and explain phenomena in relation to the will and purposes of an “intelligence” that performs “guided actions”, and in turn to subjects who perform them in relation to social norms such as honesty, efficiency, good taste, and so on. Natural and social frames encompass embodied subjects differently: in natural frames people are not responsible for their bodies because they are beyond their control; in social frames people are custodians of their bodies, which they actually manipulate to pursue their own ends or appear in the best light. In everyday life we address others using both natural and social perspectives, and we do so in a more or less credible way depending on practical circumstances that have become entrenched in social conventions. Subjects, however, are not merely passive receivers of the structure of cultural frames, but rather realize them in their everyday lives, and in so doing switch from one perspective to another, depending on the situation and their experience. This interplay of perspectives is indeed central to the way we feel and manage our bodies in everyday life, and contributes to the continuous constitution of the boundary between the natural and the social.

Let’s take a step back and see, again with the help of Goffman, how the body is implicated in everyday interaction and brought into play by it in specific ways. In our societies, as the vulnerability of individuals in face-to-face relationships has become ceremonial rather than purely physical, as it was in societies where violence was less controlled such as European Medieval societies, a gradually more elaborate body language has developed. We are less afraid than our medieval ancestors of being physically assaulted, but each of us is afraid of behaving in a way that discredits us and make us risk social exclusion (Elias, 1994). Increasingly sophisticated bodily signs - the way we look, the way we speak, our demeanour, our posture, and so on - indicate both “diffuse social statuses” such as gender, age, class, and “individual character”, that is, each person’s concept of themselves, their normality or abnormality (Goffman, 1967).

Our notion of a human being - autonomous, self-contained, to be respected - is understandable only in relation to the ceremonies we know and must accomplish during interaction by means of even minute bodily signals that require us to maintain a certain distance from bystanders, to greet in a certain way, to feign polite indifference. These forms of self-respect and respect for others therefore pass first of

all through the body: gestures, glances, the position we occupy in space, how we stand, how we touch objects or express emotions. They give substance, that is, they materially construct that “air bubble” that envelops each of us, especially in public places, and helps us project a “deep” self, which must be respected as something “sacred” (Goffman, 1963; 1967). Such embodied forms of respect are anything but superficial: they serve as a foundation, as obvious as it is affectively charged, for that notion of “humanity” which is indispensable to us and which we associate with human rights, freedom and tolerance (Schneider, 1996).

Placed thus, as the taken-for-granted material foundation of subjectivity, the body and its language cannot be controlled by the subject in a fully strategic way. The body can be acted upon, and the language of the body can be spoken strategically, only up to a point. As language, our body speaks about us beyond our intentions, and as a body it is never silent: “an individual can stop talking, he cannot stop communicating through body idiom; he must say either the right thing or the wrong thing. He cannot say nothing” (Goffman, 1963: 35). So the body has been constructed, at the same time, as an instrument and a measure of the subject: we use it to present ourselves to others, we work on it to build a certain identity and, at the same time, it speaks to others (and to ourselves) about ourselves. In other words, the body classifies us and while acting with and on our body we try to find our place in social classifications contributing to their accomplishment.

Still, knowing how to manage the body, the looks, the posture in public and crowded places is essential for the subject to give a “normal” impression of himself. And “normal appearances” (Goffman, 1971) are created above all from the body. On the “stage”, the public region of our encounters with others, the body provides a set of tools for expressing the self, a built-in vocabulary that functions as a non-verbal language, while at the same time contributing in an essential way to defining the situation and also the character of the actor. The body is a kind of “expressive equipment” (Goffman, 1959) with which the subject presents itself on the social scene. In his famous essay *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman (1959) argues that the self is the product of a scene which is performed and not a cause of it, “it is not something organic that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited” (p.245). The self is partially and locally

produced and reproduced in the various rituals of everyday life through two concatenated forms of embodied ceremonies, deference (i.e., demonstration of respect for the other) and demeanour (i.e., demonstration of self-regard) (Goffman, 1967). With our gaze, our face (what each individual brings into play in communication and in relating to others, i.e., self-image: not coincidentally, we say “losing face”), our posture, we show our demeanour and at the same time grant deference to bystanders, demanding it in return. The body, then, provides a ritual idiom for the representation of the self in everyday life, a shared, conventional, normative language, so not only we cannot help but speak about ourselves with our bodies even if we remain silent, but also we can only attempt to deviate from the norms or conform to them: for participants to any social there is an obligation to provide certain kinds of information and everyone is expected to present themselves in a certain way; the way individuals can give the least amount of information about themselves is to conform to the expectations actualized in the situation (Goffman, 1963). The body therefore is central to the maintenance of orderly interaction and the reproduction of social roles and identities. Yet, as suggested, it can only partly be acted upon instrumentally: the body’s excesses are as ordinary as our ability to control it.

Men and women, however, follow rituals that are in part differentiated in order to maintain a certain face that is consonant with the codes envisaged for each sex; at the same time, precisely by following certain rituals the difference between them is affirmed and in fact socially created. Indeed, in *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman (1959) uses gender codes as an example to show the ambiguity of the distinction between reality and fiction in the construction of personal identity. He suggests that what we consider authentic is in fact a construction, or rather a representation, the result of elaborate ceremonies, where the body is put to work in specific, but typically non-instrumental ways. Thus, Goffman writes, “when we observe a young middle-class American girl playing dumb for the benefit of her boyfriend, we are ready to point to items of guile and contrivance in her behaviour. But like herself and her boyfriend, we accept as an unperformed fact that this performer is a young American middle-class girl. But surely here we neglect the greater part of the performance” (Goffman, 1959: 81). Now, it is crucial to note that this neglected part is the representation of sexual identity. It is gender codes that support membership in a particular sexual category while specifying the spaces of courtship

strategies. Being a woman can appear as an essential and taken for granted fact, located before or at the base of what, consequently, appear as superficial artifices related to seduction: “(i)t is commonplace”, Goffman continues, “to say that different social groupings express in different ways such attributes as age, sex, territory, and class status”, but each of these attributes “is not a material thing, to be possessed and then displayed; it is a pattern of appropriate conduct, coherent, embellished, and well-articulated. Performed with ease or clumsiness, awareness or not, guile or good faith, it is none the less something that must be realized”. The staging of “essential” attributes such as gender, race, or age, all anchored in the body, is a crucial form of constructing personal identities that remains so much in the background that it evades questioning in most cases, at least as long as actors adhere to the rules that prescribe who can legitimately do certain things in certain places. In addition to the major institutions and structures - such as the labour market, the divide in educational orientations, the division of tasks within the family, etc. Goffman therefore tells us that gender differences are constructed on a daily basis through “institutional reflexivity” that makes the differences between bodies effective in a continuous and permeating ceremonial ritualization that passes through bodies, making them both taken for granted and immediately recognizable (Goffman, 1977; 1979). Through institutional reflexivity that selects, reflects and shapes bodily differences by making them effective, embodied subjectivities and social situations intersect, framing, as it were, subjects into social identities functional to the reproduction of the orderly unfolding of everyday life. Thus, “what the human nature of males and females really consists of, then, is a capacity to learn to provide and to read depictions of masculinity and femininity and willingness to adhere to a schedule for presenting these pictures, and this capacity they have by virtue of being persons, not females or males” (Goffman, 1979: 8).

The ways of addressing the other as a subject coded according to gender, the ways of managing one’s own body as a gendered body, the play of looks and positions in the different scenes of everyday life, and even the very game of seduction between the sexes are all ritualized forms that reinforce gender differences, culturally fixing their naturalness. The gender codes are not only acted out by the subjects, but also undergone and leave room for many contradictions, because they are found, in everyday reality, mixed with other identity attributes and an infinity of roles. In his famous essay on the rituals surrounding the self in modern societies, Goffman

(1967) precisely uses the example of gender to show the sometimes-contradictory interweaving of prescriptions on demeanour and deference. Gender norms and role prescriptions can be in conflict, leaving room for manoeuvre to the subjects but also forcing social actors to make difficult choices: thus, a woman may refuse to accept the showing of “respect for the fairer sex” which a man may perform by standing up and giving her way, and stress instead her being “on equal footing”. With irony, Goffman shows with this example how ambivalent the kindnesses reserved for women are, and therefore the ambivalence they must manage in order to be able to simultaneously demonstrate femininity and actively participate in social life. Even in work environments, wherein universalistic principles can be enforced, subjects can always be held accountable according to their sexual categorization, and despite numerous localized subversions, in carrying out gender, men preferentially also carry out ritualistic forms of domination and women, specularly, of submission. In contrast to other disfavoured groups, the latter are held in high regard, but it is an ambiguous consideration that denies them full recognition of their autonomy (Goffman, 1977). The analysis of sexism cannot, in this view, stop at the discrimination against women because gender stereotypes are articulated in every direction, so, the kindnesses extended by men to women and the chivalrous attention paid to them can easily be dressed up as paternalism. Thus, “every indulgence society shows to women can be seen as a mixed blessing” (Goffman, 1977: 326) which may well have the function of masking what might be considered a disadvantage: “male domination is a very special kind, a domination that can be carried right into the gentlest, most loving moment without apparently causing strain – indeed, these moments can hardly be conceived of apart from these asymmetries” (Goffman, 1979: 9).

The interactional and communicative asymmetries correlated to gender are evident in the case of the communicative licenses that can be taken with around subjects ascribed to the female sex. In his last book, Goffman (1981) focuses on the forms of speech and the ways in which these participate in the game of identity, making numerous references to distinctions between men and women. The discussion of changes in footing, that is, changes in the position we take vis-à-vis ourselves and vis-à-vis others in our utterances, is introduced in fact with a gender-related example. President Nixon, in the Oval Office with numerous government officials and journalists after the signing of an important document, jokes with an established journalist present and interrupts

the discussion to compliment her on her appearance, even asking her to turn around to be better seen. In this joking of the president’s, there is a shift in focus (footing) - from the seriousness of Oval Office politics to the micro-politics of gender - that slips the journalist’s professional role, inexorably, toward a decorative role anchored in her being a woman. This example shows the inextricability of masculinity and femininity, their embodied nature, and the fact that the feminine is to some extent “more embodied” than the masculine. Similar scenes, although increasingly contested due to the spreading of feminist consciousness and shifts in the gender order which nevertheless continue to stress the male/female dichotomy despite the pluralization of gender codes (Lorber, 2021), tend to reduce women to their gender and at the same time naturalize masculinity as dominant.

Subjectivity, embodiment and gender

In the social sciences, the observations of Giddens (1991) in *Modernity and Self-Identity* have had a particular influence: according to this perspective, in late modernity the body no longer indicates only the place that a given actor occupies in the social structure, but also and above all their person, their character, their self and for this reason becomes the object of continuous choices. In the Giddensian vision, with the increasing complexity, fragmentation and de-traditionalization of the social context, the embodied self has become a “reflexive project”, which “consists in sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives (...) in the context of multiple choice filtered through abstract systems (of knowledge)” (Giddens, 1991: 5). The actor would reflexively constitute himself not only by organizing his own narrative biography, but also by properly managing the presentation and construction of his or her own body. In the words of Giddens (1991) and Shilling (1993) “the body is becoming a phenomenon of choices and options”, the body is less and less an extrinsic datum, functioning outside the self-referential systems of modernity, but is itself “reflexively mobilised”. In this view, in a classic dualistic move, it is the body itself that may come to configure itself as a project of the subject, raw material on which the subject can and must intervene to constitute itself in forms that are positively valued in our culture but also to obtain gratification and a full sense of identity. Although physical conducts always take place within the limits set by our social position, the peculiarity of the late-modern condition would be that of pushing us to reflexively adopt some projects on the body in order to sustain our personal identities.

Especially with the Twentieth Century, the modern subject starts to work on his own body to make it an increasingly rich instrument, modifiable and improvable, of his own personal growth. No longer subject to the dangers of sin that were so present in Victorian imagery, the body becomes the ultimate territory of the self in contemporary consumer culture. Expansive practices of body control thus emphasize the personal strategic dimension rather than a collective purpose and, applying to defined spheres of “leisure”, tend to qualify as “personal” expressions of subjectivity (Sassatelli, 2014). Using one’s body as a vehicle of gratification in spaces delimited by commercial relations, consumption of objects, and leisure services, therefore becomes a kind of duty. And as Giddens (1991) and Bauman (2000) notes, late modernity confronts the individual with a complex diversity of choices that is “non-foundational”, produces “anxiety”, and offers little help in selection. Barbara Ehrenreich in her *Fear of Falling* (1989) has shown that it is mainly middle and upper-middle class professionals who fear losing position in the labour market who seek to control their bodies through health practices designed to keep them young and fit. This is all the truer for women. As Baudrillard (1998) and Bordo (1997) have notably observed, they are incessantly called upon by consumer culture to make their lives a “plastic possibility”. Free time is presented to them more than to men as an opportunity to “rediscover themselves” and the commercial proposals offered with this aim are more often linked to body services, fashion and the modification of bodily appearances.

Still, we should be wary of an all-too reflexive picture of individualization, which may lose sight of the materiality of the body. In the sociology of the body, the Pierre Bourdieu is often hailed as the one who attempted to merge two important but divergent traditions: on the one hand, the structuralist and post-structuralist tradition that sees the body as a situated and socially constituted object, and on the other, the phenomenological tradition that thinks of the body according to the category of experience (Crossley, 2001). It is especially in his theory of practice, and in particular in *The Logic of Practice* (1990) that Bourdieu proposes to understand human experience not according to cognitive and linguistic models, but in the terms of imitation and incorporation. The notion of “habitus”, which allows us to conceive of corporeality as prior to consciousness without, however, resorting to biologicistic essentialism, is here called upon to play an important role. For Bourdieu (1990), habitus is a “system of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to

function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively ‘regulated’ and ‘regular’ without in any way being the product of obedience to rules, objectively adapted to their goals without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends” (p. 84). Habitus is inscribed in the body through past embodies experiences, is standardized in the first years of life, and is an unconscious but highly adaptive mechanism that defines the state of the body (hexis) as well as the actors’ attitude towards their own bodies, others and objects. Bourdieu’s insistence on embodiment is important for thinking differently about action: our practical way of approaching the world is not a “state of soul” or adherence to instituted doctrines”, but “a state of body”. The “practical sense” though which human action unfolds is then configured as a “social necessity that has become nature, converted into motor patterns and bodily automatisms”.

For Bourdieu, the state of the body is itself the realization of a “political mythology”: lifestyle regimes reflect the cultural genesis of tastes from the specific point within the social space from which individuals originate – they are incorporated through the most elementary everyday movements inculcating the equivalence between physical and social space. Even “in its most natural appearance . . . volume, size, weight, etc.” the body is a social product: “the unequal distribution among social classes of corporeal properties” is both realized concretely through “working conditions” and “consumption habits,” and perceived through “categories and classification systems which are not independent of such distribution” (Bourdieu, 1977: 51). A striking example of this is the fatalistic attitude towards illness typical of the subaltern classes, which helps to reproduce their disadvantaged position even in the most material aspects of life (Boltanski, 1971; Bourdieu, 1984). Access to dominant body projects thus remains irretrievably socially differentiated. Conceptualized in this way, the habitus has the merit of making evident some of the limitations of theories of reflexive individualization: the performative attitude towards one’s body is only partially reflexive - since it rests on socio-historical configurations that somehow precede the actor and define his or her dispositions - and it is also unevenly distributed among different social categories which reflect different social positionings. The status and practices of the body thus reveal different positionings in the continuous reproduction of the social space. Specularly, social inequalities are less the result of institutional discrimination and more the effect of processes of inscription in the body

of differences: a form of “symbolic power” that is exercised onto the subject with its complicity.

The body, therefore, is the vector of inequalities, of systems of stratification that dictate different access to economic, social and symbolic resources sedimented over generations. One of these is, of course, gender. To the inequality between men and women the French sociologist dedicates a well-known work on “masculine domination” (Bourdieu, 2001), which represents a fundamental example, perhaps the clearest, of the mechanism of incorporation of the habitus: inequality is sustained starting from the different ways of living, feeling, and managing the body that characterize men and women, and that at the same time define what is masculine and what is feminine. The structure of gender inequalities is, for Bourdieu, naturalized as a form of symbolic power that makes obvious, taken for granted, and natural what is instead arbitrary. In order to de-naturalize gender distinctions, the French sociologist considers a society distant from the European one, that of the Berbers of Kabylia, in contemporary Algeria. An androcentric society where, through various rituals of submission, exclusion, recognition and gratitude, men and women are sorted according to patterns of opposition between male and female that refer to dualities that organize the world: high/low, dry/wet, hard/soft, outside/inside, above/below, day/night, light/dark, active/passive, sun/moon, fire/water. The structures of sexual division somehow precede the economic ones, organizing the world, time, space, body, movements. The differentiation of male and female genders is thus an arbitrary social construction, constantly pursued through the reproduction of thought patterns and practical action that oppose the masculine to the feminine. Thus “(t)he social world constructs the body as a sexually defined reality and as the depository of sexually defining principles of vision and division. This embodied social programme of perception is applied to all the things of the world, and firstly to the *body* itself, in its biological reality. It is this programme which constructs difference between the biological sexes in conformity with the principles of a mythical vision rooted in the arbitrary relationship of domination of men over women, itself inscribed, with the division of labour, in the reality of the social order” (Bourdieu, 2001: 11).

Certainly, Bourdieu acknowledges that in contemporary Western societies the very fact that male dominance has been put on the table has partially alleviated its naturalizing force. And yet, awareness is not enough, since it is through the unreflective process of embodiment that passes through fundamental

institutions such as the school and the state, but also the division of social work and the daily routine of interaction, that male domination is substantiated. A domination that passes also and above all through the particular relationship that women have with their own bodies: “(e)verything”, writes Bourdieu, “in the genesis of the female habitus and in the social conditions of its actualization combines to make the female experience of the body the limiting case of the universal experience of the body-for-others, constantly exposed to the objectification performed by the gaze and the discourse of others” (Bourdieu, 2001: 63). As a form of symbolic power, in short, male domination operates through the desires, wills, aspirations, emotions, classifications and minute bodily practices of women themselves. And coming out of such practices requires a continuous work of problematization, as women often find themselves confronted with a contradiction: “if they behave as men, they risk losing the obligatory attributes of ‘femininity’ and call into question the natural right of males to the position of power; if they behave as women, they seem incapable and unfit for the job” (Bourdieu, 2001: 67-8). And so, the gendered body, the embodied connotations of masculinity and femininity, become a fundamental terrain of politics, and around this politics the boundaries of the natural and the artificial, of the normal and the deviant, also come to be constituted.

Concluding remarks

The embodiment of gender differences is, as suggested, an uninterrupted process that naturalizes sexual difference, fixing it still often as inequality (i.e., according to hierarchical views that super-ordinate the masculine over the feminine). Power and bodies are therefore intimately related and body politics is a fundamental dimension of our societies (Sasstelli, 2012). In this light, feminism has stopped seeing gender as the cultural representation of a biological dichotomy between male and female; it prefers the view of a social process producing sexual categorization and embodiment, including our perception that there are two distinct, different, and complementary sexes. Thus, difference is implanted in the body by a social process of embodiment that Guillaumin (2006) has called “sexuation”. Guillaumin takes a constructivist position, but her constructivism is firmly anchored in the ‘material’ nature of our experience: the body becomes a sexuated construct via the differing management of time and space available to male and female bodies. Sexuation, in this view, is a social process of physical differentiation that situates people

via their bodies, dividing them into sex categories, male and female. It is, in short, the inevitable “forming of a body so as to fit correctly into society as a woman’s body or a man’s body” (Guillaumin, 2006: 318). Thus, sexuation, the fabrication of gendered bodies, is a long-term operation beginning very early on, with something new added at each stage. It is a steady process, constantly deciding what is appropriate for a woman’s body and what for a man’s. Guillaumin argues that sexuation happens along three dimensions. First, “direct” intervention upon the body, including techniques to modify it, fashion, distribution of food and checking up on respective sizes, all differing according to the sex. Second, what is called “the body for oneself”, that is practices and discourses of body management with special attention to a range of situations that train the body to handle its own physical space, posture, mobility, use of utensils and objects, tone of voice, etc. Lastly, embodiment as sexuation proceeds along the axis of “the body for others”. This includes handling the proximity between men and women, ways of being reciprocally male/female, and acting as a couple. It is precisely this process of mutual constitution of gendered bodies that we have come to think is at the foundation of the gender differences which are commanded by the gender order. And, today, it is also a process that is the subject of numerous claims - feminist but not only - that reflect an awareness of the arbitrariness of the many fine lines that separate the masculine from the feminine and vice versa, increasingly pointing to the relevance of gendered embodiment to understand today’s reality.

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