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TAKE THREE: THE MODERN AMERICAN BODY

The Late Capitalist Physique

Sarah Schrank

A well-formed body has been a marker of success in the United States since the turn of the last century, when middle-class urbanites grew fascinated with the upkeep, cleansing, and general fitness of their bodies, ascribing attributes of character development and health to new physical culture routines and diet fads. Body-building, weight loss, and cosmetic use became habits of a status-seeking social class at a time when physical appearance became more important given the anonymity, physical mobility, and enhanced visuality that characterized daily life in modern industrial cities.[1] In *Physical Culture*, tabloid publisher Bernarr Macfadden's magazine dedicated to corporeal upkeep, advertisements for elocution and posture lessons ran alongside fitness regimens and mail order forms for new products like mouthwash and hair cream.[2] For the native-born middle-class aspirant, or the newly arrived immigrant, the message was clear: how you looked, sounded, moved, and smelled on the outside was far more important than anything happening on the inside. In the city, no one knew who you were so the impression you made on the senses, and especially how you appeared and carried yourself, *mattered*. Fitness became fetishized, ironically, just as the industrializing economy relied less and less upon feats of human strength.

Indeed, at the same time that middle-class Americans placed increased value on physically fit bodies, the circumstances of industrial capitalism made achieving such health and corporeal perfection that much more difficult. Medical journals reported that Americans were entering the wage labor force at younger and younger ages, making it challenging to get regular exercise—a failure that resulted in underdeveloped skeletons and musculature (Figure 1). Doctors feared that modern advances like processed foods, which included the shift from whole wheat flour to refined grains and the wide availability of canned food, would lead to malnutrition. Medical experts and health faddists alike demonized the stimulants sugar and caffeine for undermining American fitness pursuits, encouraging weight gain, and inefficiently burning energy.[3] A lack of sunshine, however, proved the biggest concern of all. With the working classes toiling in factories and sweatshops and the middle classes cloistered in offices, medical leaders and Progressive reformers worried that cities were themselves anathema to robust healthy bodies because they blocked access to the sun. Following the Swiss doctor Auguste Rollier's pioneering research

[1]On the transformation of turn-of-the-century American culture and its role in reshaping of body norms and rituals see, for example, T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920* (1981; Chicago, 1994); John Kasson, *Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man: The White Male Body and the Challenge of Modernity in America* (New York, 2002); Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford, CA, 1991); Harvey Green, *Fit for America: Health, Fitness, Sport and American Society* (New York, 1986); Peter Stearns, *Fat History: Bodies and Beauty in the Modern West* (New York, 2002); and Carolyn Thomas De La Peña, *The Body Electric: How Strange Machines Built the Modern American* (New York, 2003).

[2]On Macfadden and the connections between physical fitness and character development, see R. Marie Griffith, *Born Again Bodies: Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity* (Berkeley, CA, 2004).

[3]For examples, see S. A. Knopf, "Dress Reform and its Relation to Medicine," *Southern California Practitioner* 4, no. 8 (Aug. 1889): 345–9; Bernarr Macfadden, "Developing a Powerful Physique: The Science of Physcultism," *Physical Culture* 22, no. 3 (Sept. 1909): 197, 238; Philip M. Lovell, "Care of the Body," *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 20, 1927, K26–31; and Jonathan Kauffman, *Hippie Food: How Back-to-the-Landers, Longhairs, and Revolutionaries Changed the Way We Eat* (New York, 2018), 23–4.

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Figure 1. To counteract hours spent in indoor offices, federal government workers lift weights during break time. Washington, DC, 1920. National Photo Company Collection (Library of Congress).

into the healing effects of sun exposure for the treatment of tuberculosis, rickets, and other wasting illnesses, American health professionals began to encourage public access to beaches and parks and the sporting of sun tans as indicators that the body was working properly.[4]

By the 1930s—as more and more Americans began to regard urban industrial life, with its toxic air, dark dwellings and workspaces, and enhanced objectification of the body, as anxiety-provoking and potentially deadly—some Americans started to experiment with social nudity. Those who did saw it as a way to forge a healthy physical experience outside the surveillance and judgments of modern capitalism, to return the body to a state of nature, and to reclaim it from the sexualization of Hollywood films, burlesque, and nudie shows. Beginning in upstate New York in 1929 and then spreading westward to California, nudists adopted elements of German *Lebensreform*, a nineteenth-century philosophy in which exercise, unprocessed food, living out-of-doors, and lots of sun exposure promised to restore the body to a natural state and challenge its commercial objectification. Not only would nudism make the body healthier by absorbing vitamin D and fresh air, it would undo class and gender distinctions, promote wholesome family togetherness, and break down uptight sexual mores.[5] The problem, of

[4]On Rollier's sun therapies and the 1927 medical identification of sunshine as a source of vitamin D, see John Stanislav Sadar, "Material Heliotechnics: A Tale of Two Bodies," in *Healing Spaces, Modern Architecture and the Body*, eds. Sarah Schrank and Didem Ekici (London, 2017), 65–84. For a discussion of the relationship between early twentieth-century urban reform and concerns about middle-class access to the sun, see Sarah Schrank, *Free and Natural: Naked Living and the American Cult of the Body* (Philadelphia, forthcoming 2019).

[5]See Michael Hau, *The Cult of Health and Beauty in Germany: A Social History, 1890–1930* (Chicago, 2003); Chad Ross, *Naked Germany: Health, Race, and the Nation* (Oxford, UK, 2005); John Alexander Williams, *Turning to Nature in Germany: Hiking, Nudism, and Conservation, 1900–1940* (Stanford, CA, 2007); and Brian Hoffman, *Naked: A Cultural History of American Nudism* (New York, 2015).

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Figure 2. Texas Instruments employees jog at the behest of a company-sponsored program in 1971. Photo by Bill Ray/The LIFE Picture Collection/Getty Images.

course, was that most Americans did not see the naked body as natural and, in fact, found the whole concept of social nudity altogether unnatural.

If social nudity presented one response to the effects of urban industrial capitalism on the body, health panics offered another. Different from terrified reactions to deadly epidemics like the Spanish flu or polio, during which public fear made sense given the lack of cures and catastrophic death tolls, health panics represented a performative social anxiety that, during times of rapid change and uncertainty, pathologized the bodies of certain segments of society as both physically and morally sick. From late-nineteenth-century concerns about female hysteria, when white middle-class women could be institutionalized or subjected to hysterectomies if deemed depressed or too sexual for their own good, to the male cardiac crisis of the Cold War, when white-collar workers were pushed to trade in their gray flannel suits and cocktails for workout clothes and running shoes, health panics have singled out certain bodies as poorly behaved, even degenerate (Figure 2). Gender, class, and race play important roles in how such anxieties unfolded and how patients were treated and judged. Treatment has often been punitive and heavy with blame, and, when the panic subsides, certain bodies simply become more acceptable than others.[6]

Industrialization had adverse consequences for workers' health, but deindustrialization and other developments in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have only made the pursuit of bodily perfection harder. Work has grown more and more sedentary. Portions have been supersized. And in this age of service industry and finance-driven late capitalism, poor people whose bodies tip the scales too far have become society's new surveillance subjects prompting derision, reality television shows, and soda taxes; meanwhile, employers encourage overweight middle-class Americans to wear FitBits and join exercise programs to reduce their

[6]For instance, see Laura Briggs, "The Race of Hysteria: 'Overcivilization' and the 'Savage' Woman in Late Nineteenth-Century Obstetrics and Gynecology," *American Quarterly* 52, no. 2 (June 2000): 246–73; Shelly McKenzie, *Getting Physical: The Rise of Fitness Culture in America* (Lawrence, KS, 2013); and Barbara Ehrenreich, *Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (New York, 1983).

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size and potential cost to insurers. Anti-smoking campaigns echo obesity warnings with even more finger-wagging. Workplaces not only ban smoking, but, as Carl Cederström and André Spicer argue, increasingly ban smokers, whether or not their smoking occurs anywhere near their colleagues.[7] The more unstable their world feels, the more Americans try to exert control over embodied behavior to steady themselves and, in the process, regulate their society's body politic.

A healthy body is not an objective state; rather, it is deeply subjective and increasingly framed as a commodity that can be purchased with the right fitness program, diet, and insurance. Not to have one is to have behaved badly and made improper choices. Into this mix comes "wellness," both a smorgasbord of therapeutic offerings like meditation, yoga, raw foods, life coaching, and Reiki energy healing, and a state of being leading not only to a healthy body but also to a peaceful mind alleviated of crippling angst. To achieve wellness is no joke. It takes work, discipline, and ritual to become a regular practitioner and reap the rewards of lower stress levels and above-average happiness promised by study after study and touted by the media. It is possible to practice wellness outside of the consumer marketplace, but most followers partake in some way of the billion-dollar wellness industry. Thoroughly ensconced within neoliberalism's individualistic commodification of health and body, wellness's obvious benefits remain generally available only to those with enough time and disposable income to spend on myriad therapeutic modalities. Like so much of contemporary body culture, it is symptomatic of the shift in health from the public to the private sector, such that without the educational and financial means, "wellness" remains out of reach for most people.

The pursuit of beauty—another often elusive and expensive goal—dovetails with this dogged quest for wellness, health, and fitness. In a socioeconomic system that privileges unattainable beauty norms—indeed, fetishizes them in both the sexual and Marxist senses of the term—achieving appropriate skin luminescence and fashionable style, to go along with appropriate thinness and muscle tone, can become a resource-intensive, time-occupying, and often obsessive quest, but one that rewards those who achieve it, no matter how fleetingly, with suitors, attention, and social status. Attractiveness, of course, has also been tightly intertwined with sexuality, but achieving the appropriate degree of "hotness" may be futile for aging adults and dangerous for children and teenagers, when desirability outpaces desire, leaving both girls and boys confused, alienated from their bodies, and vulnerable to assault and rape.[8] A cottage industry of feminist publications, online media platforms, and organizations now seeks to respond to the anxiety, grief, and desperation women especially experience when their bodies fail to measure up. The Yoga and Body Image Coalition, whose catchphrase is "This Is What a Yoga Body Looks Like," celebrates physiques of differing size and color. The Australian filmmaker Taryn Brumfitt's Body Image Movement challenges the injurious practice of photoshopping in advertising, and Gloria Lucas's Nalgona Positivity Pride forwards a body acceptance movement specifically for women of color who not only confront the gender, class, and sexuality prejudices of body objectification, but those of race as well.

Aspiring to have a desirable body is important, but putting in *too* much effort can also backfire, leading one to be labeled "obsessive," "disordered," or "vain." The pressures not only to look a certain way but to do so effortlessly, indeed *naturally*, have proliferated since the turn of the twenty-first century. Peruse any fashion magazine, style catalog, or health and fitness blog, and one is confronted with vast numbers of products that promise to make customers look natural and even confident enough to "bare it all." Indeed, commodities as far-ranging as vegetable juice to eyeshadow are marketed as Naked®, meaning, one presumes, that they will keep buyers clean, honest, and sexy. Meanwhile, the Whole Foods postindustrial complex of organic, locally sourced, hand-crafted, raw, recycled, and unbleached edible goods claims to

[7]Carl Cederström and André Spicer, *The Wellness Syndrome* (Cambridge, UK, 2015), 26–9.
[8]Peggy Orenstein, *Girls and Sex: Navigating the Complicated New Landscape* (New York, 2016).

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produce such naturalness from the inside out. The very health practices that nudists and others originally developed as alternatives to the industrial capitalist marketplace have now become essential parts of a robust consumer economy.

The body under late capitalism is the perfect commodity. It focuses attention on individual needs and deflects attention away from collectivity; it constantly changes and thus demands never-ending care and upkeep; it is ever-present and inescapable; and it generates enough anxiety to fuel the purchase of an infinite number of products and services. The more unsteady the economy and world feels, the more we try to mold our bodies into shapes and states of being that will bring us a sense of grounded stability, indeed "wellness," and yet our body's fundamental impermanence is one of the only absolute truths that we, as human beings, have.

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