

Missing Bodies: Visibility and Invisibility in the Bourgeois Public Sphere

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Introduction

One of the great strengths of Jurgen Habermas's seminal work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, was that it sought to provide an historically grounded account of the public sphere in relation to the rise of liberal capitalist societies. Habermas's analysis drew attention to the existence of a 'fourth sphere' alongside the family, economy, the state. The concept of the public sphere has retained its currency in contemporary debates surrounding citizenship and identity. Indeed, the explosion of myriad new forms of 'publicity,' has forced a redefinition of "the spatial, territorial, and geopolitical parameters of the public sphere (Hansen 1993:183) ."

The classical bourgeois public sphere, as Nancy Fraser has argued, was essentially masculine; it implicitly assumed the bourgeois male as the 'universal class'. Its presupposition, in other words, was the exclusion of women, the working class, and any others who did not correspond to this masculinist ideal. But, while many have criticized its exclusions and silences, few have traced the abstract generality of the public sphere to the 'deep structures' of capitalism itself or asked why it is that under specifically capitalist conditions individuals relate to one another "immediately, as 'abstract' human beings (Zizek 2000:104)." And yet, the point of Marx's critique of commodity fetishism was to show how the structure of commodity exchange masks the separation and appropriation of the concrete, embodied, labours of individuals by capital by transforming them into abstract, mediated, forms of commodities, money, and capital. Not only, as Marx observed, do definite social relations assume "the fantastic form of a relation between

things (Marx 1978: 165).” Human relations *in general* assume an abstract form; concrete relations between individuals become subsumed under abstract-universal notions.¹

This paper explores the salience of this structural logic of abstraction for an understanding of the contemporary public sphere. The abstracting logic of the commodity form, I argue, involves a singular dialectic of embodiment and disembodiment in which certain types of bodies become socially visible while others remain largely invisible.² Visibility and invisibility is ultimately determined by where one stands in the chain of social relations linking the sphere of production and the public sphere. In the bourgeois public sphere, those who do not conform to the ‘unmarked identity’ of the bourgeois male enter the public sphere at the cost of shedding their concrete, embodied, identities. Full embodiment remains a privilege only for the ‘unmarked’ bourgeois male. In contrast, within the productive sphere, labouring bodies, in all their gendered and racialized concreteness, are radically present, while the body of the capitalist disappears from view. In the latter, ‘Capital,’ not any particular corporeal capitalist, becomes the embodiment of an abstract valorization process.

¹ As Slavoj Žižek points out, in precapitalist societies it would have made no sense to describe the labours of peasant producers as that of a “professional” peasantry. For more on the relationship of capitalism, money, and abstract concepts of rights and citizenship see, Mooers 2001.

²I do not have in mind here the issue of ‘visible minorities’. However, as I hope to show, the abstractness of this notion in official government parlance in countries like Canada, which seems to have invented the term, has much to do with its disconnection from the way in which such identities are actually lived in class societies (Bannerji 2000).

Dialectics of Embodiment in the Logic of Capital

It was Marx's fundamental insight that human identity lies in our capacity as makers and creators of material and cultural artifacts. It is through such acts that human beings achieve what might be called positive disembodiment; we project ourselves, our bodies, into the artifact. It is through the creation of shareable material, cultural, and linguistic artifacts that human sentience becomes social, in which private experience becomes objectified and accessible to others. Thus, a certain kind of reification is essential to our self-definition as against the natural world and the world of others. Our "species life" as Marx termed it, is a rich tapestry of embodied, sensual, expressive, and emotional experience which, because it is socially shared, also means that the body itself becomes an artifact and is remade in the process of remaking the world (Scarry 1987: 251). Artifice is, therefore, also an historical process: depending on the type of social and political institutions which exist, 'making' can just as easily result in 'unmaking'. If the goal of artifice involves a modulated reciprocity between the projection of our bodies into the world and our own remaking, then thwarting this relation is equivalent to the denial of the human striving for positive forms of disembodiment. This is precisely what the concept of 'alienated labour' implies: the remaking of the self which results from artifice is interrupted by an act of appropriation which prevents the object (and its successive forms as commodity-money-capital) from ever referring back to its maker. Disembodiment and all that this implies for human self-

transformation, is only ever fully enjoyed by that small group who own or control the fruits of others' labour. Thus, capitalism rests on a fundamental "dislocation in the structure of artifice" such that,

projection of the worker's body into artifice does not carry with it its implicit counterpart of recreating his body into an artifact.. If the double consequence of making were intact, then his own alterations in the material world would be accompanied by alterations in himself in the direction of disembodiment; instead, his unreciprocated labor of projection heightens and intensifies the problems of sentience (Scarry 1987: 266-67).

The pages of *Capital* are replete with accounts of concrete acts of labour by a myriad of different types of workers.³ Workers bodies are immediately and sentiently present in the sphere of production. Marx often spends pages meticulously describing the bodily movements of workers as they pass through various phases of the labour process. The sentient world of workers remains visible and immediate in these descriptions. But, however present and palpable the connection between the embodied producer and the disembodied artifact is at the point of production, this bond is soon broken by capitalist appropriation. Acts of concrete human labour become increasingly opaque as they are translated into homogenous, exchangeable quantities of abstract social labour. The transformation of concrete into abstract social labour involves,

³ As Elaine Scarry observes: "... the pages of *Capital*, like the nineteenth-century world *Capital* describes contain, not just workers and laborers but makers, miners, growers, and gatherers; and not just these but more specifically, nail-makers, needle-makers, brick-makers, brick-layers, coals-miners, straw-plaiter, lace-makers, linen-makers, match-makers, silk-weavers, shirt makers, dress makers, iron workers, glass-bottle makers, steel-pen makers, wheat growers, corn millers, watch makers, wall builders, wallpaper makers." (266). Although most of these occupations have disappeared, we could, without much difficulty, come up with our own contemporary list.

therefore, the complete alienation of the concrete, embodied, personality of the worker. What the worker creates through the dis-embodiment process of labour, now comes back to dominate the worker as so much 'dead labour' under the control of capital. "The language of commodities – like all languages for Marx – is a language of bodies. But capitalism abstracts from these bodies, from the specific use-values and the laboring bodies which produce them (McNally 2001:69)."

Abstraction from the concrete labouring bodies involves a profound form of forgetting or repression which lay at the heart of Marx's conception of commodity fetishism. We forget that the commodities we consume are connected with the labour of others and we conflate the value of the commodity with the material characteristics of the object. Over time, Marx asserts, this inversion of things and social relations becomes naturalized or reified. This was (and remains) the standpoint of bourgeois political economy which "has never once asked the question why labour is represented by the value of its product and labour-time by the magnitude of that value... such formulae appear to the bourgeois intellect to be as much a self-evident necessity imposed by Nature as productive labour itself (Marx 1978: 174)." As the commodification of labour power and exchange spreads, all social relations become increasingly opaque. For Georg Lukacs, reification consisted precisely in the naturalization of the commodity form which "seems to penetrate the very depths of man's physical and psychic nature (Lukacs 1971:101)." The commodified worker's "fate is typical of society as a whole in that this self-objectification, this transformation of a human function into a commodity reveals in all its starkness the

dehumanized and dehumanizing function of the commodity relation (Luckacs 1971:92)".

Reification thus involves not only the cognitive misrecognition of social reality but also an impairment of corporeal memory, a systematic forgetting of bodily labours.

If workers' bodies are radically present in the sphere of production, capitalist bodies are almost wholly absent. When Marx does speak of capitalists, he almost never refers to them as an immediate presence but rather as the "personification" or as the "incarnation" of capital. Marx is not denying the physical actuality of the capitalist, but is rather highlighting the fact that in the capitalist production process the capitalist only becomes what he is through the appropriation of the concrete labours of others. The capitalist, as such, adds nothing to capital; capital *is* the abstracted labour of the direct producer. "Capital has no logic independent of labour's social practice (Bonfeld 1995:201)". Capital is thus, neither an 'automatic subject,' a thing capable of self-expansion, nor is it a projection of the capitalist's own bodily labours:

Capital. It is colossal. It is magnificent. And it is the capitalist's body. It is his body not because it has come into being through the solitary projection of his own bodily labor, but rather because it bestows its reciprocation power on him, relieving his sentience, acting as his surrogate. He "owns" it – which is to say he exists in such a relation to it that it substitutes for himself in his interactions with the wider world of person...(Scarry 1987: 264).

In the movement from the concrete to abstract labour, the body of the worker disappears, as it passes from artifact to commodity, to money, to surplus-value, to accumulated capital.

"Capital absorbs labour into itself" as Marx observes, quoting Goethe, "as though its body were by love possessed (Marx quoted in Chakrabarty 2000: 5)." And it is this abstracting movement

which, as we shall see, underpins the bodily exclusions of the bourgeois public sphere. The bourgeois body, on the other hand, is almost wholly cleansed of any association with the degrading world of labour. Not only do bourgeois bodies not labour, they are largely lacking in any of the usual markers of biological being:

The bourgeois body is a sanitized, heroic male body of rational (nonbiological) creatures; it does not break under the strain of routinized work; it does not menstruate, lactate, or go into labor; it does not feel the lash of the master's whip; it does not suffer and die. The bourgeois body is, in short, an idealist abstraction. (McNally 2001:5)⁴

The same idealist abstraction, as will become clear below, informs the Habermasian ideal of the bourgeois public sphere.

Phantom Bodies and the Public Sphere

In his original formulation Habermas depicted the bourgeois public sphere as an arena of sober and rational-critical discourse which arose with ascendancy of eighteenth century capitalism. Its classic venues were the coffee houses and salons, debating societies, political clubs and professional associations established by men of commerce, lawyers and journalists and other

⁴ In the Western philosophical imaginary male and female have long been associated respectively with culture and nature. Moreover, images of conception, birth, and parenthood are conceived in terms of “a father who is not embodied, who cannot love but only legislates from some abstract position, and a mother who is nothing but body, who can fulfill animal needs but cannot love as a social human being.” (Oliver 1997:3). Historically, class, race and gender have formed an intricate three-dimensional hierarchy of bodily exclusions. With the rise of what Anne McClintock has called “commodity imperialism” in the nineteenth century, the “rhetoric of race was used to invent distinctions between what we would now call *classes*...the rhetoric of *gender* was used to make increasingly refined distinctions among different *races*. The white race was figured as the male of the species and the black race as the female. Similarly, the rhetoric of *class* was used to inscribe minute and subtle distinctions between other *races* (McClintock 1995:54-55).”

middle-class urban professionals. For Habermas, the idea of a reasoning public, in which differences of class and other social markers were bracketed, was the cornerstone of political democracy. The modern phenomena of publicity and public opinion formation, concomitants of a free press, voluntary associations, autonomous assemblies and independent political parties, were all forged during this period. It was against this wider backdrop that the modern democratic political institutions of bourgeois society emerged. Although, it was largely populated by independent property owners and its foundations rested on the 'self-regulating market' of civil society, the public sphere was reducible to neither. The public sphere sat midway between the private realms of commodity exchange and the family on the one hand, and the institutions of state power on the other.

The decline of this golden era of the bourgeois public sphere occurs, paradoxically for Habermas, with the rise of mass democracy toward the end of the nineteenth century. The rise of new social actors demanding inclusion in the political nation produced public sphere based on a social compromise between the contending classes. This social compromise reached its apogee in the mid-twentieth century with the rise of the welfare-state, a process which Habermas terms the 'refeudalization' of the public sphere in which private and public interests become re-entwined as they had been under the absolutist states of *ancien regime* Europe. Thus, for Habermas, at the very moment that capitalism was subject to its greatest levels of democratization and social inclusion, the bourgeois public sphere became irretrievably

contaminated by private interests. The media corporations no longer reflected disinterested public debate but the crude ideological interests of monopoly capital; voluntary associations became the mere mouthpieces of sectional interests. In short, the material conditions which supported the classic bourgeois public sphere had evaporated.

In recent years, Habermas has repudiated the historical foundations of his earlier work. Indeed, political economy has been eclipsed by an increasing preoccupation with the cognitive foundations of communicative rationality. Communicative reason, Habermas believes, constitutes “the unconstrained, unifying, consensus-bringing force of argumentative speech, in which different participants overcome their merely subjective views, and owing to the mutuality of rationally motivated conviction, assure themselves of both the unity of the objective world and the intersubjectivity of their lifeworld.” (Habermas 1984:10). Rejecting Marx’s anthropology of human labour as the foundation upon which linguistic development takes place, Habermas has attempted to root his account of communicative reason in the purely cognitive and formal structures of language. Historical materialism, on this view, fails to properly distinguish the instrumental imperatives of money and power from the private and public realms of the ‘lifeworld’ which is the real locus of human interaction and potential emancipation (Love 1995:50). In other words, communicative reason develops according to its own imperatives and evolutionary path and should not be equated with what Habermas sees as the overly historicist and productivist bias of Marx. Following Kant, Habermas has sought to insulate the rational

foundations of reason from the vagaries of subjective, non-rational, and extra-discursive forms of understanding (Strong and Sposito 1995:269).

But, by so restricting the domain of emancipatory politics, Habermas merely confirms the separations between politics and economics which capitalism itself has put in place. The rigid typological distinction drawn between ‘system’ and ‘lifeworld’ effectively withdraws ‘system’ (economy and the state) from democratic transformation (Kellner 16). Moreover, by assuming that the productive sphere is governed by a kind of pure technical rationality, Habermas replicates Weber’s error of universalizing the specifically capitalist form of ‘instrumental rationality’ which underpins competitive accumulation. This de-socialization of the productive sphere allows Habermas to re-situate the terrain of emancipation within the narrow confines of the bourgeois public sphere. Social labour, rather than a key site of emancipatory struggle, becomes one-sidedly seen as a domain of instrumental domination:

by suggesting that emancipation is not possible in the realm of social labor, and by leaving us with a dehistoricized, ultra-cognitivist theory of language, Habermas so reduces the power of critique and so restricts the concept of emancipation that it is hard to see what sort of “utopian perspective” remains. His “emancipatory politics” involve little more than a gesture toward a non-coercive public sphere where the best argument can prevail – a classically intellectualist construction. Yet, this is the fruit of detaching language from the body, labor, eros, and history (McNally 2001:109).

Habermas’s hyper-rationalist approach highlights a problem already evident in his earlier work, namely, a failure to deal with issues of identity and difference or what might more generally be termed, issues of concrete embodiment. As Joan Alway observes, human beings

appear to have “no body, no feelings; the ‘structure of personality’ is identified with cognition, language and interaction... The impulsive, nonrational, and sensuous aspects of being...have disappeared (Alway 1995:109). The deracinated ideal-typical body which comes to dominate the public sphere, not surprisingly, is that of the bourgeois male. The male body itself is present only in the sense that it has become a repository for abstract authority, property, and law. A “virile subject” (Oliver 1997:119) modelled on the bourgeois ideal of the possessive individual becomes secreted within the notion of an abstract public free of all other markers of bodily identity. Notions of citizenship have been patterned on the same set of assumptions: those who are deemed to have control over their bodies become full citizens, whereas those who are ruled by their bodies become lesser citizens (Bacchi and Beasley 2002:) As Michael Warner has observed:

The bourgeois public sphere is a frame of reference in which it is supposed that all particularities have the same status of mere particularity... The bourgeois public sphere has been structured from the outset by a logic of abstraction that provides a privilege for unmarked identities: the male, the white, the middle-class, the normal. (Warner 1996:383).

Those whose embodied identities cannot find expression in officially sanctioned forms of public embodiment must seek it elsewhere. Historically, working class men and (and some bourgeois) women contested these exclusions through the formation of their own “subaltern counterpublics.” (Fraser 1996:123; see also, Eley 1996). Counterpublic spheres are spaces in which alternative forms of body politics or “surplus corporeality” (Berlant 1993:178) may be expressed. It is here that the affective and expressive aspects of embodiment are most evident:

where alternative sexualities can be explored, where what is ‘really felt’ can be voiced, where counter-strategies can be planned. These “free spaces” (Emirbayer and Sheller 1998:732) often have an underground, semi-public quality to them, relying on “hidden transcripts” which run parallel to and counter to the official public transcript (Scott 1990:5). In other words, to speak of a single, all embracing public sphere underplays the essentially contested, unstable and multiple and contradictory nature of the public sphere(s) (Hansen 1993:189). Habermas himself now concedes that his earlier account was too pessimistic about the potential for a plurality of counterpublics to challenge the official public sphere (Habermas 1996:438).

This proliferation of new forms of ‘publicity’, however, should not be read as a straightforward enrichment of public life. New economies of desire linked to new forms of identity have indeed flourished, but these changes have unfolded not according to some separate social logic but hand in hand with the expansion of capitalist commodification. As Ellen Wood observes: “social identities seem much more ‘open’ in this sense. So the separateness of the economy may appear to give a wider scope, a freer hand in the world outside it... But, in fact, the economy of capitalism has encroached upon and narrowed the extra-economic domain.” (Wood 1995:280). Capitalism constitutes the condition of possibility for emergence and expansion of contemporary forms of identity. As Rosemary Hennessy argues, “more flexible gender codes and performative sexual identities are quite compatible with the mobility, adaptability, and

ambivalence required of service workers today and with the new more fluid forms of the commodity (Hennessey 2000: 109).”

Indeed, the solace of commodity consumption has been perhaps the most common way of coping with the problem of bodily exclusion and the desire for positive forms of disembodiment. For those who have been excluded from the public sphere because of their race, gender or class, commodity consumption has served as a means both for escaping the pain of embodiment through immersion in the reified fantasies of fashion and mass-mediated culture and the desire for self-abstraction. Historically, “minoritized subjects have few strategies open to them, but one was to carry their unrecuperated positivity into consumption....commodities were being used – especially by women – as a kind of access to publicness that would nevertheless link up with the specificity of difference (Warner 1993: 241).”

However, access to publicity through commodity consumption was and continues to be (literally) purchased at a steep price. Commodity consumption, as Walter Benjamin recognized, expresses our vestigial yearning for happiness, a promise which the commodity, like some elusive lover, leaves forever unrequited. The world of fashion, along with myriad other forms of distraction afforded by the ‘culture industries,’ not only ask us to forget the acts of human labour that go into their production, they also invite us to satisfy our affective longings and bodily desires through repeated acts of consumption. “From time immemorial” remarks Benjamin in *The Arcades Project*, “this enigmatic need for sensation has found satisfaction in fashion

(Benjamin 1999:65).” The commodities of the culture industries have, as Adorno remarked, “become commodities through and through (Adorno 1996:86).” Exchange-value and not the thing itself now becomes the object of pleasure. Commodities appear to offer unmediated gratification and their consumption actually *feels* good. Yet, this sense of somatic and affective immediacy is an illusion:

The feelings which go to the exchange value create the appearance of immediacy at the same time as the absence of a relation to the object belies it. It has its basis in the abstract character of exchange value. Every ‘psychological’ aspect, every ersatz satisfaction, depends on such social substitution (Adorno 1996: 34)

If every commodity becomes a potential repository of pleasure, then no single commodity can sustain its affective charge for very long. Mass production and display undercut the commodity’s supposedly unique character. The promise of uniqueness blends into a monochromatic sameness. Thus, the promise of public embodiment through consumption turns out to be illusory and escape from the pain racialized and gendered bodies equally so.⁵

Both strategies for recuperating embodied forms of publicity are inherently limited so long as capitalism goes unchallenged. While counterpublic spheres open up some space for

⁵ For those who are consigned to public invisibility, what is seen and how it is seen, often takes on a phantasmic form. The sources of their misery are not immediately present or transparent but seem to haunt them as half-conscious suspicions that things are ‘not quite right’. These inchoate fears, traumas, and suspicions, Kathleen Stewart argues, “voice a warning or an announcement, in which those most vulnerable track the latent horrors of class exploitation, racism and sexism half-buried beneath the surface of the floating dream world.” (Stewart 2000:255) As certain bodies disappear into the shadows, is it any wonder that such fears and fantasies should grip the imagination of those whose labours come back to haunt them in the guise of increasingly elusive forms of global capital; or that those whose lives remain in the shadows should suspect conspiracies lurking somewhere behind the facade of a public sphere which conceals class inequality beneath a veil of apparent equality.

expressions of concrete embodiment, their success paradoxically depends on them remaining in some sense subordinate and oppositional. The closer they come to acceptance within the ambit of the bourgeois public sphere, the greater the dangers of cooptation. Recognition and inclusion more often than not means adapting to existing structures and practices with only most superficial markers of difference being addressed.⁶¹ At a deeper level, public embodiment requires a suppression of actual personhood in favour of a merging with the artificial person of the nation: in return for loyalty, the state ‘protects’ the local body (Berlant 1993:176). In important respects, commodity consumption and the public sphere have collapsed into one another. The affective qualities of commodity consumption have become replicated in the “prophylaxis” of the disembodied, abstract citizen. Indeed, as Lauren Belant argues, “in modern America, the artificial legitimacy of the citizen has merged with the commodity form: its autonomy, its phantasmic freedom from its own history, seem to invest it with the power to transmit its aura, its “body” to consumers (Berlant 1993: 200).” In other words, the contemporary public sphere, no less than its classical bourgeois precursor, continues to deny the

⁶ For example, many of the movements inspired by identity politics in the United States, have become prisoners of what Berlant terms a politics of “national sentimentality” in which the scars of oppression are assuaged through the ritual acknowledgment of shared pain. For the American public, the state and its constitutional apparatus has become the main vehicle for repairing the hidden pain of racism and class exploitation. The absence of social pain has become the very definition of freedom. The cultural landscape has become littered with confessional television programming in which individuals ‘share their pain’ and politicians conduct ceremonials of national feeling and healing. The politics of personal pain has become the bread and butter of identity politics. This compromise with national sentimentality, Berlant argues, has resulted in identity politics becoming hostage to a legal and constitutional framework which recognizes only certain forms of suffering as legitimate (Berlant 2000).

body precisely because it is so deeply imbued with the logic of abstraction peculiar to commodity capitalism.

The disembodied logic of abstraction has arguably now become so ubiquitous that even those whose job it is to expose its reified forms have fallen victims to its norms. As Timothy Bewes argues, the “anxiety towards reification” which characterizes so much contemporary social theory, “is *itself reifying* (Bewes 2002: xiv).” While theory worries over the reification of social experience through mass-mediation, it retains the animating myth that ‘concrete’ experience remains somehow immune to reification. And yet, concrete communicative practices have become just as imbued with the logic of abstraction. Contemporary capitalism now produces forms of consciousness and culture which circulate in a variety of text-mediated forms. Text-based media, in the form of reading, writing, viewing, operating, etc., have become incorporated into daily experience as complex sets of beliefs, theories, concepts, ideas and ideologies. As Dorothy Smith observes, it is “the peculiar property of abstraction” of these media which gives to concrete experience its ‘out of body’ character (Smith 1999: 79-80). Just as the forcible abstraction of labour power reduces all concrete forms of labour to abstract, homogenous social labour, so also is there a tendency to absorb and reduce concrete forms of communication to digitized bytes.

Today... the incorporation of a variety of informational flows and interaction into production is imposing a similar “abstraction” on the concrete variety of communicative practice... most readily recognized in the creation of a universal digitalized idiom into which all forms of communication can be coded and transcoded as “information” – a flow of bits and bytes that can be measured and

monitored as the stuff of workplace productivity and pay-per services (Dyer-Wtheford 1999:173; see also, Barney 2000).⁷

Cyberspace and Socialism: Bringing Back the Body

One version of postmodernism sees disembodiment as the very definition of emancipation. Indeed, for some, cyberspace has become the ultimate realm of free-floating freedom. In cyberspace subjects are no longer tied to the messy, fleshy constraints of embodiment but are free to discursively construct or performatively enact whatever social role they please. According to Poster:

[T]he written conversation creates the (imaginary) subject in the process of its production without the normal wrapping of context. It may be the case that the subject is always an imaginary one, and that the unified ego is an ideological illusion of bourgeois culture. In computer conversations, however, a kind of zero degree or empty space of the subject is structured into practice (Poster quoted in Worthington 2002: 201).

Freed from the constraints of corporeality, it might be thought, we could also free ourselves of the various forms of body discrimination expressed in racism and sexism. A cyber-public sphere could then be erected in which the anonymity of the participants encourages greater democracy through the levelling of existing hierarchies (Poster 2001: 111).

⁷ All of this is forgotten in the hip, often ironic, reflexivity of much current cultural practice which so cleverly conceals the reifying logic of abstraction. As Zizek observes, “The central paradox of postmodernity... is that the very process of production, the laying-bare of its mechanism, functions as the fetish which conceals the dimension of the forms, that is, the social *mode* of production (Zizek 1997:102). In other words, it is because the ‘concrete’ appears in the form of an abstraction, abstraction itself disappears from sight. We are living under the “reign of ‘real abstraction’ (Zizek 2000:16)” in which apparently ‘real people with their real worries’ (Bewes 2002:268) have become the main event of the new delirium.

Yet, it is not at all clear that we can dispense with body so easily or that virtuality represents quite the realm of freedom its proponents suppose it to be. First of all, it not obvious that those who participate in virtual communities are able to leave their embodied identities behind. As N. Katherine Hayles points out: “Far from being left behind when we enter cyberspace, our bodies are no less actively involved in the construction of virtuality than in the construction of real life (Hayles 2002).” In order to create the illusion of disembodiment it is necessary to draw a sharp boundary between ourselves and the computer screen and to reify the sensory and aural aspects of embodiment which make such interfaces possible. Informatic researchers view the universe in computational terms so that the fundamental character of both machines and humans is the processing of information. Human consciousness is thus just one among many possible configurations which information can take. According to this view, as informatic gurus Norbert Weiner and Hans Moravic have suggested, in the not to distant future humans will be able to ‘download’ their consciousness into computers (Latour 2002:128). The unexamined assumption at the heart of informatics is that information is immaterial and the body material: “Because information has lost its body... (it is) implied that embodiment is not essential to human being (Hayles 1999:4).” So conceived, the sedimented biological history of the human body and consciousness are seen as incidental, accidents of evolution which could be reconfigured in more sophisticated ‘posthuman’ technologies.⁸

⁸ Hayles defines the ‘posthuman’ in the following way: “the posthuman view privileges informational pattern over material instantiation, so that embodiment in a biological substrate is

The ‘posthuman’ may indeed represent the ultimate bourgeois dream of disembodiment. As in classical liberal thought, we are oddly more *in* than *of* our bodies: we ‘own’ our bodies much as we might own other forms of property which help us to get on in the world. As Hayles observes: “the erasure of embodiment is a feature common to both the liberal humanist subject and the cybernetic posthuman. Identified with the rational mind the liberal subject *possessed* a body but was not usually represented as *being* a body. Only because the body is not identified with the self is it possible to claim for the liberal subject its notorious universality, a claim that depends on erasing markers of bodily difference, including sex, race and ethnicity (Hayles 1999: 4-5). Our bodies are thus merely the first among many possible prosthetic devices at our disposal. In the posthuman fantasy world, detaching the self from the body is the perfect realization of the bourgeois-liberal subject now freed from the fleshy particularism of earthbound bodies: an abstract-universal quintessence.⁹

seen as an accident of history rather than an inevitability of life. Second, the posthuman view considers consciousness, regarded as the seat of human identity in the Western tradition long before Descartes thought he was a mind thinking, as an epiphenomenon, as an evolutionary upstart trying to claim that it is the whole show when in actuality it is only a minor sideshow. Third, the posthuman thinks of the body as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate, so that extending or replacing the body with other prostheses becomes a continuation of a process placing the body with other prostheses we all learn to manipulate. Fourth, and most important, by these and other means the posthuman view configures human being so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines. In the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot technology and human goals (Hayles 1999: 2-3).”

⁹ “When Moravic imagines “you” choosing to download yourself into a computer, thereby obtaining throughout technological mastery, the ultimate privilege of immortality, he is not abandoning the autonomous liberal subject but is expanding it into the posthuman (Hayles

Poststructuralism readied the ground for this disappearance of the body through an act of discursive abstraction. Bodies were removed from their messy material roots in space and time and transmogrified into free-floating cultural constructions. With the ease of Bishop Berkeley, postmodernism slipped from proposition that our practices and ideas about the body are culturally inscribed, to the much dodgier one that they are the *products* of social discourse *tout court*. On this view, the body is a kind of *tabula rasa* upon which we can write an infinite number of life scripts. The logical fallacies of this position have been well documented.¹⁰² What the culturalist position glosses over is that we are at once embodied creatures which have as part of makeup the reflexive capacity to reach beyond the limits of our corporeality. As embodied beings we naturally seek forms of positive disembodiment. We are both biological and social beings, somatic and symbolic animals, and it is because of these combinations that we are the kind of reflexive beings that we are: capable of remaking the world which has made us. As Terry Eagleton observes:

Because they move within a symbolic medium, and because they are of a certain material kind, our bodies have the capacity to extend themselves far beyond their sensuous limits, in what we know as culture, society or technology. It is because our entry into the symbolic order – language and all that it brings in its wake – puts some free play between ourselves and our determinants that we are those internally dislocated, non-self-identical creatures known as historical beings.

1999: 287).”

¹⁰ As Terry Eagleton observes, “Culturally speaking, death is almost limitlessly interpretable...But we still die, however, we make sense of it. Death is the limit of discourse, not a product of it (Eagleton 2000: 87).” See also, Kate Soper, *The Idea of Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) and Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2000).

History is what happens to an animal so constituted as to be able, within limits, to determine its own determinations. What is peculiar about a symbol-making creature is that it is of its nature to transcend itself (Eagleton 2000:97).”

Postmodernism collapses these distinctions so that our most basic biological and material practices become over-determined by the social and cultural. Yet, as Merleau-Ponty recognized, our first encounter with the world is mediated through the body. It is the body which both enables and limits our core, pre-social experience of the world. It is from the body that we encounter the world:

We grasp external space through our bodily situation. A “corporeal or postural schema” gives us at every moment a global, practical, and implicit notion of the relations between our body and things, of our hold on them. A system of possible movements, or “motor projects,” radiates from us to our environment. Our body is not in space like things; it inhabits or haunts space. It applies itself to space like a hand to an instrument, and when we wish to move about we do not move the body as we move an object. We transport it without instruments as is by magic since it is ours and because through it we have direct access to space. For us the body is much more than an instrument or a means; it is our expression in the world, the visible form of our intentions. Even our most secret affective movements, those most deeply tied to the humoral infrastructure, help shape our perception of things.

(Merleau-Ponty 1964: 5)

Our embodied relations with the natural world are the source of both our perception that we are objects in a world of objects and that oddly, unlike the other objects we encounter, we are self-conscious beings: “The enigma is that my body simultaneously sees and is seen. That which looks at all other things can also look at itself and recognized, in what it sees, the “other side” of its power of looking. It sees itself seeing; it touches itself touching; it is visible and sensitive to itself (Merleau-Ponty quoted in Archer 2000: 131) Consciousness emerges not, as for the

abstracted Cartesian *cogito*, from a propositional ‘I think that’ but from the embodied and practical, ‘I know how’ (Archer 2000:132). Consciousness, just like our subsequent acquisition of language are both grounded in practical action. As with consciousness, speech can be traced to bodily gesture, to the need to communicate about our negotiations with the natural and practical environment (McNally 2001:99). If language did not retain this essentially practical orientation of ‘getting things done,’ “we can venture that there would be a good deal less of it around (Archer 2000:158).”

There is thus much that takes place before we enter the discursive domain of ‘society’s conversation.’ Embodied human practice is the key mediator of, on the one hand, our interactions with the natural world which give rise to human self-consciousness and, on the other, the transition from gestural to spoken language. Human *praxis* is thus the fulcrum which enables humans to translate backward from embodied knowledge acquired from the natural order and forward to more extended and abstract forms of discursive knowledge. As Archer concludes:

the *human being* is both logically and ontologically prior to *social being*, whose subsequent properties and powers need to build upon human ones. There is therefore no direct interface between molecules and meanings, for between them stretches this hugely important middle ground of practical life in which our emerging properties and powers distance us from our biological origins and prepare us for our social becoming (Archer 2000:190)

By transforming the body into a discursive abstraction postmodernism merely replicates the mind/body dualism of an earlier time. The political consequence of this is, as Susan Bordo

observes, is an “abstract, unsituated, disembodied freedom... (which) glorifies itself only through the effacement of the material praxis of people’s lives, the normalizing power of cultural images, and the continuing social realities of dominance and subordination (Bordo 1993:275).”¹¹

Our bodies, it is true, have become increasingly imbricated with various technologies, just as our cognitive powers have been more widely distributed through their combination with information systems. These changes may open up new possibilities for resistance, where, for example, workers find themselves prosthetically entangled with technologies which could, under the right circumstances, be turned toward anti-capitalist ends (Dyer-Withford 1999:179-80). Nevertheless, we should not lose sight of the fact that emancipatory uses of cybernetic technologies takes place at the margins (and by a comparatively privileged minority) and that capital accumulation continues to be what drives the spread of information systems.

Nor should we forget that much of this technology has been developed in the service of systems of war. Modern technologies of destruction, Benjamin reminds us, have eroded the last vestiges of bodily ‘aura’. Any distance between the individual and his or her body has been obliterated; individuals are now systematically reduced to their bodies (Tester 1998: 33). Of the First World War, Benjamin writes:

¹¹ This sentiment is echoed by Terence Turner who charges Foucault for generalizing the abstracted view of the body: “For poststructuralism, the body is “the body”: an abstract, singular, intrinsically self-existing and socially unconnected, individual; the social behavior, personal identity and cultural meaning of this entity are passively determined by (disembodied) authoritative discourses of power (Turner 1994:46).”

A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile, human body (Benjamin 1973: 84).

Bodies in pain represent the apogee of human ‘unmaking.’ Shattered, war-scarred bodies are a retreat from the world of sentience and artifice into that of blind suffering; bodies in pain are incapable of ‘making’ the world through creative acts of self-extension (Scarry 1985: 61). If there was ever a constant of our species being, it is surely that of human suffering. Postmodernists who see the body only as a realm of endless self-fashioning forget how fragile and unchanging our bodies really are and the kinds of solidarities which can be built out of shared suffering:

suffering is a mightily powerful language to share in common, one in which many diverse life-forms can strike up a dialogue. It is a communality of meaning. It is a sign of how far many so-called radicals today have drifted from socialism...that for them all talk of communality is an insidious mystification. They do not seem to have noticed that difference, diversity and destabilization are the *dernier cri* of the transnational corporations. But a community of suffering is not the same thing as team spirit, chauvinism, homogeneity, or organic unity or despotically normative consensus. For such a community, injury, division and antagonism are the currency you share in common (Eagleton 2003: xvi).

This returns us to the issue of what we mean by *embodied* freedom. If it is constitutive of our species-being to mobilize our powers and capacities in order to remake ourselves and the world, we at least have the beginnings of an ethics of human freedom which begins from what we are as opposed to starting from some more abstract, deontological principles.¹² We can insist,

¹² It is entirely possible, of course, that our human capacity to remake ourselves and the world could be, and for a good deal of human history has been, destructive of human potential rather than promoting positive forms of self and social development. Which is to say that a

with Marx, that human freedom is about the kind of self-making that is achieved through labour and the self-mediated return of human artifacts to their producers. The ‘dislocation in the structure of artifice’ entailed in commodity production makes self-mediation impossible. Instead, concrete labour is mediated through the alien ‘abstract universal’ of money. As capital, the congealed past labours of the worker return to dominate them as so much ‘dead labour.’

What are the implications of this for the public sphere? Throughout our discussion we have insisted that the logic of abstraction which leads to the disappearance of concrete bodies in the public sphere derives from a dialectics of embodiment and disembodiment rooted in the deep-structures of capitalism. As Adorno might have said, the capitalist dialectic of embodiment/disembodiment represents ‘the torn halves of a freedom to which they do not add up’. The precondition of the disembodied bourgeois subject is the unmediated artifice of concrete labouring bodies. The bourgeois-male domination of the public sphere is therefore unlikely to be dismissed through either the discursive flourishes or cybernetic fantasies of

purely naturalistic ethics is inadequate. A properly socialist ethics hovers somewhere between the ‘facts’ of our human nature and the more abstract, universal ‘values’ to which we aspire. As Eagleton observes:

Liberal morality holds that what allows us to discriminate between those capacities we should actualize and those we should not is whether my exercise of such self realization will limit or damage yours. Socialist thought accepts this doctrine as far as it goes, but presses it further by introducing a notion... of reciprocity. We may realize those historically bred powers and capacities which do not obstruct the self-realization of others, but also, above all, those capacities which provide the very ground and possibility of others’ self-realization, in common reciprocal enhancement. It is this, surely, which the *Communist Manifesto* has in mind when it speaks of the free development of each being the condition of the free development of all (Eagleton, 1999: 160).

postmodernism. Rather, remaking the public sphere cannot be disentangled from the project of remaking the world of human artifice.

The Habermasian project of recuperating the public sphere has forgotten this basic point. The disembodied, deliberative bias of Habermas's framework makes sense only under conditions where the majority control neither their bodies nor their general conditions of life and where political participation is limited to the most passive forms of citizen engagement. An earlier generation of the Frankfurt School recognized that the project of human liberation was inextricably tied to unlocking the liberatory potential of body-memory. For Marcuse, if the body was a repository of repression and reification, it was also capable of unleashing powerful libidinal forces capable of initiating a process of de-reification. In *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse suggested that once the human body is freed from the instrumental dictates of capital "the body in its entirety would become an object of cathexis, a thing to be enjoyed – an instrument of pleasure (Marcuse 201)." According to Marcuse, "reification itself thus turns into liberation (Marcuse quoted in Floyd 2001:5). Benjamin too based his 'dialectics of awakening' on corporeal knowledge and body-memory. Moments of collective illumination could only occur when the contemplative mode of bourgeois thought was replaced by "a bodily presence of mind" in which repressed and forgotten longings for happiness were awakened:

However abstracted our relations with our bodies become, the historico-material body is always there even if forgotten. Contra postmodernism, amnesia is not totality. What has been repressed and forgotten always leaves traces of itself; there is always something to be remembered. And that remembrance – the remembrance of the body, of crushed hopes, of corpses and failed uprisings, of

dreams and the ancient meanings of words – is an indispensable part of the project of liberation (McNally 2001: 225).

Overcoming the reified logic of abstraction inherent in capitalism becomes the basis upon which *individual* acts of creative disembodiment return, in mediated form, to the direct producer. At the same time, because production is necessarily social in character, individual freedom can only be realized on the basis of a *community* of producers. Thus, *self*-making becomes part of a larger process involving the *collective* remaking of society (McNally 2000). As a result of a such a process, the capitalist dialectic of embodiment and disembodiment, of presence and absence, would begin to dissolve and with it the entire justification for the artificial separation of the public and private spheres. Where the capitalist logic of abstraction no longer reigns, where particular and universal are no longer warring opposites, a genuinely democratic body politic might finally come into its own.

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