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Inequality Made Flesh: Disability and the Political Economy of the Body

Amy Sorensen, PhD
Independent Research Consultant
sociologistatlarge@gmail.com
276-637-0271
4998 E. Lee Highway
Max Meadows, VA 24360

Abstract

By pulling together potentially disparate social theories, it is possible to extend our understanding of the body and disability in the social world. The body is intimately tied to processes of material and cultural production and consumption. This article contextualizes disability by placing it within this theoretical understanding of the body and these processes. The body is created through classed processes involving its relationship to the circulation and accumulation of capital. These classed bodies are accorded physical capital, solidifying their position within the production and consumption systems. Power, being unevenly distributed, plays an important role in how bodies are defined and categorized, as well as how they are disciplined. This article introduces new concepts associated with corporeality, including: corporeal power; productive and consumptive power; and producer/consumer/consumed/disposable bodies.

Keywords

Capital, accumulation, corporeal power, productive power, consumptive power, producer, consumed, disposable

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Amy Sorensen, PhD
Independent Research Consultant
sociologistatlarge@gmail.com
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Introduction

The purpose of this article is to extrapolate a hybrid theorization of the body as a social process in which larger systems of inequality are made flesh. I do so by pulling together multiple strands of sociological theory as they relate to the body, and then placing the "disabled" body into this context. Ultimately, this perspective situates the body as the primary component of a complex political economy that encompasses both material and cultural production and consumption. The "disabled" body provides an excellent vantage point from which to explore these processes.

Physical Labour

Historically, the body has been the primary form of production power. From hunting and gathering economies to the capitalist system, survival has depended upon the work performed by bodies. Early sociological discussions of the body at work, by Marx (1888/1844) and Engels (1892), explore the relationship between the body, labour power, capitalism, history, and spatial location. Marx (1888/1844) describes the body as the location of labour power, the fundamental source of value from which capitalists could extract profit, and through which the proletariat would receive the means of survival.

However, for Marx and Engels the body is not just the source of labour power, but also the outcome of the labour process. That is, they were interested in the ways in which the process of work shaped and altered the bodies of workers.

Later, Harvey (2000) drew together the various strands of body theory found within the work of Marx and extended it to create a political economy of the body. According to Harvey (2000), the body can be described as an 'accumulation strategy,' a method of gaining capital. Harvey draws on Marx in his formulation of the body's relationship to the work process and capitalist system. Harvey (1982) states that: "Capital circulates, as it were, through the body of the labourer as variable capital and thereby turns the labourer into a mere appendage of the circulation of capital itself."

Viewing the worker as a generic category (i.e., as labour or labour power, without gender, age, ability, or race) purely from the perspective of capital, and the related absence of subjectivity disembodies the field of work studies (Wolkowitz 2006). Wolkowitz (2006) argues for a theoretical merger between the areas of work and embodiment to create a theory that highlights the relationship between the body and work. Feminist scholars have, in a sense, re-embodied the worker by focusing on the intersections of gender, race, and age in the workplace. In her theorization of gendered organizations, Acker (1990) discusses the idea that the 'generic' worker actually comprises a particular working body - a male body. The organization of labour places particular expectations on the working body. These expectations include a lack of outside commitments and the ability to work particular schedules, all of which are associated with masculinity in our gendered system. These expectations, along with the expectation

that any worker fit into a position without changes or accommodation, also implicitly define the 'generic' worker as an 'able-bodied' worker.

Russell (2001) explains that as the economic system shifted to one based on rationalization and production, people with impairments were increasingly excluded from paid employment, ultimately shifting these people to the bottom of the market. This led to the formulation that this class of people constituted a social problem, relegating them to various institutions. This type of forced unemployment "de-valued the disabled body," rendering it unable to exchange labour power for other resources (Edwards & Imrie 2003). Continuing into modern times, those with impairments largely continue to constitute a class of citizens effectively barred from paid employment (Russell 2001). Thus Russell (2001) chooses to utilize the term "disabled body" to designate those "deemed less exploitable or not exploitable by the owning class who control the means of production in a capitalist society."

The Body and Class

Harvey (2000) argues that Marx's description of class as a person's relationship to the means of production alone is inadequate, and he offers the following definition of class under capitalism: "positionality in relation to capital circulation and accumulation" (pg. 102). He maintains that his conceptualization facilitates a more complex understanding of the "internal contradictions of multiple positionalities within which human beings operate" (pg. 102). Here, Harvey's notion of multiple positions includes those that an individual might inhabit within a social structure (including the processes of production

and consumption). Thus, a person might simultaneously be a worker, a consumer, a saver or a spender, a 'bearer of culture', a property owner and so forth. Harvey's (2000) account allows for a more nuanced understanding of class specifically, but can and should be extended to incorporate corporeal positionality within a system of complex inequalities. In other words, Harvey's explicit focus on class does not reflect these complex inequalities and the processes which create and maintain them.

Bourdieu's (2005) formulation of the classed body is a valuable contribution to this endeavor. According to Shilling (2003), Bourdieu views bodies as imprinted by class due to three primary factors: social location, habitus, and the development of taste. For Bourdieu (1984), social location refers to the ways lives are shaped and bodies are developed within the context of the external social and physical environment. Habitus ultimately is the embodiment of institutions, including the processes of inequality found within them. It is this embodiment of institutional inequalities that is of particular importance to the formulation at hand.

For Bourdieu, the body is more than its relationship to the buying and selling of labour power; it is a source of "power, status, and distinctive symbolic forms... integral to the accumulation of various resources," which can also be bought and sold in the production process (Shilling 2003). So, according to Bourdieu (1986) and Shilling (2003), the body is a source of capital, not only through its ability to do work, but also in its mannerisms, abilities, and appearance. Bourdieu (1986) refers to this as physical capital. Physical capital is a form of cultural capital that is embodied through social practice or physical attribute. It can be used not only to 'purchase' other forms of cultural

capital, but it sometimes can be used for direct economic gains. For Bourdieu, physical capital is inherently different from other types of capital (i.e. social, cultural, economic, and symbolic) in that it 1) cannot be inherited or transmitted directly; 2) is subjected to the capacities of the individual, and is therefore more transient; 3) it cannot be purchased; 4) its value is not static or universally applied; and 5) the 'exchange rate' is not guaranteed.

For people with disabilities, the acquisition of physical capital is complicated by societal views which tend to devalue these bodies (Edwards & Imrie 2003). These bodies are defined, not as holders of particular value, but by their deviation from a prescribed set of norms. The devaluation of bodies with disabling conditions is so complete that the built environment rarely reflects accessibility needs in its primary design. Rather, accessibility is a tacked-on afterthought – a governmental requirement that must find a place somewhere within a design. These non-universally designed built environments make concrete the devaluation of the disabled body by relegating them to dependence (the need to have help to access an environment), separate facilities (ramps, entrances, and restrooms), and heightened awareness of the 'unacceptable' nature of their being. The inaccessible nature of the built environment (to include buildings, technology, and machinated processes) leads also to the high level of unemployment among those with disabilities. The disabled body is forcibly blocked from gainful employment, ultimately relegating them to a position outside the formal economy.

The Body and Disciplinary Practices

Because the body is formed in relationship to its positionality within the social structure, it is also subject to the power relationships found within that structure. Thus, we must examine how the body comes to be defined, how it is surveilled and disciplined, and how embodied agency and constraint are created within the social structure.

Foucault engages the body in his description of surveillance and disciplinary practices. According to Foucault (1978), social order depends on the creation of 'docile bodies.' Docile bodies are bodies which meet the normative requirements of the external social environment. Failure to meet the standards of the docile body has particular social implications. In modern society, bodies are subjected to external surveillance as well as internalized self-surveillance.

Feminist scholars have utilized Foucault's description of surveillance and discipline to illustrate the ways in which women's bodies are more severely policed (both externally and internally), and held to stricter standards than are men's bodies (Bordo 1999). Intersecting inequalities are also an important component of the level of scrutiny applied to various types of bodies. The oppressive gaze of society is the gaze with the power to define normative, non-normative, and ideal bodies. The ideal body does not, for the most part, exist. It is, much like hegemonic masculinity, an ideal type against which bodies are measured and their values determined. The gaze that holds power is that of the youthful, white, heterosexual, able-bodied, middle-class, white male. Any deviation from this combination constitutes a non-docile body, and receives a penalty in value and an increase in surveillance and disciplinary practice requirements.

The medical gaze has long held the power to define and categorize bodies (Shilling 2003). Medical discourse sets forth the parameters and requirements for a 'legitimate' body, and values 'fixing' the non-normative body (Edwards & Imrie 2003). This power is not just involved in bodies with physical impairments, but also bodies with emotional and intellectual impairments. Medication and therapeutic techniques are also aimed at altering the way that these bodies are in the world. Bodies that veer to far from normative standards are often subjected to the most invasive types of disciplinary practices, including institutionalization.

The Body and Its Boundaries

In exploring the boundaries of the body, I draw from Harvey (2000) and argue that the body is unfinished and porous – always changing and contextual. It is dependent upon the technology available to it, and is, as Haraway (2006) so aptly described, a cyborg. The idea of the cyborg is related to the availability and use of technology to alter and extend the use and longevity of the body. Most of us are dependent upon advances in technology which ultimately become part of our bodies, or which alter the composition of our bodies (immunizations, antibiotics, insulin, wheelchairs, prosthetics, and eyeglasses). This illustrates a fluid boundary between individual bodies and the technological environment. The idea of technology as part of the body is especially important for bodies with disabilities, as these types of technology often make possible interaction within the social world and built environment.

Theorizing the Body: Hybridity and Extension

Combining the theoretical contributions of Marx, Harvey, Bourdieu, and Foucault leads to a particular formulation. The body is created through classed processes involving its relationship to the circulation and accumulation of capital. These classed bodies are accorded physical capital, which solidifies their position within the production and consumption systems. Thus working-class bodies will differ, not only in form but also in physical capital, from other types of classed bodies. Power is not evenly distributed and this distribution of power plays an important role in how bodies are disciplined.

While class has an important relationship with bodies, other areas of intersecting inequalities must be considered. All of the interrelated processes which are classed are also racialized, gendered, heterosexualized and so forth. Rather than operating separately, these processes of inequality are simultaneous and intersecting, and cannot be disentangled from one another (Crenshaw 1989). The body operates not only as the site at which the materialization of inequality occurs, but is also implicated as a mechanism through which inequality operates.

These ideas can be combined and extended by theorizing the body as having a direct tie to the larger social structure through the processes of production and consumption, which are located within a larger system of complex, intersecting inequalities. In this formulation it is necessary to look at the processes of *material* consumption and production (the focus of this article), as well as the intertwined processes of *symbolic* consumption and production. The relationship between the body and social structure varies by the body's social location, its historical and political

position, and geographic location. Additionally, the body is always changing. Thus, an account of the body within the processes of production and consumption must take all of these contexts into account. While this formulation of the body in the social structure draws on the work of Harvey, Marx, Bourdieu, and Foucault, it extends each theoretical perspective in particular directions. In order to differentiate this understanding of the body from previous theorizations, different terminology must be utilized. For example, rather than physical capital (as used by Bourdieu) or labour power (as conceptualized by Marx), this formulation is built on the idea of corporeal power.

Material Consumption/Production and the Body

Material consumption and production processes are associated with the market system in which workers perform labour to 'earn' resource access. One person's production is another's consumption and vice versa, though there is no assumption of equality in ability to consume or produce. In the capitalist system, this generally means a worker performs labour for a wage, which the worker can then use to purchase resources. Other labour systems, outside of capitalist exchange, do exist. Barter systems are used in which one person's labour is traded for another person's labour; and in more agrarian societies, labouring bodies may produce the resources themselves, without the intermediary monetary exchange. In the informal economy, unpaid labour often operates to make resources available to family units (i.e. the unpaid family labour performed primarily by women), but also may be a way for the unpaid labourer to gain access to resources (again, the unpaid family labour of women has often been the only way that women could gain

access to important resources). These examples point to the different economic relations in which bodies are implicated.

Symbolic Consumption/Production Processes and the Body

Processes of symbolic consumption and production are more subtle to detect and difficult to measure. Symbolic production/consumption is intertwined with material processes. Symbolic capital includes embodied forms that are assigned a value within the larger social environment (i.e. skin color, body shape, comportment, etc.), as well as symbolic artifacts (i.e. images in popular media) that are bought and sold within the material production/consumption processes. Additionally, products and services purchased within material production/consumption processes have a symbolic value attached to them, which is fluid and contextual. For instance, possessing a sports car increases an individual's cultural capital (separate from the increase in material capital value of this possession), but only in certain contexts. The same holds true for corporeal forms. Possessing particular corporeal forms may increase or decrease one's corporeal power depending on time, space, and social location.

Corporeal Power and Related Concepts

Corporeal power

Corporeal power can be defined as what remains of the body's capability to consume and produce after accounting for its expenditures in production and consumption processes. Because the body is also tied directly to processes of complex inequalities, the resultant

gendered, classed, racialized, and dis/abled body is imbued with a corresponding level of corporeal power.

Productive power

Productive power, put quite simply, is the body's ability to produce. Within the material production/consumption processes this is often the ability to do work that will result in gaining access to important resources. This includes not only work within the formal economic system, but also the informal economy. It additionally incorporates unpaid labour that is involved with the acquisition of resources. Within the symbolic production/consumption process, this may be the power to allow the body to be symbolically consumed. While this type of power may not be particularly empowering, as in the case of the cultural tropes of sympathy or 'overcoming' a disability, it does result in a certain level of corporeal power. Symbolic productive power may also be the power to produce a distinct embodied cultural form that is valued within society (i.e. athleticism, attractiveness, or the mannerisms necessary to be a part of 'high' culture). Productive activity over time may lead to skill development, which – given adequate opportunity- can result in increased productive and consumptive power.

Consumptive power

Consumptive power is the body's ability to consume. In relationship to material consumption/production, this is the ability to consume goods and services. Conversely, within the symbolic consumption/production processes, it refers to the ability to consume

symbolically. Thus the oppressive gaze of men often consumes the symbolic corporeal power of women, or the oppressive gaze of whiteness consumes the symbolic corporeal power of bodies of color. It is the power to 'other', exoticize, and eroticize. It is also the power to place value on particular symbolic forms.

Corporeal expenditure

There is also expenditure inherent in these processes. Materially, this expenditure often comes in the form of using up bodily resources for production. This includes both the physical resources expended in manual labour, as well as the physical resources that are used in unpaid labour like childbirth or family care labour. It is also important to acknowledge that all labour does not result in an ability to acquire resources. In these cases, the corporeal expenditure is not met with a corresponding increase in consumptive power. For instance, a construction worker whose body is left with a disabling condition after years of hard labour (or unsafe working conditions), may in fact, lose access to important resources. Symbolically, the expenditure is often a loss of cultural value. In the process of symbolic consumption, very often that which is consumed also loses value in the process of its consumption. For instance, the symbolic consumption of women's bodies by the oppressive male gaze (Bartky 1998) results in a decreased value of that body. In other words, even as the body produces a service, product, or symbol for consumption, it is symbolically consumed by the consumer, and the process itself.

Types of Bodies

The body, within production/consumption processes, can be identified as a producer, a consumer, consumed, disposable, and/or a cannibal body. These may not be mutually exclusive. The body produces so that it may consume, but it is simultaneously consumed in the labour process. It is at once a consuming and consumed body. Different bodies have different production and consumption capacities (in other words, bodies vary in their corporeal power). Those with more material and cultural resources, based on their social position, are capable of consuming adequate resources (i.e. products and services), thereby increasing their corporeal power. Those with fewer resources are less capable of consuming adequate resources. Thus, some bodies will be consumed at a higher rate than they can consume. This leads to decreased corporeal power over time.

Consumer bodies

Consumer bodies can be described as those that have more consumptive power than productive power. These are bodies that typically exhibit a higher level of power within the material and symbolic exchange processes. They are able to purchase and consume, often (but not always) adequately to maintain their corporeal power over time. For instance, a white male who has a high level of wealth and who expends very little energy within material production/consumption is primarily a consumer. However, there are also consumer bodies that retain very little corporeal power. Take, for instance, the example of the body with a disabling condition, unable to perform productive labour within the formal economy. While this body lacks productive power (materially or symbolically),

the availability of particular resources (i.e. excellent health benefits or wealth) may make it possible for this body to consume the labour power of others (i.e. home health aides). While this consumption of other bodies' labour may result in the maintenance of corporeal power for the disabled body, it may just as easily result in being consumed or disposable (described in a later section).

Producer bodies

Producer bodies are those that have more productive power than consumptive power. These are bodies that are able to produce, but not always at a high enough level to maintain adequate consumptive levels. These could be the bodies of working class individuals, who through employment are able to maintain a high level of productivity, but who lack the pay-off in consumptive power that might be found in those who earn higher wages and benefits. One example of this situation would be those with disabilities who participate in sheltered workshop labour, in which they work in a manual labour position for less than minimum wage, thereby producing without the correlated pay-off in access to resources.

Consumed bodies

Consumed bodies are those whose corporeal expenditure is greater than the sum of their consumptive and productive power. In other words, their bodily resources are being used up at a higher rate than they can produce or consume resources. These bodies may either be producer or consumer bodies. Often these bodies are those that are particularly

vulnerable to the inequalities found in the larger social structure which limit their access to adequate productive and consumptive activities. For instance, a manual labourer who expends a great deal of physical energy in their productive activities, but receives very little financial remuneration and cannot purchase health services that would mitigate the wear and tear on the body, loses productive power over time.

Disposable bodies

Normative rates of production and consumption are situated within space and time, and are related to larger economic forces. Thus, different time periods and geographic locations will set forth different expected levels of material and symbolic production, consumption, and productive expenditure. There are different levels of 'acceptable' consumption in any society, ranging from subsistence to normative to superfluous levels of consumption. Bodies that are unable – or unwilling – to produce or consume at 'accepted' levels become disposable bodies, that is, they lack an ability to consume, produce, or be consumed symbolically or materially at an 'accepted' level. These bodies are stigmatized not only by their inability/unwillingness to produce or be consumed, but in their inability/unwillingness to produce as a means to allow for normative consumption. Disposable bodies are the bodies of people who are old and marked as vulnerable or frail; chronically unemployed or homeless; those with severe mental illness, cognitive delays or physically disabling conditions; and those who are incarcerated. Often these bodies are rendered invisible through processes of de-legitimation and institutionalization.

Conclusion

By pulling together these threads from various theoretical perspectives, we can fully visualize the body situated within the processes of material and cultural production and consumptions. This perspective also allows for the transcendence from competing models of disability and body theory. The medical, social, and phenomenological perspectives fail to adequately capture the complexity of the body within the social world. However, by pulling together potentially disparate threads, it is possible to visualize the body and its nuanced connections to the larger production/consumption processes. The body is intimately bound to larger processes of inequality. It is necessary to bring the body into a central position within our exploration of the mechanisms through which inequality operates.

Disability offers a unique vantage point from which to start these explorations. While disability is 'created' by the social world, the 'disabled' body is inextricable from the processes of material and cultural production and consumption. The bodies of the manual labourer after twenty-five years of hard work, the mentally ill patient in an institution, the young woman with a disability fighting for the right to bear and raise children, and the chronically unemployed person with a disability are all tied to these production and consumption processes. By acknowledging the body in these processes we can more fully understand how inequality is made flesh.

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