

The Duty of Being Healthy.

The Universe of Meanings of “Leisure Time Society”

El deber de estar sanos.
El universo de significados de la “sociedad del ocio”

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Abstract: The body is the scenario in which late-modern self can spectacularize his adhesion to the “health project”,¹ a horizon of meaning inaugurated by modernity. The steady improvement of health is socially promoted as superior virtue of the late-modern values hierarchy. The aim of this paper is to investigate the sociological reasons for which the contemporary man builds his identity on the centrality of the aesthetic dimension, a broad horizon that includes not only the obsessive practice of fitness.

Keywords: body, health, risk, pain, identity, meaning.

¹ Beck, U. and Beck-Gernsheim, E., *Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and its Social and Political Consequences*, London - Thousand Oaks - New Delhi, Sage, 2002, p. 141.

Resumen: El cuerpo es el escenario en el que el yo de la modernidad tardía puede manifestar su adhesión al "health project", ese horizonte de sentido inaugurado por la modernidad. La salud física promueve virtudes socialmente superiores en la jerarquía de valores de la modernidad tardía. En este artículo pretendemos investigar las razones sociológicas por las cuales los hombres contemporáneos construyen su identidad centrándose en la dimensión estética –un horizonte amplio que incluye no sólo la práctica del *fitness*.

Palabras clave: cuerpo, salud, riesgo, dolor, identidad, sentido

Introduction

First, we have –if we want to present an adequate vision of the phenomenon– to point out that relationship between body and identity as we perceive it, and that seems even banal to us, is not so obvious. That is to say, relationship between physicality and interiority, a fundamental opposition in Western culture, has been understood in a very different way depending on the socio-historical configurations. For example, the dimension of intention as well as that of morality, though in our culture is attributed only to humans, in other cultures is also allowed to the sphere of non-human². The social representation of the body, as well as his self-representation, is the outcome of a complex process of social construction. So, no wonder if in the historical age in which we are living a very particular image of the man –of his body and identity– is arising. From a phenomenological point of view, the body constitutes a privileged space in which social trends of the broader human habitus reveal themselves.

The body is the scenario in which late-modern self can spectacularize his adhesion to the "health project"³, a horizon of meaning inaugurated by modernity. The steady improvement of health is socially promoted as superior virtue of the late-modern values hierarchy. On the other hand, as Michel Foucault⁴ has brilliantly shown, health is the secular substitute for religious salvation. In the name of the primacy of physical well-being a real ideological battle is being conducted against diseases. Diseases –and here we can see the ideological matrix of the phenomenon– are perceived, as demonstrated by Susan Sontag⁵, with a feeling of social shame⁶. Short, it seems that in the late-modern society, dominated by a mythology founded on efficiency, there is *again* a real "moralization of physical evil"⁷.

² Descola, P., *Par-delà nature et culture*, Paris, Gallimard, 2005.

³ Beck, U. and Beck-Gernsheim, E., *Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and its Social and Political Consequences*, op. cit., p. 141.

⁴ Foucault, M., *Naissance de la clinique. Una archéologie du regard médical*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1963.

⁵ Sontag, S., *Aids and Its Metaphors*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989.

⁶ See also Elias, N., *Postscript. Ageing and Dying: Some Sociological Problems*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1985.

⁷ Camorrino, A., *La natura è inattuale. Scienza, società e catastrofi nel XXI secolo*, S. Maria C. V. (Ce), Ipermedium, 2015.

It's moreover very likely that this particular dimension causes –in contemporary society– an increasing social attention to body care. This process of *aestheticization* –which finds expression in the growing popularity of plastic surgery, fitness practices, food diets, and the medicalization of life, translates into practice an unconscious desire to defeat death. In fact, death, on the absence of “great narratives”⁸ to which anchor the meaning of it, represents an unspeakable object: contemporary men protect themselves from the anguish of a senseless death by staging in daily life a seemingly immortal body⁹.

It's for this absence of shared horizons of meaning that the purely material dimension of existence –of which the maniacal care of the body is a valid sociological indicator– becomes one of the most important dimension of existence: the “ethics of aesthetics”¹⁰ –the *ethos* of late-modern society– completely based on the primacy of the material dimension of the bodies represents in a seemingly paradoxical way, one of the main emotional sources of consumer society.

The sphere of leisure time becomes –in this scenario– the most characterizing universe of meanings in which men of Western society construct their identity. The subject of this paper will be to investigate the sociological reasons for which the contemporary man build his identity on the centrality of the aesthetic dimension –a broad horizon that includes not only the obsessive practice of fitness.

A Brief Socio-Historical Reconstruction: From Pain as a Sign of Election to Pain as an Enemy to be Defeated

Investigating this complicated issue is not an easy task. There is a long and complex tradition of thought specialized –with points of view and perspectives even very different– in the analysis of social and spiritual meaning of the body. This *vexata quaestio*, as is widely known, has been the subject of heated debates even in the theological field. Religion –not just Christianity– is charged with the symbolic meaning the body. It was considered like a cage, a heavy and corrupt case from which soul has to be released. The positive value that Christianity attributes to pain –whose masochistic system has in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ his ontological foundation¹¹– has had significant and lasting implications for the social representation of the body in the Western world. Pain, perceived as a kind of special experiential path to the expiation of sins, makes the body an ambivalent *medium* of salvation. The debasement of the carnal dimension –the place of sin and mortality– caused, conversely, a spiritual elevation.

The dissolution of the Christian universe of meaning occurred in modern era has strongly delegitimized this particular vision of the body and of self-representation. Disease is no longer seen as a sign of election, a phenomenon that certifies the presence of a divine plan; but rather, like a “stop” in the productive machine of the bourgeois epoch. The typical efficiency-logic of mercantile society and of the capitalist one, deprives disease of religious meaning, transforming it in an enemy to fight. Extraordinary advancements in medical science –but more generally the improvement in hygiene conditions, nutrition, etc.– urge men to find more and more effective remedies to heal bodies from diseases that,

⁸ Lyotard, J.-F., *La condition postmoderne*, Paris, Les Editions de Minuit, 1979.

⁹ Bauman, Z., *Il teatro dell'immortalità. Mortalità, immortalità e altre strategie di vita*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1995.

¹⁰ Maffesoli, M., *Apocalisse. Rivelazioni sulla società moderna*, S. Maria C. V. (Ce), Ipermedium, 2009.

¹¹ See Berger, P. L., *The Social Reality of Religion*, Great Britain, Penguin Books, 1973.

disappeared their transcendent meaning, they become senseless problems to solve. It is clear that what has been said is the result of a long and gradual process, in some ways still ongoing¹².

More generally it is therefore appropriate to note how in the long term the conditions for a radical transformation of the relationship between man and pain are created. This ancestral and inextricable relationship has always been deeply characterized human life, constituting a fundamental aspect of it. It is impossible to overestimate the revolution caused by the progress of medical science in this very awkward dimension of existence. The growing achievements in medicine have overturned the man's relationship with the pain¹³. Previously, the pain was perceived as the effect of a divine warning certifying the presence of the transcendent and suggested the potential state of election of the sick person. Now, it is seen as a senseless obstacle to fight with all available medical instruments in order to defeat illness. Considered the *ontological emptying of evil* and all the treatment options available to be healthy is ultimately a *duty*. But there's more. Indulge into a lifestyle not conform to the standards of healthy conduct, involves a social stigma to the point that an attitude of this type imposes itself as evidence of a deserved punishment. Similarly, do not copy with all strength disease seems to show a psychological weakness, a lack of fortitude which, again, ends up blaming the sufferer. This complex dynamic –that we have defined "moralization of physical evil"– calls to mind in many ways the cosmology of pre-modern societies. Essentially, evil, understood as a "natural" manifestation, seems to disappear behind the scenes of the social scenario: diseases, as well as death, are now perceived neither more nor less than the consequences of the action of a guilty mankind. If in traditional societies behind each death and disease was hiding a spell or the shadow of God, in contemporary societies all things pertains to the sphere of human endeavor¹⁴. By contrast, the absence of stable and shared horizons of meaning in which evil could be framed, causes the emergence of functional substitutes, emotional supports able to integrate the meanings of individual biographies. For these reasons, several alternative matrices of meaning begin to prosper: matrices of meaning aimed to counter the anxiety caused by a state of affairs that seems unfair and, *eo ipso*, evil.

Sports Activities and Sacralization of the Body

Investigated within this broader interpretive framework, the phenomenon of *aestheticization of everyday life* in contemporary society seems to clarify considerably. Due to the legitimation crisis of religious universes of meaning –previously able to explain and justify the "marginal situations"¹⁵ which a man have to deal inevitably–, the *sacralization of the body* becomes one of the main practices of late modern identity construction. The body is the temple where we offer our sacrifices; the exclusive kingdom in which it is possible to be devoted to the worship of the true self; the only judge whose legitimacy is recognized

¹² The winding ways of medical progress and its durable commingling with pre-scientific conceptions very resistant to change are well documented, for example, by the works of Cipolla, C. M., *Miasmi e umori*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1989.

¹³ On this topic see Le Breton, D., *Anthropologie de la douleur*, Paris, Édition Métailié, 1995; see also Le Breton, D., *Expériences de la douleur. Entre destruction et renaissance*, Paris, Édition Métailié, 2010.

¹⁴ On the disappearance of this sort of "outside" see Beck, U., *Risk Society. Towards a New Modernity*, London. Thousand Oaks. New Delhi, SAGE, 1992.

¹⁵ Berger, P. L. and Luckmann T., *The Social Construction of reality. A treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, Great Britain, Penguin Books, 1991, p. 114.

and the only means through which we can realize an authentic fullness of being. But on this complex matter is necessary to make some clarifications.

In-depth work of Roberta Sassatelli¹⁶ seems to confirm these observations. The “fitness gyms” are, according to the author, integral parts of the late-modern world where we practice a particular form of “serious leisure”¹⁷. These spaces are not dedicated to generic forms of leisure but to meaningful practices, through which individuals construct an important part of their identity. The universe of meaning of gym even assumes –author continues¹⁸– moral connotations because maintaining healthy its visitors it means to provide, ultimately, an essential service to society. The higher value of the “fitness culture” comes from the fact that taking care of our body means both gratify the ego instincts and to care about the community. In this complicated dynamic, the body becomes the object of a growing market where the gym is “a crucial symbolic space”¹⁹.

It is true that in recent decades the perception of the body has been transformed, but the increasing popularity of extreme sports confirms “the body as a very place of authenticity”²⁰. As it has been amply demonstrated by the sociology of risk, uncertainty and insecurity are distinctive features of the contemporary world. This constant insecurity condition is, as is well known, one of the main problems of our time. Yet –Le Breton states– risk and danger can have a meaning radically different, even positive. In risky sports players deliberately engage themselves into activities where the uncertainty margin is considerably high, and where the same physical safety, so to speak, is put in brackets. They gratify ambivalent psychic drives by potentially challenging death. Basically – as the author affirms²¹ – “ontological insecurity” (to borrow a famous definition by Anthony Giddens) of late-modern era leads men towards risky physical activities in which, however, is possible, with skill, technique and training, dominate the unexpectable events and difficulties even extreme. The impossibility to govern threatening social forces that largely transcend the individual management skills, implies that a growing number of individuals looking for a release: in this condition of helplessness, choosing a dangerous lifestyle but ultimately controllable by means of only personal qualities it is a sort of relief. Engaging in activities of this kind ensures an important intensification of meaning of daily life, otherwise perceived as unsatisfactory, threatening and alienating. Body –Le Breton says– becomes the main medium to show the personal worth. Tasks of this kind combines typical extreme individualism of late-modern society with a burning desire for a shared recognition of own quality; these sports promise to the players a precise place in a community of the elect, in which their function is essential, even for the survival of themselves and of group. Fascination created by the challenge posed by individual to the natural forces feeds itself “of the imagery of the disappearance of the social”²², one of the main trends, in our opinion, of a certain *neo-romantic worldview* which is increasing nowadays²³. The increasing degree

¹⁶ Sassatelli, R., *Fitness Culture. Gyms and the commercialisation of Discipline and Fun*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

¹⁷ Stebbins in Sassatelli, R., *Fitness Culture. Gyms and the commercialisation of Discipline and Fun*, op. cit., p. 4.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 5 and ff.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 7.

²⁰ Le Breton, D., “Il corpo in pericolo. Antropologia delle attività fisiche e sportive a rischio”, *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia*, 3, July-September, (2002), p. 407 (my translation from italian).

²¹ Ibid., pp. 408 and ff.

²² Ibid., p. 410 (my translation from italian).

²³ From our point of view this stage is descended from a larger process that has in the *fall of humanism*, his crucial point. The widespread delegitimization that affected man’s image established over the past centuries,

of spread of this particular kind of practices finds evidence in the growing business and in media coverage that is granted to the protagonists of these sporting events, proposed as real celebrities²⁴. Basically, Le Breton argues that the state of alienation that degrades the quality of the individual by reducing them to mere procedural perform assignments in everyday life, causes the need – especially in classes that have a certain degree of professional stability, economic an existential– to look for, in this type of activity, the “spice of life”²⁵. The state of uncertainty suffered and ungovernable of daily life is perceived as a negative and destabilizing; instead, the risk “nurtured” experienced during these extreme physical activity is perceived as a positive feeling that can strengthen the spirit and the body through the gradual domestication of the dangers and of the fate. The fullness of being is therefore guaranteed by the “recourse to strong sensations, the thrill of risky practices [that] seems like the breath that saves the self in the moment of choking: the Homo Ludens takes the place of the Homo faber”²⁶.

From this point of view, the universe of risky physical activity seems to reflect the peculiar traits of the “postmodern nirvana”²⁷ –according to the famous theses put forward by Zygmunt Bauman– in which the contemporary man is relegated: awareness of the transient nature of life, a life free of any transcendent anchor, it forces humans –in order to counter the anxiety produced by the knowledge of finitude– to take refuge in the realm of immediate gratification disclosed, in this case, by the strong emotions arising from practice of extreme sports; a narrative based on a constant flow of falls and rebirths transports players into a universe in which immortality is fragmented in a repeated and indefinite sequence of experiential moments that replicate indefinitely death, putting it on stage in numerous “general rehearsal”: this normalization process of death –by constant re-enactment of symbolic challenges– is an attempt to reduce the emotional charge, “trivializing” the character of its “absolute otherness”²⁸. Risk physical activities, to use Bauman words, represent a postmodern strategy of “deconstruction of immortality”²⁹.

Conclusions

More generally, the growing expansion of the “leisure” sphere in contemporary society

contributes to the success of alternative narratives whose main character is no longer man with his inner being, but rather, a being that is completely “showed outside”: body in contact with the world unveils the ultimate truth of his being. *Au fond of the aestheticization of everyday life* in the leisure time society, there is the dissolution of interiority for as it has been conceived by humanism. Moreover, what we have mentioned as *neo-romanticism* it’s a narrative based on a symbolic elevation of nature as an authentic and uncorrupted place – think to the “great ecologist narrative” (Camorrino, A., *La natura è inattuale. Scienza, società e catastrofi nel XXI secolo*, S. Maria C. V. (Ce), Ipermedium, 2015). With these alternative narratives there are the *sacralization of technology* in the form of a peculiar *neo-enlightenment* (See Camorrino, Antonio, “L’immaginario tecnologico. Un’analisi sociologica della cosmologia contemporanea”, *Im@go*, 7 (V), 2016) and the return of the religious in the form of a particular *neo-heteronomy*. Can not delve here such difficult issues that have been the topic of other our works and will be still the subject of publications in preparation.

²⁴ Le Breton, D., “Il corpo in pericolo. Antropologia delle attività fisiche e sportive a rischio”, *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia*, 3, 2002, pp. 410-411.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 412 (my translation from italian).

²⁶ Ibid., p. 413 (my translation from italian).

²⁷ Bauman, Z., *Il teatro dell’immortalità. Mortalità, immortalità e altre strategie di vita*, op. cit., p. 101 (my translation from italian).

²⁸ Bauman, Z., *Paura liquida*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2010, pp. 64 and 54 and 55 (my translation from italian).

²⁹ Bauman, Z., *Il teatro dell’immortalità. Mortalità, immortalità e altre strategie di vita*, op. cit., p. 215 (my translation from italian).

–following in this regard the studies of Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning³⁰– can be explained within the broader process of civilization. The strict system of “self-restraint” that regulates social life since modernity implicates a social push towards alternative canalization of aggressive drives. Thus the leisure society would have created a whole range of “mimetic” experiences –according to Elias and Dunning– in which we can take part or be spectators: we can become protagonists of those activities or be an audience that simply enjoy these “mimetic” experiences ensure, by means of catharsis caused by the excitement of freeing affectivity within pacified practices and, for the most part, not harming. In this strictly regulated experiential dimension, men on one hand, can unload insuppressible psychic forces; on the other hand, they can take refuge from the burden of guilt of a mere violent practice. It should certainly be noted that, although always within the conceptual framework of the “leisure time society”, extreme sports seem to take a step forward in the direction of the risk and danger as a source of meaning. It is possible that this “jump” is an accurate indicator of the ongoing social changes in the late modern society. The worsening of the anomie of the current world implies a social desire for control that can be acted in several ways. In the presence of uncontrollable dynamics that largely exceed the possibilities of individual domain, men seek spheres where they can “feel” of being master of his own life and destiny. Challenge the limits of his own finitude in a close contest which aims, *au fond*, to remove the dead from the horizon of the possible, is the ultimate expression of this desire for control. For these reasons, the body becomes a crucial part in this process. Either in the form of *the duty of being healthy*, or in the form of sports activities to which we have referred, the body becomes the main tool of an identity construction based on exorcism of death in Western society, where the meaning of death increasingly seems to disappear behind the social scenario.

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³⁰ Elias, N. e Dunning, E., *Quest for excitement. Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1986.

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