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2007

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Recommended Citation

Orzeck, R. (2007). What does not kill you: Historical materialism and the body. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 25(3), 496-514. <https://doi.org/10.1068/d2704>.

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What does not kill you: historical materialism and the body

Reecia Orzeck

Abstract. In recent decades the body has become an important object of inquiry within the discipline of geography, as it has within the humanities and social sciences more generally. Though often critical of the tenets of poststructuralism, Marxist geographers have responded with enthusiasm to the imperative that we denaturalize the body, and have demonstrated a capacious store of resources available to this task. Building on recent efforts by geographers to conceptualize a Marxist theory of the body, this paper moves in two directions. Aligning myself with those interested in demonstrating the constructedness of the body, I begin by arguing both that the notion of bodies-as-produced is latent in historical materialism and that we can employ our insights about the production of space in order to think about the production of bodies. I then turn away from this discussion of the production of bodies and consider whether there is, in the bloodline of theoretical Marxism, any notion of the *natural* body with which we must contend. I argue that evidence of such a body can be found both in deliberate treatises on the subject and in the work of at least one scholar for whom the body was not an explicit object of study. These investigations, moreover, suggest that historical materialism implies not only the production of bodies but also what presupposes and enables this production. I conclude by considering some of the implications of subscribing to a historical materialist theory of the body.

Introduction

Theories of the body and of embodiment have become a force to reckon with within the discipline of geography. We owe this flowering of scholarship to multiple sources: to the geographers who first engaged with Michel Foucault's work (Driver, 1985; see also Hannah, 1993; Philo, 1992); to the feminist geographers who have challenged the mind-body dualism within the discipline (Longhurst, 1995; 1997; Rose, 1993); to the feminist and queer theorists who have incorporated into their work Butlerian challenges to the 'natural' body (Hubbard, 2002; Pratt, 2004; Valentine, 2000). The notion that sex and sexuality are materialized through repeated iterations has achieved so impressive a standing among geographers (see Duncan, 1996) that the theory of performativity is now applied far beyond the realm of sexual identity (Gibson-Graham, 1996; Haller, 2003; Joseph, 1998; McDowell and Court, 1994; though see also Gregson and Rose, 2000; Nelson, 1999). We owe a debt to the geographers who have challenged us to consider how racialized bodies are produced, exploited, and punished (Jackson, 1994; Tyner and Houston, 2000). The literature on embodiment—which now spans several subfields—has made us think seriously about subject positionality (Hyndman, 2004; Mehta and Bondi, 1999; Mountz, 2004), just as psychoanalytic theory has kept subject formation and its political implications on the geographical agenda (Nast, 1998; Pile, 1993; 1996). Finally, medical geographers and geographers of (dis)ability have long taken the body seriously, and have needed no theoretical license to do so (Crooks and Chouinard, 2006; Dorn and Laws, 1994; Hall, 2000; Kearns, 1993; Kuhlmann and Babitsch, 2002; Moss and Dyck, 1999).⁽¹⁾

⁽¹⁾ For a general introduction to contemporary theories of the body with an emphasis on geographical work see Valentine (2001).

Although it is far from exhaustive, we can distill from this list a strong sense that the body-turn in geography is more than a thematic innovation. The emergence of the body as an object of inquiry is deeply connected to epistemological changes in the academy more generally. In geography, like in the social sciences and the humanities, the body has been the faithful companion of and vehicle for critiques of Marxism, modernism, and humanism. Where these have tended to posit the body as the locus of universal or essential human attributes (that is, human nature), poststructuralist critics employ the body chiefly to signify specificity and difference. Rather than a single, given human body, for many contemporary theorists there are “only multiple bodies, marked not simply by sex, but by an infinite array of differences ... none of which is solely determinate” (Shildrick and Price, 1999, page 8). The body is conceived of as multiple and fluid, not as a kernel of nature lying in wait beneath layers of social scripting but as the very clay that such scripts shape. It is not “pre-representational ground”, in other words, “but an effect of representation that passes itself off as grounding” (Colebrook, 2001, page 76). Because hegemonic discourses—about race, sex, sexuality, etc—are inscribed on the body, poststructuralist scholars see it as a potentially revelatory artifact. The body promises to reward the vigilant scholar with a detailed map, not of the natural but of the social and the cultural.

Although Marxist geographers have challenged many of the tenets of poststructuralism, they have by and large not challenged the idea of the discursively produced body. Instead, they have emphasized the points of similarity between Marxism and poststructuralism, and they have worked to integrate the more productive elements of each. There are very good reasons for such conciliatory engagement. Talk of the natural has been harnessed to such loathsome agendas that there is a widely shared desire to rob it of legitimacy altogether, and in so doing rob its racist and sexist progeny of theirs. Marxists are understandably anxious to place themselves on the right side of this good fight. Moreover, agreements about the body have been arrived at with facility because Marxism, too, envisions bodies as *produced*, even if the muscle behind this production is not discourse alone, and even if the language of corporeality has not always been at the forefront of Marxist theorizing.

But although Marxists have been willing to rethink the social in terms of the corporeal, a historical materialist theory of the body remains only partially articulated. This paper is a contribution to the construction of this nascent theory. I begin by summarizing recent efforts by Marxist geographers to theorize the body. For the purposes of this brief survey, I limit my attention to three scholars: Felicity Callard and David Harvey, each of whom has begun to articulate a Marxist theory of the body, and Melissa Wright, who has begun to test the possibilities of uniting certain elements of Marxism and poststructuralism in such a way as to effect the body theories of each. The paper then branches off in two directions. Aligning myself with the scholarship evincing bodies-as-produced, I argue both that historical materialism *implies* the production of bodies, and that the specifically capitalist mode of production produces, not just bodies, but—another central element of poststructuralist theorizing—*difference*. I suggest that we develop our thinking about the production of bodies under the capitalist mode of production by recalling how space is produced under this mode. I then move on from this position of alliance with poststructuralist notions of the body to inquire as to whether there is, in Marxist theory, any *natural* body with which we must reckon. I refer to a handful of scholars in order to make the case that there is, indeed, such a body. I then use the work of Georg Lukács to suggest that in precisely the ways that historical materialism insists on bodies-as-produced it also insists on that which presupposes production.

Marxism, geography, and the body

In her intervention into the literature on the corporeal, Callard (1998) takes, as her object, not only the titular ‘body in theory’ but also theory itself. Observing the tenacity of particular theoretical interpretations of the body within geography, literary theory, and cultural studies, Callard wonders how certain ideas, and not others, calcify as theoretical *givens* at particular moments. In the case of the body, Callard (page 388) observes that, currently, “the call to understand the importance of the body” is often “a call for the fluidity of subjectivity, for the instability of the binary of sexual difference, and for a host of other working assumptions.” While acknowledging the importance of the imperative that we abandon the fantasy of the whole and discrete human subject with essential characteristics contained within the borders of a natural and naturally sexed body, Callard inveighs against our apparent unwillingness to look critically at the new assumptions spawned by this imperative.

Part of the problem stems from the unconsidered incorporation of insights from queer theory and poststructuralism into other corners of the social sciences and the humanities. Too many theorists, Callard argues, rely on a “mishmash of watered down and ill-digested work” in formulating their ideas about ‘postmodern identity’ (page 392). For example, she charges scholars with importing the Foucauldian notion of discourse into the theoretical lexicon too hastily. When the word ‘discourse’ is invoked in an “all-encompassing way”, differences between the social, the linguistic, the psychological, and the material are obscured (page 391). With respect to Donna Haraway’s work, Callard notes that scholars appear to have lionized the image of the cyborg, filing it away as an icon of postmodernism, without properly grappling with Haraway’s deep commitment to socialism and materialism. As a result of these academic shortcuts, the theory of the body that has risen to the surface of academic dialogue has met with few of the challenges it deserves.

Callard offers several challenges to the assumptions that accompany contemporary body theory. Considering the role of the body in both queer and Marxist theory, she suggests that the supposed antipathy between the two has been greatly overstated, unproductively forestalling investigations into capital’s production and endorsement of particular forms of desire. More critically, Callard argues that the poststructuralist claim that the current postmodern moment is novel, both in terms of the fluid, hybrid, and cyborgian bodies that inhabit it and in terms of the extraordinary technological capabilities that partially produce those bodies, is inaccurate. As she notes, the body has been a fragmented affair, condemned to be the appendage of a machine, since at least the mid-19th century when Karl Marx described it thus. Marx invokes the body repeatedly, and in a variety of ways, throughout his account of the factory economy in the first volume of *Capital* (Marx, 1967). Machinery is described as a body (with agency, no less); elsewhere workers are described as the organs of the collective body of the proletariat. Callard acknowledges that Marx’s vision of the body does not perfectly mirror the current queer-theory vision. She suggests, however, that working to illuminate the similarities and differences in the two visions will keep alive the complexities that are evacuated by the tendency to forget Marx altogether when thinking about the body.

Harvey (1998) also suggests that contemporary writing about the body neglects Marx at its peril. Marx, he writes, provides an account of how capital acts on differentially positioned bodies. “Since we all live within the world of capital circulation and accumulation this has to be a part of any argument about the nature of the contemporary body” (page 405). Echoing Callard, Harvey argues that Marx’s approach to the body is “something to build upon rather than to negate” (page 413). Using the circulation of variable capital as his entry point, and equipped with a definition of class as

“positionality with respect to capital circulation and accumulation”, Harvey explores how, in Marx’s writing, what produces bodies so muscularly is also what provides them with spaces and moments of resistance.

The body of labour—as a class—is pulled hither and thither as labour power is extracted from it. Certain skills and capacities are developed at certain times, Harvey explains, while others are left to atrophy. At the level of individual labouring bodies, the result of this pushing and pulling is the hierarchization and differentiation of the bodies that constitute variable capital. Thus, he argues, insofar as race, gender, and ethnicity are all exploited in the differentiation of variable capital, capital must be seen as a force at least partially constitutive of those identities. Capitalist exchange, occurring on a geographically uneven world scale, further abets the differentiation of bodies through their differential valuation according to hierarchically structured spatial relations. But in each such space, contests over the needs of the body, and over the rightful ownership of the body (the capitalist purchases labour power, not the labourer), are the fount of class struggle and class gains. In the contradictory space of consumption—where the labourer, still an appendage of capital as a consumer, has some agency—the body is likewise both produced, by, for example, manufactured desires, and producing, in the case of consumer demands. Clearly, far from being a hermeneutically sealed-off entity, the body, for Marx, is porous: the dialectical product of worlds without and within.

For Harvey, it is this notion of porosity, which unites Marxists and poststructuralists. In opposition to the traditionally Western view that the body can somehow be simultaneously a finished and closed system *and* the measure of all things, Harvey corrals behind him a full spectrum of critical theorists—from Elizabeth Grosz to Antonio Gramsci—when arguing that if the body reflects the world it must have a mechanism for absorbing that world. He admits to finding Foucault’s writing on discipline broadly compatible with Marx’s work (1998, page 407), and offers a nod to Judith Butler both by invoking performativity (page 403) and by quoting her directly (page 419). He departs from these theorists, however, when he argues against what he calls “body reductionism” (page 415). Although the return to the body as a theoretical foundation can help to illuminate an important site of political action, it cannot, on its own, dictate all the directions of political action. Neither is it “the *only* foundational concept we can trust in looking for an alternative politics” (page 415, emphasis in original). Signified by words such as ‘person’, ‘individual’, and ‘social movements’ are the noncorporeal aspects of labourers. It is only, according to Harvey, by looking at this dimension of the labouring class that we can fully understand how agents interpret their worlds and strategize for particular types of change.

Wright’s work addresses the body somewhat less directly than that of Callard or Harvey, but it pivots on the issue of whether or not Marxism and poststructuralism can be fruitfully integrated. In her “Manifesto against femicide”, Wright (2001) deliberately conflates the Marxist and the colloquial notion of value in order to demonstrate the relationship between managerial discourse about maquila workers—as not worth the resources to train—and the popular discourse about these women—as not worth the resources to protect. Wright’s project is to offer national and international organizations, especially labour unions, a new perspective on their options for protecting female labourers in Ciudad Juarez. Whereas union organizing has not been popular among the maquila workers, citywide campaigns demanding that more attention and more civic resources be allocated to investigating and ending violence against women have. If, speculates Wright, organizations such as the Casa Amiga rape and sexual assault center are organizing against the notion of the disposable woman, will this not also have positive repercussions in the maquiladora? If such an impact can be expected,

ought not the unions interested in improving the lot of these women (economically, socially) work alongside and with local feminist organizations?

In making her case, Wright invokes both Marx and Butler. Noting the existence of some bad blood between Marxism and poststructuralism, and drawing on the feminist poststructuralist critique of the centrality of class as the locus of experience within Marxism, Wright suggests that what the two share is a belief that matter is always produced. Butler's argument that discourse produces the bodies that appear to us as stable and natural is marshaled to the task of considering how the managerial discourse of disposability produces Mexican women as "waste in the making" (2001, page 561) Wright argues that the challenge to the discourse of worthlessness beyond the maquiladora can be a wrench in an economic machine that requires, as constant input, undervalued female labour.

The production of bodies; the production of difference

Historical materialism 1

Even in its most modest form, historical materialism suggests two ways in which bodies are produced. Humans, as Marx and Engels put it, "must be in a position to live in order to 'make history'" (1970, page 48). In order to be in a position to live, they must attend to their basic needs (food, clothing, shelter, etc). However historically and geographically variable these needs may be, there is, according to Marx, only one method of securing them. Without *labour*, "a necessary condition, independent of all forms of society, for the existence of the human race ... there can be no material exchanges between man and Nature, and therefore no life" (1967, page 50). Importantly, it is through these exchanges, through metabolizing nature, that the body is produced: by "acting on the external world and changing it, [man] at the same time changes his own nature" (page 173). Despite the dramatic descriptions of men and women being transformed by the enormous industrial devices to which they are tethered, the body is, for Marx, a thing 'in production' from time immemorial. It is shaped by all sensuous activity aimed at reproducing life, by all *labour* in the most basic sense of the word.

The human body interacts with nature not on its own, however, but in concert with other bodies. Thus we must consider not only how the always-hypothetical, single atomized body transforms and is transformed by nature, but how bodies transform and are transformed by the social relations of production they share. Again, Marx's examples come from the factory: the means of production—dead labour and dead nature—with which the labourer works under the capitalist mode of production "employ the labourer ... They consume him as the ferment necessary to their own life-process" (1967, page 294). This consumption of the labourer is enabled, as we have seen in Harvey and Callard's texts, by a division of labour which forces the labourer to perform a single operation repeatedly, thus converting "his whole body into the automatic, specialised implement" (page 321) and mutilating him "into a fragment of a man ... an appendage of a machine" (page 604). Cooperating together, labourers fulfill particular functions for the greater collective labouring body; they are the 'special organs' of a single organism (page 328). But, although Marx's examples are again drawn from his own spatial and temporal moment, his basic argument is that *every* mode of production—that is, every *social* formation aimed at reproducing itself—produces bodies particular to it. The capitalist mode of production as it existed in Marx's time and place produced the bodies he describes in the pages of *Capital*. A different mode of production would, according to historical materialism, produce different bodies.

Sameness and difference 1

What types of bodies, then, does the capitalist mode of production produce? It is a relatively central tenet of Marxism, particularly well tended to by geographers, that capitalism produces a particular, and particularly dynamic, spatial pattern. As Harvey (1999) and Neil Smith (1984) have demonstrated, capital manages two opposing tendencies in its spatial expansion: one toward *equalization* (of, say, the conditions of production, especially the wage–labour relation and the universalization of value as a form of abstract labour) and the other toward *differentiation*. Different spaces are produced, initially, because the extraction of surplus requires that a portion of capital be fixed in the landscape, at least for a time. Invariably, however, because of the tendency of the rates of profit to fall, a built environment profitable at a given moment will cease to be profitable and new spatial or temporal fixes will have to be sought in order to pursue accumulation and stave off crises. Space, then, is more than capital's vehicle for expansion. Without its constant production, destruction, and reproduction, capital could neither accrue surplus value nor escape the damning logic of its internal contradictions.

What is frequently left out of this narrative is that the continual differentiation of spaces from one another—uneven development—is *always also* the differentiation of bodies from one another. The division of space is incomprehensible without the division of labour. Marx and Engels (1970, page 69) illustrate this simultaneous production of difference with the case of the separation between town and country:

“The antagonism between town and country can only exist within the framework of private property. It is the most crass expression of the subjugation of the individual under the division of labor, under a definite activity forced upon him—a subjection which makes one man into a restricted town-animal, the other into a restricted country-animal, and daily creates anew the conflict between their interests.”

Just as capital must designate certain spaces for certain purposes, so too must it designate certain bodies for certain tasks. Marx's description of the labourer whose body is given over to a single, highly specific task is broadly analogous to a description of a plantation or industrial park, the spaces of which are given over exclusively to a particular type of production. There are important differences, of course, between the production of bodies and the production of spaces, not least of which is the body's qualified mobility and elasticity—attributes that allow it to mediate between capital's mobility and the built environment's immobility. My purpose here is simply to draw attention to the suggestive similarity between these two processes as a potential starting point for more nuanced explorations of this terrain.

Taking the coevolutionary relationship between bodies and spaces seriously, we could, for example, explore the possibility that just as a dual tendency—toward equalization and differentiation—is operative in the production of space, so it is in the production of bodies. As the commodity structure of production spreads throughout the globe, ever more bodies fall into a wage relation that casts them as members of a broadly defined proletariat: this internationalization of the *relations* of production is inherent in the internationalization of the capitalist *mode* of production (see Glassman, 1999).⁽²⁾ It is not necessary to rehearse here the details of the “conquest,

⁽²⁾ To be sure, in what Nancy Fraser (1997) has called the postsocialist era, we are not accustomed to thinking of bodies in such an apparently reductive manner. If we follow Harvey in thinking of class expansively, however, we can interpret the word ‘proletariat’ as implying simply those who are *within* the capitalist system but who are *without* ownership of the means of production. However internally differentiated they may be, those who belong in this category, this class, all share the dual ‘freedom’ to which Marx mockingly alluded. The international bourgeoisie is similarly stratified and is no less important to the effective functioning of capitalism (see Ahmad, 2004; Glassman, 1999).

enslavement, robbery, murder” (Marx, 1967, page 688) through which entry into wage relations everywhere takes place. For our purpose, what matters is that the process of dispossessing people from their means of production and rendering them free to sell their labour—so-called primitive accumulation—dissolves many of the old hierarchies and bonds between persons, *equalizing* them nominally if not actually (Callard, 1998, page 397; Harvey, 1998, page 407). To be sure, certain hierarchies remain, and are given new life by the capitalist system and bourgeois rule, but others, such as the feudal relationship, and many locally specific, communal arrangements, are destroyed.

If bodies are resolved into classes in this way—rendered interchangeable equivalents just as use value is rendered exchange value—how are they then differentiated from one another? It is clear that the capitalist mode of production can recruit existing, which is not to say necessarily natural, differences between bodies to its service. As Marx (1967, page 334) writes, the division of labour seizes upon “not only the economic, but every other sphere of society, and everywhere lays the foundation of that all engrossing system of specializing and sorting men”. Moreover, if the division between town bodies and country bodies was the most ‘crass’ example of the differential production of bodies, it was not, even for these men who lived in the 19th century like fish in water, the first. According to Engels (1972), for whom the modern family is founded on “the open or concealed domestic slavery of the wife” (page 137), the division of labour between the sexes is the prototype for all subsequent divisions of labour under capitalism. Although this division of labour predates capitalism, it cannot, as any number of socialist feminists has argued, be understood in isolation from it (Eisenstein, 1979; Mies, 1991; Walby, 1989). For examples of how racial categories received new life under capitalism we might look to Robin Blackburn’s (1997) argument that the modern form of racialization has its origins in the Atlantic slave trade (see also Scott, 2002) or to David Roediger’s (1991) suggestion that the consolidation of working-class identity in America is historically indissoluble from the formation of white identity. Just as the equalization of bodies fulfills certain systemic needs, so too does their differentiation. Differently marked bodies can be enlisted to perform different functions at different rates of remuneration—crucial for the competitive pursuit of capital accumulation. And the perpetuation of difference ensures the fracturing of interests among those who—however else they may be distinguished—share a common history of disinheritance.

Taking the space–body analogy a step further, we could argue that just as new spatial arrangements are sought once older ones cease to be profitable so too are new bodily relations sought. This scarcely merits illustration. The factory left to decay in Mexico when production moves to China has, as its bodily correlate, a mass of former Mexican employees who must scramble to find another source of income, as well as the Chinese workers who, at twenty cents an hour, are simultaneously the winners and losers of such a macabre game. We might even argue, following on the heels of Smith’s argument about capital’s production of scale, that capital’s reorganization of bodies involves them being located, not only in particular spaces, but also in particular scales. Consider the ebb and flow of North American women into and out of the factory during the 20th century. Respectable and patriotic during the First World War, women’s formal employment came to be viewed as selfish and unbecoming during the Depression, a pattern that would repeat itself in the course of the Second World War. In addition to raising issues about the correlation between social mores and the needs of the political-economic system, this pattern demonstrates that bodies located in one scale of production—in this case, household production and social reproduction—can be ushered, when necessary, into another. Like bodies located in underdeveloped spaces, bodies located in other scales can also be the *outsiders*—the

reserve army—necessary for the temporary resolution of capital’s crises. In both cases it seems clear that if spatial and scalar differentiation is not incidental but integral to capital’s expansion, so too is bodily differentiation.

But what exactly do we understand by bodily differentiation? Because in much poststructuralist theorizing the body as a nexus of social relations *is* the material body (understood as an effect of discourse), I have thus far resisted the task of pulling these apart. A historical materialist account of the body, however, can and must distinguish between the two. According to the logic I have traced above, as a result of uneven development and the division of labour, differently marked persons and persons located in different spaces and scales are enlisted to perform different types of labour. Different types of labour transform the body in different ways. Workers lose limbs, digits, fingernails, eyes; they develop repetitive strain injuries, respiratory diseases, skin diseases, diseases from exposure to asbestos, pesticides, and other hazardous substances. Equally material are the transformations of the body that take place beyond the workplace which owe their existence not to a type of work but to a worker’s location within the nexus of social relations⁽³⁾—relations which include uneven development and the division of labour as well as structural factors such as racism and patriarchy. Income, access to healthcare and education, environmental racism, etc are all, like occupational injury and disease, factors that *shape* bodies, and frequently in ways that are both deleterious and indelible. Thus, although the historical materialist body contains, like the poststructuralist body, “multiple and fluid possibilities of differential embodiment” (Shildrick and Price, 1999, page 12) these ‘possibilities’ are not always as enabling as Margrit Shildrick and Janet Price’s language suggests. Labour and social relations can produce, out of the fluid body, an irreversibly harmed body: out of the body flexible enough to wrestle machinery on the factory floor emerges the body with nine fingers; out of a changeable body capable of being now obese now emaciated emerges the body that will never shed its relationship to diabetes, as well as the body that can never recover from delayed neurological development.

Insofar as both uneven development and the division of labour are essential features of the capitalist mode of production, then, the social differentiation between bodies is equally essential. And, insofar as socially differentiated bodies perform different types of concrete labour, and occupy different locations in the nexus of social relations, their corporeal differentiation is inevitable. Thus, although the production of corporeal difference, unlike the production of social difference, is not a structural necessity of the capitalist mode of production, it is no less an *effect* of it. It matters not a whit, in other words, from the vantage point of accumulation, that it should be Third World women, rather than First World men, who are, because of the conditions under which they perform their agricultural work, “particularly vulnerable to communicable diseases, such as work-related malaria, hepatitis, schistosomiasis ... and other bacterial, viral and vector-borne diseases” (International Labour Organization, 2005, page 11). But although it is not a structural necessity that these women get malaria, their malaria is no less an effect of their work and work conditions—these last *translate* social differences into corporeal differences—and, as a result, their bodies are no less capable of divulging the capitalist mode of production’s secrets. For materialists, too, then, the body can be a revelatory artifact. As Deborah Leslie and David Butz (1998, page 372) demonstrate in their study of the corporeal effects of increasingly lean production at General Motors facilities in St Catharines, Ontario, “layers of injury”

⁽³⁾ I use the phrase ‘social relations’ here not in the limited sense of social relations of production but in the more general sense of the totality of systemic relations in which groups and actors are embedded.

inscribe onto the working body the “phases and places of restructuring”. And, if relations of production are scratched onto the body in this way, Marxists are wise to aspire to become, like poststructuralists, students of the body.

My purpose in this section has been neither to claim that the capitalist mode of production is exclusively or even primarily accountable for differences between bodies nor to construct an argument about the preeminence of class as a category of identity.⁽⁴⁾ Rather, my purpose has been to suggest that, under the capitalist mode of production, although bodies can be differentiated from one another with the help of sexual, racial, or other hierarchies they can also be differentiated simply by virtue of their being condemned to exist in space and scale. Although both the method of differentiation between spaces—bodies and the corporeal effects of differentiation may be contingent, the production of difference, the differential valuation of bodies in different spaces and scales, is inherent to the capitalist mode of production, *as* inherent as the constant production and reproduction of spatial difference. Just as capitalism requires the ability to leverage different spaces against one other, so too does it appear to require the ability to leverage different bodies—all of which have been equalized just enough to be vulnerable to differentiation—against one another. Capitalism’s differentiation of bodies from one another is not merely a historical fact, though it is also that, but a structural necessity of this mode of production.⁽⁵⁾

Marxism and the naturally existing body

Sameness and difference 2

There are good reasons to avoid unironic discussions of the natural. Although constructionism—see David Demeritt (2002) on the distinction between constructionism and constructivism—is something of a default position in the social sciences and the humanities, with many otherwise conservative scholars readily admitting that talk of the purely natural makes dangerous, irresponsible, and inadmissible scholarship, there remain those for whom nature holds the key to understanding the differences between men and women (see Thornhill and Palmer, 2000), as between the ‘races’. Beyond the academy, ideas about nature retain their purchase and have, as Noel Castree has recently put it, “powerful worldly effects” (2004, page 192). The temptation to avoid the possibility of inadvertently shoring up dubious and harmful claims by steering perfectly clear of all talk of the natural is understandable. Still, arguments are not wrong just because they are susceptible to manipulation and abuse, and we would be remiss to avoid holding ideas up to scrutiny, which means taking them seriously, out of

⁽⁴⁾ See Robyn Dowling (1999) on the importance of considering the classed body.

⁽⁵⁾ Indeed, the arguments in *The Limits to Capital* (Harvey, 1999) and *Uneven Development* (Smith, 1984) are defensible, it seems to me, not only because they explain a phenomenon (unevenness) that is blatantly manifest but because Harvey and Smith *do not* claim to explain this unevenness in any way that might be considered exhaustive. Unevenness is the product not only of the tendencies of the capitalist mode of production but also of other social institutions and practices (states, organized religion, the hegemony of the family, racism, heteronormativity, patriarchy) all of which may oscillate between enabling and frustrating the designs of capital, or else may enable some aspects of capital (particular sectors of the economy, for example) at the expense of others. That Harvey and Smith largely refrain, in these ‘early works’, from theorizing the way that capital works through and with other social and historical institutions both ensures the enduring importance of these works and demarcates the absolute limits of their ability to reflect actually existing social relations. In order for the theory of uneven development to proximate the world we inhabit, it must be accompanied by work that examines the history, not just the tendency, of unevenness. Their more recent offerings (Harvey, 2003; Smith, 2003) examine how uneven development, capitalism’s *tendency*, interacts with some of the historical institutions, principally the state, with which it must negotiate.

fear of endorsing the uses to which they can be put. We would be more remiss still to avoid considering these ideas in deference to an academic fashion. For Marxists, disowning the natural body cannot come prior to engaging with the space it occupies in the history of Marxist thought. Although it is true, as we have seen, that historical materialism implies the constant production of bodies, it remains the case that there are several natural bodies in the Marxist closet. A handful of examples will suffice to make this point.

Proceeding backwards in time, we have, first, Susan Buck-Morss's insistence on the link between the senses and politics.

"The aesthetic to me is a fundamentally cognitive experience. It is how the body senses reality, and I mean this in a rather animalistic, even biological sense. I know it is improper to say so, but this bodily experience is *not* always, already culturally mediated" (1997, page 37 emphasis in original).

For Buck-Morss, the body is fundamental to any understanding of aesthetics and as such it is also a potential source of radical emancipatory politics. Drawing on Terry Eagleton (1990) and on the 18th-century German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten, Buck-Morss reminds us that despite the contemporary association of the term 'aesthetics' with the trinity of art, beauty, and truth, in its original formulation it named the relationship between the sensing body and the perceptible world. The aesthetic organs are thus constituted by more than the discriminating eye and ear combination that we usually associate with 'taste'; they are constituted by all five senses, the nervous system, and the brain. Nor has this sensing body been totally overwhelmed by its acculturation. Buck-Morss writes (1992, page 6): "the senses maintain an uncivilized and uncivilizable trace ... because their immediate purpose is to serve instinctual needs—for warmth, nourishment, safety, sociability." The continued relevance of these instinctual needs—and the desire for *survival* that they assert—constitutes, for Buck-Morss, the source of the body's political trustworthiness: even if the body does not know exactly what is good for it, it can be trusted to know what is anathema to it.

A second example is Norman Geras's (1983) study of the concept of human nature in Marx's writing.⁽⁶⁾ Geras argues that, although Marx is well known for emphasizing the contingency and mutability of social and economic relations, he did not deny the existence of *some* universal human needs and powers. Geras challenges the idea, popularized by Louis Althusser, that, by the time of his *Theses on Feuerbach*, the mature Marx finally parted company with his younger self's naïve visions of human nature. He argues that throughout Marx's writings human nature has both an explanatory and a normative value. Nor are human needs, for Marx, restricted to the very basics outlined by Buck-Morss. Geras unearths, in Marx's oeuvre, the need for other human beings, for sexual relations, for circumstances conducive to health, for personal development. Though Sean Sayers (1998) places himself at odds with Geras by stressing the *historical* development of human needs and powers, he concedes that humans have certain basic needs, turning the dispute into one over whether first nature can be distinguished from second nature. Geras anticipates this argument and counters it by pointing out that, if we dismissed every concept that we could not isolate in pure form, we "would be left with no concepts or distinctions in face, simply, of 'the totality'" (1983, page 115). It does not follow from the fact that human nature is nowhere separate from social and cultural mediations (or, we might add, from the fact that

⁽⁶⁾ Of course, human nature and the natural body are not reducible to one another. Because human nature is generally imagined as being located in the body, and because both the natural body and human nature imply certain innate and universal human attributes, I have chosen to include Geras in this section.

we cannot know it without constructing it) that it has no life apart from these social and cultural mediations.

Third, reaching even further back, we run into Sebastiano Timpanaro's (1975) bold call for a reaffirmation of materialism. Timpanaro's essays reflect an anxiety about the tendency for Marxists, notably the descendents of the Frankfurt School theorists and of Althusser, to view the natural sciences as symptoms of bourgeois philosophy, even while they court psychoanalysis, which he saw as laden with ideology. Like Engels, whom he sees as unfairly sidelined among Marxists, Timpanaro emphasizes the links between historical materialism and biological materialism. Nature continues to condition humans, he argues, and the biological character of humans must not be relegated to human prehistory but must be investigated seriously. Conceding that there are risks in importing all scientific doctrines, Timpanaro (1975, page 15) insists that "pseudo-materialism", such as racist theories, "must be fought with a scientifically founded materialism and not with a return to antediluvian forms of voluntaristic spiritualism."

The fourth and final example⁽⁷⁾ of a Marxist for whom the natural body was profoundly significant is Herbert Marcuse. Throughout his writing, Marcuse considers how nature, both human and external, is channeled into the service of the dominant socioeconomic system and how it might be an ally against exploitation (see Marcuse, 1955; 1972). Importing some of Sigmund Freud's depth psychology, particularly his theories on life and death instincts, and emphasizing the role of the senses in forming political consciousness, Marcuse insists that these human irreducibles will guarantee our eventual refusal to be brutally exploited and brutally reduced to a one-dimensional existence by the capitalist system. The key to human emancipation lies in removing from the senses the thick layers of complacency and dullness that the system has imposed:

"The development of a radical nonconformist sensibility assumes vital political importance in view of the unprecedented extent of social control perfected by advanced capitalism: a control which reaches down into the instinctual and physiological level of existence. Conversely, resistance and rebellion too, tend to activate and operate on this level" (Marcuse, 1972, pages 62–63).

With this statement we return full circle to Buck-Morss's (1997, page 40) more sanguine but otherwise similar argument that "Cultural meanings are sensed bodily as being wrong". She goes on: "If we were in fact always, already produced by our respective cultures, how could it ever come into our mind to resist them?"

Historical materialism 2

Although the scholars cited above are putting forth arguments that are, in important ways, distinct, even conflicting (consider Marcuse's use of the very psychoanalysis that Timpanaro deplors), I want to draw attention to one suggestive commonality. Both Geras and Timpanaro are interested in considering the limits that the natural places on humans, and both Buck-Morss and Marcuse see the natural as—in part *because* of these limits in particular those imposed by the inescapability of certain bodily needs and aversions—a potentially reliable source of radical politics. Where I earlier suggested that needs, or rather the imperative of their satisfaction, implied bodies as perpetually produced through labour, it now seems that needs and aversions may suggest precisely what presupposes production and possibly what portends the destruction of a mode of a particular production.

⁽⁷⁾ A more exhaustive list would have to include Henri Lefebvre and Jean-Paul Sartre, as well as phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, with whom Marxist scholars concerned with the body have productively engaged.

In light of the centrality of human needs and aversions for these scholars, it behoves us to look again at what historical materialism has to say about the natural body. Before doing so, however, I want to add one more Marxist theorist to the mix. The work of Georg Lukács suggests that we can make the case for a Marxist engagement with the natural body by looking to a theorist for whom this body was not an object of inquiry. Lukács is also useful to the present discussion, however, because, insofar as it rests on irreducible human needs and aversions, his account of emancipation shares a certain family resemblance with those hinted at above. He is unique, however, in explicitly elaborating the role of a social collective in emancipation. Because the very two dimensions of historical materialism that I used to evince the produced nature of bodies—the pursuit of survival and the *social* nature of human life—reappear in Lukács’s formula for emancipation, he will return us all the more powerfully and probingly to our point of departure.

Lukács (1968, page 83) opens his essay on “Reification and the Consciousness of the proletariat”—the crowning chapter of his classic *History and Class Consciousness*—with the decree that the problem of commodities be understood not as a problem of economics, but as “the central, structural problem of capitalist society in all its aspects”. The commodity structure’s qualitative dominance of production sets in motion, according to Lukács, the totalizing tendencies that extend the fragmented and rationalized nature of the proletariat’s work to the whole of society. “The specialization of skills”, he writes, “leads to the destruction of every image of the whole” (page 103). Just as no one is excluded from occupying a position in the economic structure, neither is anyone excluded from sharing in the attendant ideology of the structure.⁽⁸⁾ As Marx describes it:

“The propertied class and the class of the proletariat present the same human alienation. But the former class finds in this self-alienation its confirmation and its good, *its own power*: it has in it a *semblance* of humane existence. The class of the proletariat feels annihilated in its self-alienation; it sees in it its own powerlessness and the reality of an inhuman existence” (Marx and Engels, 1956, page 51, emphasis in original).

The problems of consciousness arising from wage labour, writes Lukács (1968, page 100), are repeated in the ruling class “in a refined and spiritualised, but, for that very reason, more intensified form”. It is the *brutality* of the labourer’s work that ensures that he will remain opposed to it, “able to objectify himself completely against his existence” (page 172). Emancipation, according to Lukács, depends upon conditions of life and work that are so odious that the proletariat’s realization of his situation—“slavery without limits” (page 166)—is “a matter of life or death” (page 164): a matter of survival. Unlike the members of the bourgeoisie the revolutionary proletariat does not draw conclusions about its existence with recourse to philosophy or by imagining its subjectivity. The proletariat, *as a class*, experiences its objectification viscerally and thus comes to understand the entire capitalist system as “[the proletariat] is itself nothing but the contradictions of history that have become conscious” (page 178).⁽⁹⁾ This consciousness, Lukács continues, is not knowledge of an external object but the self-knowledge of the object. It is in becoming conscious of itself that the objectified proletariat ceases to be an object and becomes the subject of history.

⁽⁸⁾ This idea compares neatly with Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s (1988, page 137) notion that “amusement under late capitalism is the prolongation of work”, though they finger the mechanization of the labour process rather than the dominance of the commodity structure.

⁽⁹⁾ All three of the geographers referenced at the outset of this paper uncover in Marxism supposedly contemporary ideas about the body—that it is produced (Wright), porous (Harvey), and cyborgian (Callard). With Lukács we see clearly the Marxist roots of standpoint theory, the notion that the oppressed have a privileged insight into the system that oppresses them.

It will no doubt seem to the reader that I have, in choosing to excavate evidence of the natural in Lukács's writing, stacked the decks somewhat. It is not unimportant that Lukács was a Hegelian Marxist, and that his early works, including *History and Class Consciousness* (1968), bear a deep affinity with Marx's own decidedly humanist early writings.⁽¹⁰⁾ Indeed, it is precisely Lukács's intellectual proximity to Marx that make his writing the ideal vehicle for seeing historical materialism anew. Even if we chose to jettison Lukács's vision of human emancipation as irredeemably idealist and as simply too antiquated to be of any practical use, the implicit invocation of the natural body therein merits our attention if for no other reason than the fact that it is an inversion of the discussion of historical materialism and the body above. These apparently oppositional readings enable the dialectical insight that the very dimensions of the historical materialist understanding of history that evince bodies as produced—the satisfaction of needs and their satisfaction in concert—are the ones that point to what prefigures production. By averring that humans, in procuring from their surroundings what they need to survive, change their own nature, Marx is confirming that bodies are produced through labour; but, by insisting that humans must be in a position to live before they can create history, Marx is also insisting that humans have basic, non-negotiable needs that they must and will pursue in order to survive. Similarly, Marx describes how the mode of production—the social organization of labour—transforms bodies, but in doing so the *social nature* of the organization of human existence is presupposed.⁽¹¹⁾ The pursuit of survival via the satisfaction of needs and the social nature of all human life are, if nothing else, the steady ground atop of which all change takes place: the transhistorical basis of human history.

Conclusion

In excavating evidence of body production in Marxism, geographers have quickly traversed what was assumed to be a great distance between Marxism and poststructuralism. In the first half of this paper my aim was to contribute to this effort. After suggesting that the notion of bodies as produced is latent in historical materialism, I advocated that Marxists use scholarship on the production of space under the capitalist mode of production in order to theorize the production of bodies. In the second half of this paper I suggested that there is, in Marxism, a legacy of both explicit and implicit references to natural aspects of the body. These references signal the existence of an as yet untraversed gulf separating Marxist and poststructuralist notions of the body. Is this a gulf we want to cross? Whether and how we might do so remain to be worked out. To be sure, one way that this gulf might be bridged would be for Marxist scholars to disown any notion of the natural in *their* Marxism. The natural, it might with some justification be argued, promises rewards too paltry for the risks it entails, to say nothing of it being too unfashionably modernist. By way of conclusion, I would like to suggest two reasons for avoiding this route, and for taking seriously Marxist notions of the natural *as well as* of the produced body. To be clear, my argument is not that we necessarily accept tout court this heterogeneous Marxist legacy, but that we consider it and the implications of abandoning it.

The first reason for taking the legacy of the natural body in Marxism seriously is simply that the reasons *not to* are unsound and threaten to forestall important

⁽¹⁰⁾ Interestingly, *History and Class Consciousness* was published a decade before Marx's *1844 Manuscripts* (see Jay, 1984, page 102).

⁽¹¹⁾ Not only is the communal nature of human beings evident in Marx's early works, but it is not abandoned in *Capital*, despite several publishers' omission of the words 'von Natur' from a passage implying that humans are *naturally* social (Nitsch, 1992).

academic and political discussions. Just as theories are not invalid because of the lengths to which they may be taken, neither are they invalid because they are, on some personal level, dissatisfying. There seems to me, moreover, no inherent reason for privileging the convergence of epistemologies over their divergence, particularly when divergence is such a reliable guarantor of perceptive observation and critique. Loitering outside the gates of poststructuralist antinaturalism may provide us with a perspective on the current disavowal of the natural body that those on the inside cannot access (much in the same way that those at the borders of Marxism can see the theoretical lacunae and missteps in Marxist theorizing to which Marxists may be blind). Pheng Cheah's (1996, page 108) question, "If it is so obviously precritical to treat human existence as given, then why does antinaturalism need to be articulated again and again?", is meant to suggest the tenacity of the natural in the face of the constant barrage of refutations it is dealt, but it can also be read as an invitation to historicize these refutations. Why *is* antinaturalism being articulated again and again? Why here? Why now?⁽¹²⁾ Surely, the scholar with professional investments in antinaturalism will have the hardest time posing, much less answering, these kinds of questions.

Although the benefits of reading theories against one another are great, there is a definite cost associated with their too premature integration. Consider the following statements:

"most geographers have read and deployed performativity uncritically, in ways that both foreclose an interrogation of its more problematic aspects and constrain their own analyses By not reading performativity critically, they inject an under-theorized and often problematic notion of agency into their work" (Nelson, 1999, pages 331 – 332).

"Geographers who have worked with psychoanalysis have tended to do so in a way that has downplayed or avoided what I see as the most troubling, and thus for me important, implications of Freud's thought. This is largely because uses of psychoanalytic theory in geography have tended to render psychoanalysis compatible with other theoretical axiomatics currently dominating social and cultural geography" (Callard, 2003, page 299).

For both Lise Nelson and Callard, foremost among the hazards of annexing concepts from beyond one's discipline or epistemology is the tendency to accept precisely what one likes about a given concept without attending to its less palatable dimensions. Interestingly, Timpanaro's critique of the Frankfurt School is trenchant here. Timpanaro lamented the willingness of Marxist scholars to accept psychoanalysis *at the level of findings* without interrogating whether it was, *at the level of first principles* or assumptions, compatible with historical materialism (see, for a discussion, Williams, 1980). Callard, Wright, and Harvey avoid this pitfall by finding body production among Marxism's first principles. Their work, however, and I hope my own, raises important issues about the project of integrating Marxism and poststructuralism. Can we use conclusions at the level of findings without accepting the assumptions on which such conclusions are based? Do we invariably forsake what is truly radical and distinct about a theory when we incorporate it? How might we marry theories, and otherwise

⁽¹²⁾ Could contemporary theoreticians' attempts to banish the natural body be, like the anorectic's attempt to banish hunger, an "overdetermined *symptom* of some of the multifaceted and heterogeneous distresses of our age" (Bordo, 1997, page 426, emphasis in original)? Frederic Jameson (2003) has suggested that the proliferation of academic writing on the body is part of a more general 'reduction to the body' which, along with its temporal equivalent—'reduction to the present'—is a cultural effect of late capitalism.

promote their development, without compromising their integrity? Insofar as the refusal to face up to the heterogeneous Marxist writing on the natural body is symptomatic of an anxious desire to seal the gap between Marxism and poststructuralism, it is antithetical to these sorts of issues and, crucially, to the discovery of incompatible assumptions. *Compatible* assumptions and findings give us a map of the land, but it is only *incompatible* assumptions that, at the risk of taking the metaphor too far, can reveal the impassable lakes and streams, forcing us to decide exactly where we want to stand.

If the first reason for taking evidence of the natural in the Marxist corpus seriously is that not doing so would close off conversation, the second reason is that not doing so may alienate us from the insights it offers. As I have stated, my primary goal in the latter half of this paper was to encourage consideration of Marxist theories of the natural body, rather than to advocate for any particular theory. In the process of excavating Marxist theories of the natural, however, it was possible to advance a modest argument about historical materialism and the body, namely, that the body, while constantly in production, cannot escape two ahistorical conditions—the fact of needs and aversions, and the social nature of their transcendence. What can an understanding of these conditions contribute to radical praxis? It is beyond the scope of this paper to offer more than speculative answers to this question.

While Lukács's formula for human emancipation pivots on a punctual moment of self-realization that looks eerily like idealism, his central insight—which is also Marx and Engels's—that the oppressed *collective* represents a threat to the capitalist mode of production may be well be a message that merits airing at the present moment. It is not, after all, Mikhail Bakhtin's classical body, "the radiant centre of transcendental individualism", which is threatening to the social order, but his grotesque body, the body that is "multiple, teeming, always already part of a throng" (Stallybrass and White, 1986, page 21). It is the dominance of the collective (as well as the dominance of the female) that, as C S Lewis (1955) once observed, makes the anthill and the beehive so unnerving. If this is the case, if the fractured nature of the broadly defined proletariat is a coup, how should we be talking and fighting? The idea that there are some, however modest, universal human attributes promises to answer the overwhelming emphasis on specificity and difference, audible as much in the elite space of academy⁽¹³⁾ as in the quotidian space of the shopping mall. It promises to foreground the possibility that the forces of bodily production, whatever they may be, produce not only *too few* human bodies—one 'normal' heterosexual male and one 'normal' heterosexual female—but also, altogether *too many*.

What can a recognition of universal bodily needs and aversions offer? Not only is the act of positing human needs indissoluble from political agendas, as Kate Soper (1981) soberly warns, but many materialist feminists have explicitly cautioned against locating the body-as-source-of-resistance *outside* the social because of the implications this has for activism and praxis (see Hennessy, 1993, page 45). But do we need to exorcize all references to the natural (and with it, the universal, the given, the transhistorical ...) in order to avoid body reductionism/engulfment? For Foucault (1977, page 153) "Nothing in man—not even his body—is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-recognition or for understanding other men." That the body is not

⁽¹³⁾ As an example of the privileging of individual forms of politics over mass forms, consider Grosz's (1994, page 18) critique of Haraway: "I find her work problematic because she has a certain kind of unreconstructed commitment to a Marxist notion of politics ... I am not saying that she produces a totalizing theory but her notion of politics involves a certain kind of mass movement which I find problematic and strongly anti-Deleuzian. I am interested in the individual rather than in the conformity of a political program to a mass movement."

by the fact of it being a body sympathetic to other bodies is borne out by history. But even if we can destroy other bodies without any grievance issuing from our own, it remains a fact that not even the smallest child needs to be taught how to inflict pain, and it is not, as Geras (1995, page 153) has put it, “on account of any special forms of acculturation, historically particular social structures or types of learned behaviour, that people generally do not want to die of starvation or disease ...”. Needs may be remarkably elastic, they may vary enormously through time and across space, but our bodies can never get used to certain types of privation and exposure. Can it be that there are no implications of this? Or is it possible that the utter consistency and inevitability of our needs and aversions make us vulnerable to exploitation and, thus, to differentiation? Why is the labourer, after all, trapped in the wage relation? The gradual erasure of other modes of subsistence is only part of the answer. In fact, if the labourer did not have to meet certain needs for his or her own reproduction, his or her ‘freedom’ to sell his or her labour power would not be an ironic freedom at all. Marx’s phrase is ironic to the exact extent that the notion of being free to starve is ironic.⁽¹⁴⁾ A recognition of the role that bodily needs and aversions play in our exploitation need not—*ought not*—imply a descent into the antipolitical ‘consoling play of recognitions’ that Foucault warns against. It can prompt us not to conclude that the body is already a basis for emancipation but to ask how it might be made into one.

A historical materialist account of the body that recognizes the natural need not privilege sameness over difference or even redistribution over recognition. What such an account does instead is force us to explore how sameness makes us vulnerable to exploitation and differentiation, and how *both of these* can be harnessed to a project of emancipation—an emancipation that, far from abolishing difference, would hasten “a diversity founded on the far greater plurality and complexity of possible ways of living that any free community of equals, no longer divided by class, race or gender, would create” (Anderson, 1992, page 45). So long as we are within a system that demands constant differentiation along vertical rather than horizontal lines, redistribution can only ever be *redistribution*, recognition can only ever be *recognition*: welfarist correctives that displace the most noxious effects of inequity while masking its centrality. Better instead to dismantle the system that equalizes and differentiates so relentlessly, the system that must constantly revolutionize social relations if it is not to be undone by revolutionary social relations. For this task, we cannot afford to surrender any tools.

Acknowledgements. The author wishes to thank, for their critiques and their encouragement, Don Mitchell, Kanishka Goonewardena, Jamey Essex, Laam Hae, Matt Hannah, Tom Perreault, Tod Rutherford, Annie Simpson, Patrick Vitale, Gerry Pratt, and two anonymous reviewers.

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⁽¹⁴⁾ But just as the labourer is not truly free, neither is the capitalist; condemned to consume, if he or she is to survive, the only commodity that produces surplus value, the capitalist is as dependent on labour power as the labourer is on his or her wage. Thus, organized labour’s ‘answer’ to the capitalist mode of production’s erasure of alternative forms of subsistence is the attempt to erase the availability of extra-organized labour.

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