

How can a focus on 'the body' illuminate our understanding of power dynamics?

This essay will focus on the evolution of capitalism, and how the use of the human body has changed in each of these evolutionary stages. The reason the body is the clearest place to understand power dynamics under capitalism is due to there being no formalisation of power, no overt rituals that demonstrate the shift and possession of power. Thus, the way that the body is used and manipulated in order to gain and maintain economic independence in a capitalist society is demonstrative of the power dynamics that are in play. There are three stages of capitalism that are acknowledged in this essay, and thus there are three ways that the body can be used, from which power relations can be understood. These are, the industrial revolution and the mechanisation of labour, where although labour was mechanised, physical labour was commonplace and the primary position of the body was as an instrument of labour. Followed by consumer capitalism, where the body is used in labour, but the biggest profit is found in the perpetuation of consumerism. Lastly, 'Surveillance Capitalism' (Zuboff, 2019), is emerging as the latest evolutionary mutation, where the very nature of human experience is being commodified. The human body is an instrument in understanding the surrounding social and physical world. Power dynamics are constantly in play, and under the regime of capitalism they are becoming increasingly ambiguous; who has 'the' power, and who is affected by it? Due to the nature of power's formality in this society, it is often difficult to interpret the overall power dynamics that surround us, for example, Kertzer discusses in their book 'Ritual, Politics and Power', there is no formal and easily identifiable shift and possessor of power. 'Through political ritual, we are given a way to understand what is going on in the world, [...]' (Kertzer, 1988, p.2). Due to the ambiguity of power, the body is the canvas from which power dynamics are painted and can be expressed and seen, due to the ways in which power uses and utilises the body under capitalism. Although the body has always been used in Capitalism as a source of power and within power dynamics, the ways in which this is being done is shifting, and becoming less blatant. This essay will be arguing that it is due to the subtlety of power in capitalism, which allows for the adoption of false consciousness, which unless acknowledged and used (for example, Bourdieu, 1984 'The Body as Capital') results in the power dynamics remaining heavily one-sided.

The oldest way that the body has been used is labour. Labour does not have to be forced for it to be subject to unequal power dynamics. Following the industrial revolution, the use of the body increased despite the mechanisation of labour, as many worked in factories, and the position of the body only as a form of labour began to grow increasingly apparent. The position of the proletariat was clear in the work and social position, likewise for members of the Bourgeoisie, power dynamics between the two at the time of Marx's writing was clear and defined, something which is becoming increasingly untrue with every mutation of capitalism. Interestingly, it was the increase in living wages and humane working conditions, combined with technological advancement that meant the use of the human body was less profitable through labour, but was increasingly lucrative through consumption. Increased disposable income and greater output of materials meant that the human body was more useful as a site of consumption, if only the human body could be made to desire...Structural violence, it can be argued, is the result of capitalism, (and now exasperated by Neo Liberalism). Structural violence is the theory that inequality is institutionalised, and embedded in society. Thus, structural violence highlights the power dynamics present in the current class system, and it is interesting to understand the ways in which the body can be used by victims of structural violence to manipulate their identity creation through consumerism. This is dependent upon the opportunities that are available to each person individually, (Galtung, 1969). Using the example of boxers, Howson highlights the way that the physical body can be used to gain economic and social prestige in consumerism. In this way the body is the vessel through which ontology is experienced and expressed, and the experience of being a young working class man who uses the

power structures presented to him through structural violence to gain a fit and lean body to be used in boxing, is demonstrative of how the body is a canvas upon which the results of power dynamics can be expressed, and thus seen. (Howson, 2013, pp. 124-125). It should be acknowledged that the ability to use the body to accommodate social and economic success in structural violence does not denature the power dynamics of the system, it is simply demonstrative of the fluidity of power.

Although the physical labour of the body is still used in a system and structure of relationships which perpetuates a myriad of power relations in contemporary society, capitalism has evolved slightly. Now that the physical use of the human body has met its peak, the emotions of the body are being used as a benefit to capitalist, it has evolved to be able to manipulate and monopolise emotion, creating what is now called a consumer society. Consumerism was first acknowledged by Thorstein Veblen in his 1899 book, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. Consumer culture as described by Howson (2013) is when more emphasis is placed upon consumption than production, and things are bought not for 'their 'use' value, but because of their desirability and the kind of statements they make about the consumer', (Howson, 2013, p.115). The way that the body illuminates power dynamics here is through its expression, and the manipulation of emotions from markets and advertisers. The focus of the general population has moved away from self-denial to self-indulgence according to Howson, (2013:115). An explanation for the success of consumer capitalism lies within this ability to form and invest in the commodification of emotion. The ability to capitalise on the anxieties and insecurities made from capitalism itself is remarkable. Howson explains that the consumption of goods and products is popular due to its ability to define the person that is consuming it. The object being advertised in such a way, that they create 'symbolic worlds', where the purchaser identifies with the 'narrative and lifestyle in which the product is embedded' (Howson, 2013, p. 131). 'Therefore, in advertising and other forms of visual imagery, meanings are generated by the way products are given a symbolic exchange value. Furthermore, the products themselves and the images through which they are represented come to define and reinforce a sense [...] of self [...]' (Howson, 2013, pp. 131-132). Thus, personal style and consumption becomes a form of expression, and due to the constantly changing and increasing amount of products, identity becomes unstable, this ' [...] instability contributes to how people think about themselves and leads them to actively construct identities as a way of establishing a degree of control over their lives'. (Howson, 2013, p.118). Thus, it is through the creation of anxieties formed from the instability of identity that emotion is monopolised through capitalism. The body illuminates power dynamics in this example, due to it being a place of expression, and the site upon which emotions can be manipulated to create capital. The presence of power dynamics here is clear when discussing manipulation from a birds-eye-view in academic language, however, the inability for most to acknowledge the way that their very feelings are being commodified means that the power is imbalanced and one-sided. It is through the understanding of the processes of consumerism that false consciousness can be lost. Bourdieu discusses this process when people use their own body as a form of capital, (Bourdieu 1984, Howson, 2013, p124). This highlights the way that the body can be used in consumerism, when '[t]he development of physical capital can be seen as a tradable asset', (Howson, 2013, p.124). Physical capital is described as the ability to earn money from the physical appearance of the body. More than using the body as labour, it is the act of forming the body into a consumable item. For example, those who earn '[...] a living [from] displaying and performing the body', (Howson, 2013, p.125) such as modelling. This is interesting, as it demonstrates a loss of false consciousness which alters the power dynamics in consumer capitalism, and means that the body is a conscious and interactive component to consumerism, not simply an object of exploitation.

The most recent mutation of capitalism is Surveillance Capitalism, (Zuboff, 2019). It can be argued that the economic movement of Neo-Liberalism has fed into the shift from consumer capitalism to

surveillance capitalism. Neo liberalism came about in the nineteen eighties under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's time in parliament and President Raegan's time in office. This movement was one towards private ownership, both in terms of business and people's personal lives; taking ownership and power away from state/ government. The impacts of this have been the changes in 'political and economic policy, it is associated with unrestrained free market and global capitalism', (Harvard, 2017, 0:00 – 0:15). Many of the principles of neo liberalism have not only fed into the behaviour of multinational corporations, but also legitimised their behaviour, as they have pathed the way for surveillance capitalism. Zuboff argues that surveillance capitalism differs from market capitalism (the two forms of capitalism that have been spoken of in this essay prior), in three ways; 'First, it insists on the privilege of unfettered freedom *and* knowledge. Second it abandons long-standing, organic reciprocities with people. Third, the spectre of life in the hive betrays a collectivist societal vision sustained by radical indifference and its material expression in Big Other' (Zuboff, 2019. P.495). This form of capitalism commodifies the very nature of human experience, by accumulating it as 'free raw material for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction and sales', (Zuboff, 2019). '[...] [S]urveillance is a foundational mechanism in the transformation of investment into profit.' (Zuboff, 2019, p.53). Zuboff argues that this is such a new and fast-paced phenomena that governmental programmes and laws have not caught up with it, and 'that, with the exception of a courageous cadre of legal scholars and technology-savvy activists, it has cunningly managed to evade our [(meaning public and political)] understanding and agreement.' (Zuboff, 2019, p.54) This suggests that unlike physical labour and consumerism, the power dynamics present in this relationship with the human body are not equal in any sense of the word. This is unlike any prior forms of capitalism in that it does not present itself in any way upon or with the human body. As afore mentioned, the power dynamics within capitalism are becoming more and more ambiguous. An interesting example of the way in which surveillance capitalism is influencing people is through the phenomena of Pokémon Go. '[...] [T]he most predictive data comes from actually intervening in our experience in the real world [...] and directing us in a particular direction – always out of our awareness'. (23:00 - 24:02) Pokémon Go was made by Google, and the location of the Pokémon in the game were bought by businesses who were promised a total foot-fall by Google. The predictions of surveillance capitalism seeks to manipulate the physical location of bodies, in an attempt to control spending behaviours. 'Pokémon Go was hosting its own behavioural futures market' (24:30 – 24:43). The body becomes an increasingly difficult tool to use in illuminating the power dynamics in society when the writer of the essay themselves has not yet lost their false consciousness in understanding surveillance capitalism. However, Pokémon Go is one example of the way that the body can be manipulated by capitalism.

In conclusion, the body can illuminate power dynamics in society, as it is the canvas upon which forms of power are expressed and played-out. The very fact that the body is a site of commodification and exploitation shows that it has a role in societal power dynamics. The individual dynamics of power have changed through the evolution of capitalism. Following industrialisation, the body was used primarily as a form of labour, however, with the rise of class consciousness and revolution, this changed to consumerism. The body then began to be used as a source of capital, through the manipulation of emotions to create a manufactured identity. In this context of capitalism the body could also be used as a form of capital in that the body itself can be consumed, this alters power dynamics and results in the taking back of power by individuals – although it should be acknowledged that the pressures of structural violence are still present. Following this is the evolution of consumer capitalism to surveillance capitalism, the process of which, it should be acknowledged, was due to the movement of Neo Liberalism in 1980s economic politics, which legalised the privatisation of business and pushed for trade on the free market. Surveillance

capitalism; where human experience is collected and sold through technological data, as well as the physical manipulation of bodily location through games such as Pokémon Go, which predicts the behaviours of individuals in order to generate capital. It can be argued that with every development of consciousness, power is shared more equally between people, or power dynamics are more cunningly hidden; and capitalism evolves. Seen from industrialism, the development of Marxist theory and revolution, to consumerism and the breakdown of the social structure of classes and using the body as a form of capital, to surveillance capitalism.

References:

Galtung, J. (1969) 'Violence, Peace and Peace Research' *Journal of Peace Research*. 6(3) pp. 167-191. Available at: http://www2.kobe-u.ac.jp/~alexroni/IPD%202015%20readings/IPD%202015_7/Galtung_Violence,%20Peace,%20and%20Peace%20Research.pdf (Accessed on: 28/02/19)

Harvard, (2018) Pros and Cons of Neoliberalism. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t41rFqVpB1I> (Accessed on: 06/03/19)

Hochschild, A. R., (1983) *The Managed heart: The commercialisation of human feeling*. Berkley, CA: University of California Press

Howson, A. (2013) *The Body in Society*. 2nd Ed. Cambridge: Polity Press. Pp. 115-149

Kertzer, D, I., (1988) *Ritual, Politics and Power*. London: Yale University Press

Veblen, T. (1899) *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. NA:NA Available at: <http://moglen.law.columbia.edu/LCS/theoryleisureclass.pdf> (Accessed on: 28/02/19)

Zuboff, S. (2019) *The Age Of Surveillance Capitalism: A Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. London: Clays, Ltd.