

Western Gay Male Bodybuilding in Perspectives of Foucauldian Feminism(s): A Review

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Abstract: This paper takes a sociological perspective to explore the bodybuilding culture prevailing in the Western gay male community. Firstly, it reviews Michel Foucault's (1981) conceptualization of power and his investigation into body regulation. The paper then incorporates two strands of feminism into the analysis - one that inherits more traditional values from Marxism and the other that is more postmodernity-oriented - to critique the potential for empowerment and the limitations of the practice.

1. Introduction

Although classical sociology did not brush aside the embodied facets altogether in expounding social relations, it is contemporary sociology forging and honing a new set of perspectives and frameworks, marked by Elias's work of *The Civilizing Process*, for apprehending the body as a socio-cultural construct and an essential component in material and symbolic practices of power^[1-2]. Through an anti-metanarrative/grand-theory post-modern kaleidoscope, it is impossible to identify one single sociology of the body^[3]. So, in acknowledging the alternatives, I deliberately choose to locate my discussion about the body, especially the prevailing bodybuilding culture in the gay male community, firstly at Foucault's (1981) conceptualization of power and his investigation of the regulation of the body^[4]. Then, I incorporate two strands of feminism into the analysis - one inherits more tradition from Marxism, and the other is more post-modernity-oriented.

2. Foucault and Body

Despite his failure to overcome the dual approach that sociology has conventionally adopted and the infamous over-emphasis on structural dominance, arguably, it was Foucault who legitimized the study of the body^[5]. Based on the widely recognized triune schema for reviewing Foucault's oeuvre: archaeology, genealogy, and ethics, the body can be regarded as "an object of knowledge in the discursive practices," "the target of power in the nondiscursive practices", and "a matter of concern for techniques of the self of Greek and Roman ethical subjects" respectively (p. 51)^[6].

It can also be said that the very central theme of Foucault's work lies in the shifting forms of power, from pre-modern sovereign power to modern body-invested disciplinary power, which is marked as "non-authoritarian, non-conspiratorial, and indeed non-orchestrated" (p. 190)^[7-9]. Specifically, disciplinary power incarnates in the ways wherein bodies are shriveled, trained,

motivated, and managed. It is clearly seen that for Foucault, the body is a site of direct control, something docile to the ubiquitous powers. Specifically speaking, the body, as a socially constructed phenomenon, in contrast to the one under a naturalistic perspective, is highly malleable and invested with various and ever-shifting forms of power^[10-11]. This process usually occurs at two levels: (1) the anatomo-politics of the individual human body, including sexuality, and (2) the bio-politics of the body in a more general sense (p. 130)^[12, 4]. As for its tangible forms, Foucault writes that power “reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes, and everyday lives” (p. 39)^[13].

Namely, the power relations are inscribed on the body via interactions with professionals/knowledge, which normalizes bodies to serve prevailing hierarchy and inequality in the forms of discourses^[14]. Subsequently, a subjectified self would be created with desire being brought about and under control (Panopticon/Gaze). This is a constructive and productive process, as Foucault writes, “There is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorizing to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over and against himself” (p. 155)^[13].

For example, in Foucault’s view, sexuality is not silenced but created via contemporary discourses while under the scrutiny of medical and psychiatric professions^[15]. Along with the change of power forms, there are also shifts in discourse target (from the fleshy body to the mindful body), the object of discourse (from people’s death to their life and welfare), and the scope of discourse (from individual to population as a whole)^[11]. Beyond simply seeing the body as a discourse focus, it can be regarded as a nexus between everyday praxes and the structural organization of power^[16]. These key concepts were articulated by Foucault (1977, 1979, 1981) and, partially due to the bombarding criticism of his substantial overestimation of oppressing power’s impact, were further revised with more concern on resistance later in *The Subject and Power*^[13, 8, 4, 17]. At this period, he started to admit that power structures are not once intact but always breeding new types of values and subjectivity, fresh opportunities for budding resistance to materialize.

To summarize the mechanism of Foucauldian modern power: (1) instead of being possessed by specific individuals or groups, power is more of a “dynamic or network of non-centralized forces” (p. 191)^[9]; (2) these forces are not random but arranged into historical forms, functioning not in a top-down magisterial way, but via multiple “processes, of different origin and scattered location” (p. 138)^[8]; (3) selfhood has been established and maintained in the process not by coercion but through self-regulation to norms; (4) the impersonal nature of power does not mean there are no hierarchy, inequality, dominance, or ideologies within. The game is on its own, free of any particular person’s control, yet certain people and groups do position a better/dominant niche in the game and play.

3. Foucauldian Feminism(s) and Body

Foucauldian perspective, with its terminological system, has fueled the development of feminism in body studies. Conversely, feminist scholars equipped the examination of the body with renewed motivation to concentrate on gender, sexuality, and identity, and they used Foucault to argue against the naturalistic bodies as the basis of social inequality and individual identity (which ought to be fragmented and ever-changing), as well as the division between sex and gender common to the social science^[18-21]. Further ahead, they argue that the biological traits used to differentiate between the sexes are also socially constructed, just as the ways that create gendered forms of embodiment^[22-24].

Rewind the clock back a bit, the “old” feminist model (1960s and 1979s), which aligns with the critical analytical framework of Marxism, first subsumed all hierarchical, centralized, and

patriarchal institutions as well as practices based on an oppressor/oppressed paradigm that hypothesized men "possessing" and controlling women, who are regarded as being completely deprived of power. This incipient model had been criticized as crude and inadequate in investigating the situation's complexities, where some, if not all, men would also feel tyrannized and oppressed. Then, the first wave of Foucauldian-influenced feminism actively referred to the concepts of "discipline", "docility", "normalization", and "bio-power" based on a continuum of the logic of "colonization of the female body" and the Marxist tradition of the old model, with further complicating it by blurring the good/bad conception of social control. However, this wave failed to avoid the pitfall of original Foucault's work in overlooking the creative resistance. In response to this, the second wave of Foucault's feminism, with a more postmodern orientation, puts emphasis on the agency's potential by adopting the concepts of "intervention", "contestation", and "subversion". For example, the artificial performativity of gender discussed by Judith Butler and "parodic practices", like dragging, both challenge the essentialism in "the notion of a true gender identity" (pp. 137-8)^[18]. For the first concept, she explains in detail that, "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (p. 21)^[18].

Which she later also termed as "doing one's body"^[25]. Like Foucault, Judith Butler also makes the politics of the body, especially its gendered nature, a focal point of her theoretical consideration. She argues against a unified collective identity of women and the correlation among "woman", the female body, and the female form^[18, 26]. She has recognized a frame of the "heterosexual matrix" (p. 9), which relies on the biological categories of male and female to draw a rigid line between masculinity and femininity, meanwhile normalizing, objectifying, and naturalizing their association with man/woman^[18]. This marks the natural status of heterosexuality by demeaning the non-heterosexual practice as deviance and acts as the prototype of the subsequent theory of heteronormativity^[27].

4. Gay Bodybuilding and Technology of the Self

Taking an anti-essentialist perspective consistent with Foucault's, I render the body as interpretable and inscribed by cultural systems^[8]. I also argue that it is a heteronormative site full of orthodox gendered views, according to Butler^[18, 26]. To name an example, there is barely anything else that could compare to gay male bodybuilding in representing the malleability, plasticity, and docility of the body and also embodying the compliance internalization and self-surveillance in sculpting and displaying a muscular figure concerning the gender norm/difference, from a critical feminist perspective^[23, 28-31].

Historically, in the Western context, homosexual males would be perceived as skinny, non-athletic, and pale, a figure of the dandy that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century^[32-33]. It was an image to be appreciated as an existence of beauty joined in medical discourses on sexual inversion, which contributed to the embodiment of homosexuality as being effeminate^[34-36]. Specifically, early researchers have treated 'men who have sex with men as "women inside men's bodies" and homosexuality as "hermaphroditism of the soul"' (p. 2)^[36]. Apparently, what is rooted in the inversion discourse, which made gay people subordinate in the hierarchy, is a strict dualism underlining misogyny and the inferiority of women/femininity^[37]. Along with this was a farther-reaching modern social consensus on the division between male and female social roles at the turning point of the twentieth century. Followingly, there was a tendency in the 1960s to eroticize the male bodies in pictorial magazines popular in the gay community, which contributed to the formation of an ideal male body image. Later in the second half of the 1980s, under the backdrop of HIV/AIDS, additionally, physically being thin substantively increased the likelihood of homosexual

men being stigmatized as “contagious” while “further marginalizing an already marginalized group” (p. 104)^[32]. Thus, mainly triggered by the backlash against gay men around HIV/AIDS and accompanied by all the aforementioned factors, many homosexual men turned to bodybuilding to get rid of the “archetypal gay male physique” of slimness (p. 103)^[32], striving to appear “heterosexual” themselves and thus “passing” as straight^[38].

Both the medical discourses of sexual inversion and HIV/AIDS constitute a regime of truth that oppresses gay people and forces or tempts some of them to resort to bodybuilding to appear muscular, a way of “doing masculinity”. Bodybuilding thus can be understood via the concept of technologies of self by Foucault^[39]. As mentioned above, in his later writings, Foucault thought beyond the ubiquity of domination to scrutinize how people can creatively shape power dynamics and embody their subjectivities^[39]. He focused on specific methods and ethics for altering the view of oneself in relation to social politics (Pringle, 2005), which he termed “the technologies of the self”^[40].

The concept is defined as practices that, “permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (p. 18)^[39].

In the scenario set up by this paper, gay male individuals, at the initial stage, purposely and voluntarily learn to identify the rules of conduct and map their paths toward them. As Foucault describes in the second volume of *The History of Sexuality - The Use of Pleasure*, applying the technologies of self is ‘to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an oeuvre that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria’ (pp. 10-1)^[41].

Here, through bodybuilding, a way of transforming their bodies to appear masculine, gay people have increasingly generated a sense of empowerment by resisting the dominant medical discursive systems of sexual inversion and HIV/AIDS^[42-44]. Nevertheless, the technologies of the self are not devoid of tenets or rules of conduct; they do not essentially invalidate discourses. In this case, though gay male bodybuilders did resist certain discourses, they simultaneously obeyed and strengthened some others by forming themselves as subjects within “the truth games of sexuality” (p. 140)^[43]. Accordingly, to reverse and change the stereotypical gay male image, they made use of the rules from the regime of sexuality by cohering with gendered bodily norms found in consumer culture. They “did” masculinity trading for certain freedom at the hidden cost of locking selves into the binary gendered frame, or Butler’s heterosexual matrix, even deeper.

This is a complex relationship between gay men as both object and subject, or between reification and reproduction of gendered structure with self-conscious agents in actively utilizing possible resources (including their own bodies) to negotiate identity and struggle for living space.

5. Gay Bodybuilding and Technology of the Self

Things made an even more interesting turn in the Western history of gay male bodybuilding, that over time, as gay men began to understand the socio-cultural advantages of appearing “heterosexually muscular”, there are more of them diving into the bodybuilding (sub)culture (maybe too many). Consequently, bodybuilding and hyper-muscularity started to be seen as the opposite of heterosexuality and, as a result, as being gay. Because of this, the stereotypical heterosexual male figure began to separate itself from the gay male “protest muscularity” by emphasizing its athleticism and gradually evolved itself into a highly sporty, aesthetically pleasing, and functional physique^[32, 45].

In a retrospective view, ironically, the almost extreme pursuit of (hyper-) masculinity through bodybuilding for passing as heterosexual reversely marks a conspicuous homosexual image for this

doing. In thinking of the politics of visibility, their attempt to mitigate the hypervisibility of being sexually deviant conversely and unexpectedly contributes to an even over-the-hyper kind of bodily visibility. It can be seen from this turning point that neither the body nor the criteria of hegemonic masculinity are naturalized or fixed but socially constructed, ever-shifting, and conditionally adapted. Uncritically adopting the technologies of self to conform oneself to the regime of knowledge does not guarantee permanent liberty or equality; not only the ones who fail to afford the body transformation have been further marginalized by their already marginalized group (double oppression), but the ones actively utilizing the techniques still cannot stay mainstream and empowered in the long run for the essence of Foucauldian power being evolving and never-ending. In Western gay male bodybuilding, by playing the truth games of sexuality, the gendered and sexual hierarchies underlying have been fortified, not undercut. At the same time, the criteria and standards could constantly swing and alter in favor of heterosexual men to maintain their advantaged status quo. Nonetheless, I am not denying the potential of gay male bodybuilding, especially in queering the hegemonic masculinity, and messing up (though merely partially) the regime of gender and sexuality by showcasing the fluidity and performativity of gender and sexuality, more than once.

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