

How to Study Body Culture: Observing Human Practice

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The development of sport in the modern era has led to a widening gap between the mediated expressions of sports and human games and play, the popular festive gatherings where physical rapport denoted a communion on other levels as well, socially, psychologically, spiritually, and politically. Today, elite sports dominate media and the public interest, and the connection to the physical activities of the masses is becoming weaker and more opaque. Modern sport is a commodity, a money-maker for the venture capitalists of the event economy, but the trickle-down effect that would gain the lower ranks of the sporting community has all but dried up. This tense relationship within human bodily practice has precipitated a renewed attention to the concept of body culture – and it's probably not a coincidence that it coincided with a newfangled interest in the human body in its various physical and cultural shapes and forms within the social sciences.

Body and movement constitute fundamental conditions of human existence. This postulate, in turn, constitutes a crucial cornerstone in Henning Eichberg's critical theory of sport, which aims at developing a wider understanding of the relationship between body and movement practice (body culture), the objectification processes of movement (production culture), and the superstructure of ideas and organizations (idea culture). Also within body culture, the relationship is characterized by conflict and struggle. Thus, sport science can make an original contribution by elucidating the contradictions of body politics in society – and by rejuvenating the materialistic analysis of society. In previous contributions to idrottsforum.org, Dr. Eichberg has argued for anthropology of movement as an effective way to increase understanding of the origins of sport as well as of its contemporary manifestations. In this new article, he summarizes thirty years of comparative studies of body movements and body cultures, and draws a number of exciting conclusions that give the directions for future studies of body practice and culture from phenomenological, historical and anthropological perspectives.

*Die Basis sprach zum Überbau:
"Du bist ja heut schon wieder blau!"
Da sprach der Überbau zur Basis:
"Was is?"*

Robert Gernhardt about the relation between basis and
superstructure – a joke, untranslatable

*Das gesellschaftliche Sein bestimmt das Bewusstsein
Menneskenes være bestemmer deres bevidsthed
The being of men determines their consciousness
Karl Marx about the relation between basis and
superstructure – no joke, translatable*

1. Towards a new understanding of the ‘material basis’

The body is the material basis of our existence as human beings. The body tells our story: Who am I, who are we? From bodily interaction, human social practice comes into being.¹

On one hand, the body is a part of human existence, which the individual can not choose freely. On the other hand, the body is not determined from the very beginning. Between the given body on one hand and intentional body management on the other, body culture develops in a process, which is historical and collective. The study of body culture throws light on this process and its contradictions between ‘just doing’ and ‘trying to steer’.

You ‘make’ your own body, but you do not make it of your own individual will.

Body culture shows the different levels of what we call ‘culture’ in human life. Body culture ranges side by side with spiritual culture, which consists of the ideas, symbols and meanings of societal life, and with ‘material culture’, which is the world of human-made things, instruments and technology.

However, spiritual culture, material culture, and body culture do not just range side by side. Bodily practice is the origin of material constructions as well as the basic reference of language.² The ‘standing’ body tells about the ‘state’ of the things and about the political state.³

The body tells an underground story, which is unfolding underneath the well-known history of civilization.⁴ If this story is told bottom-up, we can talk about a sort of body foundationalism.

With this starting point, the story of philosophical materialism is both continued and discontinued. In the origin of modern materialist thinking, among eighteenth-century encyclopaedists and philosophers of nature, the physical materia was seen as determining the

1 Early on, philosophy hinted in this direction: Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels 1845: *Die deutsche Ideologie*. (= Marx/Engels: Werke. 3) Berlin: Dietz 1962, 16. – These hints have, however, not yet been followed up by research – not even in Marxist research.

2 George Lakoff & Mark Johnson 1980: *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. – Mark Johnson 1987: *The Body in the Mind. The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination and Reason*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

3 Erwin Straus 1966: “The upright posture.” In: *Phenomenological Psychology*, New York: Basic, 137-165. (First in German 1949).

4 Max Horkheimer & Theodor W. Adorno 1997: *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. London: Verso 1997. (First 1947).

world of ideas – the result was a *physical materialism*. In nineteenth-century political philosophy, modes of production, technological change and resulting conflicts of interests determined the history of institutions and ideologies – this became an *economic materialism*. If bodily practice is regarded as the basis of social identities, of conscience and historical change, a third, *bodily-human materialism* can be considered.

2. Bodily movement

Since the 1970/80s, the body has received increased attention and entered the scene of social sciences. The accelerated interest in ‘the body’ in academic research is, however, far from innocent. And the new body awareness is more than cumulative, it does not produce just ‘more’ knowledge. The boom of body research reflects a virtual body craze. The body has become a ‘resource’ in the world of capitalistic production and a new kind of problem under the conditions of industrial use and alienation.

In consequence, the focus of the dominant body discourse is largely colonized by questions of health and illness, curing and hygiene, which mirrors changes in the world of capitalist production and alienation.

Parallel to this, a fashionable body discourse tells mainly about body shape and body image, about decoration, tattoos, and clothing. It corresponds to the actual state of consumerism and merchandise, the commodification of the body.

A further body discourse is about sexuality. This field opens up for the awareness of societal contradictions – contesting the industrial patriarchy.

All together, this profile of ‘the social body’ is illustrative, but too narrow. The static body attracts one-sided attention, while the dynamic body in motion is neglected.⁵ The discourse about the body as a ‘being’ bears marks of reification forced upon it by the powers of production, consumption and reproduction.

What is neglected is the body as a field of dynamic human interaction, of movement. In movement, human subjectivity develops through bodily dialogue with others.

The body is not only a certain substance or materiality. Nor is it just a sign or construction, as recent theories of constructivism will have us believe. Bodily existence is a third category: movement.⁶

Bodies in movement, this is what the study of movement culture is about. However, the concept of ‘movement’ touches upon at least three very different dimensions of human life: bodily movement, emotional movement and social movement.

First dimension: People move in concrete bodily activities like sports and dance, games and meditation, outdoor activities and festivals. To understand *bodily movement*, one needs a theory of body practice. Praxeology casts light on the culture of inter-bodily situations and relations.

5 About this profile see Bryan S. Turner 1984: *The Body & Society. Explorations in Social Theory*. London: Basil Blackwell. – Chris Shilling 1993: *The Body and Social Theory*. London: Sage.

6 Maxine Sheets-Johnstone 1999: *The Primacy of Movement*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. – Concrete movements studies: Knut Dietrich 2001 (ed.): *How Societies Create Movement Culture and Sport*. Copenhagen: Institute of Exercise and Sport Sciences, University of Copenhagen. – Knut Dietrich 2002 (ed.): *Socialisation and the Social Change in Movement Culture and Sport*. Copenhagen: Institute of Exercise and Sport Sciences, University of Copenhagen.

Second dimension: People are moved by feelings, emotions and humour. Emotions (i.e. e-motions), motives and motivations demonstrate that there is *emotional movement* – fascination and euphoria, anger and fear, pain and laughter. This is what the psychology of social interactions and social relations is about. By a psychology of belonging, togetherness and difference, one discovers identity.

Third dimension: People unite in *social movements*. They meet in associations and peer groups, informal networks and formal organizations. This is what the sociology of popular life and democracy is interested in. This is where we discover civil society.

The three dimensions are connected with each other – but how? There is a multitude of studies in the specific fields of body movement, emotional movement and social movements. They need, however, to be supplemented by a new type of comparative knowledge – and philosophy. It's hardly by chance that different languages use the same term for these different levels: movement – *bevægelse* (Danish), *bevegelse* (Norwegian), *rörelse* (Swedish), *Bewegung* (German), *mouvement* (French) and *movimento* (Italian).

3. The dialogical body – relativity of the body

There is nothing elementary or simple in bodily movement, neither in running, jumping or throwing nor in pull or tug. The body is not at all simple, but a field of complex tensions.

Body knowledge is especially marked by tensions that arise between the objective and the subjective dimensions of bodily existence. Objective is – or seems to be – what we can talk about or handle: the *It-body*. Subjective is what we experience and do: the *I-body*. There is, however, a third dimension, and this is the dialogical body, the relation body-to-body: the *You-body*.⁷

Bodily learning does not primarily mean applying some general or explicit rules to a particular practical situation. We learn primarily by mimetic flow from body to body. Side by side with explicit learning – and before all – there is implicit learning.⁸ Tacit knowledge is mediated from face to face and from body to body. Bodily learning is a dialogical process between the master's movement and the apprentice's movement. And the master-apprentice relation, far from being hierarchical, can and will turn around at any moment, the master becoming the apprentice and the apprentice turning into master.

The living body is not sufficiently described by objective or subjective understanding. It includes a third: the relational, which makes human body knowledge fundamentally relative.

7 Martin Buber 1923: *Ich und Du*. English 1986: *I and Thou*. New York: Collier.

8 Michael Polanyi 1966: *The Tacit Dimension*. Garden City/New York: Doubleday.

4. Sociality inside the body

When analysing the cultural relativity of the body, we discover sociality inside the body. Human social existence is not only to be found somewhere outside, nor high above the individual body, but within bodily practice itself.⁹

By this anthropological approach, the study of body culture gets in touch with the deep psychology of the body. We are able to discover and describe society inside the movement of the body, inside the embodied soul, and inside personal experience and action, human feelings, emotions and affects.¹⁰

Also in this respect, the paradox of the index finger is true: When pointing towards something outside, three fingers will point back at oneself. A discourse pointing towards the other as object, will tell about one's own subjectivity. When analysing society outside, three fingers point to the societal pattern inside one's own bodily practice.

5. Bodies in plural, inter-body, and inter-humanism

Looked at closely, the human body is always related to bodies in plural. The study of movement culture reveals – like the human navel – that the human being is not alone in the world.

In this respect, 'the body' is an abstraction. 'The body' in singular is reductive in the same way as 'the individual' is. Bodily existence consists of bodies in plural, of inter-bodily relations. The human body is an inter-body.

This is the existential humanistic place of gender. If the discourse is about 'the body', gender answers by the critical question: Which body are we talking about? Female – male – a third one? – If the tale is about 'the human being', gender asks: Which human being are we talking about? Female – male – or a third one? – "*The truth begins between two*" (Martin Buber).

This contradicts the Western tradition to think of the body in an individualistic way. The epistemological solipsism treats the human being as if it were primarily alone in the world – and only secondarily 'socialized'. First the human being, and then society – this is the logic of methodological individualism. It reflects the alienation in industrial capitalist society.

The assumption that the centre of what is human is placed inside the 'skin bag' of the individual, is challenged by the discovery that the core of human existence is to be found *among* other bodies, *between* body and body. The human body acts together *with* other bodies, and always *also*, joining the others who have been there before.¹¹

9 Norbert Elias 1939: *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation. Soziogenetische und psychogenetische Untersuchungen*. 17. ed. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1992. – Also Elias & Eric Dunning 1986: *Quest for Excitement. Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell. – Critical about Elias' theory of civilization see: Hans Peter Duerr 1988-2002: *Der Mythos vom Zivilisationsprozess*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp. Vol. 1: *Nacktheit und Scham*. Vol. 2: *Intimität*. Vol. 3: *Obszönität und Gewalt*. Vol. 4: *Der erotische Leib*. Vol. 5: *Die Tatsachen des Lebens*.

10 An impressive anthropological study on body and magic practice: Jeanne Favret-Saada 1980: *Deadly Words: Witchcraft in the Bocage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (First in French 1977).

11 Peter Sloterdijk 1998/2004: *Sphären. Plurale Sphärologie*. vols.1-3. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, here vol. 1.

Through its ex-centric bodily position, the human being is an Among and a Between, a With and an Also. Human bodily existence is ex-centric.

If we understand the bodies in plural as the material basis of human existence, humanism reveals itself as inter-humanism.

6. The body as a field of contradiction

Bodies in plural and in variety – this does not only mean harmonious coexistence, but also conflict and contradiction. Body culture does not only promote integration and social inclusion, but it is also a field of rebellion and subversion.

The study of body culture is political. The modern production of results by sport is open towards totalitarian anthropomaximology,¹² which produces freak circus plus sport pedagogy, mortal engines and the prosthesis body of the future.¹³ The ‘productive body’ provokes a quest of alternatives – unproductive bodies, counterproductive activities, revolting bodies. Body culture confronts the human being with political choice.

Seen in this perspective, popular games are not only forerunners of sports, nor marginal relics or smart supplements, but also alternatives to sport.¹⁴ There is contradiction in the field of body cultural practice and sport.

When paying attention to conflict, research joins the tradition of dialectical awareness. Nothing is simple, everything contains internal contradictions.

Dialectical thinking has, however, sometimes been narrowed down towards a dualistic concept of antagonism. The idea of thesis and antithesis was caught in the dichotomous trap of a ‘main contradiction’, demanding an either/or. This was not prevented by the Hegelian postulate of a synthesis as solution.

If the dualistic misunderstanding of the dialectical process shall be avoided, attention has to be directed towards the third. There is always a third position outside the ‘main contradiction’, which sets the conflict into perspective. Considering the dialectical relation between mass sport and elite sport, we find that movement culture, at closer examination, reveals a trialectical contradiction.

The hegemonic model of Western modern body culture is *achievement sport*, translating movement into records. Sportive competition follows the logic of productivity by bodily strain and forms a ranking pyramid with elite sports placed at the top. Through sportive movement, people display a theatre of production.

12 On this Soviet term see: Vladimir V. Kuznecov 1979: “Der Sport – Hauptfaktor für wissenschaftliche Erkenntnis über Reservemöglichkeiten des Menschen.“ In: *Theorie und Praxis der Körperkultur*, DDR, 28: 868-72. (First Moscow 1973).

13 John M. Hoberman 1992: *Mortal Engines. The Science of Performance and the Dehumanization of Sport*. New York: The Free Press.

14 Jean-Jacques Barreau & Guy Jaouen 1998 (eds.): *Éclipse et renaissance des jeux populaires. Des traditions aux régions de l'Europe de demain*. Karaz: FALSAB. (1st ed. 1991). – Barreau & Jaouen 2001 (eds.): *Les jeux traditionnels en Europe. Éducation, culture et société au 21e siècle/Los juegos tradicionales en Europa. Educación, cultura y sociedad en el siglo 21*. Plonéour Ronarc’h: Confédération FALSAB (French and Spanish). – Wojciech Liponski & Guy Jaouen 2003 (eds.): *Ethnology of Sport*. Special issue of *Studies in Physical Culture and Tourism*, Poznan, 10: 1. – Joël Guibert & Guy Jaouen 2005 (eds.): *Jeux traditionnels. Quels loisirs sportifs pour la société de demain?* Vannes: Institut Culturel de Bretagne.

A contrasting model within modern body culture is delivered by *mass sport*. In gymnastics and fitness sport, the body is disciplined by subjecting it to certain rules of ‘scientific’, social geometrical or aesthetic order.¹⁵ By rhythmic repetition and formal homogenization, the individual bodies are integrated into a larger whole, which is recommended in terms of reproduction, as being healthy and educative. Through fitness sport, people absolve a ritual of reproductive correctness and integration.

There is, however, a third model present in *festivity, dance and play* – it is popular assemblage. In carnival and folk sport, people meet people by festive movement.¹⁶ This kind of gathering is what may give life to the top-down arrangements of both productive achievement sport and reproductive fitness sport. But the body experience of popular festivity, dance, play and game is a-productive in itself – it celebrates relation in movement.

The trialectical relation between achievement production, disciplining integration and festive encounter tells a bodily story about the logics of market, state and civil society. Body culture displays the existing tensions between uncontrolled profit, equal distribution and association in solidarity. This contradiction is related to the triad of *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*.

Trialectical analysis reveals the hegemonic body culture as relative and political.¹⁷

7. Reification of the body, critical theory, and the narrative

The study of body culture is challenged by the colonization of the body. The hegemonic body culture is oriented towards achievement – centimetres, grams, seconds, points – as well as towards disciplinary rules and alleged ‘functions’.¹⁸ All this tends to reify the dialogical interactions between body and body.

State logic subjects the body to power, control, ‘evaluation’, and training of ‘competences’. This is the reification of bureaucratic control and ‘management’.¹⁹

Market logic subjects the body to instrumental use – the body is a means of production. And commercial logic makes the body a target for the appeal of consumption – this is the reification of the commodity.

The techno-logic of sport and other forms of discipline calls for a critical theory. Critique is not only a negation, but also creative. It turns our attention to otherness.

Practical alterity can be found in the new alternative body cultures as well as in traditional movement cultures and popular games. But the internal contradictions of the ‘mainstream’ itself produce ‘otherness inside’, too.

15 Petr Roubal 2007: *Embodying Communism: Politics of Mass Gymnastics in Post-War Eastern Europe*. Budapest: Central European University, dissertation.

16 Mikhail Bakhtin 1968: *Rabelais and his World*. Cambridge: MIT.

17 About the trialectical method see Henning Eichberg 1998: *Body Cultures. Essays on Sport, Space and Identity*. London: Routledge. – Anthropological applications: John Bale & Joe Sang 1996: *Kenyan Running. Movement Culture, Geography and Global Change*. London: Frank Cass. And Bale 2002: *Imagined Olympians: Body Culture and Colonial Representation in Rwanda*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

18 Allen Guttmann 1978: *From Ritual to Record*. New York: Columbia University Press. – Henning Eichberg 1978: *Leistung, Spannung, Geschwindigkeit. Sport und Tanz im gesellschaftlichen Wandel des 18./19. Jahrhunderts*. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta.

19 Michel Foucault 1977: *Discipline and Punish*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Human beings have always used a very practical way of countering reification: the narrative. Narrative makes ‘solid’ things flowing and gliding. The narrative is poetical and mythical, creating living pictures. Alternative discourse begins by thick descriptions of bodily life and movement. The body narratives exist in plural and diversity. The narrative is the movement of the discourse.²⁰

The tale of the body can, however, be distorted by the power of ‘legitimate interpreters’. These authorities are the priests of Olympism, the media experts, and the pedagogues of correctness. But even through the discourses of power, even through the heroic tales of Olympic sports, the diverse and contradictory narratives are living their subversive life.

8. Comparative method – bodily otherness

‘Culture’ in singular is an abstraction. The study of body culture is always a study of body cultures in plural. Body cultures are human life in variety and differences, assimilation and distinction, conflicts and contradictions. This demands a comparative approach to otherness.

Otherness is not only something to be accepted as ‘deviating’ from a given standard. ‘The other’ is a fundamental condition of knowledge. Without the attention to other identities, the observer is unable to discern her or his own identity. By the comparative method, observation oscillates between *identity* and *alterity*.

In this perspective, the comparative study of body cultures contributes to intercultural understanding.²¹

9. Historical relativity – body-cultural change

Another quest of alterity goes along the time axis: Historical observation helps us to a deeper understanding of actual ‘normality’.

History is, however, often misunderstood as a quest of the ‘origin’, or as a reconstruction of the ‘tradition’, which is leading from ‘forerunners’ to the actual patterns. History is also misunderstood as a representation of a ‘development’, whose earlier phases point forward to our actual status, but are ‘not yet’ fully unfolded. History is, however, more and other than that.

History is awareness of fundamental change. The historicity of the body lies in the change of body culture. History makes us meet otherness in time – there is bodily alterity

20 Andrew Sparkes & Martti Silvennoinen 1999 (eds.): *Talking Bodies. Men’s Narratives of the Body and Sport*. Jyväskylä: SoPhi, University of Jyväskylä.

21 Some Asian studies: Susan Brownell 1995: *Training the Body for China. Sports in the Moral Order of the People’s Republic*. Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press. – Satoshi Shimizu 2005: “Cultural struggles on the body in Japan and Asia: When should we use ‘modern’ or ‘traditional’ body techniques?” In: *International Journal of Eastern Sports & Physical Education*, Suwon, 89-104. – About the body in early anthropology see Susan Brownell 2006 (ed.): *The 1904 St. Louis Olympic Games and Anthropology Days: Sport, Race, and American Imperialism*. University of Nebraska Press, in press.

‘before’ and ‘after’.²² Historical change means that any actual situation is historically relative.

If body culture is studied under the aspect of change, sport appears neither as universal, nor has it a fixed essence. Sport is culturally specific and relative. There was no sport in ancient Egypt, in ancient Greece, among the Aztecs or Vikings, and in European Middle Ages, though there were games, competitions and festivities. Sport resulted from societal changes in the eighteenth-nineteenth centuries.²³

And: What has developed historically can also disappear again. In this understanding, history is fundamentally a knowledge of revolution.²⁴

10. Space and place of the body

Bodily display and movement always create space – socio-psychical space. Bodily activities may be related to indoor or outdoor milieus, they may require specialized facilities or rise in a bodily opposition against existing standardized facilities, against the ‘sportscape’. In movement, straight lines are confronted by mazes and labyrinthine structures, by patterns of fractal geometry.

The ‘nature’ of body culture – of outdoor life, naturism and green movement – can be a world of liberation and opposition. But it can also be a way of colonization and simulation, forming a ‘second nature’. Or it can even be a world, which is simulating our senses, a ‘third nature’.

The study of body culture has always a dimension of *cultural ecology*.

In everyday language, ‘space’ and ‘place’ are often confused. In contrast to this mix-up, the cultural ecology of movement leads to a distinction between space and place.²⁵

Space can be described in coordinates and by choreographies. Spatial structures can be standardized and transferred from place to place. This is the case with the standardized spatial facilities of sports.

The *place*, in contrast, is unique – it is only here or there. Locality is related to identity. We play in a certain place – we create the place by play and game. We play the place, and the place plays with us.

Space and place may clash in societal practice. And the intermediary space may be a third dimension.

22 For this point, two diverse works of Michel Foucault should be read in connection with each other:

Foucault 1966: *Les mots et les choses*. Paris. English 1971: *The Order of the Things. An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Pantheon. – And Foucault 1975: *Surveiller et punir. La naissance de la prison*. Paris: Gallimard. English 1977: *Discipline and Punish*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

23 See note 18. The “Eichberg-Mandell-Guttman theory of the uniqueness of modern sports” was critically discussed in: John Marshall Carter & Arnd Krüger 1990 (eds.): *Ritual and Record. Sports Records and Quantification in Pre-Modern Societies*. New York: Greenwood.

24 About the relation between sports and revolution see Ian McDonald 2006: “One Dimensional Sport.” Paper for the International Network for the Marxist Study of Sport - <http://marxistsport.pbwiki.com/f/One%20Dimensional%20Sport.doc>.

25 Yi-Fu Tuan 1977: *Space and Place. The Perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. – John Bale 2004: *Running Cultures. Racing in Time and Space*. London/New York: Routledge.

11. Configurations and qualities of movement

Though bodily movement may be experienced as a whole, it is the pattern which reveals the inner tensions and contradictions. That is why the study of body culture has to focus on the configurations of movement in time and space, the energy of movement, its interpersonal relations and objectivation, the superstructure which are the institutions and ideas of body culture.²⁶

The *time* of movement is marked – among others – by contradictions between cyclical, progressing and situational time.

The *space* of movement has contradictory elements of the straight line and the labyrinth, of geometrical space, identitary place and intermediary space.

The *energy* of movement can be described by a multiplicity of different atmospheres, attunements, radiations, and moods.

The *interpersonal relations* in movement tell about power and gender, about winners and losers, about the You and We in motion.

The *objectification* of movement develops in the tension between process and result, between production, reproduction and a-productive encounters in bodily activity.

What is resulting from these diverse configurations is not *one* sport, as the hegemonic imagination of Western society will have us believe. It is a multiplicity of movement cultures, also inside ‘one culture’.

This diversity can also be described in terms of the qualities of modern movement culture. Such qualities are play and game, fight and confrontation, dance and rhythm, concentration and meditative movement, nature and outdoor life. Each of these qualities implies its own psychology of movement.²⁷

The different qualities are not only expressed by some specific activities, but they are integrated inside any particular activity. The educational challenge is to make this multiplicity explicit and living. However, the qualities of movement in the different activities are mixed in different ways. Hence, different body cultures are living their life side by side – and may live in conflict. The habitus conflict is a basic condition of class struggle.²⁸

12. The people and bodily democracy

The body is related to what is called the people. Play and game, dance and festivity, competition and fight are fundamental for popular culture. In movement culture, people develop identity and the question of nostrification: Who are we?

The body in movement is an identity marker. Like one’s name and one’s life history, the body tells ‘who we are’.²⁹

26 Henning Eichberg 2001: “Thinking contradictions. Towards a methodology of configurational analysis, or: How to reconstruct the societal signification of movement culture and sport.” In: Knut Dietrich (ed.): *How Societies Create Movement Culture and Sport*. University of Copenhagen: Institute of Exercise and Sport Sciences, 10-32.

27 Henning Eichberg & Claus Bøje 1997: *Idrætspsykologien mellem krop og kultur*. Vejle: DGI-forskning.

28 The term of *habitus* was – after Max Weber and Norbert Elias – developed by Pierre Bourdieu for sociological use.

29 David Joel de Levita 1965: *The Concept of Identity*. Paris/Den Haag: Mouton.

This questions the dominating assumptions about who ‘the people’ are, the folk. Like the concept of ‘the body’, the term ‘the people’ has become colonized by hegemonic theories, mainly by substantialism and constructivism.

Traditionally, one has tried to define a given people by a certain substance, treating it like a material object. The *substantial ‘people’* was objectified by criteria of language, historical origin, territory, religion, customs, ‘national character’ and inner psychic disposition, state and constitution, common economy, community of communication or whatever. This substantial understanding could have exclusive or even racist connotations.

The substantial view of the folk was opposed by interpretations of the ‘people’ as an idea. The ‘people’, it was said, is nothing but a construction, created by the propagandistic actions of some leaders or intellectuals, typically nationalist ideologists. This *constructivist ‘people’* had and has elitist connotations: The people does not exist in itself, nor does it find itself, it is made from above – as an ‘imagined community’, an ‘invented tradition’ or even a ‘false consciousness’.

The concept of movement breaks this dual pattern. “*We are the people!*” is the basic saying of democracy.³⁰ It means: We are in motion! While a ‘population’ exists in stasis, ‘people’ means *people in movement*. By reclaiming the street, people reclaim their individual and interacting bodies.³¹

People in movement and popular movements (in plural), identity, nostrification and the recognition of otherness are preconditions of living democracy. The inter-folk relation – when people meet people, what in Danish is called the *mellempfolkelig* encounter – is a test of what is popular (in Danish *folkelig*) in a given culture.

The study of diversity and of cultural relativity is helpful to develop openness towards the *recognition* of alterity.³² This implies conflicts with political strategies of non-recognition. Some body cultures are strongly non-democratic or anti-democratic, uniforming the people, hierarchizing, repressing, torturing and exterminating. Strategies of homogeneity try to extirpate the heterogeneous life.³³ Recognition of the heterogeneous otherness leads to bodily democracy. The right to diversity is a basis for democracy as life form – democracy from below.

The study of body cultures, thus, contributes to the culture of democracy. Movement culture is a field where the rights to diversity, to self-determination and to free expression are tested and unfolded in socio-bodily practice.

30 Possibly the earliest documentation of this sentence – “*Wir sind das Volk!*” – can be found in Georg Büchner’s drama *Dantons Tod* (The death of Danton), 1835. It described conflicts inside the French Revolution of 1789, between Danton and Robbespierre. Suddenly people enter the scene crying: “We are the people!” The slogan obtained new power in the revolutions of 1989 in Eastern Europe.

31 Henning Eichberg 2004: *The People of Democracy. Understanding Self-Determination on the Basis of Body and Movement*. Århus: Klim.

32 Charles Taylor 1992: *Multiculturalism and “The Politics of Recognition”*. Princeton/N.J.: Princeton University Press. – Nancy Fraser 2000: “Rethinking recognition.” In: *New Left Review*, May/June, 3: 107-120.

33 This contradiction was formulated by Georges Bataille.

13. Towards a squinting theory

What we need for the understanding of body culture is a squint-eyed view. Squinting means: to focus on two points at the same time.

We focus on the concrete historical situation and on the concrete place: All is change, all is *particular*, all is local – all is relative in space and time.

And we focus on the anthropological, universal, and *existential*: All is related to human existence, to the existence of human beings in plural, to inter-human life in inter-bodily processes.

All what human beings do – also the most exceptional and even the ‘inhuman’ actions – bear witness to what the human being is capable of. This potential is universal. However, what the human being actually does is particular. It may often be statistically improbable. Certain features of human culture may be unlikely, but they are real.

When squinting with our eyes, we do not produce the wholeness of one consistent picture. There is overlap, and this will sometimes make us dizzy. What was clear before becomes blurred as soon as we focus. However, the pictures of the “Magic Eye”, which was the great craze of the 1990s, have shown that squinting can be an art of looking behind the surface of things. Suddenly, configurations appear, which our naïve gaze would not be able to catch. By training our eye, we are able to see something else, something third.

In this respect, the study of body culture has a shaman dimension.