

## Body care and health obligation: hexis and power in modernity

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**Abstract** *The aim of this essay is to provide a brief reflection on the contemporary ethics imposed on the body, which points to a growing responsibility and obligation of the individual regarding healthy and correct ways of living. The central object of analysis is the body constitution in modernity, in a space of technical intervention, problematizing contemporary forms of body care, such as diets and physical exercises, which express taxonomies that come from the matrix of meanings in modernity.*

**Key words** *Corporality, Science, Health, Society*

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## Introduction

The body assumes a privileged position in contemporary society, granted and constructed by both scientific and media discourses that are instrumentalized within a culture sustained by the Judeo-Christian matrix as its mirror legislator<sup>1</sup>. In these terms, Western society has consecrated the body with an iconographic *status*. This status, in a relation of purpose, became an object of pride and zeal for the narcissistic investment<sup>2</sup> and a reflective project of self-identity<sup>3</sup>. However, in order to be contemplated, it is first ritualized by modern techniques and symbolically transformed into a radical expression of the will to be of the subject of modernity.

An elusive matter, always open to the negotiation of a new meaning, the body is - at every moment - objectively re-signified in deep agreement with the symbolic order of the social world, revealing itself in the imaginary distinction of the desirable and the feared or, even, the acceptable and the refusable. Under a modern perspective, the mirror imposingly reflects an ideal built around the body and constantly renews notions such as beauty, ugliness, health, vigor, and youth.

In this construction, the body is a total social fact that integrates cultural dimensions, which are internalized and marked in the flesh; it is an expression in the form of living matter, drawn in lines and curves, and preferably, in accordance with the signs given by the logic of the social institutions<sup>4,5</sup>. Straight lines and polished forms, fast and free movements, functionality and elegance. Everything for the hypothetically democratic existence of the body in the midst of late modernity, where corporal practices are instruments and purposes that reflect both the incorporation of contemporary ethics and aesthetic values. Also, a healthy and active lifestyle is considered a priority, as well as the element that gives value to the identity of the self. The purpose of this essay is to reflect upon these matters based on contemporary sociological literature.

In addition to this brief introduction, the text is divided into two parts, plus the final considerations. On the one hand, we attempt to explain how articulations between body and health permeate the construction of individuality in modernity, as well as the body emancipation from traditions and its autonomy at a reflexivity level. On the other hand, we also aim to discuss the appropriation of the body by the biomedical discourse, and how this discourse has been transformed, acquiring the disturbing potential of go-

verning life energy. This is done through science and techniques which are shrouded in morality, helping to introject correct biological ways of living and disseminate different forms of self-governance.

Subsequently, we examine the paths of this morality, aiming to reveal the intention behind its uses, which, besides the containment procedures of bodies and domestication, impose purposely unattainable legitimate ways of being in the world and in life in society. Therefore, we claim they are destined to comply with mechanisms of symbolic violence which support the construction of hegemonic bodies. From the relationship between social structures and subjectivity (the latter forged within these processes), the matrix - of perception and appreciation - of mirror legislators is reproduced and disseminated in the modern West<sup>1,6</sup>.

## The body and a healthy lifestyle

The subject of Enlightenment, provided by reason and consciousness, and Humanism, which have put the man in the center of the universe, are both historical marks that prompted the emergence of individualism as a condition. In modernity, the knowing subject, mainly under the Cartesian philosophy, who is free and autonomous in their mental faculties and transcends rooted traditions, inaugurates a new understanding on the modern subject. This understanding, in turn, indicates a link of interdependence between the individual and society, since it reflects the transformations that occur in the social, psychic, and behavioral structure of individuals<sup>7,8</sup>.

During this self-reflection exercise, the modern subject emancipates themselves from fixed traditions and looks at their own body as an ethical construct of a daily liturgy of effort and application of precise techniques. Thus, the body starts to represent a social and symbolic investment - although individual - that designates, both in form and in its expression, the spectacle of itself orchestrated in the aesthetics of existence. Life becomes a work of art, full of style, aesthetic, and ethical values, artisanal and permanently constructed by and for the subject who aims at *living well* in the world that they are inserted in through the care with themselves<sup>9</sup>. The aesthetics of existence, in the Foucauldian sense, results from a relation of self to self, from a constant self-transformation; the existence taken as flexible matter for the (re)elaboration of itself. The body is the domain of this self-aesthetic,

*locus* of micro-conflicts, standardizations, and resistances. The body translates the being, gradually designed for the subject and for others, to meet equally constructed expectations. The body looks and exposes itself to be looked, sees and is also seen. In this scenario, a new ethic of the body is being built, and the scientific discourse has an important role because it acts as a convenient device in the construction of a functional, productive and healthy body, desired in the context of this new ethic that governs life.

Foucault, when reflecting about the body in modernity, analyzes the disciplinary mechanisms of manipulation of the corporal machine which fundamentally aim at the increase of the utility and the degree of domination<sup>10</sup>. Fit and docile, the body internalizes the commands of disciplinary power and, consequently, of submission and control. The surveillance space, once favoured by the panoptic structure, becomes incorporated by the individual with the development of self-control and mastery of technologies which aim at self-improvement. For Foucault, the “governmentality” for the governability of life produces biopolitics<sup>11</sup> based on the genesis of knowledge; its power manifests itself in the policies of the body and mind and, in this sense, the body becomes a construct of power and knowledge in the process of rationalization of modern society. Industrialization, bureaucratic control, scientific management, discipline, and regulation take over the body, which abandons its former natural and spontaneous condition<sup>12,13</sup>.

In turn, the process of rationalization and, by extension, disenchantment with the world, made possible by technical-scientific development, characterizes modern Western society<sup>14</sup>. The knowledge on objects, the world and nature is rationally constructed and organized, in a planned, calculated and predictable way. This process is present in the political, economic and administrative spheres of the capitalist system through an effective bureaucracy, and also in other dimensions of human life. Gradually, all ordinary activities are carried out on a rational basis, including those related to physiological needs.

Thus, a mechanistic view of the body has been consolidated since the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries: the construction of an anatomico-physiological knowledge and the incorporation of biodynamics, through the concept of calories, emphasizes the role of food in the functioning of the body as a machine and the balance between ingestion and expenditure<sup>15-17</sup>. There is calculation and organization regarding food choice. The modern diet

- which was developed along the birth of food science and nutrition, of concepts such as thermodynamics and kilocalories, and the constitution of the field of medical practice - expands the scientific discourse on eating rules and adequate models of life control. It is worth emphasizing that the very term “diet”, which etymologically expressed a political Athenian lifestyle, is re-signified in modernity. The conventional therapeutic system reinforces the concept with food and physical regimentation based on the Western concept of a “healthy lifestyle”<sup>12</sup>.

From this new scientific rationality, biomedicine progressively appropriates life, body and health, establishing biological normality and standardizing behaviors<sup>15,17-19</sup>. This knowledge transformed into technique not only spreads, but penetrates and perpetuates the minds and bodies of individuals, calling for the proper use of biological energies in order to achieve a productive, healthy and responsible life<sup>20</sup>. Under this mathematical outlook, the science of Nutrition rationalizes the act of eating, evinces the energy balances and the chemical composition of the diet – these are no longer naively called “food”, but usually and mistakenly “demonized”. Arnáiz<sup>16</sup> makes a fundamental reflection of these societal transformations when he points out that

[...] *dietary normalization has taken shape around the balanced diet, that is, an eating pattern based on the restriction or promotion of consumption of certain foods [...] and the prescription of a set of guidelines [...]*

According to the author, therefore, an eating normalization based on the idea of a balanced diet prevails. This new rationality that guides the eating behavior has its reasons and unfoldings in the new contemporary corporealities, constituted under the aegis of neoliberalism. The body, together with the scientific knowledge, becomes a differential of the business subject, who tirelessly invests in valuing themselves in search for success and achievements, both personal and professional. Following the view of Dardot and Laval<sup>21</sup>, the global market establishes the new way of the world, which, by setting rules and stimulating competition, justifies inequalities and redefines social relations and individual perceptions. The business subject aims at self-improvement, self-sufficiency, high performance (in all spheres of life), self-control and, consequently, control of emotions and the body, such as the currently worshiped high-level athlete. “No time for losers”! Good performance, synonymous with pleasure, becomes paramount, after all “we are the champions”!<sup>21</sup>.

Within the technical-scientific discourse and contemporary social practices, new bodily liturgies align with strategies for the rational management of the body. The physical pain and discomfort are less intense, relieved or controlled not only by a healthy and balanced diet, but also through the ingestion of vitamins and/or increasingly effective medicines. At the same time, one experiences a body that combines technological innovation, surgical techniques, prostheses and the various fitness modalities. A body that is controlled and shaped by practices and techniques, and, at the same time, re-signified by scientific debate. A body that, on the one hand, provides a greater sense of autonomy and freedom, to the extent that it is perceived as the result of individual care and choices, and, on the other hand, carries and expresses the ethical and aesthetic values of the group in which it is rooted. A body that, according to Giddens<sup>3</sup>, has a “double meaning” in terms of agency: it is individually controlled, enabling the maintenance of self-identity, and is socially shown and displayed<sup>3</sup>. Biography and history, both individual and social, are intertwined in the understanding and expression of the body in contemporary times.

Body practices – such as exercises, diets, cosmetic care, and hygiene rituals – radicalize the Foucauldian biopower in modern culture, according to Goes and Villaça<sup>22</sup>, and thus denote a certain imprecision between discipline and pleasure. The individual, in pursuit of perfect health and beauty, fighting against physical and biological degeneration, engages in constructs of power subtly elaborated in favor of contemporary ethics, which gives the body the dual imperative of health/aesthetics. Power investments assume another form and, according to the authors, instead of expressing themselves through the relationship between control and repression, they present themselves as seduction and stimulation<sup>22</sup>.

Thus, mirror reflections assume specific contours in modern culture, such as strong and rigid, which, however, take on multiple forms. In these contours, a new notion of beauty is built and ideally promoted by the fashion industry, social media and other mass communication media. The beautiful is now represented by the young body (regardless of age), which is strong, agile and healthy, sculpturally shaped by sports practices, balanced diets, vitamins, surgical techniques, among others. From catwalks to streets, from gyms to parks, beautiful bodies (steady, strong, and healthy) are the goal to be achieved and replicated.

Nevertheless, the emergence of subversion processes to this imposed order or norm cannot be left out. These combats between hegemonic bodies, different lifestyles (with the dominance of a morality of dispositions and behaviors), constitute dynamics that involve new conquests of meaning that require reconstructions and other corporal movements of resistance in constant fight, both across and for spaces. This perspective is well illustrated when political guidelines of social movements are brought to light, such as the ones linked to LGBTQ+ minorities, to debates led by native Latin American feminism, or to the agendas of the black feminist movement. Other dispositions for being in the world are claimed, based on the politicization of the body and its autonomy. These bodies, which are historically turned invisible and stigmatized, claim their space and legitimacy in the public sphere, promoting other uses, new representations and emerging demands of health care. The body becomes a political territory for contestation.

Despite this counterbalance, inside the very system, there are variations of the body plastic, which occurs within similar repertoires. There is an expansion of possibilities, but it is not entirely democratic. Although plural, the exposed corporealities are multiple expressions of the same political project, which aims at the construction of the healthy individual and that knows how to “correctly” live so as to not waste life energy. This political project must go through the body.

One of the reasons that explains part of these transformations regarding practices and corporal representations is provided by Baudrillard<sup>2</sup>. The author suggests that the body has acquired an extraordinary sign-value in modern culture, embracing the feature of “being the most beautiful object of consumption”. Therefore, he exemplifies how patterns of feminine beauty are built within Western society: “... it is evident (all it takes is a glance at other cultures) that beauty and thinness have no natural affinity. Fat and obesity were also beautiful in other places and during other times”<sup>2</sup>.

Another reason to be highlighted lies in the fact that health has become increasingly complex, and the boundaries between well-being and disease become more nebulous, or rather tenuous, since scientific knowledge is marked by dynamicity and constant updating. Among the consequences, we highlight the speed in which concepts such as “healthy lifestyle” and “proper diet” are (re)elaborated, in addition to the persistent intellectualization of the everyday life. This

leads to the construction of new habits that incorporate precise techniques for the promotion of the ever-changing wellness.

Nowadays, well-being has become synonymous with a lifestyle that prioritizes physical activities and practices of bioasceticism, as the individual progressively specializes in “self-control, controlling their own cholesterol, weight, intake of alcohol and anything that may contaminate their health”<sup>23</sup>. In a scenario of maximization of health and new technologies that operate upon the body, the individual has a responsibility, which results in self-monitoring, self-control, self-care, and in guilt<sup>24,25</sup>.

If the form and performance of the body do not meet the norm, the individual is the one who is not invested in its construction, who does not care for themselves. For Cerqueira<sup>23</sup>, “body, health and beauty merge. The body is built, consumed, standardized in the sense of its purification and aesthetic refinement”. It is produced by a diet in which food assumes a strictly nutritional functionality, by rationalizing body movements now calculated and planned according to the energy rates that can “be burned” and body parts that can be modeled. The changes in its governance envision an idealized performance driven by the replacement of hormones; an improvement through off-label products that consists in reconfiguring bodily and psychic events mediated by pharmaceutical solutions with the use of medicines for non-medicinal ends<sup>26</sup>.

The normative conception of a healthy lifestyle leads to the pathologization of sedentarism and the overvaluation of physical activities, planned and calculated, which are now seen as a kind of remedy for life<sup>24,25</sup>. This simplifies not only the notion of health but also the motivation to practice physical activities. Thus, under this logic, exercises lose their “hedonistic character.” Ferreira et al.<sup>25</sup> state that: “Just as it is common to reduce the bitterness of a drug by diluting it in sweet substances or anticipating the cure of the disease, it is often the motivation to practice physical activity elsewhere than in itself”. Thus, sedentarism is something that needs treatment, and the person who ignores this fact is not taking care of themselves, adopting an unhealthy lifestyle. Again, individual accountability and guilt in the name of contemporary ethics is imposed on the body by the so-called “healthy lifestyle”. In a world that praises the subject with high performance in all spheres of life, in Dardot’s and Laval’s<sup>21</sup> words, there is almost no room for the ones who do not adapt and value themselves;

this intensifies individual guilt and, by extension, promotes feelings of loneliness, depression and anxiety.

In this scenario, health is mainly perceived as an individual responsibility, since there is this option of choosing, despite the cultural conditions that have forced the individual to be seduced by all kinds of fast foods and by the physical comfort of modern life, brought about by automobiles, elevators, remote control, and mobile devices. The individual is faced with the replacement of pleasure with discipline, between the seduction of instant and fleeting fun, the appeal of fast, mass-produced food always at hand – with energy labels – and the duty to lose weight and physical training for redemption. In the double guilt of the excess of flavor (although artificial) and of knowledge (often manipulated or concealed by the food industry), of sin and penitence, the individual is encouraged to consume ever-changing concepts of health and a healthy lifestyle, which provoke new desires and temptations<sup>27</sup>. The proclaimed freedom of choice is questionable and points out that, with regard to bodily practices, it is necessary to consider, within the Elisian perspective, the interdependence between the individual and their society<sup>7,8</sup>.

### **Body Hexis: expression of normative practices and symbolic power**

There are traces of certain symbolic powers in the body territory of movement. They are practices, mentalities, representations, and feelings towards the body that reflect new mechanisms of control. These hegemonic corporealities give form to a type of power that transfigures already instituted relations of domination through their own means – the body. The symbolic violence manifests itself by the prestige and recognition of these discourses regarding the body, about how it should be, because they are naturalized forms of socialization that soften the disparity and oppression through charm instead of physical coercion<sup>28,29</sup>. The application of techniques for the body to occupy its proper place in the social space and have its aesthetics and productive functionality assured relates to the biopolitics that, when representing the legitimate discourse, inculcate norms and needs manifested in the body.

The disciplinary power, which aims at the individual body, and biopolitics, which has as its object the life of the population, were widely explored by Foucault<sup>10</sup> in the context of strengthening the nation-state and the standardization

of society. Through biopower, modern states use control and discipline techniques over the - individual and social - body, regulating behaviors, managing health, birth rates, mortality and life-expectancy, diets, sexuality, and others<sup>10</sup>. Contemporary biopolitics, in turn, fruit of technological and scientific advances, acts not only in the production of public health policies claimed by groups that fight for social rights, but also promoting specific obligations for the biological community. In the latter, the subject develops specific relationships with themselves and with others, based on a type of knowledge at a molecular level, in order to be able to manage genetic risks. In times of highly preventive biotechnology, a new citizenship is constituted: the biological citizenship, “which gives subjects a social identity increasingly based on bodily predicates”<sup>30</sup>. Thus, together with a new form of sociability, biosociability refers to “groups of people who redefine their individual and collective identities around their own diseases or susceptibilities...”<sup>30</sup>. In this context, incorporation techniques (hormones, hearing aids, prostheses, wheelchairs, “improving technologies”, among others) are pillars in this process, since they constitute identities and question the notion of normality when acting on bodies<sup>19,30</sup>.

Bourdieu<sup>29</sup> states that the bodily dispositions and the diacritical signs manifested in the body reveal classificatory schemes that can only be understood when located within the social space occupied by the individual. This would lead us to decode the entire lifestyle, eating behavior, and corporal pedagogy of a social group, not only as an objective of economic imperatives, but mainly as a smoothed form of social contradictions materialized in the preference for certain repertoires of life (i.e. certain objects and patterns of attitude). So to speak, lifestyles retranslate positions in the structures of social relations, expressing and defining objective differences in existence conditions.

Thus, practices are products of the dialectical relationship between *habitus* – the embodied disposition – and the material conditions of existence, which allow the reuse of this *habitus*<sup>28</sup>. This can be understood as the result of internalizing external structures; internalized schemes that lead to the engendering of the thoughts and actions of a culture, providing a sense of social belonging and highlighting this rooting. The internalized exteriority, present in our minds and bodies, forms a system of durable and socially variable dispositions. The *habitus* is creative and

inventive, but solely within the limits of its structures. It is generative and unifying, since it puts into action and justifies the constancy of dispositions, of likes and preferences, building and understanding the dimensions of the practice. It is a structuring structure and a structured structure<sup>28</sup>.

The images that circulate as symbolic markers of the body contours inscribe attributes in the represented form. For example, by endorsing female thinness, the desirable lean body, fine and contained, and by excluding its opposite, the body is perceived as deformed and classified as hyperbolic, or represented as extravagant. The constructions of sense for the reality of the social world establish arrangements for the whole of the social that is lived as a communal dimension of meaning in which the bodily forms are tuned to certain models of identity.

For Bourdieu, symbolic systems perform a political function as acceptable and plausible devices of the imposing ideas and values, in that they tenuously guarantee the acceptance and naturalization of constructs of meaning. The imposition of a body *hexis*, as a legitimate symbolic violence of a way of being in the world, of legislating images that express the taxonomies of the matrix of meanings of the dominant culture, constitutes only one of the many other actions by which limits or social classifications are imposed<sup>28</sup>. The symbolic violence expresses these impositions (consciously or unconsciously), incorporated and reproduced, in order to adhere to images and their meanings. An adhesion and belonging to the culturally-shared imaginary.

On the symbolic violence present in the gender system that establishes and organizes social relations, in the field of standardizations and normalizations of living, the impositions of cultural marks that symbolize the feminine in the female body, for example, are emblematic. A daily liturgy in relation to body care, health practices, and personal hygiene is established, which leads to the production of the idealized image through a particular dressing code, cosmetics, mechanization and programming of physical exercises, eating behavior and rationalities that guide food decisions and clearly have a direct relationship with power and control over this body that materializes the socially attitudes expected from the female. Thus, body technologies constitute gender technologies<sup>31</sup>. This liturgy is radicalized in the compulsion of physical exercise and in eating disorders, markedly relevant in younger segments of the female population<sup>32,33</sup>.

The body attains itself as a space of construction of meanings, in which the symbolic power is disputed and exercised in the form of a legitimate body *hexis*: slenderness, postural haughtiness, muscle tone, self-control diet, high stamina and energy are the ultimate achievement of a healthy lifestyle. Symbolic systems enunciate relations of meaning to the social world, a fact that gives it support<sup>29</sup>. The discourse produced on the body subtly includes the taxonomies belonging to the matrix of meanings of the dominant culture, and the effect of the appropriation of the forms of body perception consists essentially in the dissemination of classification systems reported by the scientific field – body hygiene, healthy lifestyle, nutritional balance. The medical language and its signs are basically the language of power, the one that communicates a system of symbols and objects as real discourses about life and positive intervention in collective existence<sup>34</sup>.

The process of symbolization led by the body engenders those significant associated with “beauty”, “ugliness”, “desirable”, or “rejection”, which enunciate legitimate judgments of the symbolic system forged in the individual. The subjectivation of values expresses and softly justifies the unity of the power system. One of the most accurate examples of this process can be drawn from the older generation. Incorporating values of youth – which now embody not only the generational question but also this “state of mind” – and assuming new possibilities and forms of sociability, old age is now considered the “best age”. Utility, creativity, and dynamism come to characterize the current discourse about the elderly. They have now proclaimed their autonomy. In the consumerist logic, not only the physical/biological well-being is important, but also is “youthful” beauty – hence the largely explored “rejuvenation industry” – exposing the constructed inseparability between health and aesthetics. Individual responsibility, the choices made along the trajectory of life, and new age classifications are created as a way of blaming

and justifying those who do not fit into this idealized image of the elderly. According to Britto da Motta<sup>35</sup> there is “a ‘fourth age’, foreshadowing a fifth... And these, almost nobody wants to study or understand...”.

Finally, new imaginary constructions and evaluative updates promote other meanings to the framework of bodily practices without, however, significant changes in the essence of the reflexes.

### Brief considerations

In modern times, the constitution and affirmation of Western individualism has surpassed the dimensions of social values of individual freedom. Our society “has made the critique of reality, the dissatisfaction with ‘what is already there’, and the expression of this dissatisfaction an inevitable and obligatory duty of the lives of each of its members”<sup>27</sup>.

Politics and life, as an emancipatory Enlightenment project, is the possibility of choosing lifestyles and the reflective mobilization of the self and body to reach certain “existential parameters”<sup>3</sup>. These processes of self-realization are somehow possible because there is an enrichment of the individual dimension and politicization of intimacy and of certain lifestyles.

Science’s discourse regarding the definition of a healthy lifestyle turns health into a duty ethically grounded in the human condition of modern freedom. Thus, it is no longer a natural condition. This right to individual freedoms is strongly supported by the duties ratified by symbolic systems since health and beauty have become inseparable imperatives in our reality. Therefore, contemporary images of surface aesthetics, of body rationalization techniques, and of calculated diets supply the collection of necessary symbols to understand the movement of thought that modern society achieves regarding the human condition.

### Collaborations

RCF Giordani idealized the text, participated in the bibliographic research, writing and final review; and MTH Horochovski participated in the writing and final review.

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