

# THE TURN OF THE BODY: HISTORY AND THE POLITICS OF THE CORPOREAL<sup>1</sup>

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**RESUMEN:** En este artículo se evalúa el tratamiento de lo corporal en la historia desde un reciente pasado foucaultiano hasta el presente. El "giro somático", se argumenta, no sólo puso de moda el cuerpo en los textos de historia sino que cuestionó de manera fundamental la naturaleza misma de la historia como forma de investigación. En este trabajo resumimos primero la concepción anti-esencialista del cuerpo que Foucault desarrolla a través de sus conceptos de "biopoder" y "biopolítica", para después discutir el impacto del giro somático en la nueva historia cultural. Se discute el modo representacionista de expresión foucaultiano en relación con las reacciones "experienciales" que ha suscitado así como el espacio que se abre para un nuevo y políticamente alarmante tipo de esencialismo, el "presentacionismo". Se discuten otras dos alternativas posibles para el tratamiento del cuerpo en la historia hoy en día, una radicalmente neo-esencialista y la otra no, dado su esfuerzo por sacar a la luz los aspectos políticos en torno a la contemporánea vida biologizada.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Foucault; biopoder; historia de la medicina; historia cultural; representaciones; presentacionismo; políticas de la vida; biologización.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The last few decades of the twentieth century witnessed the body moving from no one's particular concern to virtually everyone's preoccupation – including historians. Roy Porter writing on the history of the body in the revised second edition of Peter Burke's *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* declared that "body history" had become the "historiographical dish of the day" (Porter, 2001, 236) – having proclaimed in the first edition, a decade before, that the topic was "in the dark" and "too often ignored or forgotten" (Porter, 1991, 212, 226). The "negligence" side of this "negligence-to-obsession" scenario is not strictly accurate; as Michel Foucault observed in *Surveiller et punir* (1975), "historians long ago began to write the history of

# EL GIRO DEL CUERPO: HISTORIA Y POLÍTICA DE LOS CORPÓREO

**ABSTRACT:** This paper reviews the encounter of the body in historical scholarship from the recent Foucaultian past to the present. The "somatic turn", it argues, did more than merely render the body temporarily fashionable in history writing; it fundamentally challenged the nature of history as a form of inquiry. The paper outlines Foucault's anti-essentialist understanding of the body as developed through his concepts of "biopower" and "biopolitics", before discussing how the somatic turn impacted on the new cultural history. The latter's representationalist mode of expression is discussed in relation to the "experiential" reactions to it and the space these open for a new and politically worrying kind of essentialism, "presentationalism". Two other possible directions for the body in history writing today are considered, one radically neo-essentialist, the other not, in its effort to lay bare the politics of contemporary biologized life.

**KEY WORDS:** Foucault; biopower; history of medicine; cultural history; representations; presentationalism; politics of life; biologization.

the body". They had shown, among much else, how the body was

"a target for the attacks of germs or viruses, [...] to what extent historical processes were involved in what might seem to be the purely biological base of existence; and what place should be given in the history of society to biological 'events' such as the circulation of bacilli, or the extension of the life-span" (*Discipline and Punish*, 1977, 25).

But Porter was right to imply that the flow of historical scholarship on the body had significantly revved up, even if he didn't understand how or why. He could only list some of the types of historical interests that now revolved around the body – demography, art, biology, and so on. What he

failed to grasp was that "body history" had only accelerated after Foucault drew attention to the importance of a *non*-purely biological view of the body – a non-essentialist politically invested view of it that undermined how historians had previously conceived it. Furthermore, it was not "body history" that came to excite interest, but the notion of a historicized body. This was the new register of concern that by the millennium's turn had bookshelves groaning under the weight of the body "at risk", "at work", "at war"; "in question", "in theory", "in language", "in shock", "in pain". The historicized body "of the artisan", "the disabled", "the mad", "the Jew", "the erotic", "the beautiful", and "the saintly", were among the many now to be "explored", "contested", "expressed", "invaded", "imagined", "emblazoned", "engendered", "experienced", "disembled", "dismembered", and "reconstructed" – to draw only from some of the titles of Anglophone monographs.

With a vengeance the somatic moment had arrived, cresting on a body wave in popular culture. Especially in the West, people were becoming increasingly obsessed with their bodies. Narcissistic concerns over health and fitness, dieting, weight loss, obesity, personal grooming, drugs for sexual and mental "enhancement", tattoos, body piercing, cosmetic surgery, gender reassignment, organ transplantation, and so on, had left the socio-political preoccupations of the 1960s and 1970s far behind. AIDS, to be sure, was not unimportant in opening the floodgates to this corporeal attentiveness. But bodies had also become big business, the focal point of an expansive and internationally expanding consumer culture. While bodies had always been important in human existence, not least for social ordering, by the late twentieth century the fixation and fascinated with them had become many people's only source of identity, as well as "the privileged site of experiments with the self" (Rose, 2007, 26).

There exist no across-the-board account of how intellectuals came to engage with the body in the late twentieth century. To explain fully the conditions of possibility for that interest would require nothing less than a cultural history of our times – a cultural history with none of its material moorings omitted. It would have to attend to shifts in politics and political-economic theory, in commercial practice, and in the status of nation states relative to global configurations, as much as to developments in biomedicine, bioethics, visual culture, and communication

technology. Further, it would have to engage seriously not just with feminism and gender politics, and with the push for gay, lesbian, and disability rights, but also with all the waves of theorization in these and related areas of intellectual concern and activism.

This paper attempts nothing so ambitious. Its purpose is simply to review the encounter of the body *in historical scholarship* from the recent Foucaultian past to the present. However, the task is not as straightforward as it sounds, and might even be construed as misguided. Paradoxically, history writing is a poor Archimedean point from which to draw the recent history of the body, for it has been a territory less devoted to that particular exercise than one fundamentally challenged by it. Put simply, the modern discipline of history was philosophically and methodologically assaulted by the "postmodern" literary turn in Western intellectual life that elevated the body to a privileged site. The "somatic turn" (of which body history was a part) was broadly a means to explicate and illustrate how concepts and categories like "the body" and practices like "history" served to naturalize, rationalize and cohere a reality that was increasingly felt by many late twentieth century intellectuals to be fragmented. Both the body and the discipline of history could be seen to be products of (and for) "modernity" – the project whose grand narratives of progress, socialism, and Enlightenment served to disguise the fact that terms like "the individual", "the social", "nature" and even "reality" were not "objective" epistemologically autonomous entities, but rather, "historical and normative creations, designed to handle the exigencies of political power and political order" (Joyce, 1995, 83). Conventional history writing came to be seen as inherently modernist inasmuch as its business was to invent or apply coherent narratives of the past, and through those narratives (and its own narrative structure) shape understandings of the present. Modern history writing, in other words, came to be seen as serving much the same kind of sense making as the category of the modern body in *its* capacity to cohere and constrict understanding. In fact, historically, the categories of "the body" and "history" mirrored each other: the invention of modern history as a would-be objective discipline coincided with the invention of modern medicine as an enterprise seeking to objectify the body. In tandem, the profession of medicine sought to objectify the body, while the profession of history sought to objectify the past (Long, 2004). Both were products of

the modernist (more generally, Enlightenment) project that invented our idea of the disciplines.

Overall, then, the focus on the body within the linguistic post-modern-cum-somatic turn led to intense concentration on the nature of history as a form of inquiry. "Body history" was not about the history of the body as a discrete object of inquiry, but about new ways of discoursing on and representing knowledge, including historical knowledge. Thus any attempt to explicate how the body became the "historiographical dish of the day" risks missing out what the focus on the body in intellectual culture actually signified – a critique of history along with other mediated constructions of the world. Any history of the historiography of "the body" therefore runs the risk of obliterating the politics involved in the somatic turn in history writing. Too easily it can end up being nothing more than a reification of body history, if not a reification of the body itself as an essentialized entity reducible to its biology. The danger, in short, is that of cohering a historical narrative around the very thing that came to serve above all to problematize and de-stabilize the notion of historical coherence. Although it may not be possible to avoid such pitfalls in a brief sketch of the historiography of the body in the discipline of history, in what follows it is from out of that concern that emphasis is placed on the politics of this problematization and destabilization. As will be seen, the discipline of history has been subject to not one but several turns around the body, all of which have served to bring to the fore questions about the "nature" of "the past" and our interpreting of it.

## 2. FOUCAULT

As already mentioned, no one was more responsible for inculcating the somatic turn than Michel Foucault. In a variety of important publications around corporeal themes, Foucault drew attention to the complicated relationship between power and the human body. For him, it was through somatic discourse, or through discursive practices operative in and upon the physical body, that modern power came to be constituted and exercised. What he came to call "biopower" refers to the somatically shaped and shaping knowledges and practices that aimed both at normalizing the health of individuals (through the defining, measuring, and categorizing of bodies), *and* at the managing and regulating of human populations<sup>2</sup>.

This was a notion of power that did not derive simply from social and political institutions. Since the late eighteenth century, Foucault believed, innumerable systems had come into place to encourage people to self-regulate in the interest of preserving and extending their lives<sup>3</sup>. At the same time as this "care of the self" came to be willingly pursued, nation states for their part – for military and economic reasons – became intent on the health and welfare of their citizens in the aggregate. With the intensification of nationalistic ambitions towards the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, nation states increasingly implemented disciplinary technologies around the body – practices around dress, drill, and diet, for instance – to render the body ever more amenable to productivity and social order. Increasingly, nation states also implemented regulatory techniques to measure and monitor the body around "norms". Indeed, the notion of "the norm" or *normativity*, Foucault suggested, is that which links the biological and social disciplinary techniques aimed at individuals with the regulatory ones aimed at populations<sup>4</sup>. The "modern" body – the normatized body – was the aim and the outcome of the concerted action of both.

Foucault's concept of biopower was not to be understood as something negatively experienced, or merely acting repressively from only outside the body – it was, after all, literally *embodied*. It was a productive agency, much the same as language itself was coming to be regarded in the work of Jacques Derrida and fellow linguistic theorists. As such, Foucault's notion of biopower radically challenged conventional sociological understandings, not least Marxian ones, where power was seen to act as an external force for coercion and domination, whether it was exercised instrumentally in a crude mechanical fashion, or mediated through ideology, "false consciousness" or other capitalist machinations of "truth". Thus, whereas within medical sociology this conventional notion of power was translated into the concept of "medicalization" to mean the territorialization and exercise of knowledge and power by the medical profession, for Foucault medicalization embraced the whole of our somaticized culture in which identity and the meaning of life are fashioned through the body, or through the notion of biological life itself. In effect, argued Foucault, it was through the body – through the various political investments of knowledge/power in and around it – that the modern subject (that is, us) was made. This making was held to lie outside the ambit of individual

cognition and control, and outside the instrumental or mediated dominations of ruling authority.

For Foucault, the body was a referent for the discourses that he sought to analyze, and for the question of who we are. This had little purchase power, however, in the one area of historical scholarship where the body might be thought to have mattered most – the history of medicine (Cooter, 2007). Here the body was very largely taken for granted as an unproblematic biological given; there was little comprehension of it as a form of knowledge continually being invested and re-invested in power relations, or of the idea of body knowledge as in and of itself *constituting* politics. At issue, especially within the academically ascendant field of the *social* history of medicine in the 1970s and '80s, was, rather, the medical profession whose power was perceived simply as exercised upon and through the body. Social historians of medicine, operating in the wake of influential social critiques of the power of the "medical establishment", such as Ivan Illich's *Medical Nemesis* (1976), largely followed in the train of E.P. Thompson in elaborating a version of "history from below" around the social power of medical profession in relation to patients (Porter 1985). Here, too, "medicalization" was conceived purely in terms of professional knowledge and power, whether studied from the top down or (à la Roy Porter, the British doyen of the field) from the bottom up. By illuminating historically the social structuring, exercise, and effects of this power in the "real world", social historians of medicine could feel that they were contributing to the politics of social change. They were not idly "interpreting the world", as Marx's famously indicted philosophers, but were serving in their own way "to change it". Foucault looked all too much like a philosopher providing no obvious political solutions to anything; indeed, his non-marxian, anti-structuralist attention to somatic discourse could be interpreted as a counter to prescriptive social politics, if not a disguised apology for something more reactionary. In effect, Foucault's corporealization of power in general, and his de-centering of the notion of medical power in particular, robbed the social history of medicine of its "medicine", debased its political interests, and bankrupted its explanatory power. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that when Porter came to admit to body history having become "the historiographical dish of the day" it was with remarkable reluctance to attribute much either to the outcome or to Foucault.

But by then – indeed, by the 1980s – the Rubicon has been crossed in history as almost everywhere else in the social sciences and humanities. What Foucault would have identified as a new episteme was beginning to reign, even if in history writing the accommodation to this corporeal "regime of truth" was slow, uneven and partial. Its signature was evident in the move away from the sociological paradigm (and Marxism in particular), and the displacement of "the social" (now understood as a historically constructed category) by "the cultural". Above all, it was signaled by heightened attention to the body within cultural studies of all sorts, and within feminist studies especially. Social politics came to be displaced by concerns with the politics of identity and the construction of the supposedly autonomous modern "self". The wider context was one of increasing commercialization around the individualized body and the widespread sense of the disappearance of a "genuinely democratic space under the thickening blanket of privatization and the declining welfare state" (Davis, 1990, 302). As in the world of music, songs of protest were surrendering to songs of the self. As important was AIDS, not because it *caused* epistemological shift, but because (initially, at least, in not being easily explained) it appeared to render arbitrary the conventional distinctions between the cultural and the biological, as well as the disciplinary boundaries historically separating sociology, ecology, and biology (Rosenberg 1998, 347, 355n41)<sup>5</sup>. AIDS encouraged new modes of thinking about knowledge and perceptions of power, and in this respect became a testing ground for Foucault's thinking on biopower for many cultural theorists and activists. Indeed, it was largely around AIDS that the anti-essentialist and anti-structuralist "literary turn" fused decisively with the "somatic turn" (Cooter/Stein, 2007). AIDS hastened "a crisis of representation... a crisis overt the entire framing of knowledge about the human body" (Watney, 1987, 9; see also Treichler, 1987).

### 3. THE BODY IN THE NEW CULTURAL HISTORY

It was mainly through the portal of Foucault's anti-essentialist approach to the body that cultural history came to embrace the body and, in the process, to re-constitute itself in many respects. To be sure, there were various prior encouragements to it, not least from the anthropology of Clifford Geertz (Geertz, 1973) and Mary Douglas (Douglas,

1966, 1973, 1975), which had inspired a number of historians to focus on corporeal matters. While body history – or more precisely, the historicization of body fragments – was still mostly the preserve of literary theorist and feminist scholars (often one and the same), increasingly there were meeting points and crossovers with historians. The “new cultural history”, which accepted that the somatic turn was an offshoot of the literary one, came to approach the body as something entrenched in sensibility, images, illness vocabularies, and related symbolic practices. Hard structures were abandoned in favor of poststructuralist “negotiations”, and language was embraced as a productive force, constitutive rather than simply reflective of reality. The social reductionism inherent to social history could be done away with. No longer was anything to be reducible to its social construction, and nothing was reducible to any single cause. Social categories were no longer to be seen as prefiguring consciousness or culture or language, but rather, were to be seen as dependent upon them. Such categories were now to be understood as instantiated through their expression or representation. All in all, a more constructivist view of reality, and a more ontological view of history were taking shape.

Pioneering in these respects within historical scholarship was *The Making of the Modern Body* (1987) edited by Thomas Laqueur and Catherine Gallagher. As the book’s Introduction pointed out, this was “a new historical endeavor”, deriving “partly from the crossing of historical with anthropological investigations, partly from social historians’ deepening interest in culture, partly from the thematization of the body in modern philosophy..., and partly from the emphasis on gender, sexuality, and women’s history” (Introduction, vi). As the list belies, what was “new” here carried considerable baggage from the past. Indeed, in the “making” in the title (also in Laqueur’s *Making Sex: Gender and Sex from the Greeks to Freud* (1990), the monograph that expanded his germinal essay on the construction of a two-sexed model of gender difference published in his and Gallagher’s edited volume) was the suggestion of causal narratives and teleological undercurrents – perhaps even whiffs of nostalgia for the sociological notion of power (if not the politics) of that other famous “making”, by E.P. Thompson, of *the English Working Class* (1963)<sup>6</sup>. But overall there was here far more that was novel than antique, so much so, that it might be said in retrospect, that the “making” that was most apparent was that of a new corporeal

regime of truth moving into history writing. Biological essentialism was routed, and constructivism embraced in the place of causality and linear narratives. Instead of the body being perceived as a naturalistic biological given that could be taken for granted, it was regarded as an entity that itself had a history, and whose very construction in history could be reckoned a central historical problem. Within an intellectual discourse that owed much to the 1980s-born literary “New Historicism” and its debts to Foucault in terms of the making of modern identity, the body within the new cultural history was becoming a tool for thinking beyond categorical constraints<sup>7</sup>. Such thinking was regarded as itself a “radical and necessary form of activism” (O’Connor, 2000, 214), or a way of speaking against dominant discourses (even if it couldn’t change them). It was also a means to out-think conventional history writing, for not only was the body that was historicized within this intellectual discourse perceived to be inherently unstable and fragmented, but so too the notion of history. History was no longer to be understood as a stable or unified body of facts, or a neutral “background” against which any object or event might be situated and studied. Such a view of history could be construed as itself *ahistorical*. Rather, history was coming to be seen primarily as a set of changing representations of the past. Situating bodies historically in their appropriate “representational regimes” was part and parcel of the re-thinking of the meaning, purpose and shape of history. Increasingly, therefore, history (as in the history of the body) was approached as a text: authored, discursive, and malleable in every respect. It was as a made up text that it became a resource for (historical) constructivist and (literary) deconstructivist analysis, neither of which was any longer very separable.

Thus did the new cultural history render the body and historical epistemology privileged sites for literary and cultural analysis. But it was not long before the nature of that privileging was called into question. The problem with the representational approach, it came to be seen, was its acceptance of the body only *as a representation* – the very title of the journal (first issued in 1983) wherein Laqueur and other historians joined forces with their New Historicist literary colleagues. “Representationalism”, it came to be lamented, held that the body (like everything else) was nothing more than a discourse, or something entirely structured by language. In effect, then, in the course of de-essentializing the biological body, the new



(representationalist) cultural history of the body essentialized or naturalized language. Left out, it was felt, was the *lived experience* of the body and of history. Bodies had flesh, just as the past had substance. Among historians, as opposed to those in cultural and literary studies, this "realism" mattered for, ultimately, there was no basis for the practice of history without it, and little point in fighting to change oppressive remnants of the past.

This was a position that had in fact been argued for in body history as early as 1987 by the feminist and historian Barbara Duden, albeit somewhat inadvertently. Drawing on the insights of the Foucaultian medical sociologist, David Armstrong, Duden's impressive and acutely self-reflective *The Woman Under the Skin* (English translation, 1991) sought to capture "the vanished reality of the 'corporeal self'" through the study of the casebooks of an eighteenth century German medical practitioner. At its heart was the pursuit of the experience of the self that might have existed before the "biological" realities of the modern body silenced it. Duden's book was written independent from the work of Laqueur and the "representationists" and, in fact (as Adam Bencard has shrewdly observed), failed to render "experience" itself a cultural construct, as opposed to the experiences of the body (Bencard, 2007, 181). Nevertheless, in retrospect, *The Woman Under the Skin* stands at the head of what became an ever-lengthening queue of cultural historians insisting on the need seriously to heed corporeal experience.

As formidable as Duden's contribution, and more critical of body talk in general, was the essay by the medievalist Caroline Walker Bynum, "Why all the Fuss About the Body" (1995). Reflecting on the super-abundance of works on the body, Bynum lamented that so much of it failed to acknowledge that bodies eat, work, suffer, die, and undergo emotions, thoughts and experiences. In the bulk of the body literature, she complained, the body is dissolved into language, and refers only to "speech acts or discourse". Dissatisfied with the Foucaultian anti-essentialist epistemologies that underlie such work (although by no means wishing to revert to biological essentialism), Bynum sought to save a space for real lived bodies. Without such a space there could be no place for feminist politics, it seemed – a worry that was made explicit by the American poststructuralist philosopher and "third wave" feminist, Judith Butler in her influential *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive*

*Limits of Sex* (1993). This political issue was also addressed frontally by the feminist Elizabeth Grosz in *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (1994).

By the new millennium, then, cultural historians with an interest in the body were largely in agreement. There was consensus around the importance of the *real experience* of the body and, apriori in the face of its discursive evaporation, the need to hold on to it as something more than a linguistic representation. And there was consensus over the need to carry out the recovery of the "real" body without any return to biological essentialism. Discourse was not dismissed; instead, it was appreciated as a realm of historical inquiry that was not mutually exclusive from that of experience; both had a place in practice of history. By this point, too, many historians were finding satisfaction in the conclusion provided by Butler, that language is "performative" in shaping conceptions of the body, a view that enables human experience to be understood as embodied. So far as this view obtained a space for feminist political action, it harkened back to the position of the existentialist Simone de Beauvoir who had argued that the "reality" of the political circumscription of women's lives came prior to the creation of any notion of the "essence" of womanhood that served to naturalize those political conditions. In short, the work of Butler and others re-opened an intellectual space for feminist struggle in the face of its closure through the earlier over-emphasis on language.

In part because of these intellectual achievements around the body, and in part because the commercial market for them was becoming saturated, interest in the historicized body began to wane. Increasingly, "the body" had the look of exhaustion, just as did the intellectual movement of postmodernism that had breathed life into it. For historians who had never embraced the postmodern-cum-somatic turn this was welcomed as a means to reassert conventional (essentialist) practices and understandings. This was perhaps most noticeable in reactionary articulations of "global history" which mediated the unifying historical narratives of modernity (Cooter/Stein, forthcoming). It was also apparent in art history, a discipline that in the 1980s and '90s found itself besieged by the postmodern study of "visual culture". Writing in 2006, the art historian Martin Kemp, for instance, railed against the "deconstructive criticism of historical culture" that treated the past "as a sour land over which to exercise present concerns and anxie-

ties". In its place, explicitly, he sought to revive "an agenda for history [that] was more common in the past than it is today" (Kemp, 2006, 2). For Kemp and like-minded historians, post-modernism with its iconoclastic anti-essentialism could be written off as a mere passing fashion, not something that had radically re-shaped thinking in general, and thinking on history in particular.

#### 4. THE RETURN OF BIOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL ESSENTIALISM

Where, then, does this leave the history of the body and the body in relation to the idea of history? Three positions or directions seem apparent. The first might be described as that involving the burning of bridges: the wholesale abandonment of constructivist programmes in history writing along with a return to biological essentialism. This is the position adopted by Barbara Stafford in her *Echo Objects* (2007). Although Stafford, a historian of the body and visualization, was never much indebted to Foucault, she was well aware of how the history of the body was unfolding in postmodernity, as reflected in her *Body Criticism: Imaging the Unseen in Enlightenment Art and Medicine* (1991). In subsequent work, she acknowledged, "we live in an age of otherness, of assertive identities, of the 'diversification of diversity'" (*Visual Analogy*, 2001, 10). However, in *Echo Objects*, written after she attended weekly seminars on computational neuroscience, Stafford became convinced that "those of us in the humanities and social sciences" had acquired "wonderful new intellectual tools to re-imagine everything from autopoiesis to mental imagery". Converted, she was compelled "to rethink the major themes of my life's work", and, evangelically, to press this "rethink" on art, cultural, and literary historians; to have them "consider seriously the biological underpinnings of artificial marks and built surface". (2007, 1).

"As scholars of the myriad aspects of self-fashioning we can usefully enlarge and even alter, our humanistic understanding of culture, inflecting it with urgent discoveries in medicine, evolutionary and developmental biology, and the brain sciences. In other words, the role of culture is not just to stand outside, critiquing science, nor is science's position external, and acting on culture. Rather, we are discovering at the most profound levels that our separate investigations belong to a joint project, at last" (2007, 1-2).

Neuroscience, she had come to believe, "enables us...to comprehend...reflex tendencies from the inside out". Old problems were to look new after being "sieved through the cognitive turn", and "traditional cultural assumptions by which many of us have long lived" were to be turned "upside down" (2007, 175-176).

While some social scientists may be anxious to hop on Stafford's essentialist bandwagon (and thereby enter into the now hegemonic neurobiological talk that, for example, turns the study of market psychology into "neuroeconomics")<sup>8</sup>, it is hard to imagine many historians following suit, either wittingly or unwittingly. But this is far less possibly the case with regard to the second direction that can be discerned for the body in history. Indeed, it is from this other direction that one historian has been led to produce the first sustained attempt at a history of the historicized body, Adam Bencard, in his doctoral dissertation "History in the Flesh" (2007). Bencard draws on the scholarship of those who came together on the pages of *History and Theory* in 2006 to discuss the notion of "presence" – a sequel of sorts to the questions raised by, but not resolved through, the somatic turn. Of central concern to these scholars was the question of how to make the lived experience of the past a part of the living present, or how to put the experiential sense of presence into history writing. This was not unlike the concern of Duden and others in their effort to recapture corporeal experience in history, although the orientation of the contributors to *History and Theory* was less that of epistemology and knowledge production (though it depended upon that postmodern legacy)<sup>9</sup>, than ontology, or notions of the "temporality of being" such as had preoccupied the philosopher Martin Heidegger. How, the various contributors wondered, could "authenticity" (the Heideggerian notion that was taken up by Sartre) be put back into the domain of historical study (Bentley, 349)? Moreover, this quest for authenticity was explicitly pitted against representationalism, perceived by these authors as the besetting sin of the literary turn that had overlooked that representations are not only shaped by experience but also *determined* by them. As stated by one of the contributors to the debate, the Groningen philosopher-psychologist turned historiographer, Eelco Runia, representationalism, in common with postmodern historiography, effectively purged history of reality. "Presentationalism", on the other hand, or the quest for "presence" in history, was about being in touch with it (2006, 195).

Another major contributor to this forum was the anti-Derrida literary theorist Hans Gumbrecht. He imagined the concept of presence being developed in opposition to "meaning culture".

"In a meaning culture [that is, one preoccupied by language] knowledge is understood as subjective interpretation, the subject occupying an external relation to the natural world. The aim of knowledge is to transform the world [as in Marxism], and thus the temporal dimension is central to meaning-culture, along with the concepts of consciousness and processes. In a presence-culture humans are embedded in the material world characterized by its spatial, tangible relations. Knowledge tends to be understood as revelation rather than interpretation, and the idea of changing the world becomes pointless" (2006, 318; see also Gumbrecht, 2004)).

Beyond "a reconciliation of humans with their world" (Gumbrecht, 2006, 317), what Gumbrecht was arguing for, it seems, was some kind of essentialist pre-knowledge, a position flying in the face of historical ontological understanding of the construction of knowledge/power such as articulated by Foucault. Quite why Gumbrecht desired this is not clear. Like the other advocates of "presentationalism", his efforts were explicitly *apolitical*. While the phenomenological basis of the "presentationalist" position has similarities with the existentialism of Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, it departs fundamentally in having no interest in championing liberation and freedom. Not only are Enlightenment-rooted social politics outside the frame, but so too is any postmodernist tilting at dominant discourses as a form of activism. Yet it can hardly be said that presentationalism is non-political – as was made plain by one of the more empirically minded contributors to the discussion in *History and Theory*, the historian Rik Peters. In his essay on "presence" in fascist political culture, Peters pointed to the "striking affinities" between what his co-contributors to *History and Theory* were involved in and what the early twentieth century Italian "philosopher of fascism", Giovanni Gentile was pursuing in seeking the "cultural awakening" of his countrymen.

"First... there is a strong resemblance between Gentile's notion of 'pure experience' and the contemporary theory of sublime historical experience; both stress direct contact with the past, the obliteration of the subject/object distinc-

tion, and the primacy of experience. Furthermore, Gentile *cum suis* perfectly understood what Runia means by presence as 'being in touch!.. with people, things, events, and feelings that made you into the person you are. It is having a whisper of life breathed into what has become routine and clichéd" (2006, 372).

These similarities between fascists and presentationalists are no coincidence, Peters observed.

"When we study Gentile and Fascist culture we look in a distant mirror. Looking in this mirror we see ourselves, we see our own yearning for reality, our need for presentification, and our thirst for action. We may even feel some of the enthusiasm of the hundreds of artists, architects, scientists, historians, and philosophers working together for the great common cause in the schools, universities, cultural institutes, and exhibitions. Indeed, in Mussolini's Italy, we recognize something of ourselves: we recognize a culture struggling with its own historicity" (2006, 372-373).

From this perspective, the presentationalists in their effort to move beyond the literary postmodern turn and beyond the world of "meaning culture" might be seen as advocating somewhat more than merely the return of ontology "to the center of historical theory" (Bentley, 2006, 349). They can be seen as generating a space for a neo-fascist politics founded in notions of purity and cultural unity, and even of reviving the possibility for the struggle for historicity around the body<sup>10</sup>. Yet these would be but the unintended consequences of a discussion that was in fact more metaphysical than "historical" in the sense of being tied to any analysis of specific times and places (in the manner, say, of Rik Peters' article). What can be said, though, is that the presentationalists were positing a new essentialism through their critique of representationalism's essentialising of language, namely, the essentialism of the essence of experience.

In his dissertation on "History in the Flesh", Adam Bencard chose not to refer to Rik Peters' contribution to *History and Theory*. Instead, he drew on Runia and Gumbrecht to provide a larger casting for, and possible solution to, the problem of the poverty of corporeal experience highlighted by Duden, Bynum and Butler. This was an intellectually brave move, which succeeded in problematizing the gap between the discursive construction of the body and the



common experience of it. If nothing else it resulted in an impressive narrative around the history of the historicized body – one that would have left Roy Porter and other social historians flabbergasted. Ultimately, however, Bencard failed to resolve anything through his incorporation of presentationalism into the historicization of the historicized body. The main reason for this was not that he overlooked the large body of literary theory on the “metaphysics of presence” unfolded by Derrida and others from the 1970s onwards – and hence the fact that all subsequent discussion of “presence” was in one way or another embedded in literary theory and not an escape from it. Rather, more generally, Bencard was to trying to reconcile two irreconcilable modes of intellectual discourse: on the one hand, the historical, and on the other, the metaphysical or philosophical (and psychological), which are *ahistorical*. In the consideration of “consciousness”, for example, philosophers and psychologists (like Runia) need overlook that such concepts or analytical categories are historical constructs not historically transcendent essentialist departments of mind (see Hacking, 2002; Smith, 1992, Smith, 2007). Bencard, in seeking to bridge the gap between language and reality in history, could not escape such disconnects from historical time and place. The only way out of the problem he set himself was to posit the redesign of history itself, a reconfiguration that would involve “nothing short of the reconceptualization of the past – indeed of time itself”, as one of the contributors to *History and Theory* proposed as the goal for the future (Bentley, 349). This may be fine and well for the philosophy of history, or for inquiry into the nature of the past itself, such as the presentationalists were seeking. But it was less well suited to the business of historical practice that Bencard was after. At best, within an inquiry into history as a form of inquiry, it could only leave open the question of the relationships that might possibly exist between knowledge, experience and epistemology. At worst, for the history of the body in historical writing, it evaporated contextual exigencies.

## 5. THE POLITICS OF “LIFE”

In contrast to the above two possibilities for writing the historicized body, the third resists the siren call of essentialism in the course of opening out contemporary biopolitics

and biopower. Most prominent here is the historically minded sociologist Nikolas Rose. Like the medical sociologist, David Armstrong, Rose has been a British practitioner of Foucault’s ideas since the mid-1970s, much of his earlier work being directed to the analysis of modern psychological subjectivity (Rose, 1985). His latest work, gathered together in *The Politics of Life Itself* (2007), moves to the practices of biological personhood as the most potent present sites of new knowledges and powers. Especially in reference to molecular biology and neuroscience, Rose illuminates the making of contemporary biosubjects and biosubjectivities. He details the biological existence that we now inhabit, rather than one we can fanaticize ourselves out of, or seek to discredit according to old meta-narratives of understanding. To be sure, Rose’s ethnography of the “politics of life” posits a meta-narrative of its own – that, drawn from Foucault, of ever-extending biological investment in the construction and practice of human identity. In our post-human, post-genomic world, he argues, “biocitizenship” – individualized identity framed in terms of biological existence – has come to replace communal social citizenship of the sort characteristic of industrialized nation states before the surrender of much of their former identity to global economics, and before their withdrawal from health care and public health concerns (Cooter 2008)<sup>11</sup>. The somaticization of the ethics of life now extend almost everywhere: whereas “over the first sixty years or so of the twentieth century, human beings came to understand themselves as inhabited by a deep interior psychological space, and to evaluate themselves and act upon themselves in terms of this belief..., over the past half century, that deep space has begun to flatten out, to be displaced by a direct mapping of personhood, and its ills, upon the body or brain, which then becomes the principle target for ethical work” (Rose, 2007, 26). Hence we are now caught up in a new “game of truth” which works at a molecular level, with genes and neurons rendered visible and transformed into the determinants of our moods, desires, personalities and pathologies – the whole of it having become the target of the pharmaceutical industry. Thus has the body become a new object of research and knowledge production embedded in, and re-constituting itself through, new power relations. Such are the politics of “life – the new entanglements of power constituted in and through body/knowledge.

Unlike other commentators on the post-human condition, Rose, like Foucault, offers no activist manifestoes for or

against the politics of the biologization/somaticization of life (cf Gray, 2001). His, rather, is merely the observation that biocitizenship *is* a political state, which requires that those with investments in their biology (such as persons with AIDS, with genetic disorders, or simply purchasing Viagra) *become* political by virtue of the nature of that investment (Rose, 2007, 149). Thus Rose is consistently critical of those who fail to comprehend the positive engagement that people now have with their biology, and who can speak only in anachronistic reductive terms of the social evils of biology (such as racism). Such socio-moral political utterances are reminiscent of social historians of medicine on the one hand, and the neo-essentialists on the other.

## 6. CONCLUSION

In *The Culture of the Body: Genealogies of Modernity* (2001) the intellectual historian Dalia Judovitz remarks: "The fate of the body as an idea, like that of subject-

tivity to whose emergence it is linked, is haunted by the foreclosure of its past meanings and history. Once consolidated in the modern period, the idea of the body takes on the character of a given that renders its prior forms and modalities of existence difficult to perceive and understand" (Judovitz, 2001, 1). Like the idea of the modern body – the possibility of which so surprised Nietzsche<sup>12</sup>, and the history of which (or epistemological archeology of which) so fascinated Foucault – the idea of the postmodern body as something constructed in history remains to be revealed. This paper has not sought to detail the conditions of possibility for it, but rather, briefly, to review some of its guises in historical writing over the past few decades in relation to anxieties over the nature of history. Not the least of those anxieties for historians is that of constructing a history of the postmodern body outside an *ahistorical* notion of "history". Another is the new breed of essentialisms – biological, political, and historical – which threaten to foreclose on the historical ontology of the biological present, the politics of whose understanding is so urgently required as the door closes on the modern body in modernist history.

## NOTAS

1 Acknowledgements: This paper draws on two previous publications (Cooter 2004 & 2007). Section 3 owes much to Adam Bencard's doctoral dissertation (Bencard 2007), which it was my privilege to co-examine. It was from it that I learned of the "presentation-ists", among much else. Bencard's dissertation provides a far more elaborate and nuanced account of the work of the "body historians" referred to in this paper. My thanks also go to Claudia Stein whose unfailing acuity generated many helpful suggestions, and Javier Moscoso and Manuel Lucena Giraldo for inviting me to the seminar on Polyphonic History from whence this paper derives. As ever I am grateful to the Wellcome Trust for their continued support.

2 Foucault rendered "biopower" and "biopolitics" most explicit in his lectures at the Collège de France 1975-1976 (English trans. 2003) chapter 11. See also his essay on "The Politics of Health in the Eighteenth Century" (1980), and his "The Birth of Biopower" (2003), and the section on biopower in Rabinow and Rose, 2003: xxviii-xxxi, where it is noted that the concept was introduced by Foucault in his *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1 "to embrace all the historical processes that have brought human life and its mechanisms into the realm of knowledge-power, and hence amenable to calculated transformation". Foucault argued for biopower as a distinct regime of power, its objects and methods being given shape within a particular type of rationality. For elaborations of the concept, see Rose and Rabinow,

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- 2006; Rose, 2007: 50–54; Bashford, 2004; Hacking, 1982; Gastaldo, 1997; Davidson, 2001.
- 3 Foucault, 1980; for a lucid exposition of the transformation Foucault describes, see During, 1992, chapter 2: "Medicine, Death, Realism".
  - 4 On the origins and Foucault's use of the concept of normativity, see Sinding 2004; Ernst 2006. Exactly when "normal" was first used to mean "typical" (and thereby "naturalized" and rendered immutable) is unclear. Hacking, 1990: 166 cites Balzac's use of it in 1833. On the place of statistics in the creation of normativity and objectivity, see T. Porter, 1995; Desrosières, 1998. For an example of the complexities that could be involved in this process, and how individuals might come to regulate themselves through normalizing technologies in medicine (specifically the clinical thermometer), see Hess, 2005.
  - 5 By the late 1980s, the new genetics was also bringing about the collapse of the boundaries erected between "the natural" and "the social" and, hence, the collapse of the Enlightenment narrative about liberating humans from the constraints of "nature": Rheinberger, 2000.
  - 6 Mary Fissell (2004) in the conclusion to her essay on the cultural history of medicine renders this nostalgia explicit though her preference for a social history of dead bodies over a cultural history of them.
  - 7 The "New Historicism" was devoted to contextual readings of cultural and intellectual history through literary texts. It was not especially body orientated, and its debts to Foucault were inclined more to his discussion of subjectivities and technologies of power (mechanism of repression and subjugation) than to biopower.
  - 8 On the scientificity of contemporary "neuro-talk" and its dangers, see Crawford, 2008.
  - 9 According to one of the contributors to the discussion on presence in *History and Theory*, Frank Ankersmit (2006: 350), the "epistemological reorientation [of postmodernity] was not a distraction from returning to ontology *but rather its precondition*".
  - 10 Admittedly, it is hard to see how this could be done in the post-nation state context in which the individualized body and the autonomous self has left the body's higher holistic purpose for the *volk* so far behind.
  - 11 "Epistemological citizenship" has been suggested as a somewhat better term (Jasanoff 2005) though this too retains the contradiction of "citizenship" as democratic and voluntarily participatory.
  - 12 "What is most surprising is rather the body; one never ceases to be amazed at the idea that the human body has become possible". Quoted in Judovitz (2001: vii).

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