The Useful Body: The Yogic Answer to Appearance Management in the Post-Fordist Workplace

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Abstract In this article posture-based yoga practice will be discussed as a contingent social construct which has evolved as a type of bodywork that answers specific needs of contemporary yoga practitioners. I shall focus on yoga practice in present-day Germany. The prevalent form of physical, posture-based yoga associated with Hatha Yoga will be discussed in sociological terms and related to needs that arise due to the post-Fordist deregulation of work. To cope with these work conditions a demand for more flexibility, fitness, and expression management arises to be met by postural yoga. I shall analyze some aspects and effects of current "yoga bodywork." This analysis results in the thesis that today's predominant form of yoga creates an "inside" perspective of a productive "useful body" that stands in contrast to the "outside" perspective that consumer society has on the physical body—being a place of consumption and aesthetical appearance.

Introduction

The common yoga practice in Germany at the turn of the twentieth to the twenty-first century (hereafter referred to as "contemporary yoga") mainly consists of sequences of body postures (*āsana*), a few breathing exercises, and a relaxation phase lying down. Such postural yoga is mostly taught in group classes. The exercises are adapted to the participants' physical conditions and abilities. A yoga class takes about one and a half hours. This form of group class is so widespread that—regardless of the history of yoga—one could conclude that yoga (at least) in Germany is a form of bodywork. In this article, this predominant form of yoga will be discussed as being a contingent social construct that has been adapted and modified by contemporary yoga practitioners to fulfill their specific needs, and to

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B. Hauser (ed.), *Yoga Traveling*, Transcultural Research – Heidelberg Studies on Asia and Europe in a Global Context, DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-00315-3_6,

respect their specific work and living conditions. Based hereupon, some examples of the effects of current "yoga bodywork" will be presented.

My previous sociological research on posture-based yoga has shown that this practice influences the physical as well as the mental, emotional, and social well-being of practitioners.[1] Analyzing yoga practice from the standpoint of a sociologist requires a conceptualization of body and mind, especially that of the interaction of body and mind. How can a physical posture class influence a person's social well-being? The concepts of the human body-mind nexus which sociologists have developed can be traced back to the roots of occidental philosophy: Plato and later Aristotle postulated interactions between body, soul, and mind. While Aristotle's perception on discursive knowledge was that it was gained through (physical) sensory perceptions, through the whole body as a unity, Descartes' claim of the fundamental mind-body dichotomy lead to a fundamental shift. A dualistic perception of human existence developed since then.[2] The worldview of the dualism of consciousness and body being a part of matter that obeys the laws of physics has become hegemonic. It stems from Descartes' methodological skepticism, which states that the only certain knowledge is that of your own consciousness. Consciousness undoubtedly exists since it is the starting point for any mental activity. Furthermore, Descartes promoted the instrumental use of the human body in occidental culture by introducing the perception of one's own body as an object and that of consciousness as a subject.

Descartes' theory of a basic dichotomy has become dominant, not only in sociological theory. Classical sociology has so far hardly developed any procedural ideas of the body, but remains attached to the body-mind duality in most cases.[3] This separation often leads to a blind spot for body issues; the body is simply not classified as a social entity by itself.[4] Sociality is primarily located in consciousness, in the subjects' perceptions, knowledge bases, and patterns of interaction. Generally, sociological interest focuses on the mind (consciousness) that presumably characterizes man as a social being. Referring to this, Shilling talks about the disembodied perspective of classical sociology.[5] The body appears as a pre-social object, raw material so to speak, which sociology therefore loses sight of. The function of the body is seen in the biological naturalness that places consciousness in space and time. If at all, the body contributes to the subject's social existence by displaying social factors such as age or gender (a concept which has been challenged for some time by gender studies).[6]

In contemporary sociological theory and research specifically, the human body is mostly addressed with regard to its representations, interactions, and social uses.[7] Post-structuralist theory rejects the seeming naturalness of bodies and the claims to

[1] Schnäbele (2010).

[2] Ibid. 124.

[3] For further discussion of the sociology of the body see ibid., 123–132.

[4] E.g. Durkheim (1999 [1895]).

[5] Shilling (1993, 8). For a critique of Shilling's observation see Waskul and Vannini (2006).

[6] For a gender studies perspective on the body see Butler (1999).

[7] Malacrida and Low (2008) and Waskul and Vannini (2006).

power that legitimize themselves through presumably biological, therefore natural, differences. Opposing the idea of a "natural body," post-structuralist theory conceptualizes the body instead as a space for and an effect of textual, discursive references and social constructions.[8] Another influential approach is that of Pierre Bourdieu. He makes reference to the body within the context of social interactions, insofar as it is conceived as a carrier of social capital.[9] Yet Bourdieu presents the body as only a carrier not a sentient agent. However, Barbalet and Lyon, even if only in consumerist terms, consider the body's sentient dimension.[10] This construct of a consuming body will later in this chapter be discussed with regard to what I call the "useful body."

When addressing the effects of postural yoga practice, I argue that the body has to be seen not only as a social but also as a sentient body that transfers knowledge to the mind. It has to be conceptualized, following Aristotle, as an agent that creates knowledge through the sense organs.[11] The body is more than just physical substance, more than just a carrier of capital, even. Based on my previous discussion elsewhere, I shall conceptualize the relationship between body and consciousness as a procedural entity which exists beyond but not independently of discursive thinking.[12] This body-mind nexus is transformed through yoga practice. The body, in close interaction with mental processes, becomes, I argue, more efficient and useful for the yoga practitioner.[13] I shall further discuss the social implications of this effect of posture-based yoga practice.

Yoga: A Contingent Social Construct

Following Fuchs, the Sanskrit term *yoga* derives from the verbal root *yuj*, literally "to yoke." "Yoga" initially alluded to yoking draft animals in front of a wagon. Over time, two main meanings developed from this.[14] Firstly, yoga became a term for "conjunction" or "unit." This meaning is derived from the fact that several draft animals are yoked in front of a wagon. Secondly, the word yoga came to signify "control" and "discipline," derived from the command which the yoke had of the draft animals. Hence the *Yogasūtra* of Patañjali in its second verse states: "Yoga is the cessation of the turnings of thought" (*Sūtra* I 2).[15] The achievement of such a unified, controlled state of mind requires discipline and focus. In this respect

[8] Csordas (1994, 12) and Butler (1999).

[9] Bourdieu (1984), Bourdieu (1998), and Bourdieu et al. (1999).

[10] Barbalet and Lyon (1994, 52).

[11] For an extensive discussion see Schnäbele (2010).

[12] See Ibid., 123–158.

[13] Especially moments of inner silence, moments of meditation, when discursive thinking comes to a halt, have been identified as having a transformative potential (see Schnäbele 2010, 154–158).

[14] Fuchs (1990, 11).

[15] Miller (1998, 29).

"classical yoga" fundamentally is a mental effort and a state of mind, or rather a state of consciousness as yoga does not only address the rational mind but also emotions, memory, and subconscious patterns. At the same time *yoga* signifies the various techniques which lead to that state, as described in the *Yogasūtra* or in the *Maitrāyaṇī Upaniṣad*. Patañjali and other classical texts mention for example breathing techniques (*prāṇāyāma*) which facilitate slowing down mental activity. However, the present-day yoga scene in its diverse expressions has to be distinguished from the scripture-based definitions of 'yoga'.[16] Contemporary yoga is a highly plurivalent and transient social practice including a multitude of activities such as the predominant fitness-oriented, posture-based group classes, but also including religious worship, diet regimens, chanting groups, meditation classes, and individual therapeutic practices for clients dealing with life-threatening illnesses. Considering this long, incomplete and constantly changing list, any definition of what counts as yoga practice is at best an approximation.

In the course of history, yoga has again and again experienced modifications and extensions influenced by other traditions which lead to what we observe today as contemporary yoga. One significant wave of modifications can be traced back to Tantrism when further postures and techniques were introduced, created, and integrated in what came to be known as *haṭhayoga*.[17] Similarly, related practices were abandoned or adapted. This process stretched over a longer period of time and resulted in a new understanding of yoga, which Joseph Alter contrasts with the classical era as follows:

> On the one hand, the *Yoga Sūtra* has very little to say about *āsanas* and, on the other, the *Haṭhayogapradīpikā* is about *āsanas* and *prānāyāma* and very little else.[18]

When comparing the *haṭhayoga* texts with the *Yogasūtra*, the *Bhagavādgītā* and the *Upaniṣad*, one finds that early classical yoga hardly refers to the physical practices mentioned in regard to *haṭhayoga*. In classical yoga, achieving a state of knowledge—of harmony with the self—was by no means connected to sophisticated cleansing and strengthening exercises. Quite the opposite: *Haṭhayoga* newly introduces these techniques and establishes them over the centuries while at the same time proclaiming the "eternal tradition of yoga."

Yoga practice has undergone significant changes not only during Tantrism but maybe even more so during the late nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. *Prāṇāyāma,* mental practices and cleansing techniques, crucial parts of *haṭhayoga*, shifted more and more to the background and made room for an extensive *āsana* practice. A type of yoga developed which was very much focused on fitness, health, and gymnastics, a type of yoga that cannot be found anywhere in the older yoga scriptures.[19] Whereas in *haṭhayoga* the body was mainly used for soteriological purposes, in contemporary yoga the body is trained to be more

[16] See Hauser's Introduction: Transcultural yoga(s). Analyzing a Traveling Subject.

[17] Eliade (2009, 200) and Sjoman (1999 [1996]).

[18] Alter (2004, 20).

[19] Sjoman (1999 [1996]), Alter (2004), and Singleton (2010).

flexible and useful (which does not imply that contemporary yoga has no spiritual purpose at all, however the physical posture practice is first and foremost conceived as means to train the body). Mark Singleton suggests that certain European and American body cultures, such as bodybuilding and women's gymnastics, strongly influenced what, during the twentieth century, became, and still is considered, yoga. Following Singleton new variations of poses were invented, but also new groups of poses, e.g. standing poses.[20] At any rate, the current academic discourse on the history and continuity of yoga is quite lively, and thus it is problematic to talk about a yoga tradition as such.

The popular notion of a "yoga tradition" is often used to suggest or claim a somehow consistent transfer of knowledge over time. Based on Alter's position, here "tradition" will be looked at as a contingent, inconsistent transfer of knowledge which is subject to diverse historical influences. Alter critically distances from the stylization of yoga as an original timeless practice, and emphasizes the historical situation of the practice:

> The problem ... is that Yoga, even more so than religion and science ... is constructed as both timeless and beyond time. And so it is all the more important to situate it in history as a product of human imagination.[21]

Alter analyzes yoga as a social construct and contingent cultural practice which was created from socio-historical conditions that changed it again and again. Consequently, when talking about tradition, this shall not evoke the association of a seamless continuity, but designate the genealogy of today's postural yoga. In social practice though, yoga is oftentimes presented as being eternal, a kind of holy practice beyond time, for instance on the website of a yoga studio:

> Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga became a very hip and trendy style of yoga during the past 20 years. But it is also a very old yoga path with a tradition reaching centuries back. Indeed, the practice of Ashtanga Yoga has most probably remained the same for thousands of years in the form that we still follow today.[22]

Yoga is discursively constituted as "eternal" and thereby valid.[23] In their teachings, today's yoga instructors often refer to the classical texts, especially the *Upaniṣad*, the *Bhagavādgītā,* or the *Yogasūtra* of Patañjali, which allegedly convey "true" knowledge. However, it would be both misleading and inexpedient to draw on a canon of authoritative texts as a means of comparison for rating certain yoga practices as being "authentic," since each of these texts again was the result of a certain historic figuration.[24] None of the above mentioned texts can provide a supra-historical truth that could serve as proof of the authenticity of yoga, especially because these scriptures themselves do not form only one consistent yoga

[20] Ibid., 161.

[21] Alter (2004, 5).

[22] URL: http://ashtangayoga.info/ashtanga-yoga/power-yoga.html (accessed 22 December 2009). See also Nichter (this volume).

[23] Schnäbele (2010, 47–52).

[24] Alter (2004, 18).

discourse.[25] Apart from authoritative texts, "true masters" who would have conveyed knowledge centuries old are quoted, but there is no traceable line of masters in yoga that could be traced back several centuries.[26] The construction of a continuing tradition having existed virtually unchanged for thousands of years and being legitimized by a master in the Himalayas, may very well be a powerful rhetoric image on various levels but it conflicts with current findings and evidence about the historical reality of yoga tradition which, again and again, has been and still is characterized by ruptures and the assimilation of various influences.[27]

As a result of the current research on the history of yoga, it is safe to conclude that yoga, as it is practiced widely these days, is mostly (even though not exclusively) a fitness-oriented system that has been shaped over the last 150 years. Contemporary posture-based yoga resulted from a new emphasis on physical culture in the twentieth century, a development that continues. Today, health, fitness, and wellness are widely discussed. Self-help books on diet, gymnastics, yoga, pilates, or other fitness regimens are very popular. Politically, this is supported by a strong emphasis on individual responsibility and preventive healthcare. Yoga practice must be seen as a part of the broader political scope of individualized health- and self-care, yoga bodywork being a part of this personal prevention program and fundamentally a requirement of modern society.[28] Not surprisingly, yoga became popular during the second half of the twentieth century, parallel to the rise of specific work and life conditions.

Socio-Historical Background of Contemporary Yoga Practice

Contemporary postural yoga is practiced mainly by the middle class in urban areas of Europe, North America, Australia, if not worldwide. This urban social group is characterized by an above average level of education, and work in the increasingly delimited, immaterial knowledge work sector, as well as in the affective work sector.[29] In recent decades, these professionals have been confronted with growing behavioral demands regarding their personal performance and efficacy while facing

[25] Ibid., 15.

[26] For a serious discussion of the yoga "tradition" in a popular magazine see Anne Cushman's article "New Light on Yoga" in the *Yoga Journal* 1999 (http://www.yogajournal.com/wisdom/466_1.cfm) (accessed 22 December 2009).

[27] Singleton (2010).

[28] De Michelis (2005), Schnäbele (2010), Singleton (2010), and Strauss (2005).

[29] On the educational status of yoga practitioners see Fuchs (1990) and Strauss (2005). Immaterial work encompasses the service sector, information technology, media, engineering, and many other knowledge based sectors in which a specific corpus of knowledge is required. Often academic training is compulsory to work in these areas. It is rarely manual work, but mostly mental work. Affective work is mainly found in the service sector, in healthcare, customer services, social work,

an increased density of work, as well as the gradual delimitation of their working hours. These changes in the work sector can be attributed to the general shift from Fordist production to post-Fordist forms of work (and production): The term post-Fordism describes the dominant economic system of the Fordian model of standardization and administration being replaced by flexible, deregulated work; a gradual change since the early 1980s.[30] Especially the discourses on flexibilization, competition, and fragmentation of employment relations create fragmented subjectivations of constant adjustments to changing work and thus also life conditions. The post-Fordist discourse requires significantly more flexibility of the subjects. Under these demands, an increasing amount of employees regard yoga as an adequate form of recreation. There are clear parallels: The flexibility required on the employment market is practiced in yoga.

Especially the industries of immaterial production and affective social work, in which many yoga practitioners work, are characterized by processes of deregulation and flexibilization of the organization of work. One essential element is the implementation of flexible working hours.[31] For example, part time work can rarely be managed within the prescribed "part time." Insofar, additional work on a "voluntary" basis is required and expected. The situation is similar in industries such as advertising, information technology or media, forms of self-employment, social work, and other areas of emotional work. More flexible working hours tend to blur the difference between work and non-work, between employment and pastime. The direct consequence is the consistent limitation of regeneration or reproduction time which results in higher stress levels. Furthermore, in delimited work arrangements when it is unclear where work ends and pastime begins, a professional attitude has to be maintained at all times. Especially in the service sector, physical expression, appearance, and attitude have to be managed and manipulated. The prescribed smile of employees in the service industry is one of the most striking examples. As Strauss has pointed out, "[m]aintaining cheerful, calm, competent appearances can be extremely stressful, and so a need to develop stress-reducing strategies becomes critical, not only for optimal enjoyment of life, but simply to keep one's job."[32] Personal appearance in public, hitherto private time and finally the personality of employees are increasingly monopolized. The post-Fordist, subject-focused understanding of work requires employees not only to execute given tasks, but also to dedicate all their skills, creativity, "energy," and personality. Employment has been taken out of the discursive context of economy and its function of securing one's livelihood. Gradually it has shifted into the context of "self-expression" and the satisfaction of unfolding one's own abilities.

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teaching, etc. Emotional work requires a seemingly natural friendliness towards customers or clients. Emotional availability is expected and an integrative part of many professions.

[30] Schnäbele (2010).

[31] On the change in employment contracts and work conditions see: Möller (2000), Negri et al. (1998), Schnäbele (2010), Sennett (1998), and Voß (1994, 1998).

[32] Strauss (2005, 72).

This shift is also reflected in the way work is regulated, in the changed work demands. Employees now also have to carry financial risks and responsibilities as employees within the realm of a company, which only self-employed people had to take before. One example is the fact that work is increasingly organized in teams or projects without direct instructions by supervisors. At the same time, teams and all people involved are responsible for the results of their work. Management passes on the economic risks to team or project members who are lower on the hierarchy. Such arrangements typically include the liberty to determine one's own working hours, but the workload is so high that this does not result in an advantage for the employees, but that they possibly have to sacrifice part of their free time. Professionals are expected to work extensively while at the same time seeing their work as a personal fulfillment. So-called target arrangements support the obligation to exploit oneself. The difference between voluntariness and obligation is opaque in this area of conflict of demands and expectations, which might also be the reason for one's own positioning not being precise. When one's own and others' interests can no longer be distinguished, the confidence manifesting in one's body perception is blurred. On this background, yoga practitioners work out a bit of clarity for themselves by listening to the interests of the body on a physical level, by experiencing and mapping limits (as discussed later in this article), by separating themselves from behavioral demands. Gorz describes the post-Fordism necessity to access the whole person as follows:

> When the communicative, relationship-intensive, cooperative and discovery skills become part of the workforce, they can, naturally, not be commanded any longer, insofar as they presume the autonomy of the subject. They don't unfold on command, but as a result of the subject's initiative or not at all. The power of the capital can then no longer directly be applied on living work through hierarchical pressure, but only in an indirect manner. It has to move to areas above and beyond the company and has to condition the subject in a way that he or she accepts or chooses exactly what you want to force upon him or her. In this case, the company and the place of employment stop being the most significant place of the main conflict. The front will then go along everywhere where information, language, way of life, taste and trends are created and shaped by capital, trade, state or media. In other words, everywhere where the individuals' subjectivity or "identity," their values, their self-images or those of the world are continuously structured, fabricated and formed.[33]

The voluntariness of dedicating your entire personality to the work process is established in forms of more or less subtle enforcement, including the necessity to market your own work power and person. "[The new] worker who has become social [is] independent and able . . . to organize both [his] own effort and relationship to other activities," as Lazzarato recognizes.[34] This new ideal type of employee thus does not only have to organize his own work, but himself as well. Employees increasingly have to market themselves. Higher volatility of work arrangements implies that marketing oneself becomes crucial to build a career and avoid unemployment.[35] The "worker entrepreneur" is therefore increasingly constituted by the

[33] Translation V.S., Gorz (2000, 61–62).

[34] Translation V.S., Lazzarato (1998, 49).

[35] Voß (1998).

request for self-control and self-economization rather than company control of his work.[36] Skills have to be developed "voluntarily" with the aim of economically using them. The distinction between one's professional profile and one's personality is slowly disappearing, as the whole personality is valued first and foremost in its economic applicability. Subjectivity thus becomes the key category of the immaterial service sector work.[37] Subjectivity not only includes personality, knowledge, and soft skills, but also peoples' physicalities. Bodies have to appear capable, strong, flexible, and aesthetic, a reflection of the productivity the employees offer. They have to function and merge with the corporate identity behind the mask of a smile. The ideal body is invisible in its perfect applicability. Furthermore, these professionals are confronted with higher expectations towards their own appearance management: A display of happiness and positive attitude is mandatory. In this context, yoga practice among other reasons is a very popular coping strategy as it trains practitioners to maintain a cheerful calm attitude (even) under difficult circumstances.

The increasing behavioral demands as a consequence of flexibilization and reorganization of work relations manifest in the body, as they do not correspond to the body's own needs. It is thus not a coincidence that Strauss sees a connection between the popularity of body-focused yoga and the increasing behavioral demands of workers.[38] Neither is it surprising that De Michelis refers to the urban lifestyle, which causes stress, as a significant reason for the popularity of yoga.[39] Accordingly the spread of the *āsana*-based yoga classes began among the urban middle-class populations in the world, whether in Los Angeles, London, Hamburg, or Sydney. As discussed in the previous paragraphs, these populations suffer from employment conditions that they consider to be stressful and are looking for balancing strategies. Yoga is praised as a relaxing, healthy body technique and therefore becomes more and more popular with the spread of delimited knowledge-sector work. This is especially true for people working in the care sector as well as in the information technology, media, and advertising industries.[40] It is very obvious that this is not a trend affecting a small number of employees.

Another important factor is that yoga contributes to the fitness of those practicing it. Since physical fitness is also associated with aesthetics and health, this area is very important for most yoga practitioners. In the context of today's capitalistic society focused on gainful work, fitness is part of preventive health. Looking healthy is equated with being healthy, and being in charge of one's own health is one of the modern values through which people in the United States and

[36] Ibid.

[37] Möller (2000).

[38] Strauss (2005).

[39] De Michelis (2005, 249).

[40] Schnäbele (2010).

Europe could be introduced to yoga.[41] One needs to maintain one's own physical health in order to be able to meet the demands of work and one's private life. This is part of the neoliberal appeal to the subjects' relationship with themselves: Help yourself to maintain your own health. Personal responsibility for one's own health is mandatory, health being defined traditionally as nonexistence of disease, but increasingly being defined as a state of physical and mental wellbeing. The demands of aesthetic self-presentation have increased in recent decades in an highly visual service economy with the result that the appearance of health and fitness might even be more important than health itself. Professional success in many ways depends on the employees' successful presentation to the outside world. This trend towards successful self-presentation is based on the increase of affective work in the service sector, which requires direct customer contact, where a certain physical appearance and certain behaviors, such as a "natural smile" are expected. The majority of employees in the affective work sector are women. Considering this, it comes as no surprise that the majority of people practicing yoga—70–85 %—are women.[42] Yoga practice perfectly blends into the lives of many practitioners, yet this is also ambivalent as I shall show.

The Constitution of a Useful Body

Contemporary yoga is valued for being both a physical exercise for perfecting the body and as a mental training of the mind. Singleton extensively discusses this point specifically focusing on the start of the twentieth century.[43] Alter even concludes that the foundation for the development of yoga towards a predominantly physical practice already emerged with the evolution of *haṭhayoga*.[44] In *haṭhayoga* the human body was regarded as an instrument to overcome physicality, by applying mental discipline as prescribed in classical scriptures. Alter suggests that the basis of the fitness aspect of the practice was already laid. True or not, the ambivalence of the body is an important aspect of today's practice, as it has been for a couple of centuries.[45] Yet there is another aspect which exerts a lot of influence on the experience of one's body in contemporary yoga practice: Following socio-critical positions, the body can be conceptualized as a place of consumption.[46] The consuming body is defined through its visibility within consumer society. It consumes food, fashion, attitudes, and bodily techniques. It consumes and at the same time it represents the marketability of the subject. The body as an advertising

[41] Strauss (2005, 13 and 31).
[42] Fuchs (1990), Schnäbele (2010).
[43] Singleton (2010).
[44] Alter (2004, 21).
[45] Singleton (2010).
[46] Featherstone (1982).

and projection space is used strategically in order to achieve clever social positioning within the work sector and in one's personal life. Still, it is a relatively passive body which forms in the development of service- and consumer societies: In the twentieth century the amount of physical work decreased gradually due to the growth of the service sector and decline of basic production in post-industrial societies. Hence Barbalet's and Lyon's claim: "With the domination of mental over manual labor the phenomenal experience of the body and its ideological and common-sense representation is consumerist."[47] In this sense, the body becomes a place of consumption whose task it is to accept requests for consumption and, in exchange, work in paid employment. Such daily use of the body stands in sharp contrast with the conscious, aware posture practice of a yoga class, as will be discussed further down.

During yoga classes, physical experiences are created, lived through, discussed, and afterwards integrated into one's vast amount of socio-cultural knowledge. These experiences are specific for contemporary society, for they are embedded in the social setting of the yoga group class and, furthermore, they are embedded in the surroundings of the class: Visiting a yoga studio after a challenging day at work or after bringing the children to school, every practitioner brings their own cultural background with them into the yoga practice itself, which generally is that of consumer society. The next paragraphs give some examples of personal body experiences during yoga practice and their cultural interpretations. It gives an impression of the actual perspective on, and therefore also production of, contemporary postural yoga. However, these observations have to be seen as only one aspect of today's yoga practice, among manifold others, such as the understanding of yoga as a spiritual path or specific psychological reactions which are embedded in contemporary practice. This paper focuses singularly on the construct of the physical body and on the wider social implications of bodily experiences.

In the following I shall demonstrate how contemporary postural yoga "works on the body" and give some examples of typical bodily experiences and their ex-post discursive evaluation. The interview quotes and observations in the next paragraphs are drawn from the previously mentioned empirical research by Schnäbele, published in 2010. For this qualitative, explorative study, in 2006 and 2007 multiple, single, and group interviews with 34 yoga practitioners, male and mostly female, were analyzed to produce an overview of the discursive field of contemporary yoga practice. The sample was drawn from the population of an urban area, namely the city of Hamburg, Germany. How exactly and in what ways is the awareness of the body shaped in and by yoga practice? The perception and discursive construction of the human body in contemporary yoga practice are generally structured by two patterns: Firstly, they are moderated through the experience of limits, for example by testing the limits of personal strength and flexibility; secondly, an inside versus outside perspective of the body is created.

[47] Barbalet and Lyon (1994, 52).

Limits

The issue of limits is part of the standard conversation of yoga practitioners in the aforesaid study. It is, for example, expressed in the headstand (*śīrṣāsana*) being the favorite exercise. "I have always thought that the headstand is great," is not an isolated statement but a standard phrase. The headstand is an *āsana* which is often associated with the fear of falling over and getting hurt. In addition, the headstand requires some strength and a strong sense of balance. The exercise is therefore considered to be challenging and difficult, mentally as well as physically. Nevertheless, it is claimed to be one favorite exercise by the great majority of yoga practitioners. There is a direct connection here to testing one's own limits and the headstand challenge does just that. Physical and mental development go hand in hand. New realms of action are created on both levels. Accordingly, advanced yoga practitioners regard difficult positions such as arm balances, e.g. scorpion pose (*vṛś cikāsana*) or forearm stand (*piñcamayurāsana*), or variations of any reverse postures as their favorite exercises.

The conception of crossing limits fulfills a very important role in practitioners' lives.[48] Limits are used to "map the body" which practicioners often experienced as a one-dimensional place before beginning a regular yoga practice. The mere fact that humans are physical beings does not necessarily imply that they have elaborate body awareness. Yoga practitioners communicate quite the opposite, namely that the demands of consumer society to use one's body as a means of consumption make the body more often than not a passive "foreign territory." It is typically regarded as a consuming entity that is meant to function well and look attractive.[49] This perception gradually changes in the course of regular yoga practice. "You feel your own limits, you can somehow locate your own body," is but one remark. The experience of limits allows practitioners to differentiate between their bodies' visible ("outside") appearance within society and their personal experience of a sentient body ("inside"). The more the body is "explored" and thereby mapped, the more detailed the inner body awareness becomes. This gradual process is described as something positive in any case: "Well, you always feel really good afterwards and it's nice to actually reach your limits, it's also some kind of challenge."

In light of this, limits are constantly pushed further in yoga practice. Every new *āsana* is a challenge that sometimes has to be practiced intensively until you finally master it: "And it's really nice when you have practiced for months and months and all of a sudden, you can do something that you weren't able to do before, yeah. Nice." This process is described as a development process which requires both social space and time. The body is not "discovered" at one particular moment, but is gradually experienced through the yoga practice by continuously setting new limits: "And it's really exciting . . . to go to your own limits. For me, it was some sort of . . . development process, also that I noticed where my limits are." This process

[48] See also chapter 4 by Hauser, Chapter "Touching the limits, Assessing Pain: On Language Performativity, Health, and Well-Being in Yoga Classes".

[49] Barbalet and Lyon (1994).

produces success stories: "You think that [a certain *āsana*] is impossible or you can't do it any longer and then you see, somehow it does work and some postures you really can go into finally after a certain amount of time."

Yoga practitioners find that it is an essential aspect of yoga practice to successively explore their own limits, to "touch your limits" again and again. On the one hand, limits are realized and accepted as a given, on the other hand, they are produced in the moment of the experience, both on a physical level and, in the same instant, also on a mental level. Hence limits are (re-)created in the process of yoga practice, for example when testing your own abilities with regards to the headstand. The limit is drawn on the basis of yoga practice, i.e. in respect to the attempts to master certain practices, and it is moved in the course of further practice towards greater competences. Insofar as the body is mapped by drawing limits, this process allows the body to consciously dissolve limitations. When there was no limit because there was no awareness of the limit, it could not be dissolved either. Creating awareness of limits enables overcoming them.

Inside/Outside

One effect of body experiences in posture-based yoga class is the awareness of limits as described above, and subsequently the heightened awareness of the "inner" functionality of the body. Such an internal "functional" awareness of the body stands in contrast to the external "visual" demands of consumer society. The following extract from an interview with a yoga practitioner is a good example to illustrate this:

> I still remember that I was very, very focused on the outside in terms of my body feeling. So, well, I looked in the mirror and thought O.K., I like that, I don't like that, but I didn't really have a feeling of "I feel good" or "something hurts" or "I'd like to be more flexible," or something like that, but it was all focused on the outside a lot, very much like, to what extent am I what I would like to be on the outside and not, how am I feeling at the moment [translation V.S.].[50]

The above quote illustrates a very important structure in consumer society: The hegemonic expectation to present an aesthetic body is typically met as much as possible. The body is perceived in a one-dimensional manner, as a projection screen for beauty ideals and socially accepted behaviors. Creating a socially acceptable body thus typically defines the relationship with one's body.

The quote above at the same time illustrates how in the course of appropriating one's "own" body during yoga practice, the body is given a very different position. Adapting to social norms of beauty recedes to the background gradually while the communicative exchange between consciousness and body is experienced as being more important. This establishes an opposition to discourses of aesthetics.

[50] All interviews have been published in Schnäbele (2010).

The inner feeling and functionality of the body encourages producing a counter-discourse. The body becomes multidimensional. It is increasingly defined through its "inner" functionality and its wellbeing and less through its "outside" appearance. Discursively created norms of visual beauty are avoided when defining beauty from the inside. "That's what body awareness is. . . . Even from the inside, I also feel . . . this beauty, simply a—a body." Another statement expresses an appreciative relationship with one's physicality:

> No matter what the body is like, simply when you feel it, how great it is and, yeah, this somehow, this beauty, but from the inside, not what it looks like or something like that, like, I simply feel: Great [translation V.S.].

This inner perspective contrasts with hegemonic discourses of objectivation and outer evaluation of one's own body. This becomes especially clear in the following extract from an interview:

> I had an aggressive attitude towards my body. Well, I looked at the body as a sort of object. You have to be like that, you have to be able to run for half an hour; you have to be able to do this and that. You are not allowed to be hungry at a particular time. . . . Yeah, you are my object, you belong to me; I am in the position to form you in any way I wish. And accordingly, well, I had a really really negative feeling towards my body; well, I didn't consciously sense my body by itself. I rather felt like I was at war with it [translation V.S.].

The above passage continues with the statement that she was not happy with her outer appearance, followed by an elaboration of the ways in which her body image changed in the course of yoga practice, thus establishing the communicative relationship with her sentient body, similar to what has been outlined above and which is typical of yoga practice. She notes that she "must treat the body with respect . . . that you get back much more, then; that it would cope with much more as well." A relationship of exchange is established between body and consciousness: The body can cope with more intense challenges when it is treated "respectfully." This requires that the body is given agency. Insofar as the Cartesian dichotomy of mind versus body, as well as the objectivation of the physical, are gradually transformed, the body itself becomes a subject. The body becomes a sanctuary and a place of resistance against pervasive demands of consumer society.

The Subjectivity of the Body: The Useful Body

The contemporary practice of Hatha Yoga converges with the renewed emphasis on physical culture in the twentieth century: The body is given much more attention. Both its appearance and fitness become meaningful topics. Besides, in sociology theorizing the body and its agentive dimension is a rather new concept. To some extent it levels the Cartesian concept of superiority of mind over matter. The superiority of the mind for centuries implied the inferiority of the human body. However, as an effect of yoga practice the dominance of the mind is actively and, most important, practically questioned. The popular rationalization of Hatha Yoga

legitimizes this experience while it stands in contrast to the Cartesian dichotomy. Apart from various nuances, it basically postulates the unity of all mental, rational-mental, and emotional processes with physical existence and only separates the human soul which exists beyond the process of thinking, from human material existence.[51]

Movements during yoga practice convey a heightened somatic experience, or, rather, an identification with the physical body. One does not have a body, one is the body. Hence I follow Carolyn Thomas who in respect to sports claims: "Rather than treating the body as an object, or as an 'it,' ... the athlete becomes one with the body. In the phenomenological sense, the athlete not only has a body but is her or his body."[52] In my view this equally applies to a yoga practitioner. The focus on challenging physical exercises is the same in both cases. To experience subjectivity, the process of conscious thinking is secondary. The movement itself in the present experience is a form of subjectivation. In Thomas' words: "Before anyone tells you or before you think about it, you, as your body, experience yourself as a moving being and as all the physical components that comprise movement."[53] The separation of body and mind is subsequently established, insofar as it is subordinate to the experience of the moment. Indeed the experience of movement precedes the discursive (which does not make it prediscursive, but exceeds discursiveness), although it takes place in a discursively configured space and even though procedural subjectivation of body and mind is always transmitted socially.[54] Ongoing experience can step out of the discursive into a non-discursive moment of "flow."[55] An opening for transformation is created in such moments of flow which not only yoga practitioners describe as being special: "Such moments reflect a sense of completeness, harmony, achievement, sensuousness, personal insight, or spiritual joy."[56] In these moments, thinking itself can be experienced as contingent, which implies that social discourses, e.g. consumerist discourses, can be experienced as contingent and can thereby be challenged.

These processes of transformation of body and, at the same time consciousness, not only affect yoga practice, but everyday life as well. They become especially relevant where constant appearance management is expected of subjects, such as in the knowledge work sector of the service industry. Especially in case of employment in the service sector, customer contact requires constant friendliness, an open attitude, and a constant smile. One's own external presentation thus dominates the relationship to the body in the context of gainful employment. The body is "managed" accordingly—you take care of its appearance, it is kept healthy and it is

[51] Eliade (2009) and Feuerstein (2001).

[52] Thomas (1996, 510).

[53] Ibid., 511.

[54] Papadopoulos and Stephenson (2006, 23) and Schnäbele (2010).

[55] Csikszentmihalyi (2008).

[56] Thomas (1996, 511).

trained.[57] Attention on physicality implies that the body is seen as a personal resource and as a social symbol. This especially applies to its visibility and thus its external appearance. The objectified physicality is questioned by yoga practice through the processes of defining and overcoming the body's limits and thereby creating a personal inside-versus-outside perspective of one's own body. Moreover, moments of flow challenge the outside perspective of the aesthetic body, because they offer an alternative, inner physical awareness. The body is successively given a subjective position, namely that of a part of the "unity" of consciousness and physical presence. This specific yogic body is termed here the "useful body," i.e. a body which is still viewed as an objective resource and a visual representation of the subject, but considerably less so. Rather, the useful body is perceived as a sentient body and functional agent in everyday actions.

A more refined perception of the body and its increased strength and flexibility make it even more useful to yoga practitioners who, for example, claim that "I sense the body and I also have the feeling that I can do something with it, [while] before [practicing yoga] I felt like it would interfere with my plans." The body is described as a reliable partner, for example when having to carry heavy loads:

> You get stronger and, no matter what you are facing, you are somehow ready for it, even if it's only on a physical level to start with, for instance, being able to carry certain things without being scared of getting hurt. I still work as a waitress and so on, [now] I somehow have a better feeling to do so [translation V.S.].

The new experience of the body as gained by yoga practice spills over to the employment world of the waitress. The body is used differently than before, the fear of getting hurt by carrying too heavy loads is maybe not completely gone, but significantly reduced. In many different work and everyday life contexts, the strength of the body is emphasized: "That someone could move like that . . ., that [I have] such power . . ., this was so enchanting somehow." From the internal perspective, a strong body becomes more important than its aesthetic, outside appearance. This fact is emphasized by the shift from the "external" (appearance, beauty, visibility) to the "inside" perspective (functionality, awareness).

However, it cannot be denied in this context that the body is also experienced as being aesthetic. Yoga is "not only gymnastics . . . where your legs become much more toned, much slimmer or something like that," these are only "side effects." Effects such as a better performance, beauty, or fitness of the body are well noted. Speaking of "side effects" suggests that they are minor while truly they are immensely important when it comes to fulfilling demands of post-Fordist society to promote oneself. At any rate, the importance of appearance and performance is put into perspective by the growing awareness of an "inside." The useful body is considered beautiful; at the same time it is perceived as an agent of its own. And thus its "inner" beauty shall be displayed to the outside. This ambivalence is not dissolved anywhere, but is, if at all, taken with a pinch of salt, as in the example above, where the interviewee talks about "side effects," but laughs at the

[57] Shilling (1993, 5).

same time: "You cannot escape social requirements and expectations." Considering that this comment is being delivered with a laugh, the side effects have to be more important than the words themselves suggest. Taking social requirements of aesthetic appearance management and self-marketing into account this is hardly surprising. Other side effects of posture-based yoga include physical capacity, patience, and flexibility.

Conclusion

Contemporary yoga practice in Germany (and possibly elsewhere) modifies the relationship of body and consciousness in a way which creates the reflexivity, strength, and flexibility required under post-Fordist work conditions and, at the same time, shapes the outside appearance according to the hegemonic discourses on beauty and efficient, socially accepted behavior in work environments. The body gradually becomes stronger, a more effective tool. Yoga practice integrates into everyday life as it helps to cope with pressure of the work environment, and helps to build up resilience, flexibility, and the strength to face the demands of modern work life. What is more, another systematic effect of regular yoga practice is the development of more refined body awareness. The body gradually becomes an agent of its own: "The useful body."

Over the course of such a gradual change, divergences are noted by the yoga practitioner between the altered self-perception and his or her persisting working conditions. The body awareness changes, becomes more complex, but the demands of social and work life remain. Thus, one central aspect that becomes clear to most yoga practitioners is the contrast between the transforming experiences in yoga practice and the constant demands of the work environment. For example, the need for regeneration is "heard" from "inside" by listening to the signals of the body, such as exhaustion, headaches, or simply feeling unwell. Gradually, the individual pays more attention to the needs of the body (and consequently the mind as well) at his or her workplace. This results in subversive actions such as establishing small breaks on the job for one's own regeneration, mostly without making it a "political topic." The obligation to always be available is thereby avoided. Another strategy is to favor part-time instead of full-time work.

Resistance against behavioral demands in work is not politically motivated, but is an expression of the gradual rejection of the monopolization of the body by societies' demands. Accessing the "entire person" is met with resistance, which takes the form of claiming control over one's own life and time and defending the regeneration both body and mind need. No political background is expressed. Subversive practices develop exclusively from the need to maintain one's own embodied existence which, in yoga practice, is experienced as something immensely positive and alive. It is often stated that the "perfect yogic life" cannot be realized within a capitalistic society, beginning with the mere fact that everyday work life does not allow enough time for an extensive yoga practice. Many yoga practitioners simply try to achieve a place of happy "centered" subjectivity under

diverting, distressing work, and life conditions that are determined by others. Micro-political subversive strategies as described in the above paragraph often are enough to defend one's health effectively.

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