2.4

TRANSFORMING POWER WITH EMBODIED PRACTICE

Jethro Pettit

Introduction

Social activists and academics are increasingly turning their attention to the influence of socialised norms and belief systems on civic and political agency. Looking beyond the wilful exercise of power by some over others, and beyond political economy and rational choice framings of power, there is growing interest in how power is created and reproduced through dominant narratives and behaviour (Clegg and Haugaard 2009, p. 3). Much debate in this direction was sparked by Steven Lukes's *Power: A Radical View* (1974/2005), which compelled political scientists to acknowledge how people's needs and beliefs can be manipulated to secure their 'willing consent to domination'. Yet thinkers and activists from critical, constructivist, feminist, race, queer and other perspectives have long seen power as the reproduction of socialised norms – residing in the very fabric of society rather than in episodic struggles for domination or resistance. This internalised or 'invisible power' as we generally call it in this volume (after VeneKlasen and Miller 2002, Gaventa 2006) is particularly insidious and resilient, shaping the possibilities for civic and political agency.

Power conceived as 'more systemic, less agent specific [... and] more generally constitutive of reality' (Clegg and Haugaard 2009, p. 3) could imply that those who are marginalised have little scope or agency to challenge the status quo. Yet a less pessimistic view of socialised power recognises that norms are malleable, ever evolving and subject to disruption and re-creation by agents. This may happen through everyday acts of resistance (Scott 1985), through 'unruliness' (Scott-Villiers, this volume) or through moments of 'disconfirming' or 'de-structuring' established ways of seeing or doing things (Haugaard 2003, pp. 90–92, drawing on Giddens 1984). Agency is not separate from the constitution of power, in dualistic opposition to structure, but plays a central role in continuous processes of cultural signification (Butler 1990, pp. 195–8). But enacting alternative values and narratives, even in minute ways, can be instances of structural change – not only in politics but in culture, science, philosophy, art, education, the media and in everyday moments of domestic and social interaction. Of course, this proactive re-shaping of norms does not always lead to progressive outcomes; the point is that structures are not fixed, inscribing themselves on agents, but are continually affirmed or reconfigured through minute acts of compliance and resistance.

Social activists who understand power in this way tend to focus not just on winning immediate political battles, but on shaping values and beliefs, linking the personal and political, pushing back against those who propagate oppressive narratives, and articulating and enacting norms that align with their claims. This can be challenging work given our pervasive collusion with systems of power through behaviour that tacitly complies with prevailing norms. Patriarchy, racism, homophobia, xenophobia, nationalism, fascism, class and caste hierarchies, consumerism, environmental exploitation and many other forms of inequality and exclusion are all profoundly naturalised in many societies – even where their propagators and beneficiaries can be identified and challenged. An intersectional view that recognises how multiple forms of exclusion overlap and amalgamate poses further challenges for agency. We may be relatively liberated in relation to some spheres, for example gender or sexuality, but deeply implicated in others, such as class or consumerism. What scope then do we have as everyday civic and political beings to shift these embedded forms of power? How can we disrupt our own 'willing consent to domination' – or indeed our willing consent to dominate? How can we expose and transform embodied and habituated collusions with power?

Social movements and liberation struggles have often responded to invisible power with popular education activities that foster critical consciousness, such as campaigns inspired by the literacy methods of Paolo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). Recognising and unlearning socialised beliefs and assumptions, and gaining critical objectivity on structural power, enables a shift from 'practical consciousness' to 'discursive consciousness' (Haugaard 2003, p. 100). Transformative learning usually focuses on the critique of structures of oppression, with the expectation that heightened conceptual awareness will stimulate agency for resistance. Yet habituated patterns of behaviour can be remarkably resilient to reasoned thinking. In this chapter I argue that invisible power is constituted by more than the narratives, beliefs and language held in the conceptual domains of our consciousness. It is also manifest in our individual and collective embodiment of social dispositions, such that critical consciousness alone will not catalyse civic and political agency. While oppression can be rationally exposed and analysed, 'aha moments' will not generate agency without also disrupting embodied collusion with power.

Anglo-American political science has largely failed to account for the embodied and intersectional dimensions of power and democratic citizenship (Hawkesworth 2016). Political economy analysis therefore tends to focus on agents, their interests and alliances that can be observed 'above the waterline' (Pettit and Mejía Acosta 2014; see also introduction to this volume). Yet an emerging perspective among social theorists, social activists and cognitive scientists points to more embodied and intersectional dimensions of power and exclusion – challenging liberal and rational choice assumptions about civic and political participation. Research on embodied cognition is

recognising the situated, perceptual and somatic dimensions of neural processes, seeing behaviour as enactive and experiential rather than responding to central commands from the brain, or to mental representations of reality, as traditionally assumed in cognitive science.[1] Action does not necessarily follow logic, reason or choice: it can flow from a more complex processing of embodied and habituated experience of what is normally said or done, which suggests that even when conscious of oppressive power relations we tend to comply rather than resist.

As a university teacher, and a facilitator of reflective learning and action research with civil society activists and organisations, I have become more curious about the ways that power is habituated – existing not just 'out there', imposed through social and political structures and ideologies, but self-reproduced through micro-moments of speech, gesture and movement. I've been struck by how resilient internalised power can be to dialogue and analysis, and have been drawn to facilitation methods that combine critical reflection with practices of creative and embodied learning. By this I mean proactive methods and disciplines for understanding bodily powers, actions and reactions both viscerally and logically. Social mobilisation and transformative adult learning strategies often include theatre, role play, scenarios and hands-on work experience, as well as meditation, yoga, tai chi and other martial arts. Collective action in the form of protests and marches is also embodied practice, serving not only as visible displays of solidarity but as creative, bodily enactments of alternative imaginaries, values and narratives. By working with and through the body, combining embodied practices of learning and action with processes of critical awareness-raising, I have found that we can expose and transform these patterns of power.

In this chapter I begin by revisiting theories of power, asking how they account for the cognitive and embodied processes that create and reproduce power, and what possibilities or constraints are implied for civic and political agency. Next, I look at research from the field of embodied cognition, relating its theories of mind to the findings on invisible power and agency. Finally, I share insights from my experience leading embodied practices as a teacher and action-researcher, particularly enactment, body sculpting and exercises inspired by Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*. In the conclusion I suggest that enabling civic and political agency requires a 'pedagogy for the embodied mind' that integrates critical consciousness with embodied knowledge.

1 'Cognition is embodied when it is deeply dependent upon features of the physical body of an agent, that is, when aspects of the agent's body beyond the brain play a significant causal or physically constitutive role in cognitive processing. In general, dominant views in the philosophy of mind and cognitive science have considered the body as peripheral to understanding the nature of mind and cognition. Proponents of embodied cognitive science view this as a serious mistake. Sometimes the nature of the dependence of cognition on the body is quite unexpected, and suggests new ways of conceptualising and exploring the mechanics of cognitive processing' (Wilson and Foglia 2017, p. 1).

Invisible power: socialisation and embodiment[2]

Lukes (1974/2005) famously argued that power is not always observable or marked by coercion or conflict. Responding to academic debates about who wins or loses in policymaking, he distinguished three 'dimensions' of power, suggesting that identifying who prevails in observable decision-making (the first dimension) and detecting how power works behind the scenes through agenda-setting and 'mobilisation of bias' (the second dimension) don't adequately account for how people's 'willing consent to domination' is secured. For Lukes, the third and most insidious dimension of power is the manipulation of need and beliefs, normalising oppression in such a way that some conflicts and decisions never need to arise.[3] This third dimension of power, in Lukes's original formulation, is something *deliberately used* by powerful actors to manipulate others' beliefs. Power is *exercised* by those who have it over those who don't to shape their perceived interests, without coercion or force.

Inspired by Lukes, John Gaventa characterises this third dimension as socialisation in addition to wilful manipulation, seeing it as a 'form of power in which conflict is more invisible, through internalisation of powerlessness, or through dominating ideologies, values and forms of behaviour' (Gaventa 2006, p. 29). Here invisible power is not limited to the overt influencing of beliefs, but is a process by which all actors are conditioned and constrained by social norms. In the same vein, Lisa VeneKlasen and Valerie Miller define invisible power as what 'shapes the psychological and ideological boundaries of change', including 'people's beliefs, sense of self … acceptance of the status quo [… and] sense of superiority or inferiority as "natural"' (Miller et al. 2006, p. 10, see also VeneKlasen and Miller 2002, and Bradley, this volume). Invisible power can thus be understood both as *a form of agency* – intentionally used by the powerful to manipulate the less powerful (or indeed used subversively by the less powerful to disrupt dominant and oppressive narratives) – and as *a process of socialisation* that naturalises norms and behaviour for everyone, powerful and powerless alike.

Challenging Lukes's agency-centric account, Clarissa Hayward (1998, 2000) argues that putting a 'face' on this dimension of power hides the ways in which norms and beliefs shape the boundaries of acceptable thought and self-constraint for *all actors*. The idea that ideological power is wielded by actors obscures self-reproducing forces of discourse and knowledge. Following Foucault, she locates power not in the wilful intentions of actors but in 'networks of social boundaries' that incorporate all actors into norms, rules and standards which govern their freedom:

2 This section is adapted from Pettit (2016a).

3 Lukes's three dimensions of power have been reformulated over the years by contributors to this volume (notably VeneKlasen and Miller 2002, Gaventa 2006) as visible power (the first dimension), hidden or shadow power (the second dimension) and invisible power (the third dimension). However, these forms of power have acquired new meanings and implications for strategy, and continue to evolve in the diverse contexts in which activists and authors are working, as evidenced in the chapters in this volume.

> Power's mechanisms are best conceived, not as instruments powerful agents use to prevent the powerless from acting freely, but rather as social boundaries that, together, define fields of action for all actors. Power defines fields of possibility. It facilitates and constrains social action. (Hayward 1998, p. 12)

Lukes later came to accept both ways of understanding this third dimension of power, while defending his focus on the intentional manipulation of beliefs in processes of political contestation.

Power viewed in this way shifts attention not only from agency to socialisation, but from reason, choice and intent to embodied dispositions and involuntary behaviour. It changes the focus from power as driven by perceived self-interests to more complex cognitive processes whereby social conduct and positioning are embodied and habituated – including in ways that may be counter to one's interests. Here invisible power recalls Foucault's (1991) 'disciplinary power' where institutions like schools and prisons need not rely on coercion or punishment to enforce behaviour; subjects discipline themselves, subjugating their bodies to what's considered acceptable or to what will not be punished. In this view of power there is no need for a prior ideology or discourse to determine action: experience itself shapes 'discursive practices' or 'bodies of knowledge' that define what is normal or deviant (ibid.). Knowledge does not determine or imprint behaviour in a causal fashion. As summarised by Haugaard (2003, p. 106):

> tacit knowledge is created by going through the motions of predictability… When actors are inculcated with routinized behaviour then the appropriate actions and reactions become virtually reflex … The physical insistence upon routine produces an actor with a particular, and desirable, practical consciousness knowledge who is unlikely to reflect.

Judith Butler similarly argues that gender identities are embodied through what she calls *performativity* – repeated, ritualised acts that constitute power while simultaneously being constrained by existing norms and discourses. For Butler, 'the body is always an embodying of possibilities both conditioned and circumscribed by historical convention. In other words, the body is … a manner of doing, dramatizing, and reproducing a historical situation' (1988, p. 521). Butler rejects the idea of the body as a 'passive medium that is signified by an inscription from a cultural source figured as "external" to the body' – departing from some readings of Foucault that there is a passive material body 'prior to discourse' (1990, pp. 175, 176). Binaries of mind/body, culture/nature and structure/agency drop away in her more iterative account, where 'what is called gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo' (1988, p. 521). Butler sees language and body as 'invariably related' because 'the speech act is at once performed (and thus theatrical, presented to an audience, subject to interpretation), and linguistic' because 'speech

itself is a bodily act with specific linguistic consequences' (1990, p. xxvii).[4] This theatrical dimension makes performativity a collective rather than an individual process – public rituals re-enacted within and also reaffirming the boundaries of legitimised social meanings (1988, p. 527, cited Turner 1974).

This historical and embodied reproduction of power is also at work in Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* (1980). Here power is a cultural and symbolic creation, constantly reaffirmed through a subtle interplay of agency and structure. This occurs through the effects of *habitus* – the practical, learned and subjective habits or dispositions that shape our behaviour; and *field* – the norms, standards and structures that prevail in society. *Habitus* is neither a result of free will nor wholly determined by structures, but arises from a kind of interplay between them over time: dispositions are shaped by past events and structures, and at the same time shape current practices and structures, and condition our very perceptions of these (Bourdieu 1984, p. 174). We don't 'reason through our actions based on an objective assessment of the outcomes' (Bourdieu 1980, p. 54), as rational choice advocates would suggest. Rather, over time, we internalise the 'objective conditions' of structures in a subconscious and embodied way – as *habitus* – which regenerates structures. We tend to avoid doing or saying things that don't make practical 'common sense' within the confines of the field, and we rationalise our behaviour around what is allowed or not allowed. While rational-objectivists would have us experiment with *all* possible actions and outcomes, *habitus* gives 'disproportionate weight to early experiences' in life that have shaped our rationality (Bourdieu 1980, p. 54), so we are innately constrained by our own history.[5]

Despite differences among these theories of power, all of them draw attention to the role of the body, beyond logical processes of cognition, in creating and reproducing power. There is a shared implication that even with the ability to reflect critically and objectively we will not necessarily 'act' differently in relation to power. The body is a central driver in the performance and (re)production of power, tending to act in accord with historical, normative boundaries. This raises doubts about rational-objectivist notions of choice and the Cartesian ideal that reasoned thought precedes and determines action. Turning to questions of civic and political agency, this understanding of power disrupts liberal, pluralist and behaviourist assumptions that citizens rationally assess and select from political

4 Roman numeral citations from Butler (1990) are from her 1999 preface to the 2nd edition of *Gender Trouble*.

5 More than a set of rules we are consciously aware of, *habitus* is the internalisation of social experience, the processes by which normative responses are *physically inscribed in our bodies*. Bourdieu is not often cited for this aspect of his thinking because it is easier to grasp the idea that *habitus* reflects cognitive 'beliefs'. Yet with *habitus* social relations are 'turned into muscular patterns and bodily automatisms … a way of bearing one's body, presenting it to others, moving it, making space for it, which gives the body its social physiognomy' or 'bodily hexis'. The body acts as a 'memory-jogger' with its 'complexes of gestures, postures and words … which have only to be slipped into, like a theatrical costume, to awaken, by the evocative power of bodily mimesis, a universe of ready-made feelings and experiences' (Bourdieu 1984, p. 474).

alternatives. Choice and its aggregation (e.g. through markets or elections) lose meaning as the very field of possibilities and permissible actions within that field are constrained – the more so if there are negative consequences for transgression. Agency is constrained by what might be called *civic habitus* (Pettit 2016a, Pettit 2016b). While for Lukes the scope for agency is compromised by ideological manipulation, perpetrated by actors with capacities of coercion (even if not exercised), here agency is undermined by deeply socialised and embodied norms and boundaries. Possibilities of choice and action are shaped by prior life experience and by disciplinary norms and consequences that have been repeatedly performed and habitually embodied.

Embodied cognition

Social theories have clearly attempted to understand embodied power and its possible effects on civic and political agency. But what do cognitive scientists have to say about the habituation of norms and boundaries, and whether or how tacit compliance with power can be disrupted? If power is embodied, to what extent can newfound insight change behaviour, or non-conforming behaviour shift boundaries and norms? Is critical consciousness sufficient as an impetus for civic and political agency, or do our bodies themselves need to reconfigure internalised power? Theories of invisible power as embodied are remarkably consistent with findings from cognitive science, neurobiology, neurolinguistics, artificial intelligence, psychology and neuro-philosophy.[6] There is a growing field of 'embodied cognition' which questions computational and representational assumptions about cognition, and departs from Western philosophical binaries of mind and body, reason and feeling, structure and agency, etc. This broad field shares a common thesis that:

> Many features of cognition are embodied in that they are deeply dependent upon characteristics of the physical body of an agent, such that the agent's beyond-the-brain body plays a significant causal role, or a physically constitutive role, in that agent's cognitive processing. (Wilson and Foglia 2017, p. 1)

6 Some studies of embodied cognition, including those of Varela et al. (1991), like the theories of embodiment found in Bourdieu, Butler and Foucault, were influenced by the continental philosophy of phenomenology, particularly Husserl (1913) and Merleau-Ponty (1964), who was one of the first to link phenomenology with cognitive science. Varela et al. are also influenced by Buddhist philosophies of consciousness. Other foundations of embodied cognition – not covered here due to space considerations but arguably congruent with ideas of embodied power – are from neuroscience (e.g. Damasio 2000, Damasio 2006), neuro-linguistics (Johnson 1987, Lakoff and Johnson 1999), artificial intelligence (Clark 2008), psychology and neuro-philosophy (Gallagher 2005, Thompson 2007). The account of Varela et al. here is adapted from Pettit (2016b). For a good summary of the field of embodied cognition see Wilson and Foglia (2017).

The field of embodied cognition is too vast to elaborate here, but it is worth considering an early influential argument made by Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch in *The Embodied Mind* (1991). Contrary to traditional representational models of cognition, they maintain (like Bourdieu) that we don't rationally plan our actions by evaluating and choosing from available options. Rather, we perceive, respond and improvise in a highly flexible way according to context and history: we are '*situated* agents, continually coming up with what to do' (Varela 1999, p. 55, original emphasis). In studies of visual perception and action, Varela and his colleagues reject the 'computationalist tradition' in cognitive science, which assumes that sensory data is gathered and processed by a controlling centre somewhere in the mind, which then responds to an 'internal representation' of reality upon which it can act (1999, p. 54). Brain-imaging techniques are unable to detect any such centre of cognition; instead, there are complex multidirectional networks of activity and feedback loops through which coherence emerges (1999, p. 49). Our mind neither 'recovers' an objective outer world (realism) nor 'projects' an inner construct of the world (idealism), but instead functions via a process of 'mutual specification' which enables us to 'enact a world' (Varela et al. 1991, pp. 172, 151).

This proposal sheds light on the possible workings of both *habitus* and *performativity* – and not coincidentally, as Varela, Bourdieu and Butler were all influenced by Merleau-Ponty's studies of visual perception (1962) and by Husserl's phenomenology (1913). Yet it is significant that social theories of embodied power find support in neurobiological studies of 'enactive cognition' where '*The cognitive self is its own implementation: its history and its action are of one piece*' (Varela 1999, p. 54, original emphasis). For Bourdieu, *habitus* is what gives us 'practical sense' of 'things to be done or said, which directly govern speech and action' – what he calls 'a feel for the game' (1980, p. 66). And in Butler's performativity the body dramatises its own historical conventions (1988, p. 521). This meeting of the body and its historical and situated context, like the encounter of *habitus* and *field*, are where 'the organism both initiates and is shaped by the environment', and both are 'bound together in reciprocal specification and selection' (Varela et al. 1991, p. 174). This mutual process reflects the post-structural view that agency and structure are not in dualistic opposition, but iteratively and mutually constitute power – even perhaps as a singular embodied experience, as Butler would suggest, rather than a 'play' back and forth.

This view could be dismissed as overly deterministic, denying any possibility of autonomous free will or of mind over matter. But these accounts all acknowledge, albeit in different ways, that there is a *mutual* process at work, not a one-way inscription of the environment or social structures upon the individual (Ingold 2000, Rawnsley 2007). For Butler, 'performativity is a theory of agency', inviting us to recognise the 'delimiting power' of the field that defines gender identities and conditions the possibilities for action, and to find ways to transform it (1990, pp. xxv, xxiii) – without the illusion that agency is completely separate from and opposed to structure. The stated aim of *Gender Trouble* was precisely 'to understand what political agency might be, given that it cannot be isolated from the dynamics

of power from which it is wrought' (ibid., p. xxv). For Bourdieu, *habitus* is not deterministic, but an interplay of both 'structured' and 'structuring' dispositions which 'is constituted in practice and is always oriented towards practical functions' (1980, p. 54). And for Varela et al., 'perception is not simply embedded within and constrained by the surrounding world; it also contributes to the enactment of this surrounding world' (1991, p. 174). The question is not whether we have agency, but what is the 'we' that is acting, what is it acting 'upon' and how can we become more aware of this situated, historical and enactive process.

The embodied turn in cognitive science doesn't deny possibilities of agency; but it does challenge long-held assumptions about autonomy, rationality and agency in Western thought. Rather than the Cartesian dualism of 'I think therefore I am', mind and body are integrally situated in context and experience. While not explicitly concerned with power, ideas of embodied cognition have profound implications for efforts to enhance civic and political agency. Transforming power at this level involves accessing the enactive and situated body, its senses and feelings, its collective experience and relationships, and its profound connection to the world. In my experience this reclaiming of embodied existence as a pathway to civic and political power cannot be achieved with analytical or linguistic forms of cognition alone, but calls for embodied practices of learning.

Embodied practices for transforming power

Educational theory and practice also recognise the role of the body and its senses, feelings and experience in facilitating deeper and transformative learning (see for example Gardner 2006). Yet these approaches tend to find traction in infant, primary and secondary education rather than further and higher levels. In the training courses for development workers and social activists, embodied learning exercises – if used at all – are treated as *steps toward conceptual sense-making*, as means to an end rather than being valued in themselves as methods of learning. The exploration of power through drama, movement and body is non-existent in most university-level social science courses. Learners may be taught *about habitus*, disciplinary power or performativity, and are expected to use this theoretical understanding to go out into the world and make a difference; but they are not asked to examine how power is enacted with their own bodies. Where acknowledged, embodied practices are to be used with subjects of change, but not by change agents themselves. Yet without capacities for the embodied transformation of power, change agents are likely to mirror and reinforce dominant norms and behaviour, however unwittingly.

Many methods can be used effectively to bring the body into processes of transformative learning. Here I focus on theatre techniques inspired by Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* (see also McCarthy 2004, Guhuthakurta 2008, Mills 2009). These approaches can range from communicating messages in dynamic ways to deeper and more participatory processes of group reflection and action. In my practice as a facilitator of learning processes with civil society organisations, and as a university teacher and researcher, I've experimented with methods of storytelling, simulation, role play, body-sculpting and Forum Theatre (Boal 1994). Here I will draw out insights from using these embodied practices to explore power, and from Boal's explanations of his methodology, and explore their relevance to ideas of invisible power, embodied cognition and civic agency.

Methods of re-enactment and role play can be excellent ways to surface the personal experience of learners as a starting point for exploring power through body and feeling, to grasp its essence *before* moving on to more abstract sense-making. This can be a sensitive process, and it is important to set boundaries of safety (such as limiting body contact); to allow participants to opt out if they wish; and to be prepared to interrupt the action if boundaries are crossed. Scenes can be developed from learners' life experiences in response to prompts such as 'a time I felt contradiction or discomfort in my work' or 'a time I felt powerful or powerless'. Creative writing or storytelling exercises can be used to develop raw material for the scenes, inviting learners to share narratives in pairs or small groups, and then to develop them into performances to share and discuss in plenary. Guidance can be given to help participants develop their performance pieces – for example using embodied symbolism, metaphor and fantasy rather than necessarily aiming for realism. This approach ensures a concrete 'showing' of power in bodily experience rather than an abstract 'telling', and surfaces forms of power that could otherwise be flattened by conceptual language.

Methods of body-sculpting can also be used individually and in pairs or groups to further explore moments and experiences of power. This can take the form, for example, of exploring two poses that represent alternate states of feeling less or more powerful in particular situations. Working in pairs, participants can take turns mirroring one another's poses, or re-sculpting each other to try out alternative poses. Reflection can be deepened by drawing the contrasting poses on paper, writing words on them and sharing these in a 'gallery walk', in addition to performing and discussing them in plenary. Learners often comment on having gained surprising new insights into themselves and their embodied behaviour, for example in how they relate to others or how they deal with conflict. Body-sculpting exercises can make us more sensitive to what we are feeling and doing in everyday situations, and to how minute differences in posture and gesture, directions or aversions of gaze and facial expressions are part of how we experience and exercise power. We can identify and practise power-shifting postures and movements, get better at 'reading' others' body language and become sensitive to how we might feel and act rather than only thinking our way out of oppressive power dynamics.

Boal's Forum Theatre method adds deeper levels of exploration to enactment and body-sculpting. Scenes are performed for an audience by a prepared cast with a protagonist who is trying to resist or change an oppressive power dynamic. The audience, or 'spectactors', can stop the action and take the place of the protagonist to try out alternative strategies, while the facilitator can also freeze the action and 'dynamise' it, for example asking the actors to reveal their thoughts and feelings. The underlying power dynamic often remains unchanged, sparking discussion about structural aspects of power and the need for longer-term, systemic and collective change strategies; but the protagonist can also succeed in at least partially disrupting the power in an

embodied way, offering clues to the potential forms of agency that can effect change. Forum Theatre exercises can be facilitated with participants with no theatre background at all, or they can be led by an experienced troupe.

Forum Theatre exposes power at both the level of socialised structures, narratives and beliefs and at the level of individual dispositions and actions – dimensions that are not always integrated well in critical pedagogy. It visibilises the particular and personal, in addition to the general and social, inviting embodied awareness of individual and collective agency while also critiquing the ideologies, structures and beliefs that enable or constrain that agency. For some this exploration of power at both the personal and structural levels can be uncomfortable, rubbing against ideals of what it means to gain critical consciousness. It brings in the 'non-rational' body and enlarges the personal rather than jumping to abstract and collective concepts, which can be unsettling for those used to more analytical and structural critique. Boal's methods have been criticised as 'therapy', crossing the line from social analysis to trauma healing. He was accused of 'bourgeois individualism' during his political exile from Brazil when adapting his methods to the 'new oppressions' and alienation he observed in Europe. Boal's English translator and protégé, Adrian Jackson, defends this connection between the 'socio-political' and the 'psycho-therapeutic':

> The truth of the matter is that the work ... has always had therapeutic effects, and that these effects have been as much on individuals as societies. Therapeutic is not necessarily a pseudonym for normalising ... The implantation of oppression in our heads is not nullified because we face concrete 'actual' oppressions outside – far from it: the two work inextricably together, they compound each other. (Jackson cited in Boal 1994, pp. xxi-xxii)

For Boal power is not just an objective social structure, but is lived by subjective individual beings. His ideas of 'osmosis' (how we inscribe social norms within ourselves) and 'ascesis' (making visible and understandable the general law behind a particular event) speak to the connections between the individual and wider social structures, much like discipline, *habitus* and performativity. A theory of power based on internalisation and embodiment calls for an emancipatory approach to learning that works with bodily experience. Boal saw a need to address power at the individual and embodied level as well the group and societal level, using theatre to imagine and enact new possibilities. In the context of social activism against dictatorships and structural violence in Latin America, Boal wanted to move beyond the more instrumental forms of popular theatre he had used in the past. Influenced by Freire, he sought to create 'a theatre which is not didactic, in the old sense of the word and style, but pedagogic, in the sense of a collective learning' (Boal 1994, p. 7). Much popular theatre was 'agit-prop', which at the time 'seemed right ... to exhort the oppressed to struggle against oppression. Which oppressed? All of them. The oppressed in a general sense. Too general a sense' (ibid., p. 1). Boal saw limits to 'sending messages' and giving 'solutions' to the oppressed (ibid., p. 3), and wanted a theatre that could transform real lives:

> When the spectator herself comes on stage and carries out the action she has in mind, she does it in a manner which is so personal, unique and non-transferable, as she alone can do it, and as no artist can do it in her place ... I learnt to see the human being struggling with her own problems, individual problems, which though they may not concern the totality of a class, nevertheless concern the totality of life. (Boal 1994, p. 7)

While there were no dictators using violence against the poor in Europe, Boal observed 'new oppressions', 'loneliness', the 'impossibility of communicating with others' and 'fear of emptiness'. We conform to society without noticing it: 'the cops are in our heads, but their headquarters and barracks must be on the outside' (1994, p. 8). This view resonates with Hayward's idea of power as 'networks of social boundaries' that enable or constrain (2000), Bourdieu's notion of *field* (1980) and Butler's iterative and historical constraints on action (1990). Oppression doesn't just affect one part of the population, but ensnares everyone in its invisible grasp. Forum Theatre's ability to enquire into how we embody power with or without overt coercion has given it a wide appeal.

Acting in what Boal called the 'aesthetic space' of the stage also enables a deeper reflection on the phenomenon of power. The stage, even defined as a line across a room, provides for a special kind of reflexivity – the ability to see yourself 'in the act of acting, in the act of feeling, the act of thinking' (1994, p. 13). This self-awareness during the re-creation of the lived moment is not simply conceptual:

> Knowledge is acquired here via the sense and not solely via the mind ... This process of knowledge ... is constituted not only of ideas but also of emotions and sensations. Theatre is a therapy into which one enters body and soul, soma and psyche. (Boal 1994, p. 28)

Forum Theatre aims not only to understand power but to change it. For Boal, theatre can 'stimulate knowledge and discovery, cognition and recognition'. It provides a kind of 'plasticity' which invites creativity, imagination, dreams and memory and 'awakes in each observer, in diverse forms and intensities, emotions, sensation and thoughts' (1994, pp. 20, 21). Reflection is done with the body, senses, creativity and imagination. This is again a challenge to the idea that pragmatic action flows from abstract conceptualisation (theorising our experience), as in the popular notion of 'learning cycles' (e.g. Kolb 1984). Agency can also flow from bodily experience and the creative exploration of alternatives with the body.

Conclusion

Our bodies understand and experience power in ways that our conscious minds do not. Somatic and emotional reflexes serve as living maps of our past experiences with power, through which we trace and re-perform habituated patterns of hierarchy and domination. It is in our bodies that agency and structure converge and

construct meaning, blurring self and society, and constituting ourselves as more than an individual, rational and centrally commanding brain. The social, philosophical and biological sciences are converging around the embodiment of cognition and of invisible power. This has profound implications for social activists and professionals, and how we can effectively create and mobilise civic and political agency. Transforming invisible power requires an experiential awareness of the body, its senses, its embedded history, its ways of responding and relating to others, and its profound connection with the world.

Methods of enactment, simulation, role play, body-sculpting and Forum Theatre constitute one of several traditions of embodied practice and learning. These techniques can enable us to replay our sensory and emotional experiences, re-create physical renderings of invisible norms and boundaries, and imagine and enact changes in our habituated collusion with invisible power. Other traditions of embodied practice and learning can be equally effective and complementary. In performance art, for example, the body can be used to recognise and challenge cultural norms (e.g. De Preester 2007). There are growing communities of practice and training in techniques of embodied facilitation (e.g. Walsh n.d.; see also https://embodiedfacilitator.com/). Feminist popular education offers well-developed methods for exploring embodied experiences of patriarchy, gender and power, thereby enhancing more discursive approaches to critical pedagogy (see Arce Andrade and Miller, this volume). There are growing examples of the use of embodied learning processes in social mobilisation work, including practices of yoga, tai chi and other martial arts and energy work (see for example Friedman 2017). Like Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*, these methods intersect unapologetically with therapy and trauma-healing, making links between experiences of power at the personal and societal levels.

Embodied practices of learning and action need to be repositioned from their fringe status as fun or entertaining activities, or as stages *toward* critical consciousness, to the very core of what it means to generate meaningful civic and political agency. This is not to deny the vital work of political and ideational struggle in shifting invisible power, but to suggest that without complementary efforts to transform embodied power, critical and discursive initiatives will fall flat. A 'pedagogy for the embodied mind' departs from rational-objective, individual consciousness-raising and looks beyond the propagation of alternative narratives as primary drivers of change, embracing the power of embodied knowledge and stimulating civic and political agency in both mind and body.

References

Boal, A., 1979/2000. *Theatre of the oppressed*. London: Pluto.

Boal, A., 1994. *The rainbow of desire: the Boal method of theatre and therapy*. London: Routledge.

Bourdieu, P., 1980. *The logic of practice*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Bourdieu, P., 1984. *Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste*. London: Routledge.

Butler, J., 1988. Performative acts and gender constitution: an essay in phenomenology and feminist theory. *Theatre Journal*, 40(4), 519–531.

Butler, J., 1990. *Gender trouble*. London: Routledge.

Clark, A., 2008. *Supersizing the mind: embodiment, action and cognitive extension*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Clegg, S. and Haugaard, M., eds, 2009. *The Sage handbook of power*. London: Sage.

Damasio, A., 2000. *The feeling of what happens: body, emotion and the making of consciousness*. London: Vintage.

Damasio, A., 2006. *Descartes' error: emotion, reason and the human brain*. London: Vintage.

De Preester, H., 2007. To perform the layered body: a short exploration of the body in performance. *Janus Head*, 9(2), 349–383.

Foucault, M., 1991. *Discipline and punish: the birth of a prison*. London: Penguin.

Freire, P., 1970. *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Herder & Herder.

Friedman, M., 2017. Transforming cultures of violence: ploughing the soil, planting the seeds of new social norms [online]. Toronto: Gender at Work. Available from: https://genderatwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Transforming-cultures-of-violence-Feb-22.pdf [Accessed 5 May 2019].

Gallagher, S., 2005. *How the body shapes the mind*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gaventa, J., 2006. Finding the spaces for change: a power analysis. *IDS Bulletin*, 37(5), 22–33.

Gardner, H., 2006. *Multiple intelligences: new horizons*. New York: Basic Books.

Giddens, A., 1984. *The constitution of society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Guhuthakurta, M., 2008. Theatre in participatory action research: experiences from Bangladesh. In: P. Reason and H. Bradbury, eds. *The SAGE handbook on action research: participative inquiry and practice*. London: Sage, 510–521.

Haugaard, M., 2003. Reflections on seven ways of creating power. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 6(1), 87–113.

Hawkesworth, M., 2016. *Embodied power: demystifying disembodied politics*. London: Routledge.

Hayward, C., 1998. De-facing power. *Polity*, 31(1), 1–22.

Hayward, C., 2000. *De-facing power*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Husserl, E., 1913. *Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a phenomenological philosophy. First book: general introduction to a pure phenomenology*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

Ingold, T., 2000. *The perception of the environment: essays of livelihood, dwelling and skill*. London: Routledge.

Johnson, M., 1987. *The body in the mind: the bodily basis of meaning, imagination and reason*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Kolb, D., 1984. *Experiential learning: experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Lakoff, G. and Johnson, M., 1999. *Philosophy in the flesh: the embodied mind and its challenge to Western thought*. New York: Basic Books.

Lukes, S., 1974, 2005. *Power: a radical view*. London: Macmillan.

McCarthy, J., 2004. *Enacting participatory development: theatre-based techniques*. London: Earthscan.

Merleau-Ponty, M., 1962. *The phenomenology of perception*. New York: Humanities Press.

Miller, V., VeneKlasen, L., Reilly, M. and Clark, C., 2006. *Making change happen 3: power. Concepts for revisioning power for justice, equality and peace*. Washington DC: Just Associates.

Mills, S., 2009. Theatre for transformation and empowerment: a case study of Jana Sanskriti theatre of the oppressed. *Development in Practice*, 19(4/5), 550–559.

Pettit, J. and Mejía Acosta, A., 2014. Power above and below the waterline: bridging political economy and power analysis. *IDS Bulletin*, 45(5), 9–22.

Pettit, J., 2016a. Why citizens don't engage: power, poverty and civic habitus. *IDS Bulletin*, 47(5), 89–102.

Pettit, J., 2016b. Civic habitus: toward a pedagogy for citizen engagement. In: A. Skinner, M. Baillie Smith, E. Brown and T. Roll, eds. *Education, learning and the transformation of development*. London and New York: Routledge.
Rawnsley, A.C., 2007. A situated or a metaphysical body? Problematics of body as mediation or as site of inscription. *Janus Head*, 9(2), 625–647.
Scott, J.C., 1985. *Weapons of the weak: everyday forms of resistance*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
Thompson, E., 2007. *Mind in life: biology, phenomenology, and the sciences of mind*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
Turner, V., 1974. *Dramas, fields, and metaphors*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
Varela, F.J., Thompson, E. and Rosch, E., 1991. *The embodied mind: cognitive science and human experience*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
Varela, F.J., 1999. *Ethical know-how: action, wisdom and cognition*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
VeneKlasen, L. and Miller, V., 2002. *A new weave of power, people and politics: the action guide for advocacy and citizen participation*. Rugby: Practical Action.
Walsh, M., n.d. *Working with the body in training and coaching* [e-book]. Brighton: The Embodied Facilitator Course. Available from: https://embodiedfacilitator.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/working-with-body-e-book.pdf [Accessed 5 May 2019].
Wilson, R.A. and Foglia, L., 2017. Embodied cognition. In: E.N. Salta, ed. *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy (Spring 2017 Edition)*. Stanford, CA: Center for the Study of Language and Information. Available from: https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/embodied-cognition [Accessed 3 June 2019].

2.5

TOWARDS A POLITICAL PRACTICE OF EMPOWERMENT IN DIGITAL TIMES: A FEMINIST COMMENTARY FROM THE GLOBAL SOUTH

Anita Gurumurthy and Nandini Chami

Overview

The digital moment is exciting and exasperating in equal measure for feminists immersed in the political practice of 'empowerment'. On the one hand, internet-mediated space is synonymous with a new grammar of political performativity that links the intensely 'personal' with the 'public', 'civic' and 'political' in strikingly creative ways (Raman and Kasturi 2018). Feminist practitioners who are increasingly disenchanted with the limitations of conventional legal-institutional channels for social change have found a cornucopia in digitally mediated political action that harnesses the destabilising potential of cultural performance (Baer 2016). Just think of the countless flash mobs, Twitter storms, digital media-based street installations and meme projects organised by feminist groups in the global North and South (Baer 2016, Subramanian n.d., Vemuri 2016).

On the other hand, emerging practices of 'digital feminism' are caught in a double bind (Baer 2016). Even as they attempt to challenge existing gender and other social hierarchies, their transformative potential hinges on whether and how progressive feminist narratives catch the public eye in the unending streams of information. Also, emerging digital media cultures are characterised by a post-feminist sensibility; as funny memes become the default for attracting attention in the incessant flows of the internet, both performance and the female body become commodified. We are witness to paradoxical representations of female subjectivity in this neo-liberal context that 'promote sexual agency and abstract notions of empowerment at the expense of politics' (French 2017, p. 161). The perverse confluence in cyber-space of politically charged actions and depoliticised performance results in a farcical situation where any woman who speaks online is labelled a 'feminist' (Devika 2018).

The theoretical question that confronts us in this complex bricolage of simultaneous assimilation (into the status quo) and destabilisation (of normative gender

Citation info:

Pettit, Jethro, 2020, ‘Transforming power with embodied practice’, in McGee, Rosemary and Pettit, Jethro (eds) 2020, *Power, Empowerment and Social Change,* (pp 68-82), Abingdon: Routledge