2

Men's Bodies

True Masculinity

Arguments that masculinity should change often come to grief, not on counter-arguments against reform, but on the belief that men *cannot* change, so it is futile or even dangerous to try. Mass culture generally assumes there is a fixed, true masculinity beneath the ebb and flow of daily life. We hear of 'real men', 'natural man', the 'deep masculine'. This idea is now shared across an impressive spectrum including the mythopoetic men's movement, Jungian psychoanalysts, Christian fundamentalists, sociobiologists and the essentialist school of feminism.

True masculinity is almost always thought to proceed from men's bodies – to be inherent in a male body or to express something about a male body. Either the body drives and directs action (e.g., men are naturally more aggressive than women; rape results from uncontrollable lust or an innate urge to violence), or the body sets limits to action (e.g., men naturally do not take care of infants; homosexuality is unnatural and therefore confined to a perverse minority).

These beliefs are a strategic part of modern gender ideology, in the English-speaking world at least. So the first task of a social analysis is to arrive at an understanding of men's bodies and their relation to masculinity.

Two opposing conceptions of the body have dominated discussion of this issue in recent decades. In one, which basically translates the dominant ideology into the language of biological science, the body is a natural machine which produces gender difference – through genetic programming, hormonal difference, or the different role of the sexes in reproduction. In the other approach, which has swept the humanities and social sciences, the

body is a more or less neutral surface or landscape on which a social symbolism is imprinted. Reading these arguments as a new version of the old 'nature vs. nurture' controversy, other voices have proposed a common-sense compromise: both biology and social influence combine to produce gender differences in behaviour.

In this chapter I will argue that all three views are mistaken. We can arrive at a better understanding of the relation between men's bodies and masculinity. But this cannot be done by abstract argument alone. So I will introduce, a little out of order, some evidence from the life-history study presented more fully in Part II.

Machine, Landscape and Compromise

Since religion's capacity to justify gender ideology collapsed, biology has been called in to fill the gap. The need may be gauged from the enormous appetite of the conservative mass media for stories of scientific discoveries about supposed sex differences. My favourite is the story that women's difficulty in parking cars is due to sex differences in brain function. (There is no actual evidence of the sex difference in parking, to start with.)

Speculation about masculinity and femininity is a mainstay of sociobiology, the revived attempt at an evolutionary explanation of human society that became fashionable in the 1970s. An early example of this genre, Lionel Tiger's *Men in Groups*, offered a complete biological-reductionist theory of masculinity based on the idea that we are descended from a hunting species. One of Tiger's phrases, 'male bonding', even passed into popular use.

According to these theorists, men's bodies are the bearers of a natural masculinity produced by the evolutionary pressures that have borne down upon the human stock. We inherit with our masculine genes tendencies to aggression, family life, competitiveness, political power, hierarchy, territoriality, promiscuity and forming men's clubs. The list varies somewhat from theorist to theorist, but the flavour remains the same. According to Edward Wilson, the doyen of sociobiologists, 'the physical and temperamental differences between men and women have been amplified by culture into universal male dominance.' More specifically, others claim that current social arrangements are an outgrowth of the endocrine system: for instance, that patriarchy is based

in a hormonal 'aggression advantage' which men hold over women.[1]

The endocrine theory of masculinity, like the brain-sex theory, has also passed into journalistic common sense. Here, for instance, is the opening of a recent newspaper article on snowboarding safety:

> The most delusional, risk-inducing cocktail in the world is not a Zombie, a Harvey Wallbanger, or even the infamous Singapore Sling. It's the red-hot blend of testosterone and adrenaline that squirts through the arteries of teenagers and young men. That is why more than 95 per cent of the injuries in snowboarding are experienced by males under the age of 30, and the average age at injury is 21.[2]

The account of natural masculinity that has been built up in sociobiology is almost entirely fictional. It presupposes broad differences in the character traits and behaviours of women and men. As I noted in Chapter 1, a great deal of research has now been done on this issue. The usual finding, on intellect, temperament and other personal traits, is that there are no measurable differences at all. Where differences appear, they are small compared to variation within either sex, and very small compared to differences in the social positioning of women and men. The natural-masculinity thesis requires strong biological determination of group differences in complex social behaviours (such as creating families and armies). There is no evidence at all of strong determination in this sense. There is little evidence even of weak biological determination of group differences in simple individual behaviours. And the evidence of cross-cultural and historical diversity in gender is overwhelming. For instance, there are cultures and historical situations where rape is absent, or extremely rare; where homosexual behaviour is majority practice (at a given point in the life-cycle); where mothers do not predominate in child care (e.g., this work is done by old people, other children or servants); and where men are not normally aggressive.

The power of biological determination is not in its appeal to evidence. Careful examinations of the evidence, such as Theodore Kemper's *Social Structure and Testosterone*, show that nothing like one-way determination of the social by the biological can be sustained; the situation is far more complex. As Kemper bluntly concludes, 'When racist and sexist ideologies sanction

certain hierarchical social arrangements on the basis of biology, the biology is usually false.'[3]

Rather, the power of this perspective lies in its *metaphor* of the body as machine. The body 'functions' and 'operates'. Researchers discover biological 'mechanisms' in behaviour. Brains are 'hardwired' to produce masculinity; men are genetically 'programmed' for dominance; aggression is in our 'biogram'. Both academic and journalistic texts are rich in these metaphors. For instance, few American readers of the snowboarding article just quoted would have missed the metaphor of the fuel-injected engine that has got mixed up with the cocktail metaphor. This neatly assimilates the exotic snowboard injuries to the all-too-familiar case of motor accidents caused by reckless young men – which in turn are commonly assumed to have a biological explanation.

When a metaphor becomes established it pre-empts discussion and shapes the way evidence is read. This has certainly happened with the metaphor of biological mechanism, and it affects even careful and well-documented research (which most sociobiology is not). A good example is a widely discussed study by Julianne Imperato-McGinley and others. A rare enzyme deficiency, of which 18 cases were found in two villages in the Dominican Republic, led to genetic-male infants having genitals that looked female, so they were raised as girls. This is analogous to the situations in the early lives of transsexuals described by Stoller in the United States, and on his argument should lead to a female 'core gender identity'. But in the Dominican Republic cases, the situation changed at puberty. At this point, normal testosterone levels masculinized the adolescents physically. The authors reported that 17 of the 18 then shifted to a male 'gender identity' and 16 to a male 'gender role'. The researchers saw this as proof that physiological mechanisms could override social conditioning.[4]

Closely examined, the paper shows something very different. McGinley and her colleagues describe a village society with a strong gender division of labour and a marked cultural opposition between masculine and feminine – both of which are social facts. The authors trace a gradual recognition by the children and their parents that a social error had been made, the children had been wrongly assigned. This error was socially corrected. The bodily changes of puberty clearly triggered a powerful *social* process of re-evaluation and reassignment. What the study refutes

is not a social account of gender, but the particular thesis that core gender identity formed in early childhood always pre-empts later social development.

The Dominican Republic study inadvertently shows something more. The authors observe that, since the medical researchers arrived in the community, 5-alpha-reductase deficiency is now identified at birth, and the children are mostly raised as boys. Medicine thus has stepped in to normalize gender: to make sure that adult men will have masculine childhoods, and a consistent gender dichotomy will be preserved. Ironically, Stoller's work with transsexuals in the United States does the same. Gender reassignment surgery (now a routine procedure, though not a common one) eliminates the inconsistency of feminine social presence and male genitals. The medical practice pulls bodies into line with a social ideology of dichotomous gender.

This is what would be predicted by a semiotic analysis of gender. Approaches that treat women's bodies as the object of social symbolism have flourished at the meeting-point of cultural studies and feminism. Studies of the imagery of bodies and the production of femininity in film, photography and other visual arts now number in the hundreds. Closer to everyday practice, feminist studies of fashion and beauty, such as Elizabeth Wilson's *Adorned in Dreams* and Wendy Chapkis's *Beauty Secrets*, trace complex but powerful systems of imagery through which bodies are defined as beautiful or ugly, slender or fat. Through this imagery, a whole series of body-related needs has been created: for diet, cosmetics, fashionable clothing, slimming programmes and the like.

This research is supported, and often directly inspired, by the post-structuralist turn in social theory. Michel Foucault's analysis of the 'disciplining' of bodies is a corollary of his account of the production of truth within discourses; bodies became the objects of new disciplinary sciences as new technologies of power brought them under control in finer and finer detail. The sociology of the body developed by Bryan Turner moves in the same direction at a somewhat more material level. Observing that 'bodies are objects over which we labour – eating, sleeping, cleaning, dieting, exercising', Turner proposes the idea of 'body practices', both individual and collective, to include the range of ways in which social labour addresses the body.

These practices can be institutionally elaborated on a very large scale. This is demonstrated, and connected to the production

of gender, in recent work on the sociology of sport. Nancy Theberge's 'Reflections on the body in the sociology of sport' convincingly shows how the different regimes of exercise for women and men, the disciplinary practices that both teach and constitute sport, are designed to produce gendered bodies. And if social discipline cannot produce adequately gendered bodies, surgery can. Cosmetic surgery now offers the affluent an extraordinary range of ways of producing a more socially desirable body, from the old 'face-lifts' and breast implants to the newer surgical slimming, height alterations, and so on. As Diana Dull and Candace West found by interviewing cosmetic surgeons and their patients in the United States, cosmetic surgery is now thought natural for a woman, though not for a man. Nevertheless the technology now extends to the surgical production of masculinity, with penile implants, both inflatable and rigid, to the fore.[5]

Though work on the semiotics of gender has overwhelmingly focused on femininity, at times the approach has been extended to masculinity. Anthony Easthope in *What a Man's Gotta Do* surveys the issues and is easily able to demonstrate how men's bodies are being defined as masculine in the imagery of advertising, film and news reports. There are studies at closer focus, of which perhaps the most remarkable is Susan Jeffords's *The Remasculinization of America*, which traces the reconstitution and celebration of masculinity in films and novels about the Vietnam war after the American defeat. There has also been a recent interest in gender ambiguity. Marjorie Garber's encyclopaedic account of literary, stage and filmic cross-dressing, *Vested Interests*, takes the semiotic approach to gender about as far as it will go in claiming that the mismatch of body and clothing is an 'instatement of metaphor itself'.[6]

Social constructionist approaches to gender and sexuality underpinned by a semiotic approach to the body provide an almost complete antithesis to sociobiology. Rather than social arrangements being the effects of the body-machine, the body is a field on which social determination runs riot. This approach too has its leading metaphors, which tend to be metaphors of art rather than engineering: the body is a canvas to be painted, a surface to be imprinted, a landscape to be marked out.

This approach also – though it has been wonderfully productive – runs into difficulty. With so much emphasis on the signifier, the signified tends to vanish. The problem is particularly striking

for that unavoidably bodily activity, sex. Social constructionist accounts were certainly an improvement on the positivist sexology of Kinsey and Masters and Johnson. But social constructionist discussions had the odd effect of disembodying sex. As Carole Vance ruefully put it,

> to the extent that social construction theory grants that sexual acts, identities and even desire are mediated by cultural and historical factors, the object of the study – sexuality – becomes evanescent and threatens to disappear.[7]

Gender is hardly in better case, when it becomes just a subject-position in discourse, the place from which one speaks; when gender is seen as, above all, a performance; or when the rending contradictions within gendered lives become 'an instatement of metaphor'. As Rosemary Pringle argues in 'Absolute sex?', her recent review of the sexuality/gender relationship, a wholly semiotic or cultural account of gender is no more tenable than a biological reductionist one.[8] The surface on which cultural meanings are inscribed is not featureless, and it does not stay still.

Bodies, in their own right as bodies, do matter. They age, get sick, enjoy, engender, give birth. There is an irreducible bodily dimension in experience and practice; the sweat cannot be excluded. On this point we can learn even from the sex role literature. One of the few compelling things the male role literature and Books About Men did was to catalogue Problems with Male Bodies, from impotence and ageing to occupational health hazards, violent injury, loss of sporting prowess and early death. Warning: the male sex role may be dangerous to your health.[9]

Can we, then, settle for a common-sense compromise, asserting both biology and culture in a composite model of gender? This is, essentially, the formula of sex role theory, which, as shown in Chapter 1, adds a social script to a biological dichotomy. Moderate statements of sociobiology often acknowledge a cultural elaboration of the biological imperative. A similar position was argued in the 1980s by Alice Rossi, who had been one of the feminist pioneers in sociology:

> Gender differentiation is not simply a function of socialization, capitalist production, or patriarchy. It is grounded in a sex dimorphism that serves the fundamental purpose of reproducing the species.[10]

Masculinity, it would follow, is the social elaboration of the biological function of fatherhood.

If biological determinism is wrong, and social determinism is wrong, then it is unlikely that a combination of the two will be right. There are reasons to think these two 'levels of analysis' cannot be satisfactorily added. For one thing, they are not commensurate. Biology is always seen as the *more* real, the *more* basic of the pair; even the sociologist Rossi speaks of the social process being 'grounded' in sex dimorphism, the reproductive purpose being 'fundamental'. And that is taken for granted in sociobiology. (These metaphors, I would argue, express an entirely mistaken idea of the relationship between history and organic evolution.)

Nor does the pattern of difference at the two levels correspond – though this is constantly assumed, and sometimes made explicit in statements about 'sex dimorphism in behaviour'. Social process may, it is true, elaborate on bodily difference (the padded bra, the penis-sheath, the cod-piece). Social process may also distort, contradict, complicate, deny, minimize or modify bodily difference. Social process may define one gender ('unisex' fashion, gender-neutral labour), two genders (Hollywood), three (many North American native cultures), four (European urban culture once homosexuals began to be sorted out, after the eighteenth century), or a whole spectrum of fragments, variations and trajectories. Social process has recast our very perception of sexed bodies, as shown by Thomas Laqueur's remarkable history of the transition in medical and popular thought from a one-sex model to a two-sex model.[11]

However we look at it, a compromise between biological determination and social determination will not do as the basis for an account of gender. Yet we cannot ignore either the radically cultural character of gender or the bodily presence. It seems that we need other ways of thinking about the matter.

The Body Inescapable

A rethinking may start by acknowledging that, in our culture at least, the physical sense of maleness and femaleness is central to the cultural interpretation of gender. Masculine gender is (among other things) a certain feel to the skin, certain muscular

shapes and tensions, certain postures and ways of moving, certain possibilities in sex. Bodily experience is often central in memories of our own lives, and thus in our understanding of who and what we are. Here is an example, from a life-history interview in which sexuality was a major theme.

* * *

Hugh Trelawney is a heterosexual journalist aged about thirty, who remembers his earliest sexual experience at age 14. Very unusually, Hugh claims to have fucked before he masturbated. The well-crafted memory is set in a magical week with perfect waves, Hugh's first drink in a hotel, and 'the beginning of my life':

> *The girl was an 18-year-old Maroubra beach chick. What the hell she wanted to have anything to do with me I don't know. She must have been slightly retarded, emotionally if not intellectually. I suppose she just went to it for the image, you know, I was already the long-haired surfie rat. I recall getting on top of her and not knowing where to put it and thinking, gee, it's a long way down . . . and when I sort of finally got it in, it only went in a little way, and I thought this isn't much. Then she must have moved her leg a little way, and then it went further and I thought oh! gee, that's all right. And then I must have come in about five or six strokes, and I thought the feeling was outrageous because I thought I was going to die . . . And then during that week I had a whole new sense of myself. I expected – I don't know what I expected, to start growing more pubic hair, or expected my dick to get bigger. But it was that sort of week, you know. Then after that I was on my way.*

* * *

This is a tale of a familiar kind, recounting a sexual coming-of-age. In almost every detail it shows the intricate interplay of the body with social process. Choice and arousal, as Hugh reconstructs it, are social (the 'beach chick', the 'surfie rat'). The required performance is physical, 'getting it in'. The young Hugh lacks the knowledge and skill required. But his skill is improved interactively, by his partner's bodily response ('she must have moved her leg a little bit'). The *physical* feeling of climax is immediately an interpretation ('I thought I was going to die'). It triggers off a familiar symbolic sequence – death, rebirth, new growth. Conversely the *social* transition Hugh has accomplished, entering into sexual adulthood, immediately translates as bodily fantasy ('more pubic hair', 'dick to get bigger').

Hugh jokingly invokes the metonymy by which the penis stands for masculinity – the basis of castration anxiety and the classical psychoanalytic theory of masculinity discussed in Chapter 1 – but his memory also points beyond it. The first fuck is set in a context of sport: the week of perfect waves and the culture of surfing. In historically recent times, sport has come to be the leading definer of masculinity in mass culture. Sport provides a continuous display of men's bodies in motion. Elaborate and carefully monitored rules bring these bodies into stylized contests with each other. In these contests a combination of superior force (provided by size, fitness, teamwork) and superior skill (provided by planning, practice and intuition) will enable one side to win.[12]

The embodiment of masculinity in sport involves a whole pattern of body development and use, not just one organ. Highly specific skills are of course involved. For instance, bowling a googly in cricket – an off-break ball delivered deceptively with a leg-break action out of the back of the hand with the elbow held straight – must be among the most exotic physical performances in the entire human repertoire. But players who can do only one thing are regarded as freaks. It is the integrated performance of the whole body, the capacity to do a range of things wonderfully well, that is admired in the greatest exemplars of competitive sport – figures such as Babe Ruth in baseball, Garfield Sobers in cricket or Muhammad Ali in boxing.

The institutional organization of sport embeds definite social relations: competition and hierarchy among men, exclusion or domination of women. These social relations of gender are both realized and symbolized in the bodily performances. Thus men's greater sporting prowess has become a theme of backlash against feminism. It serves as symbolic proof of men's superiority and right to rule.

At the same time, the bodily performances are called into existence by these structures. Running, throwing, jumping or hitting outside these structures is not sport at all. The performance is symbolic and kinetic, social and bodily, at one and the same time, *and these aspects depend on each other.*

The constitution of masculinity through bodily performance means that gender is vulnerable when the performance cannot be sustained – for instance, as a result of physical disability. Thomas Gerschick and Adam Miller have conducted a small but remarkably interesting study of American men trying to deal with this situation after disabling accidents or illness. They dis-

tinguish three responses. One is to redouble efforts to meet the hegemonic standards, overcoming the physical difficulty – for instance, finding proof of continued sexual potency by trying to exhaust one's partner. Another is to reformulate the definition of masculinity, bringing it closer to what is now possible, though still pursuing masculine themes such as independence and control. The third is to reject hegemonic masculinity as a package – criticizing the physical stereotypes, and moving towards a counter-sexist politics, a project of the kind explored in Chapter 5 below. So a wide range of responses can be made to the undermining of the bodily sense of masculinity. The one thing none of these men can do is ignore it.[13]

Nor can the manual workers whose vulnerability comes from the very situation that allows them to define masculinity through labour. Heavy manual work calls for strength, endurance, a degree of insensitivity and toughness, and group solidarity. Emphasizing the masculinity of industrial labour has been both a means of survival, in exploitative class relations, and a means of asserting superiority over women.

This emphasis reflects an economic reality. Mike Donaldson, collecting accounts of factory labour, notes that working men's bodily capacities *are* their economic asset, are what they put on the labour market. But this asset changes. Industrial labour under the regime of profit uses up the workers' bodies, through fatigue, injury and mechanical wear and tear. The decline of strength, threatening loss of income or the job itself, can be offset by the growth of skill – up to a point. 'It is at that point, unless he is very lucky, that a man's labouring days are over.

The combination of force and skill is thus open to change. Where work is altered by deskilling and casualization, working-class men are increasingly defined as possessing force alone. The process is virulent where class exclusion combines with racism, as in South Africa under apartheid. (The apartheid economy literally 'reserved' skilled jobs for white men, and casualized black labour on a massive scale.) Middle-class men, conversely, are increasingly defined as the bearers of skill. This definition is supported by a powerful historical change in labour markets, the growth of credentialism, linked to a higher education system that selects and promotes along class lines.[14]

This class process alters the familiar connection between masculinity and machinery. The new information technology requires much sedentary keyboard work, which was initially classified as

women's work (key-punch operators). The marketing of personal computers, however, has redefined some of this work as an arena of competition and power – masculine, technical, but not working-class. These revised meanings are promoted in the text and graphics of computer magazines, in manufacturers' advertising that emphasizes 'power' (Apple Computer named its laptop the 'PowerBook'), and in the booming industry of violent computer games. Middle-class male bodies, separated by an old class division from physical force, now find their powers spectacularly amplified in the man/machine systems (the gendered language is entirely appropriate) of modern cybernetics.

The body, I would conclude, is inescapable in the construction of masculinity; but what is inescapable is not fixed. The bodily process, entering into the social process, becomes part of history (both personal and collective) and a possible object of politics. Yet this does not return us to the idea of bodies as landscape. They have various forms of recalcitrance to social symbolism and control, and I will now turn to this issue.

Complexities of Mire or Blood

W. B. Yeats's wonderful poem 'Byzantium' imagines a golden mechanical bird, symbol of the artifice of an ageing civilization, scorning 'all complexities of mire or blood'. Images of remoteness and abstraction contrast with 'mere complexities, The fury and the mire of human veins'.[15] The 'mere' is deeply ironic. It is precisely the plurality and recalcitrance of bodies that gives force to Yeats's irony.

Philosophy and social theory often speak of 'the body'. But bodies are plural (about 5.4 thousand million in 1994) and are very diverse. There are large bodies and small bodies; bodies permanently stained with soil or grease, bodies permanently stooped from bending over a desk, and other bodies with spotless, manicured hands. Every one of these bodies has its trajectory through time. Each one must change as it grows and ages. The social processes that engulf it and sustain it are also certain to change.

What is true of 'bodies' in general is true of men's bodies in particular. They are diverse to start with, and they get more diverse as they grow and age. In an earlier essay on 'men's bodies',

I wrote poetically of bodily masculinity as centring on the combination of force and skill symbolized by sport; and remarked that

> To be an adult male is distinctly to occupy space, to have a physical presence in the world. Walking down the street, I square my shoulders and covertly measure myself against other men. Walking past a group of punk youths late at night, I wonder if I look formidable enough. At a demonstration I size up the policemen and wonder if I am bigger and stronger than them if it comes to the crunch – a ludicrous consideration, given the actual techniques of mass action and crowd control, but an automatic reaction nevertheless.[16]

That was ten years ago. Ten years later, rising fifty, the body concerned is a bit balder, significantly more stooped, decidedly less space-occupying, and much less likely to be in dodgy situations on the street.

Not only are men's bodies diverse and changing, they can be positively recalcitrant. Ways are proposed for bodies to participate in social life, and the bodies often refuse. Here are two examples from the life-history interviews.

* * *

Hugh Trelawney, whose sexual initiation story was quoted above, launched as a student on a familiar path. Determined to be a 'legend', Hugh became 'animal of the year' at his university, on a spree of booze, drugs and sex. A couple of years out, working as a teacher, he was becoming alcoholic and seriously ill. He left his job, wound up in a drug-induced emotional crisis and a detoxification unit. The blow to his pride was as much about the body as about the social humiliation: 'This is all wrong, I'm a first grade footballer.'

* * *

Tip Southern, starting from a position of greater class advantage, partied even harder. His private-school peer group called itself the 'Sick Patrol; dressed outlandishly, crashed parties and took them over, smoked lots of dope.

> *We were pretty radical, rebellious, angry young men. Men with a mission but partying full on all the time. Towards the end it was just one big blur. Binge after binge after binge . . . It was just full on, we were getting pissed all the time; really, really drunk but handling it because we were so full of energy. You don't get hangovers when you are that young and that much on the go.*

Off to university, things got heavier again: 'really heavy wild parties', punch made with industrial alcohol, hash and hallucinogens. In due course both Tip's family and his body stopped coming through.

I tried to get jobs. 'What are you qualified for?' Nothing. I didn't have any good clothes with me because I had been roughing it for a long time . . . So I never got jobs. I don't think I looked like the most respect – I mean, I was very undernourished in a general way, I was taking a lot of drugs, a lot of acid, drinking a lot. I have got this picture of me in my room, hidden away, of myself in the worst state that you can imagine: big stoned swollen red eyes, a huge stye in this eye, and just the most pallid face. I was drinking far too much, taking really nasty drugs, really dirty acid, eech! And just got real bogged down with it all. And finally I just knew I had to do something drastic.

* * *

Crisis stories such as these show bodies under pressure reaching limits. Michael Messner, interviewing former athletes in the United States, heard parallel stories. The pressure of high-level competitive sport obliges professional players to treat their bodies as instruments, even as weapons. As Messner puts it, 'the body-as-weapon ultimately results in violence against one's own body.' Playing hurt, accidents, drug use and constant stress wear down even the fittest and strongest. Timothy Curry's recent case study of an American wrestler shows how sports injuries become a normal career expectation. The body is virtually assaulted in the name of masculinity and achievement. Ex-athletes often live with damaged bodies and chronic pain, and die early.[17]

These are extreme cases; but the principle applies in much more routine situations, such as the industrial workplaces discussed above. Bodies cannot be understood as a neutral medium of social practice. Their materiality matters. They will do certain things and not others. Bodies are *substantively* in play in social practices such as sport, labour and sex.

Some bodies are more than recalcitrant, they disrupt and subvert the social arrangements into which they are invited. Homosexual desire, as Guy Hocquenghem argued, is not the product of a different kind of body. But it is certainly a bodily fact, and one that disrupts hegemonic masculinity.[18]

Even more striking is the case of gender-switching, where bodies pass the most fundamental of boundaries set for them by

the modern gender order. The very language for talking about this issue has been captured by medicine, freezing desperation and carnival into conditions and syndromes: 'transvestite' and 'transsexual'. This freezing has been aptly criticized by social scientists and postmodern theorists; 'Queer Theory' celebrates the symbolic disruptions of gender categories. Yet the medical ideology and the critique collude in reading culture as the active term and bodies as passive, as landscape. Gender-switching can even be seen as the ultimate triumph of symbol over flesh, with transsexuals' having their bodies literally carved to the shape of the symbolic identity they have adopted.

Accounts by people doing gender switches do not show the body under the rule of the symbol. The autobiography of Katherine Cummings, a level-headed and witty Australian gender traveller, speaks of an incomprehensible but undeniable material need, to which symbolic self and social relations had to give ground. Gary Kates, re-examining the classic gender-switching story of the Chevalier d'Eon in the late eighteenth century, observes that d'Eon, though convinced of being a woman, disliked the symbolism and practicalities of women's clothes. D'Eon only put them on, under protest, when obliged to by the French political authorities.

These are not unique cases. At the boundaries of gender categories, bodies may travel in their own right. The momentum may be so strong that proprioceptive consciousness is transformed, with hallucinations of the other-sexed body – some temporary, some permanent. In the case of 'David', mentioned in Chapter 1, Laing wrote of 'the woman who was inside him, and always seemed to be coming out of him'. I suggest this is a bodily, not just a mental, experience. Two differently gendered bodily experiences emerge in the same place. Bodies, it seems, are not only subversives. They can be jokers too.[19]

Banquo's Ghost: Body-Reflexive Practices

How can we understand the situation when bodies, like Banquo's ghost, refuse to stay outdoors in the realm of nature and reappear uninvited in the realm of the social? Mainstream social science gives little help. As Turner observed in *The Body and Society*, bodies went missing a long time ago from social theory. Social

theory for the most part still operates in the universe created by Descartes, with a sharp split between the knowing, reasoning mind and the mechanical, unreasoning body. Theories of discourse have not overcome this split: they have made bodies the objects of symbolic practice and power but not participants.

To break out of this universe it is not enough to assert the significance of bodily difference, important as this has been in recent feminist theory. We need to assert the activity, literally the *agency*, of bodies in social processes. The crisis stories earlier in this chapter showed the rebellion of bodies against certain kinds of pressure. This is a kind of effectiveness, but not full-blown agency. I want to argue for a stronger theoretical position, where bodies are seen as sharing in social agency, in generating and shaping courses of social conduct.[20]

* * *

Don Meredith, a great storyteller, offered a long comic tale of his youthful search for the First Fuck. After a series of fiascos he reached the goal, formed a relationship and then found himself unable to ejaculate. In time, however, he became more sophisticated:

> *I am very anal oriented. And I discovered this in a relationship with a young woman quite accidentally, I really enjoyed it. She was inserting her finger into my anus and I thought 'My god this is fantastic.' And like even with masturbation I sort of generally touched round that area but never really gone into it. But I guess that was like a trigger for it. When this young woman was doing it, it was just really electrifying me, and I never found it difficult to ejaculate with her. She really touched a spot well and truly. So I thought now what I would really like is to have a relationship with a man where I would be inserted into. And that really excited me, the whole idea of it.*

* * *

Here the bodily arousal and action is woven into the social action. Don experienced his body and its capacities through interaction. In a strong sense one can say that he discovered his body in interaction. He was virtually led to his anus by a partner. The climax of his first fuck was simultaneously a physical sensation and the high-point of the longer narration of the Tale of Don's Virginity – 'wow, I've never had this before'.

The socialness of the physical performance is not a matter of social framing around a physiological event. It is a more intimate connection that operates especially in the dimension of fantasy – both in nuances of Don's virginity story, and more directly in the fantasy of a new social relation 'where I would be inserted into'.

This fantasy started from the experience of being finger-fucked. It arose in a social interaction, but it was wholly a bodily experience too. The body's response then had a directing influence on Don's sexual conduct. 'Agency' does not seem too strong a word for what Don's sphincter, prostate gland and erectile tissues here managed between them.

Research on sport that has emphasized the disciplinary practices producing gender does not capture this side of things. Jogging, for instance, is certainly a socially disciplined activity. I tell myself this every second morning while struggling out of bed and tying on the running shoes. Yet each August in Sydney, 40,000 pairs of feet *willingly* set off down William Street towards Bondi in the 'City to Surf' run. A crowd run is a striking illustration of the pleasure of sociability through shared bodily performance.

Nor does the idea of 'resistance' to disciplinary practices cover what happens when the iron cage of discipline clunks down on the ground and gets bent. Two days ago, in the bus going up to the university, I sat opposite a young woman who was wearing running shoes, running socks, running shorts, a silk blouse, long silver earrings, full make-up and blow-dried hair with combs. Was she being simultaneously controlled by *two* disciplinary regimes, sport and fashion, each of which gave up somewhere about the waist? At the least she was doing something witty with them, she was able to manoeuvre.

With bodies both objects and agents of practice, and the practice itself forming the structures within which bodies are appropriated and defined, we face a pattern beyond the formulae of current social theory. This pattern might be termed body-reflexive practice.

Don Meredith's electrification illustrates the circuits involved. The bodily pleasure of being finger-fucked, which results in stimulation of the prostate gland as well as the anal sphincters and rectal lining, had social effects. It led directly to the fantasy of a new social relation, one with a man, 'where I would be inserted into. And that really excited me.'

This excitement was transgressive. Don thought of himself as heterosexual. He had rejected advances from a gay man while on the great quest to lose his virginity, 'beat him off with a tent peg'. But now the bodily experience of being penetrated led to the fantasy of a homosexual relationship, and in due course to real homosexual encounters. (Don had no luck. In his exploratory gay fuck the partner lost his erection.)

There is nothing about sphincter relaxation and prostate stimulation that demands a relationship with a man. A woman can do the job perfectly well. It is the social equation between anal penetration and a male partner that provides the structure of Don's bodily fantasy. Anal sex is a key symbol of Western male homosexuality, though AIDS research shows it is done less often than its symbolic importance might suggest.[21]

The circuit in this case goes from bodily interaction and bodily experience, via socially structured bodily fantasy (involving the cultural construction of hegemonic and oppressed sexualities), to the construction of fresh sexual relationships centring on new bodily interactions. This is not simply a matter of social meanings or categories being imposed on Don's body, though these meanings and categories are vital to what happens. The body-reflexive practice calls them into play, while the bodily experience – a startling joy – energizes the circuit.

* * *

Adam Singer recalled a moment of trauma with his father:

> *He bought my brother a cricket bat for Christmas and he wouldn't buy me one. He'd say I couldn't play cricket. And things like throwing a ball. How a man throws a ball is different to how a woman throws a ball. I didn't want to throw a ball in front of my Dad because I knew it wouldn't look right, it wouldn't be like the way a good strong boy should throw it. And once, I remember, I was brave enough to throw it. And he made fun of me and said I threw it like a girl.*

* * *

Here the circuit is condensed in time. The public gender meanings are instantaneously fused with the bodily activity and the emotions of the relationship. Even so, there is a split perception. Adam has learned how to be both in his body (throwing), and

outside his body watching its gendered performance ('I knew it wouldn't look right').

In Adam's story the body-reflexive practice of sport called out a declaration of difference ('he made fun of me and said . . .'), with all the emotional charge of the father–son relationship behind it. In time, Adam collected more evidences of being different. Finally he deliberately began a relationship with a man to find out whether he was gay – that is, to find out where in the gender order this 'brave enough' body belonged.

* * *

Steve Donoghue had no doubts about his location. He was a national champion in surf sport, making a rich living from prizes, sponsorships and commercials. He had a superb physique, cultivated with four to five hours' training every day. Steve's body was capable of astonishing feats of precision as well as endurance:

> *I can spread my energy over a four-hour race to not die, to not have to start up slowly. I can start at a pace and finish at a pace every time. When I swam, I used to do 200 metres, which is four fifty-metre laps. I can start off, and any fifty is pretty well to the tenth of a second the same time each lap, and I wouldn't even be looking at a watch . . .*

Like others skilled at sports, Steve had a detailed and exact knowledge of his body, its capabilities, its needs, and its limits.

* * *

The body-reflexive practice here is familiar; its gender consequences perhaps less so. Steve Donoghue, young-man-about-beach, was trapped in the practices required to sustain Steve Donoghue, famous-exemplar-of-masculinity. He could not drink-drive, nor get into fights when pushed around (for fear of bad publicity). He could not go boozing (because of training), nor 'have much of a sex life' (his coach was against it, and women had to fit in with his training schedule). In other words, much of what was defined in his peer culture as masculine was forbidden him.

Indeed, the body-reflexive practice that constructed Steve's hegemonic masculinity also undermined hegemonic masculinity. Steve's social and psychological life was focused on his body. The competitiveness essential to the making of a champion was turned inwards. Though encouraged by the coach to hate his

competitors, Steve did not. Rather, he talked of 'mental toughness' and his ability to 'control the pain', to 'make my body believe that I am not hurting as much as I am'.

In short, Steve was driven towards narcissism – while the hegemonic construction of masculinity in contemporary Australian culture is outward-turned and plays down all private emotion. Yet the narcissism could not rest in self-admiration and bodily pleasure. This would have destroyed the performance on which Steve's life trajectory depended.

In his version of competition, the decisive triumph was over one's body. Steve's magnificent physique had meaning only when deployed in winning. The will to win did not arise from personal 'drive', a familiar word in sports talk that Steve did not use at all. It was given to him by the social structure of sporting competition; it was his meaning, as a champion.

The circuit of Steve's body-reflexive practice was thus a complex one, moving through the institutionalized system of commercialized sport, beach product manufacturing and advertising, and mass media, to the personal practices of training and competition. This system is far from coherent. Indeed it contains substantial contradictions, betrayed by the contradictory masculinity produced in Steve's life. And if this is true for an exemplary masculinity such as Steve's, there is little reason to think the circuits of body-reflexive practice for the majority of men are markedly more coherent.

Body-reflexive practices, as we see in all these instances, are not internal to the individual. They involve social relations and symbolism; they may well involve large-scale social institutions. Particular versions of masculinity are constituted in their circuits as meaningful bodies and embodied meanings. Through body-reflexive practices, more than individual lives are formed: a social world is formed.

Forming the World

Through body-reflexive practices, bodies are addressed by social process and drawn into history, without ceasing to be bodies. They do not turn into symbols, signs or positions in discourse. Their materiality (including material capacities to engender, to give birth, to give milk, to menstruate, to open, to penetrate, to ejac-

ulate) is not erased, it continues to matter. The *social* process of gender includes childbirth and child care, youth and ageing, the pleasures of sport and sex, labour, injury, death from AIDS.

The social semiotics of gender, with its emphasis on the endless play of signification, the multiplicity of discourses and the diversity of subject positions, has been important in escaping the rigidities of biological determinism. But it should not give the impression that gender is an autumn leaf, wafted about by light breezes. Body-reflexive practices form – and are formed by – structures which have historical weight and solidity. The social has its own reality.

When feminism around 1970 spoke of 'patriarchy' as the master pattern in human history, the argument was overgeneralized. But the idea well captured the power and intractability of a massive structure of social relations: a structure that involved the state, the economy, culture and communications as well as kinship, child-rearing and sexuality.

Practice never occurs in a vacuum. It always responds to a situation, and situations are structured in ways that admit certain possibilities and not others. Practice does not proceed into a vacuum either. Practice makes a world. In acting, we convert initial situations into new situations. Practice constitutes and re-constitutes structures. Human practice is, in the evocative if awkward term of the Czech philosopher Karel Kosík, onto-formative. It makes the reality we live in.[22]

The practices that construct masculinity are onto-formative in this sense. As body-reflexive practices they constitute a world which has a bodily dimension, but is not biologically determined. Not being fixed by the physical logic of the body, this new-made world may be hostile to bodies' physical well-being. Tip Southern's and Hugh Trelawney's enactments of hegemonic masculinity were hostile in this way – examples of 'self-inflicted wounds', as Australian slang calls a hangover. The practice of unsafe sex, in the context of the HIV epidemic, is a more sinister case in point.

Both Tip Southern and Hugh Trelawney, as it happens, undertook reform of their masculinity – bodily reform as well as change in relationships. Hugh went into a detoxification unit, and decided to make 'fundamental changes' in his conduct. He determined to be less competitive, more open to others, and to treat women as people not as objects in a sexual game. Where this

reform led will be seen in Chapter 7. Tip got off the drugs and found an outdoor job doing physical labour, which helped return him to health. He formed, for the first time, a lasting relationship with a young woman.

Of course no two stories could represent all attempts by men to change. Different trajectories will be found in Chapter 5. What these two stories illustrate, nevertheless, is an inescapable fact about any project of change. For men, as for women, the world formed by the body-reflexive practices of gender is a domain of politics – the struggle of interests in a context of inequality. Gender politics is an embodied-social politics. The shapes taken by an embodied politics of masculinity will be a principal theme of the rest of this book.