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Having Your Beefcake and Eating it Too: Capitalism and Masculinity

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“What men want to learn from nature is how to use it in order wholly to dominate it and other men.” Adorno & Horkheimer

“Manliness is a cultural site that is always under construction.” John F. Kasson

“Masculinity’ is a contested term....[I]t should be pluralized as ‘masculinities’ because in any society at any one time there are several ways of being a man. ‘Being a man’ involves cultural images and practices. It always implies a contrast to an unidentified femininity.” Joan Acker

This paper locates the roots of contemporary patriarchal mainstream masculinity in late nineteenth century developments in body building and the emergence of beefcake photography. It identifies the ways in which the rise of Capitalism is inextricably bound up with the image of musclebound masculinity. Examining the conceptual limitations at work in the term ‘beefcake’, the paper will argue that our toxic attachment to a monolithic masculinity which finds its most profound expression in destruction and force is a form of Stockholm Syndrome; as if testosterone were a race poison to which we’ve developed a fatal addiction.

I. The Body as Object

Theodor Adorno, in his book *Negative Dialectics*, reminds us that “objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder”. In other words, every time we create a concept there is always something left out, something that doesn’t fit in, something lopped off in order for the concept to circulate and function in its ideal form. Like the ugly sisters hacking off toes to squeeze their bloodied feet into the glass slipper in the hope of marrying the handsome prince, our standard ways of conceptualizing inevitably distort the realities they purport to describe in order to establish a seamless identity between the concept and its object. Every concept thus requires conformity to its idealized form, and what doesn’t conform to the ideal is violently amputated in the rush

to define and control. In other words, to define is to limit. It's never the full picture. The full picture is messier, more complex, and includes all those things that don't conform to the concept in its idealized form. The act of conceptualization, in other words, always produces a remainder.

Adorno calls this remainder the non-identical and it is here, he claims, where what doesn't fit in is discarded, that something approaching the truth can be found. It is precisely the things that do not fit in that will provide the supplement necessary for the full picture to emerge. Every definition thus helps shapes an ideology at the expense of the truth, peddling as somehow natural or inevitable what is, in actuality, a conglomeration of custom, political motivation, cultural assumption, and embedded historicity. Concepts have a history which is always political, charged with implicit values whilst nonchalantly parading as self-evident, as purely and simply 'what is'.

With this in mind, I'm going to start to think about some of the things erased or removed from our conceptualization of the term "beefcake". I'm going to focus on the non-identical, on the excluded or erased aspects of that concept. On what *isn't* being said when we use that word. In this way, I hope to expose the ideological oppressions, the violent hierarchies, that lurk just outside the ring fencing of that concept.

An online slang dictionary gives this definition of 'beefcake': "a muscularly handsome male", offering as an example of the word in use the sentence, "*She's been going out with a real beefcake.*" Immediately, then, we are presented with highly gender normative and heteronormative co-ordinates with which to frame and focus our understanding of the concept of beefcake. It is always male. And its sexual orientation is towards women. Thus the concept of beefcake is, on the most basic, definitional level, saturated with cultural assumptions about the gender and sexual orientation of the subject to whom it is attached. In other words, there is an active, semantic exclusion of beefcake as gay, lesbian, female, queer, trans or bisexual.

If we turn our attention to the classic visual signifiers of beefcake, as exemplified by Bob Mizer's iconic photography for *Physique Pictorial* magazine in the 1950s, other layers of exclusion are added to these conceptual erasures, however homoerotic their impulse might be. For we find, almost without exception, in the most cursory search on Google, for example, page after page of white, able-bodied males flexing their guns for the world to see. I trawled through a good couple of hundred images before I came across a black face, and there were no images of disabled body builders at all.

II. The Inscribed Surface of Events

As Michel Foucault has shown, power relations have an immediate hold upon the body; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs. He writes:

The body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated Self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration. (Foucault 1977, 148)

Foucault developed Nietzsche's methodology of genealogy "as an analysis of descent", which is "situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body." In other words, between the specifically disciplinary command to have a body and the actual sensations of the body lies a space which, for men, can be the cause of great anxiety. That command is a highly disciplinary silencing, a denial of those sensations and a blanket refusal to concede that they play any role in our experience of knowledge: as a man, one must not 'know' one's own body. It is thus a space in which the male body vanishes if the command is to be obeyed; that is, if the body is to signify as male at all. Social bodies of men - those institutions that have tended to uphold a belief in objectivity and reason as the only reliable forms of knowledge - therefore retain and perpetrate that very domination which must be abdicated on the individual level by submission to the laws of the group upon entry to it. These laws allow that individual to exist, to signify, only so long as they are strictly followed. To be a man is to discipline and dominate the culturally coded 'private' domain of the body and its sensations. 'Manhood' is the prize bestowed upon successful completion of this task. For the sake of self-preservation, masculinity is performed, and such performativity, as Judith Butler argues, constitutes its claim to essence (Butler 1990).

Such mimicry for the sake of self-preservation, however, is a highly unstable process, for the Law contains within its performativity a necessary repetition in constant danger of mutating, of producing an alternative that, through a form of symbolic excommunication, constitutes the greatest challenge to its unquestioned immutability.

III. The Corporate Body; or, "Weakness is a crime: don't be a criminal".

The genealogy of beefcake can be traced back to the 1880s, with Eugen Sandow, who entertained the American public with his musculature and feats of strength, inspiring a fascination with the perfect male body which consolidated a modern, commercial form of masculinity predicated on strength, resilience and self-empowerment as the keys to success. In 1899, for example, the magazine *Physical Culture* warned: "Weakness is a crime: don't be a criminal".

From its very inception, body-building culture was corporate America's fuck buddy. Beefcake is a capitalist fetish used to characterize the American dream turned nightmare. Furthermore, Sandow's personal narrative evoked a childhood of perpetual ailments, transcended by self-determination; his strength an overcoming of personal deficit. He recounts being "a slight and sickly child" whose chances of survival were slim. This narrative of strength and determination was mainlined into popular culture; it was at the centre of Charles Atlas's success: the seven-stone weakling transformed into the muscle man who would never get sand kicked in his face again.

The underside, or negative, of this narrative of transformation, however, is one of shame. An unexpressed shame. Beefcake as the signifier of the sickly or bullied child. This shame articulates and informs a specifically modern form of capitalism centred on the visual of the overdeveloped male, the corporate superman. It is a shame the overcoming of which necessitates buying into the very discourse which created it, thus perpetuating the cause and the effect in a vicious circle that continues, with every turn, to reinforce and duplicate the violent hierarchies it attempts to transcend. The abjected figure of the skinny child is buried underneath a mountain of muscle that rises high above its shameful origins, and in so doing perpetuates a heteronormative and capitalistic standard as destructive as it is compelling. It is the kind of “kill or be killed” mentality at the heart of corporate capitalism. And we are all its victims.

As John F. Kasson writes: “The theme of metamorphosis lies at the heart of bodybuilding: and a longing for male metamorphosis lay deep in the culture of the United States and much of western Europe at the advent of the modern age” (Kasson, 2001, 94). The rise of the body builder, of the muscled he-man as masculine ideal, is thus contemporaneous with the growth of industrial capitalism. Rampant corporatism can be seen to be intimately caught up with a vision of heroic, musclebound masculinity the development of which is coterminous with these narratives of transformation from puny boys to men of strength, confidence and command. Weakness is criminalized as capitalism stakes a claim on the power and success to be had once one has acquired the right body: images of heroic white male superiority are thus deployed within an ideology whose purpose is to dominate women, people of colour, disabled bodies, queer bodies, and less technologically advanced societies. As Joan Acker writes in ‘Is Capitalism Gendered and Racialized?’:

Masculinities are essential components of the ongoing male project, capitalism. While white men were and are the main publicly recognized actors in the history of capitalism, these are not just any white men. They have been, for example, aggressive entrepreneurs or strong leaders of industry and finance. Some have been oppositional actors, such as self-respecting and tough workers earning a family wage, and militant labor leaders. They have been particular men whose locations within gendered and racialized social relations and practices can be partially captured by the concept of masculinity. (Acker 2006, 82)

It is clear that capitalism requires masculine aggression in order to survive, creating a planet of perpetual war, environmental destruction, and economies of exclusion in which only those at the top, the superrich, stand a chance of surviving. The demonization of the poor, the needy, the sick together with the violent suppression of difference, of any alternative, are not just unfortunate by-products of capitalism, they are its structural requirements. Furthermore, this conglomeration of ideal masculinity and aggressive corporate capitalism naturalizes itself through a discourse of assumed self-evidence:

Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the taken-for-granted, generally accepted form, attributed to leaders and other influential figures at particular historical times. Hegemonic masculinity may exist simultaneously, although

they may share characteristics, as do the business leader and the sports star at the present time (Acker 2006, 82)

IV. Male fantasies

Any account of modern masculinity has to address the ways in which becoming a man is a form of discursive, and very real, violence. Klaus Theweleit's study of the *Freikorps* - a group of self-appointed vigilante soldiers in Wilhelmine Germany, who, refusing to abdicate their military status at the end of World War I, went around suppressing workers' revolts in the brutal manner of a war - offers a powerful analysis of the formation of the soldier male. Through close readings of these soldiers' private and public writings, Theweleit identifies certain recurring attitudes towards women, bodies, masses - attitudes of disgust, fear and murderous hatred. That such feelings cannot be neatly restricted to the geographical and historical specificities of Theweleit's primary texts has been noted by at least one reviewer: in the *New York Times Book Review*, Paul Robinson remarks that they are, rather, "the common property of bourgeois males - and perhaps non-bourgeois males as well" (cited in Benjamin and Rabinach's foreword to Theweleit 1989, xiv). Similarly, Barbara Ehrenreich argues in her foreword to volume one of *Male Fantasies*, that

Theweleit refuses to draw a line between the fantasies of the Freikorpsmen and the psychic ramblings of the 'normal' man: and I think here of the man who feels a 'normal' level of violence toward women (as in, 'I'd like to fuck her to death')...the man who has a 'normal' distaste for sticky, unseen 'feminine functions'...the man who loves women, as 'normal' men do, but sees a castrating horror in every expression of female anger...or that entirely normal, middle-class citizen who simply prefers that women be absent from the public life of work, decisions, war. Here Theweleit does not push, but he certainly leaves open the path from the 'inhuman impulse' of fascism to the most banal sexism (Ehrenreich in Theweleit 1987, xv)

There is, in other words, a continuum established in Theweleit's argument between "ordinary male fantasy and its violent counterpart" (Benjamin and Rabinach in Theweleit 1989, xiv). As Arthur W. Frank comments, Theweleit's text "both expands its concerns and decenters its specificity" (Frank 1996, 70). So what does Theweleit's analysis offer in terms of understanding that continuum and its workings within culture?

Theweleit demonstrates that the aspects of the body that are rendered fearful and thereby in need of control by the Freikorps are the flows of desire, the genitals, the anus and its flow of shit; all these things threaten the impenetrably armoured body of the soldier both within and without, with the result that

The soldier male is forced to turn the periphery of his body into a cage for the beast within. In so doing, he deprives it of its function as a surface for social contact. His contact surface becomes an insulated shield, and he loses the

capacity to perceive the social corpus within which his insulated body moves. (Theweleit 1989, 22)

The skin has become a shield, and social contact has been forfeited. This insulation is dangerous, for it removes the soldier from the social corpus. For the soldier, inhabiting the body is to remove it as an organ of the senses that can be opened up onto a reality that is shared with others. As Mary Douglas has shown, matter that flows from the body is often perceived as dangerous because of its transgression of boundaries (Douglas 1984). The bodily interior is experienced by the soldier as a dangerous mass that must be contained, just as the social mass becomes a threatening force that must be defeated, and both battles require exacting military strategies. Indeed, the two struggles are in reality one and the same battle, for “the terrain of their rage is always at the same time their own body” (Theweleit 1987, 233). Theweleit writes of the soldier: “the arena of war is first and foremost his own body; a body poised to penetrate other bodies and mangle them in its embrace” (Theweleit 1989, 191). A body, that is, incapable of acknowledging its own penetrability. A ‘male’ body.

The training process begins early, in the military academy, where the young soldier’s body is continuously on display during its reconstruction: “Withdrawal is impossible, since there is no place to retreat to” (Theweleit 1989, 144). Constant surveillance plays a crucial role in maintaining the vigilance of this bodily numbing. Punishment for a break in this vigilance is always oriented exclusively on the body, which is treated as something that must be broken before it can be made stronger. In order to survive, the young cadet inevitably develops a “thick skin” which Theweleit warns us not to read metaphorically.

And little by little the body accepts these painful interventions along its periphery as responses to its longing for pleasure. It receives them as experiences of satisfaction. The body is estranged from the pleasure principle, drilled and reorganized into a body ruled by the ‘pain principle’: what is nice is what hurts...(Theweleit 1989, 150)

A kind of masochism, then, is the consequence of such training, a channeling of the need for pleasure into a need for pain: a pain to be endured, overcome, transcended, as proof positive that the body can - indeed, must - be dominated. This is at the heart of becoming a soldier. The cadet found incapable of such transcendence is labeled a ‘sissy’, feminized through his inability to submit his body to the requirements of the military machine. In this environment, remaining within, and therefore at the mercy of, the body’s innate vulnerability is a pejorative and feminine trait, with the result that the soldier “organizes his own struggle for survival as a direct onslaught on femininity” (Theweleit 1989, 279). As a consequence of this detachment from or erasure of the body, however, the capacity for pleasure is also purged. “Pleasure, with its hybridizing qualities, has the dissolving effect of a chemical enzyme on the armored body” (Theweleit 1989, 7). Discipline is thus, as Foucault argues, an “anti-nomadic technique”, primarily aimed at fixing, for “that which moves brings death, and one kills that which moves” (Foucault 1985, 205, 218).

The individual who emerges from this process is finely tuned to a certain corporeal and emotional anaesthesia – drilled to be part of a machine that is built to last, to succeed, to win (Theweleit 1989, 159). His only equals are those other components of the war machine, and “all others belong only ‘under’ him - never alongside, behind, or in front” (Theweleit 1989, 160). To become this ‘man of steel’, the soldier must construct an armour to protect him from his own flesh, from the flows of shit, urine, blood, sperm and desire that threaten to dissolve his boundaries. His most urgent task is “to pursue, to dam in, and to subdue any force that threatens to transform him back into the horribly disorganized jumble of flesh, hair, skin, bones, intestines, and feelings that calls itself human” (Theweleit 1989, 160).

Self-discipline thus becomes a relationship of dominance over one’s own bodily flows predicated on the denial of their existence. The whole of the soldier’s body must become “*intensely absent*” (Theweleit 1987, 203, original emphasis). It must be “locked from itself, a terrible secret” (Theweleit 1989, 197); and “must not become familiar, ‘known’; it must be an object and source of fear” (Theweleit 1987, 414). Fear of the body leads the soldier male to abandon his body, and “his abandoned body becomes the burden he lays on the shoulders of his colonized victims” (Theweleit 1989, 418), and, once there, it is mercilessly persecuted. For to kill becomes the only pleasure permitted to the soldier, and Theweleit catalogues example after example of *Freikorps* accounts of the pleasure of killing, concluding from this that they “seem less to possess a sexuality than to persecute sexuality itself - one way or another” (Theweleit 1989, 61). They persecute sexual pleasure, *jouissance*, and the lack of control such a state threatens to produce, albeit through an act which brings, for them, its own form of pleasure: murder. The soldier, Theweleit writes, “desires to move beyond himself, bullet-like, toward an object that he penetrates” (Theweleit 1989, 179).

Through what Eric Santer calls ‘corporeal mnemotechnics’ the body becomes invested with a performative duty to stay on the right side of the Law by always and repeatedly remembering to do the right thing. Masculinity becomes a fight for supremacy, a force of dominance; a push for pole position in the violently hierarchized culture of modern patriarchal capitalism; and a suppression of difference. The hypermuscled strategies of beefcake masculinity parade as the monoliths of Mammon.

V. The Revolution Will Not be Masculinized

The question remains whether – given its origins within a heteronormative and militarized corporate discourse - the concept of beefcake can be somehow reclaimed, or queered, in any useful way. As Eve Sedgwick writes: “If queer is a politically potent term, which it is, that’s because, far from being capable of being detached from the childhood scene of shame, it cleaves to that scene as a near-inexhaustible source of transformational energy” (Sedgwick 1993, 2).

One challenge to the heteronormative gendernormative conceptualization of beefcake can be found in the work of two female artists: Francesca Steele and Heather

Cassils. The latter, according to her website, uses “an exaggerated physique to intervene in various contexts in order to interrogate systems of power, control and gender”. She has devoted her artistic practice to bodybuilding to give herself the appearance of a muscle man. Steele, too, has taken to bodybuilding. She wrote on her blog, in 2009

Whilst using the unusual and specific techniques of female bodybuilding as art itself, I am aiming to allow my body to become a vehicle to explore physical concerns in an impersonal, critical yet artistic way. I hope to challenge stereotypical assumptions of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’, whilst amassing a framework of both qualitative and quantitative research and data. The project is also providing the background for a series of video and performative artworks, using themes of embodiment, mind over matter and further visual investigations into the relationship symmetry has to beauty. Here, it is my body itself, that will become the document of my practice.

Or there is Buck Angel, a transman porn star, “The Man With a Pussy” – providing an example of how the concept might be queered in interesting and challenging ways. Masculinity as a performance available not only to men¹.

Given the homoerotic appropriations and applications of beefcake, how might we understand gay men and body building? In his study of sport and homosexuality, Brian Pronger argues that “gay muscles” are a subversive take on orthodox masculinity, saturated with postmodern irony. Similarly, D.A. Miller argues:

Even the most macho gay image tends to modify cultural fantasy about the male body if only by suspending the main response that the armored body seems developed to induce: if this is still the body that can fuck you, etc., it is no longer – quite the contrary – the body you don’t fuck with. (Miller 1992, 31)

In truth, however, I fear gay muscles only reinforce the *status quo* by fetishising our oppression, contributing to the ongoing commodification of the body, and reinforcing orthodox masculinity by worshipping it even as it crushes us in its over-developed arms. It would appear to be a form of Stockholm Syndrome: we have grown to love our captors. In a very real sense, our investment in the concept of beefcake reinforces an ideology that ultimately oppresses us, perpetuating a sense of shameful inadequacy, reproducing discursive overvaluations of an idealized masculinity in whose shadow we all wilt, and measured against which we can only ever fall short.

We need to address this poisonous problem of capitalism and idealized masculinity before it’s too late. It may well be too late. But as the drag artist Taylor Mac says, *The Revolution Will Not be Masculinized*.

¹ See Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Duke University Press, 1998).

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