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Aleksa Milanović
Faculty of media and communications, Singidunum University, Belgrade, Serbia

The Impact of Social Changes on the Methodological Development of Transdisciplinary Body Studies

Abstract: This paper deals with the methodological development of research work in the domain of body studies. Since the 1980s there has been a significant change in study approach to the phenomenon of the body in several scholarly disciplines, but it is even more important that since then, this topic has been approached from the standpoint of interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity. As a result, body studies have emerged as a new transdisciplinary field of study. This paper aims to point out the key social changes that have contributed to a greater interest in body studies, which led to the development of an encompassing transdisciplinary methodological approach to body issues.

Keywords: body studies; disciplinarity; interdisciplinarity; transdisciplinarity; social changes.

> "I consider theories and methodologies as moments in time and space, and not as universally given phenomena."[1]

The issue of the human body can be approached from a myriad of different research disciplines, and each of them has its specific contribution to it. Besides that, these differences in research methods generate different understandings of what body is, and how it can be defined. It is quite expected that the approaches stemming from natural sciences like biology or medicine would be much different than those of the humanities or social sciences. However, even within social sciences and the humanities, systematic methodologies of how to think about the human body and its social role can be very different, even to the point of discursive disagreement.[2] The num-

[1] Nina Lykke, *Feminist Studies: A Guide to Intersectional Theory, Methodology and Writing* (New York and London: Routledge, 2010), 3.

[2] Paisley Currah and Monica J. Casper, "Bringing forth the body: and introduction", in *Corpus: An Interdisciplinary Reader on Bodies and Knowledge*, eds. Monica J. Casper and Paisley Currah (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 4.

*Author contact information: aleksa.milanovic@fmk.edu.rs

ber of scientific and theoretical research platforms through which we can analyze, interpret, problematize, and reveal the body in social sciences and the humanities grows bigger, especially in the last few decades. That phenomenon comes from the fact that there has been an increased interest in understanding the human body in its numerous contexts in the last few decades. "The last few decades of the 20th century witnessed the body moving from no one's particular concern to virtually everyone's preoccupation."[3]

It is important to stress that this multiplication of bodily-related discourses didn't happen within scholarly disciplines. It was precisely the result of the abandonment of the monodisciplinary approach, and of introducing the possibility of actively combining and intertwining different disciplinary knowledge, in a way that it has become inter- or transdisciplinary. Separate sciences and disciplines did produce a kind of a base that enabled us to understand the body in its different discursive forms, but they couldn't give a substantial answer to new questions and problems that have been arising in the last couple of decades. Some of the disciplines weren't ready to give up their universal model of bodily interpretation which they saw as the only one possible, so they never really opened themselves up for different problematizations. Besides that, within some of the disciplines, and especially in science, the body was still absent, or neglected. To illustrate that it is interesting to look at the case of sociology, and at the way it conceived body as its research object. Topics related to the body were always a part of sociological research, as sociology was dealing with social issues. However, the body was never explicitly and directly taken as the main object of analysis and discussion – it was always introduced as a side topic, and defined as a side, default presence (or absence!), which can be characterized as an *absent presence.* As an American sociologist, Chris Shilling defines it, "the body has been absent from sociology in the sense that the discipline has rarely focused on the body as an area of investigation in its own right"[4]. One of the main reasons for that was once applied the general rule that sociology researched society – and the body, being material, belonged to the natural sciences. Sociology, thus, divided itself from certain research paths, and left them to biology, medicine, and psychology, following the traditional concept of disciplinary studies. Legitimizing this division meant legitimizing the conceptual division between what science understood as *natural*, and what had been understood as *social*.

In order to overcome these disciplinary isolated approaches, it was necessary for the disciplines to transgress restrictive disciplinary limitations, and to look at the body in an interdisciplinary way.[5] It actually happened in the 1980s, when interdisciplinary approaches led not only to new discursive connections but also to completely new discursive standpoints that took the body and bodily-related topics as their main object of research. Rising interest in the matters of the body at that time caused a

[3] Roger Cooter, "The turn of the body: history and the politics of the corporeal", *Arbor* 186, 743 (2010): 393.

[4] Chris Shilling, *The Body and Social Theory* (London: Sage Publications, 2003), 172.

[5] Bryan S. Turner, *Regulating bodies: Essays in Medical Sociology* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 125–28.

constitution of a completely new research field, loosely named – *body studies*. This field is characterized by interdisciplinary relations of sociology, cultural studies, gender studies, and anthropology. This turn was caused by social changes that started to become more prominent from the beginning of the 1970s: women's rights movements, sexual and gender rights movements, human rights and animal rights movements, and ecology initiatives. This huge activist turn largely problematized the issue of the body and influenced academic research in the domain of body studies. Also, technology and medicine development at the very end of the 20th century supported greater interest in body research within social studies and the humanities.

According to American sociologist Bryan Turner, there are four main social movements that contributed to a larger interest in theoretical body studies: women's rights movement, homosexual rights movement, elderly rights movement, and (dis)ability rights movement.[6] These movements carved out the space for discussing problems that women and other marginalized groups faced, which found its place even within a firm academic context. The feminist movement was especially seen as important in this change, since with the rise of second-wave feminism, women's body transformed into a place of contest and resistance to all repressive patriarchal social norms, laws, and values. This critical standpoint uncovered all the pressures and tortures pointed out to women's body throughout history, but also in that present moment. Women's body, alongside to gender and sexuality issues, became one of the staple points of research within the culture studies field.[7]

Sexual and gender minority movements started developing at the beginning of the 1970s. First, they were conceived as purely activist initiatives, and then they transformed into the wider movements, that impacted academic research. Namely, theoretical redefining of the terms like *gender* and *sex* in the context of feminisms led feminist studies towards women's studies, and then, with the inclusivity wave, they transitioned into gender studies that included masculinity studies too. The strengthening of identity politics during the 1970s and 1980s provoked the emergence of sexuality studies, that soon separated from gender studies and women's studies.[8] Sexuality studies produced gay and lesbian studies. However, the beginning of the 1990s witnessed a huge number of critics towards identity politics, its tightness and homogeneity, which was followed by the emergence of queer theory, offering a new model of thought for gender and sexual identities.[9] The influence of queer theory and transgender activist movements at that time gave birth to transgender studies, as a separate academic discipline. All these interdisciplinary fields brought body studies

[6] Bryan S. Turner, "Introduction: the turn of the body," *Routledge Handbook of Body Studies*, ed. Bryan S. Turner (New York: Routledge, 2012), 6.

[7] Stuart Hall, "Cultural studies and its theoretical legacies," in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 268.

[8] Chris Beasley, *Gender & Sexuality: Critical Theories, Critical Thinkers* (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2005).

[9] Reese Carey Kelly, "Queer Studies," in *Encyclopedia of Gender and Society*, ed. Jodi O Brien (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2008), 962.

into the focus, at the same time bringing up theoretical terms such as gender, sex, sexuality, identity, difference, Otherness, representation politics, and performativity theory while introducing the concept of intersectionality into a feminist theory and other gender and body theories. This brought new questions which problematized the issues of race, class, and ethnicity as categories intertwined with gender and sexuality.

The disability rights movement, as a movement that problematizes the concept of ability itself, also hugely contributed to the development of a distinctive branch of academic studies. During a significant part of the 20th century, the problem of (dis) ability was named and researched only as an individual problem of medical cause,[10] but contemporary research stressed the importance of a broader social and discursive approach. This change was largely influenced by social movements and communities that gathered around the rights of persons facing the *disability* label. These movements started in the form of resistance towards standard approaches to the concept of body disability, which had marked persons with differently abled bodies as individuals with a *lack,* leading them to social isolation. Such a complex social and scientific problem caused the activist organizations to form, and in 1972, in Great Britain, UPIAS (Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation) was founded. Their ideas and principles contributed to the definition of the *social* model of interpretation of disability in 1983, which acted out as a model contrasted to the *medical* model of disability. Contrary to medical understanding of disability as a physical lack, the social model of disability stands for a model that approaches the very term of disability not as a cause, but as a *consequence of social judgment* towards persons that cannot confine to the imagined normative standard of bodily shape and functionality.[11] The importance of this approach lies in its critical sharpness, pointing out to social barriers that actually produce the notion of centrality versus marginality, and puts everything that comes into the "marginal" under oppression. "Disability activists and theorists have argued, for instance, that disability should be understood as a minority identity, not simply as a 'condition' of lack or loss to be pitied or 'overcome.'"[12] During the 1980s and even the 1990s, (dis)ability studies were still largely missing from sociological and social sciences, as well as in the humanities, compared to the feminist, gender, and queer studies.[13] However, during the first decade of the 21st century, they became more and more visible, and by the time, and especially from 2010, they expanded to a noticeable discursive path. This important interdisciplinary field of the humanities connects

[10] Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory," in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard J. Davis (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 333–53.

[11] Tom Shakespeare, "The Social Model of Disability," in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard J. Davis (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 214–21.

[12] Robert McRuer, "Critical Investments: AIDS, Christopher Reeve, and Queer/Disability Studies," in *Thinking the Limits of the Body*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Gail Weiss (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003), 146–47.

[13] Dan Goodley, Bill Hughes, and Lennard Davis, "Introducing Disability and Social Theory," in *Disability and Social Theory: New Developments and Directions*, ed. Dan Goodley, Bill Hughes, and Lennard Davis (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 1.

theories of intersectionality to feminisms, racial studies, queer studies, transgender studies, and other similar and related fields of *different* bodies research.[14]

Demographic changes and data show a constant increase in the number of older persons in Western society in recent decades, and it contributed to a growing interest in the issue of aging. It induced numerous questions asking about the status of the elderly in Western societies, as well as the need for response to the attitude of contemporary society towards the aging process, both in public discourse and in the academy. The mentioned increase in the number of elderly was caused by an increase in life expectancy, and by the *baby boom* generation phenomenon. The baby boom was specifically noticeable after the Second World War, and it continued until the 1960s. The demographic shift caused by the baby boom was followed by economic, but also social changes that could be seen in the relation of institutions and society towards the elderly. Besides researching the status of the elderly in society, the phenomenon of *age studies* introduced and showed reactions to ageism, and similar negative attitudes and prejudices towards the aging process and older people.[15] At that time gerontology was already a defined study field, but what age studies brought was a possibility of an interdisciplinary approach to the aging process as *lived* and *cultural* experience in a cultural context.[16] Besides that, the problematization of older bodies and aging in times of strong advances in medicine, biotechnology, and anti-aging trends, becomes an extremely challenging field of theoretical work.[17]

The end of the 20th century brought a huge technological spurt and an increased interest in contemporary medical solutions, which all influenced a significant widening of the fields belonging to body studies. New technologies can be applied directly onto the body, but also indirectly, through environmental transformation, to which bodies react by adapting, or by difficulties and resistance. Parallel to the development of digital and biomedical technology a new approach emerged, trying to understand the overcoming of biological determinism, as well as possibilities of connecting biological and technological materialities. All this brought up the issues of the body again, specifically in the way of being not-only-a-natural-phenomenon:

> [N]atural body has been dramatically refashioned through the application of new technologies of corporeality. [...] by the end of the 1980s the idea of the merger of the biological with the technological has infiltrated the imagination of Western culture, where the 'technological human' has

[14] Josh Lukin, "Disability and Blackness," in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard J. Davis (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 308–15; Nirmala Erevelled and Andrea Minear, "Unspeakable Offenses: Untangling Race and Disability in Discourses of Intersectionality," in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard J. Davis (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 354–65.

[15] Lynne Segal, "The Coming of Age Studies," *Age Culture Humanities: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, Issue I (2014): 31–34.

[16] Chris Gilleard, "Aging and Aging Studies: Celebrating the Cultural Turn," *Age Culture Humanities: An Interdisciplinary Journal* Issue I (2014): 35–37.

[17] Alex Dumas, "Rejecting the Aging Body," in *Routledge Handbook of Body Studies*, ed. Brian S. Turner, (New York and London: Routledge, 2012), 375–88.

> become a familiar figuration of the subject of postmodernity. For whatever else it might imply, this merger relies on a reconceptualization of the human body as a 'techno-body', a boundary figure belonging simultaneously to at least two previously incompatible systems of meaning – 'the organic/natural' and 'the technological/cultural'.[18]

The speed of technological development indeed enables the human subject to overcome its biological limitations; in postmodern societies, it brought up the notion of the biotechnological body, which can be seen as the interconnection of bio- and techno- in the focal point of the *body*. As a result of rethinking the body in this way, new branch of body studies came to the spotlight at the end of the 20th century, and they dealt with the notion of posthumanity, or a posthuman subjectivity: "'[p]ositioned in a liminal zone, the post-human is neither male nor female, neither human nor machine, neither dead nor alive. Indeed, the mutation is central to the notion of the post-human, describing a human identity which is caught between the idea that the self is becoming 'other' than itself, and the image of that self which is being mediated by the very technology that determines it"[19]. The posthuman body is a result of a process of *merging* the human and machine body, but at the same time it is also the body in the process of redefining and transforming humanity into something else, something *other*, something that can even be defined and mirrored in theory through *other-than-human* body studies.

All the social changes mentioned here led not only to the increased interest in the material aspect of body studies, but also to theoretical activities connected to the immateriality of the body, or the absence of the material body.[20] These new critical approaches appeared as a consequence of the *turn of the body,* and their significance lied in the influence they have had onto the later theoretical work related to body studies. It included heavy critical attitudes towards the discursive Foucauldian body,[21] which was, as many of the authors claimed, absorbed into the discourse and submerged into the language. A body of this kind had been seen as a passive entity, a mere product of a discourse that controls it and owns it.[22] Research of this kind, as it has been said, were focused only on specific social aspects of the body, while they completely neglected material bodily components. The work of a discourse and its influence on the body is, of course, unavoidable, but it is of utmost importance to have in mind the bodily capacity to *react* to discursive pressure, and to resist discursive practices, thus changing and diminishing their agency. These new theoretizations of a lived, feeling-and-reacting

[18]Anne Balsamo, *Technologies of the Gendered Body: Reading Cyborg Women* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 1996), 5.

[19] Julie Clarke, "The Human/Not Human in the Work of Orlan and Stelarc," *The Cyborg Experiments: The Extensions of the Body in the Media Age*, ed. Joanna Zylinska (London, New York: Continuum, 2002), 33.

[20] Caroline Bynum, "Why all the fuss about the body? A medievalist's perspective," *Critical Inquiry* 22, 1 (Autumn 1995): 1–33.

[21] Kathleen Canning, "The body as method? Reflections on the place of the body in gender history," *Gender & History* 11, 3 (1999): 499–513.

[22] Lois McNey, "The Foucauldian Body and the Exclusion of Experience," *Hypatia* 6, 3 (1991): 125–39.

body, brought the theory back to biological fundamentality in a way, though with a different result. Although Foucault's theory was useful in the times of uncovering and defining the concepts of social control, disciplining the body and understanding how women's body suffers the oppression within the patriarchal system,[23] a huge number of feminists criticized Foucault precisely because of neglecting materiality of the bodies, and gender difference between them.[24]

The development and intertwining of scientific and theoretical disciplines related to the body and social changes caused so many new and different schools of thought to emerge. In order to accentuate the importance and the role of the body in contemporary society, Brian Turner, a sociologist, introduced the concept of *somatic society*, "in which critical social and political concerns are transferred onto the human body such that bodily disruptions are ways of thinking about political disruptions"[25]. In *somatic society,* the body acts as a node of crossroads of different discursive potentialities, and it cannot be seen just as a surface onto which discourses might inscribe themselves. The body is, first and foremost, a *reactive* platform that uncovers the operational forces of the discourses and processes present. Contrary to the approaches that analyzed body as the text and *reflective* surface opened to reading, Turner offered the methodological approach that sees the body as an active, or, better to say, reactive field. Turner intended to shed a light on a fact that somatic society shows transpositions of actual social and political problems on the body itself, which becomes a place that makes *frictions* with different political discourses.[26] That means that in contemporary society "body is the most important agent that uncovers tensions and crisis in the society"[27], and its importance is even bigger if we look into theoretical research of body studies as to the vehicle for finding the answers for social changes and their directions. In these circumstances, any theoretical and methodological work must be conceived as a complex and hybrid field, asking for serious research that will engage different academic disciplines, professional practices, and activist initiatives.

The concept of a body, but also the other concepts closely related to the body as race, gender, sex, or sexuality, can be regarded as transdisciplinary concepts.[28] It is so because of a long-term and specific layering of meanings that added to this transformation, theoretical significance, and function. "Concepts are not fixed",[29] as Dutch

[23] Margaret McLaren, *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2002).

[24] Sandra Lee Bartky, "Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power," in *The Politics of Women's Bodies: Sexuality, Appearance and Behaviour*, ed. Rose Weitz (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 25–45.

[25] Turner, "Introduction," 5.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Turner, *Regulating Bodies*,12.

[28] Stella Sanford, "Contradiction of Terms: Feminist Theory, Philosophy and Transdisciplinarity," *Theory, Culture & Society, Special Issue: Transdisciplinary Problematics* 32, 5/6 (2015): 159–82; Stella Stanford, "Sex: A transdisciplinary concept," *Radical Philosophy* 165 (2011): 23–30.

[29] Mieke Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 24.

cultural theorist Mieke Bal says; "they travel – between disciplines, between individual scholars, between historical periods, and between geographically dispersed academic communities"[30]. In that sense, concepts travel through limitations of disciplines, historical periods, and national borders. All this traveling will change their meaning, usage, and function, which will make them dynamic, flexible, and interchanging elements of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary articulation of scientific fields. "All of these forms of travel render concepts flexible. It is this changeability that becomes part of their usefulness for a new methodology that is neither stultifying and rigid nor arbitrary or 'sloppy'."[31]

With all these mappings positioned, the most comprehensive approach to a complex phenomenon of the body today is achievable only through the methodological standpoint of *transdisciplinary body studies*. The main reason for this choice can be found in the very definition of the term transdisciplinarity, which relates to disciplinary nomadism, or free-floating directionality through historical heritage and contemporaneity of different disciplines. Contrary to the disciplinary approach that requires clear and respected rules and borderlines of the discipline(s), a unitary methodology, and universal goals, transdisciplinary approach transgresses and erases those limitations. Transdisciplinarity, at the same time, differs from interdisciplinarity, which relates to connecting and combining different disciplines and their methodologies in order to produce new knowledge. Interdisciplinarity implies *moving* from one discipline to the other and creating a concrete, definable and integrated problematic approach, that still keeps specific disciplinary competencies intact. Therefore, interdisciplinarity still articulates different types of knowledge into specific, paradigmatic disciplinary methodological standpoints. On the other hand, transdisciplinarity rearticulates disciplines and hybridizes them, which leads to non-linear, hybrid knowledge production.[32] "The notion of transdisciplinarity is an advance, formally, in denoting a movement across existing fields (as opposed to simply a thinking between them or a multiplication of them); and it is an advance in terms of theoretical content, in so far as it locates the source of transdisciplinary dynamics pragmatically in a process of problem-solving related, ultimately, to problems of experience in everyday life."[33]

One of the more important characteristics of transdisciplinarity is addressing problems that don't necessarily belong to the fields of mono- and interdisciplinary research.[34] Social sciences and the humanities offer many complex and complicated problems that go beyond the tools that firmly shaped disciplines and their paradigms. Sometimes these problems just don't respond to the usual terminological apparatus, or the established definitions and laws of the disciplinary thought. For instance, the

[30] Ibid.

[31] Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities*, 25.

[32] Roderick J. Lawrence, "Housing and health: from interdisciplinary principles to transdisciplinary research and practice," *Futures* 36 (2004): 488–89.

[33] Peter Osborne, "From structure to rhizome: transdisciplinarity in French thought," *Radical Philosophy* 165 (January/February 2011): 16.

[34] Lykke, *Feminist studies*, 26–30.

problem of sexual and gender non-conforming bodies can be taken as an example of a topic that cannot be analyzed properly from just one discipline. This kind of research takes a specific transdisciplinary approach. In order to address social problems of individuals and communities discriminated by their skin color, gender, sexuality, age, ability, ethnic or religious denominations, and so on, it is necessary to invoke the knowledge that comes from the knowledge systems other than an academic one. That means that it is important to acknowledge and apply research methodologies coming from within the communities that are being an object of academic, or any other professional research.

In an effort to enrich the academic knowledge with community-based knowledge, it is important for the academic system to establish continual relations with the individuals coming from targeted communities, or with the organizations that represent their interests and rights, and to include them into the research process. The transdisciplinary approach often implies and recommends dialogue and cooperation with the stakeholders who might not be a part of the academic community, but whose knowledge and experience can be valuable not only for defining a research problem, but also for positioning of research questions, conceiving an analytical framework, contextualization of issues, and finding a potential solution. It would also invoke a more flexible methodological approach, as well as dropping the firm protocols and procedures of disciplinary research.[35] If we go back to the point of the first initiatives of starting a school of thought known as body studies, we will see that the social movements against discrimination and marginalization had a key role in it. It is thus expected and needed for an academic community and methodology to accept and support the dialogue that would connect academic and activist sectors as equal partners in knowledge generation.

One of the more important roles of social sciences and the humanities should be the task of establishing a strong support system for the production and development of knowledge as a vehicle for social change. It is about the knowledge that questions common sense, that shakes the patterns of thought and action, that tears down the dominant narratives and imposed normative standards. For that kind of knowledge to appear, it is necessary not only to transgress some of the methodological rules and overcome disciplinary boundaries but also to connect the academy and communities, so the dominant and subjugated knowledge can finally be regarded as equally worthy.[36] Speaking of the body studies, it is more than evident that historical, as well as contemporary social changes influence the development of research traditions and paths, causing new methods and new (trans)disciplines to emerge. However, both science and theory do influence the social context and cause changes, so we can say that it is always a two-way process.

[35] Roderick J. Lawrence and Carole Despres, "Introduction: Futures of Transdisciplinarity," *Futures* 36 (2004): 397–405.

[36] Ann Hartman, "In Search of Subjugated Knowledge", *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy* 11, 4 (2000): 19–23.

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