

# BODY MODIFICATION AS AN INDIVIDUAL SUBVERSIVE PRACTICE

*Marina Sakač*

## INTRODUCTION

The distinct sociocultural, economic, and political context of Serbia in the first quarter of the 21<sup>st</sup> century exhibits an intriguing and prolific ground for investigation. The neoliberal context in which Serbia has found itself after a socialist regime has morphed into a combination of socialist values and morals, and the materialism and expected economic bravado of capitalism.

This context creates a situation in which adolescents live in their family homes unable to obtain financial independence. The economic factor of this situation is most prominent and obvious. These circumstances affect the relationships, but even more so, they create new value systems and mechanisms in order to obtain a sense of autonomy.

The interest in corporeal autonomy comes from a personal experience. Being a young adult, an adolescent living in the family home, creates a characteristic relationship with the parents. Having an interest in body modification poses a great deal of conflict between the child and the parents. There is a remarkably similar reaction in parents of all children interested in body modification.

Many animosities emerge from it, once the parents are introduced to the idea that a child chooses to harm their own body in order to express their sense of style or beauty. The most common reaction of the parents that comes to the forefront of this discussion and conflict is the question of being employable – whether the child will be able to find a career, be accepted in their field of interest, and become an economically productive member of society. This comes from the capitalist concept of understanding life, moral, and social values as something that emerges from productivity, specifically the economic power and financial stability and independence.

Apart from the emphasis on the economic aspect as an argument against body modification and even denial of the child's corporeal autonomy, the most common comparison made visually is with the uncultured and uncivilised tribes and peoples. They are often portrayed as unintelligent and incapable of the normality that the Western culture, or a relatively Western society tries to uphold. This argument will be taken into consideration in understanding how the negative portrayal of non-Western cultures affects the narratives and understanding of cultural differences as inadequate and inherently foreign.

This article is based on a short informal study and empirical data collected in 2019. It deals with the narratives of young adults, 20-30 years old, as well as media representation, and parental narratives. It will identify some aspects of these narratives which emerge from or are a part of social, cultural, and political discourses. Additionally, this article will provide a historical context of anthropology and epistemology of bodily practice to ensure understanding of how corporeality and autonomy are understood by the author.

## BODY IN ANTHROPOLOGY

The body in anthropological thought and research up until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has widely been unproblematized, it has been conceptualised as a universal biological base upon which culture plays its infinite variety (Lock 1993, 134). At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, politics of reproduction, human sexuality, emotions, and shamanisms have been implicating the body in various studies, and even though anthropologists have proven to be a good deal more alert to the theoretical challenges posed by the body than other social scientists, they too have accepted the notion that the physical body falls naturally into the domain of basic sciences (Lock 1993, 134). One of the reasons for this would be the problematic taxonomies that have been used for human beings categorising them based on technological development – such as in cultural evolutionism with Tylor and Levy-Bruhl – the theoretical approach was criticised for its ethnocentricity, valuing the white Western human as the most advanced in evolution.

Margaret Lock poses the idea that the body itself remains a source of creative tension. Decentring the physical body of the basic sciences and questioning the epistemological assumptions entailed in the production of natural facts has radicalised, and relativised the perspective on several dichotomies, such as nature/culture, self/other, mind/body, while at the same time inciting increased reflexivity with respect to anthropological practices as a whole (Lock 1993, 134). Theoretically as well, these dichotomies in Western metaphysics from Durkheim to Hertz have dealt with understanding the body as something that is good to think with. With time these ideas had developed by embracing holism, unity, inclusion but were also used to justify hierarchy, difference, and exclusion (Lock 1993, 135). Anthropological empirical data has shown the oversimplified understanding of these categories that have been used to describe and understand the moral landscape through time and space.

Related research has shown how social categories are literally inscribed on and into the body, with prescriptions about body fluids, cosmetics, clothing, hair styles, depilation, and ornamentation acts as signifiers of local social and moral worlds (Lock

1993, 135). Fundamental reformulation of the problem of the body as one of semiosis, in other words, how the body functions as both a transmitter and receiver of information. Since the 1980s the interpretations that seek explicitly to collapse mind/body dualities are now privileged. The body is no longer portrayed simply as a template for social organisation nor as a biological black box cut off from mind, and nature/culture and mind/body dualities are self-consciously interrogated (Lock 1993, 136).

Throughout the study of body modifications, one is met with a wide variety of reasons for this type of adornment and aesthetic. Inspiration is taken from music genres, specific lifestyles, purely aesthetic, visually pleasing, coming of age, and for some it expresses their autonomy. Whichever category we look into deeper, we will understand that they are all connected to a sense of individuality, a sense of self which today is becoming increasingly more difficult to define. As Margaret Lock pointed out, the body does not play a role of a template for cultural inscription, nor is it cut off from the mind, it takes up a considerable amount of time and effort to portray what one wishes to show to the outside world. This portrayal in my research, what I have learned from my interlocutors, is that in its own way it is supposed to mirror the world within but is often met with disapproval and misunderstanding. A predefined mode of existence is encouraged, one that reflects a socialist sameness and unity of the parents' childhood and young adult life. More often than not, the individuality of the capitalist lifestyle does not compute well with the socialist point of view of the parent.

Epistemologically speaking, the changes in anthropology were inspired by a more relativist approach which appeared in the 1970s and 1980s. It offered a new understanding of corporeality and sexuality as culturally and historically contingent, unlike the previous period which considered them in biological categories (Radović by Petković 2014, 105). The prevailing trend until the 1970s in examination of the human body and sexuality was in terms of universality, naturalism, and essentialism. This ethnocentric perspective was overcome with the increase in ethnographic fieldwork (Margaret Mead, Edvard Evans-Pritchard, Bronislaw Malinowski, and many others) which had deepened the corpus of anthropological knowledge (Petković 2014, 104).

Authors such as Thomas Csordas, Judith Butler, Sherry Ortner, in Serbia Zorica Ivanović and Predrag Šarčević, have provided a new outlook on body and sexuality, they ceased to be considered in binary categories, and have implemented a more intersectional perspective, considering the body as culturally and historically contingent (Petković 2014, 105).

# MATERIALITY OF THE BODY

Judith Butler points out Simone de Beauvoir's claim that 'one is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman', which she interprets as identity which is tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts. Body and gender must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self (Butler 1988, 519). This consideration is taken in Maren Wehrle's understanding of Butler's theory of performativity, which moves from determinism to a postmodern voluntarism, dependent on 'performances' rather than on a stable prefigured essence or core (Wehrle 2020, 366). She investigates the matter of bodies seriously, how these subjects themselves experience, are affected, enabled, or constrained by norms, why they might desire to preserve them or are motivated to resist them, and to what extent they are able to do so (Wehrle 2020, 366).

The interlocutors who I have talked to have stated their need to resist the traditional norms of beauty in a patriarchal cultural context which often represses the female and male need to express their individual identity in the form of body adornment. These individuals performatively change and subvert the constituted set of socio-cultural identity categories, they re-act to the respective norms and resist them, as Wehrle points out. In this article the body is understood as one which we relate to, which is us and we are in it, as Merleau-Ponty points out – we do not merely behold as spectators the relations between the parts of our body and the correlations between the visual and tactile body: we are ourselves the unifier of these arms and legs, the person who both sees and touches them (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 173). Understanding the body as something which has the ability to unify various perceptions and experiences visually or with touch, we may consider this notion in the need for individual expression. The piercing or the tattoo no longer represents something which is on the body but becomes an indivisible part of it. It is no longer considered just as adornment and with time it becomes what the person perceives themselves to be, a person with a piercing on a face or an unusual tattoo on the body.

The materiality of the body itself is changed, precisely because body adornment is not a piece of clothing that one can easily change once they are not interested in it and also because body modification will leave visible scars on the skin. It is advised and suggested by my interlocutors that once a person gets a tattoo or a piercing, he or she must live with potential consequences – for some it may be pain for a long time, for others, it is a sense of accomplishment, overcoming fear of physical pain.

## THE „GOOD LIFE“

The intersection of categories which were most prominent in my research were the ideas of being employable, which are connected to commodification of the body, docility of the body, and perception of what a good life is in contemporary Serbia.

One of the most important achievements of an independent young adult in Serbia today is to gain financial independence. This can be accomplished by learning how to discipline the body in order for it to become desirable. This body once disciplined will be fit for commodifying. Bodies are discovered as a target of power, Michel Foucault understands docile bodies as ones that are manipulated, shaped, trained to obey, respond, and become skilful in order to increase their forces (Foucault 1977, 136). He understands disciplines as a modality which implies an uninterrupted constant coercion, supervising the processes of the activity, in order to subject its forces and impose upon them a relation of docility-utility (Foucault 1977, 137).

This understanding of disciplines is what I consider in my research when dealing with the parental narratives, reactions, and conflicts which arise from a body, or more precisely an individual who does not want to be subjugated to these types of coercion which imply that the body will be prepared for utilisation. The mere fact that the individuals or interlocutors of my research challenge the norms, broadening the meaning of individuality through physical change means they are subverting the narrative of a ‘good life’ which is being imposed by the parents.

Once bodies are disciplined and taught how to be docile, they can be commodified in what Pierre Bourdieu understands by a commodified body. In modern societies, this refers not only to the body’s potential as a labour power, but to the methods in which the body has become a more comprehensive form of physical capital; a possessor of power, status, and distinctive symbolic forms which is integral to the accumulation of various resources (Shilling 1993, 127). The production of physical capital refers to the development of bodies in ways which are recognised as possessing value in social fields, while the conversion of physical capital refers to the translation of bodily participation in work, leisure, and other fields into different forms of capital – usually economic capital but may also refer to cultural capital (for example education) and social capital (meaning all networks which enable reciprocal relations) (Shilling 1993, 128).

In contrast to traditional societies where power is exercised more directly by one embodied individual over another, the modern body has a far more complex role in the exercise of power and the reproduction of social inequalities.

Rejection of submission to these norms of commodification is a rejection of the capitalist system and precariat to some extent. As stated above, the reproduction of social inequalities is also contained in the negative perception of modified bodies as ones that belong in prisons or on the margins of society – most notably, tattoos are in the social and mutual imaginaries perceived as something that only people in prison do to their bodies, either to indicate belonging to a specific group or the rank in a group. Often forgotten are the army tattoos which depict names of loved ones, most notably mothers, wives, and girlfriends. This imaginary is very hard to challenge without disrupting family relationships or creating conflict.

The parental concerns about the bodies of their children not becoming docile or capable of commodifying comes from a deeply rooted idea that body adornment categorically belongs to uncivilised peoples and will eventually harm the child's opportunities in life. If one cannot become employable in the eyes of the parent, one cannot achieve a 'good life'.

These ideas and real-life concerns come from notions of care or what Tatjana Thelen describes as the utmost importance of our self-understanding and moral sensibilities to our visions of a 'good life' and 'a good society'. As such, care is often mapped onto temporal and geographical axes, that is, it is seen to have transitioned in Europe from the 'traditional' intergenerational care of former times to 'modern' care in a core family or institution' (Thelen 2015, 499). This notion of care can be connected to the understanding of what good parenting is, as if the child's failure directly reflects parental failure – one who is not capable of teaching and disciplining their own child, in order for them to have a chance to achieve a good life, is a failed parent.

In Smiljka Tomanović's work we can consider what she calls markers of adulthood – key life events which are: financial independence, independent housing, marriage, and starting a family (Tomanović 2012, 238). Good parents would be capable of leading their children to the path towards a good life, in other words, achieving all the markers of adulthood. These life events would enable young people to transition from adolescence to adulthood. However, the specificity of the Serbian context is that their children might not leave the family home or become fully independent for a very long time, sometimes never. There are many cases of young adults and adults living with their parents because of the lack of financial means necessary for what would be considered a normal life.

Adolescence or young adulthood, as Smiljka Tomanović names it in her research, is connected not only to financial independence, but also emotional autonomy, the subjective or psychological independence is noted as one of the most relevant in their

pursuit of autonomy (Lavrič by Tomanović, 2012, 230). The time period that Tomanović refers to is important for understanding the changes that have occurred politically and economically in Serbia in the post-Yugoslav era. In the period between 2003 and 2011, the state has been opened up to changes which have completely replaced the socialist conception of time, family, progress, and productivity with a capitalist one. For some this change has been joyful, for others, it has been a burden and a struggle. If we understand the context of the changes that the state has been going through, we could understand how one is willing to challenge the patriarchal, capitalist, and beauty norms in order to achieve a sort of independence, psychological or emotional – this is the conclusion taken out from conversations with my interlocutors, the abstraction of an independent life which in the Serbian context often cannot even be achieved at all. By defying the beauty standards needed to take part in a capitalist system, these young adults are reinterpreting what it means to be worthy of employment.

## ON THE PERIPHERY OF CAPITALISM

As understood by Ognjen Kojanić, peripheries are often recursively reinscribed in multiple scales, demonstrating unevenness in the relationships between multiple centres and multiple peripheries. Rhetorical boundaries and substantive definitions of regions hinder a deep understanding of the processes that generate new and reproduce old peripheries on the continent (Kojanić 2020, 49). The author calls for a relational approach, understanding space which consists of social relations, and also considers how spaces and peoples are marginalised as a consequence of political-economic processes, as well as due to the way they are treated in intellectual discussions or various (self-)marginalising discourses (Kojanić 2020, 50). Post-socialism is in many ways a relation to that legacy, often in the form of a need for it to be overcome by embracing neoliberal capitalism (Kojanić 2020, 51).

For these and many other reasons and changes that the post-socialist state of Serbia has gone through in the last two decades have opened the space to talk about what I would consider *coping mechanisms*, not in the strict psychological sense, but more as a reaction to the contradictory cultural norms that are imposed on young adults today. They are contradictory in so much that the parent-child relationship is often based on imaginaries of a socialist morality – that good work would somehow create an opportunity to achieve a *good life*. Unfortunately, these parents often overlook the fact that their children do not live in socialism anymore.

Even with the changes noted by Tomanović, showing that young people have obtained a better financial status in 2011 compared to 2003, this has not contributed to

better housing, only 4% have bought their housing property, and another 7% are renting. For most of them, the trajectories and milestones have been postponed to a later age. Compared to youth transitions in the socialist period, the transition is now prolonged since the markers of adulthood are being postponed. The author has also pointed out that family formation in Serbia is typical for the Southern European family formation model, where young people remain in their parental home for a longer time and leave it mainly in order to form a family – when they get married (Tomanović 2012, 238–239).

There have been very few changes in the social structure since, meaning that there are new career paths and opportunities for young adults, but in most cases, they stay dependent on their parents until they are capable of finding a steady income and affordable housing. It is at this point that we can consider how these body modifications might represent the need for autonomy in a new way, dealing with the lack of independence through something similar to a *coping mechanism*.

## CONCLUSION

This article has aimed to showcase a short research, as well as the theoretical overview of the historical development of anthropological perspectives on the body, and the historical and political context of contemporary Serbia.

The epistemological shift in anthropology in terms of corporeality and sexuality, which had been reconceptualised, deconstructed is now considered to be historically and culturally contingent. It has led to a proliferation in ethnographic research but also in how body, sex, and gender are considered in contemporary research within anthropology and social sciences. The criticised ethnocentricity of the approach prior to the epistemological shift has affected our understanding of the body as a socio-historic category, which was more or less unexplored in social sciences to that point.

The phenomenological approach of Merleau-Ponty, Butler, and others, has been understood through the materiality of the body which plays a relevant role in our relation to our own identity, individuality, even sexuality which has not been considered thoroughly due to the constraints of this article. As one of the important dimensions of individuality, sexuality in the context of body modification should be taken up in further research.

Conceptualising a good life in parent-child relationships has been useful in understanding how parental care and moral values affect the relationship with their own child, positively and negatively. Unable to understand the world their children live in, parents create a somewhat hostile environment in which they blame themselves for



the children not achieving what they have defined in their minds as a good life. These imaginaries affect the quality of relationships as well as making it impossible for their children to acquire the skills which would help them obtain their own financial independence in what is considered a normal time span.

The distinct sociocultural context of Serbia in the first quarter of the 21<sup>st</sup> century exhibits an intriguing array of complex relations and situations in which young adults can become outraged and choose to act subversively. However, this subversion can never be fully obtained, precisely because it does not affect the socio-political situation, it only affects the personal relationships with family, friends, or co-workers. This subversive act can be considered in terms of defying commodification and docility of their own bodies which are expected to become employable, worthy of a career. Financial independence which is considered one of the most important factors of psychological and emotional stability in young adults often cannot be obtained, not due to lack of education or skills, but due to nepotism, political discrimination, lack of opportunities, and job shortages.

# BIBLIOGRAPHY

Butler, J. 1988. Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory. In: *Theatre Journal*, 40(4), 519–531.

Foucault, M. 1977. *Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Kojanić, O. 2020. Theory from the Peripheries: What Can the Anthropology of Postsocialism Offer to European Anthropology? In: *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures*, 29, 49–66.

Lock, M. 1993. Cultivating the Body: Anthropology and Epistemologies of Bodily Practice and Knowledge. In: *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 22(1), 133–155.

Merleau-Ponty, M. 2002. *Phenomenology of Perception*. New York: Routledge.

Petković, S. 2014. O osobenostima antropološkog pristupa adolescenciji, v: *Antropologija*, 14(3), 93–118.

Shilling, C. 1993. *The body and social theory*. London: Sage Publications.

Thelen, T. 2015. Care as social organization: Creating, maintaining, and dissolving significant relations. In: *Anthropological Theory*, 15(4), 497–515.

Tomanović, S. 2012. Changes in transition to adulthood of young people in Serbia between 2003 and 2011. In: *Sociologija*, 54, 227–243.

Wehrle, M. 2021. Bodies (that) matter: The role of habit formation for identity. In: *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 20(2), 365–386.