

Steffan Blayney, Joey Hornsby, and Savannah Whaley (Eds.), **The Body Productive: Rethinking Capitalism, Work and the Body**, New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2023, 226 pp., \$39.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by

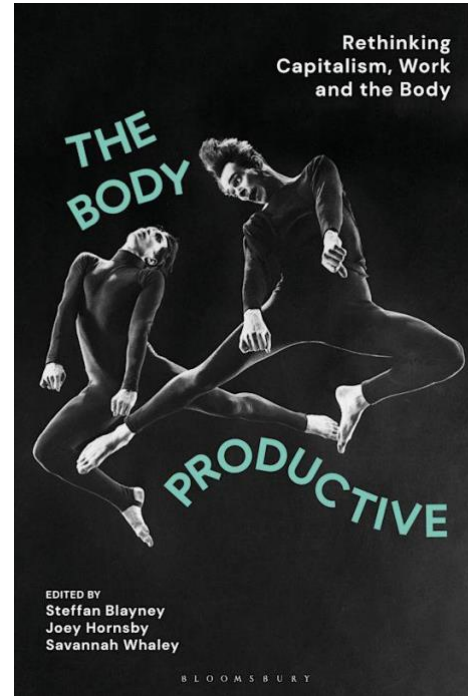
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The body is a site made (ill)legible by capitalism and its productions. How one comes to understand their relationship to the work they do, and how they do it, is largely predefined by the form that the capitalist stimuli takes shape in that particular time. Capitalism, although evolving in *practice* through space and time, consistently situates *productivity* as the most basic aim of the body.

In 1972, Didier Deleule and Francis Guéry published *The Productive Body* (Guéry & Deleule, 1972/2014), a treatise on these very topics concerning the body, labor, and capitalistic (re)production. For reasons we can only speculate, this book was released to little fanfare, but a 2014 translation gave the text, only previously fully available in French, new life. Steffan Blayney, Joey Hornsby, and Savannah Whaley, the editors of ***The Body Productive: Rethinking Capitalism, Work and the Body***, were inspired to revisit the concepts of the 1972 piece because they observed in contemporary society a machinist existence that has created new, and exacerbated old, tendencies of capitalism.

The meat of the book starts much in the same way that it ends—with a more intensive dialoguing with the materials in *The Productive Body* (Guéry & Deleule, 1972/2014). Guéry starts us off with a living retrospective, dissecting his thinking at the time of writing the first book and editorializing how his views have changed. He talks about Marx—a lot. But this is because in developing his original concepts, he used Marx's *Capital* (Marx, 1867/2024) as a theoretical foundation. By his estimation, the earlier work can only beget as much understanding of society as what Marx himself could grasp within his own time. So, he looks back and adds addendums.

He still agrees that the limits of the body's capacity for production have been disfigured by capitalism. He notes we must engage with the ecological destruction endemic to capitalism. He identifies that revolution, particularly the Maoist Cultural Revolution, inspired the central provocation of his section of *The Productive Body* (Guéry & Deleule, 1972/2014). He questions whether socialism, or the removal of the "head" [bourgeoisie] from the "body" [proletariat], can actually achieve the goals of ameliorating social inequity. In theorizing at present, he estimates that the idea of cutting off the head as a solution is flawed, and that in imagining the restoration of the Earth, a refined strategy based on leadership, intellectuality, and sincere reflection can move us toward "self-consciousness" instead of "murder"—murder, I presume to



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be, of the head. Yet, even though he disrupts some of the assertions made within the original text, there is still an argument for the use of these earlier theories, and such is explicitly reasoned in chapter 11, "Algorithmic capitalism, digital machinofacture, and the productive body," where Stephen Shapiro and Philip Barnard make a case for why these earlier musings are still useful.

For those who are mostly invested in learning about the original piece, these chapters would be of particular value alongside Dan Taylor's third chapter, "Do we still not know what a body can do? Spinoza, Arendt, and The Productive Body," where he largely argues that whether intended or not, Spinoza and Arendt's theories were central to the development of the arguments in *The Productive Body* (Guéry & Deleule, 1972/2014). It follows then that in interacting with chapter 3, one would find the central arguments more enriching if they were to familiarize themselves with the work of Spinoza or at the very least Spinoza's 1677 treatise, *Ethics* (Spinoza, 1677/2020).

Generally, the middle of the text is more expansive (in content) in its theorizing on the contemporary laboring body.

Take Graham Jones' chapter 6, "The dialectical body: Bringing science back into socialism," which discusses the natural sciences and the need for a "process-relational" ontology (systems are constantly evolving in the present, but also shaped by their past) as a lens for contemporary Marxists to critically engage with present-day considerations like climate change. To him, disregarding the natural sciences as a viable arena for Marxist interpretation restricts the breadth of revolutionary possibility. This contribution was especially useful because he offers tangible suggestions, positing that through the use of a process-relational ontology, Marxist materialism as a theory can progress.

Or consider chapter 5, "Empty promises: The financialization of labor," where Phil Jones makes the astute observation that in the contemporary, the promise of labor to be done, or the potential for a person or group to participate in a labor act, updating a LinkedIn account as an example, turns citizens into human capital instead of "laborers." As there is a surplus of laborers (job loss) due to automation, for example, citizens now must use numbers, ratings, and entrepreneurship in order to prove their *potential* to be workers instead of actually working (literally). For Jones, this process is a function of financialization, and within financialization, all actions on account of human capital become "promissory" in nature. This (loose) focus on data reminded me in some part of Dawn Woolley's contribution in chapter 8, "The Quantified Self, the ideology of health and fat," wherein Woolley makes the case that self-tracking (or fitness tracking), necessitates a relationship to data (akin to likes and shares in Jones's chapter) that relate the capacity to produce to the constant self-regulation (implies fit/fat=healthy/unhealthy) of one's body. Thus, to use an idea from chapter 5, productivity comes to be represented through "aesthetic."

I would recommend these chapters for those interested in expanding their ideas on techno-capitalism, alongside chapter 10, "(Re)productive data-bodies: Privacy, inequality, and anti-abortion politics in the age of tech capitalism," by Grace Tillyard, where she unpacks data profiling, reproductive control, and anti-abortion groups.

I found chapter 7, "Neither appropriated nor expropriated: Notes toward an autonomist cripistemology of the productive body," to be well-theorized—in a frustrating way. In it, Arianna Introna raises the disabled body as a site of resistance against capitalist productivity. To do this, Introna uses the theory of "non-history" to suggest that the non-affordances implied by differently abled bodies within the capitalist framework that expects its laborers to constantly work toward surplus value are dissonant with productivity. I had complex opinions about this piece in particular because although the concepts presented in it were exciting, I struggled against the idea of the "non-productivity of the crip biological body" (p. 121) because the "crip" body is never identified or named. Rather, we, the readers, are expected to accept the crip body as a thing that is inherently and *consistently* in the absence of productive capacities. Still, even with these reservations, this chapter is a must-read. And this emphasis on non-productivity as a way to refocus biopolitics is in the same spirit of chapter 9, "The artefact of losing: The (bio)poetics of miscarriage" by Helen Charman and Christopher Law, where the authors explore how lyric poetry on abortion and miscarriage ("non-productive maternal experiences", p. 176), could be used to "challenge" biopolitics.

As such perspectives were missing from the original work, the biggest contributions of this piece are the authors' dynamic theorizing on race, gender, ability, and so on, in conversation with the body. Yet, although a lot of the content can be useful for rethinking even the definition of the *term* body, such as done in a thought-provoking chapter 4 by Marina Vishmidt, "Corporeal and abstract: Is there a 'left biopolitics' of bodies?" where she unpacks "bodies" and "identity politics," the book lacks a cohesiveness both because of the limitations of anthology texts generally, and because each chapter dives into a different idea from the inspired text, which makes it a little difficult to piece together the main theoretical contributions of *The Productive Body*. Even more so, although in chapter 2, Guéry emphasizes that their original piece was somewhat a Marxist contribution, in this anthology we still find the voices of *The Productive Body* understated beneath the icon of Marx and others of such stature, so that at times this did not feel so much like a retrospective of Guéry and Deleule, but a retrospective of Marx by way of Guéry and Deleule.

Even still, for readers interested in learning more about the laboring body, there is enough material to elicit useful reflections, but I suggest one reads up on some of the theorists named earlier to help demystify much of the dense content found within this work. At the very least, one must glance at *The Productive Body* (Guéry & Deleule, 1972/2014) to retrace their steps.

References

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