The Emancipatory Power of the Body in Everyday Life

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Niches of Liberation

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Preface

Introduction: The Return of the Body

The launching of ChatGPT in November 2022 stirred a heated debate on the opportunities, limitations, and risks of artificial intelligence (AI). Some of these issues are quite obvious, such as the fears that AI is soon going to replace a range of traditional jobs, including those that have so far been thought of as being creative and therefore immune to the jeopardies of technological civilization. These fears are indeed considerable, as suggested by a survey which found that 62% of job-seekers were anxious about their future work lives.[1]

Using AI in politics may breed equally devastating effects. As I have written elsewhere, employing self-learning software and bots to mobilize public opinion through setting up false, that is, non-human, accounts on social media has been a patent practice for some time now. In what is a more long-term and robust campaign, bots of various nations clash to produce convenient Wikipedia entries.[2] We can easily imagine that a continued upsurge of such maneuvers can indeed put democratic

[1] Lydia DePillis and Steve Lohr, "Tinkering with ChatGPT, Workers Wonder: Will This Take My Job?" *The New York Times*, March 26, 2023.

[2] Leszek Koczanowicz, *Anxiety and Lucidity: Reflections on Culture in Times of Unres*t (London: Routledge, 2020).

societies at risk by destroying or distorting debate while at the same time supporting dictatorships and authoritarianisms disguised as democracies.

Besides the identification of these immediate and acute effects of the widespread introduction of AI, there are more refined and subtle approaches that seek to fathom the relevance of AI to the very human existence, the place of humans on the Earth, and the future of the civilization they have developed. This train of thought is epitomized by a seminal essay authored by the distinguished scholars Yuval Harari, Tristan Harris, and Aza Raskin, published in *The New York Times*.[3] The text begins with a reference to a study in which seven hundred prominent experts were polled; half of the respondents stated that there was a likelihood of 10% that humanity would disappear or its potential would be severely diminished as a result of the dissemination of AI. According to the authors, this survey gestures at a looming threat which we do not realize is there. We do not agree to have new medications put on the market before they have gone through an array of complicated clinical tests. Yet consent was given to the immediate and unrestricted introduction of AI.

Admonitions against the purported hazards of AI are anchored in a certain vision of the human:

> In the beginning was the word. Language is the operating system of human culture. From language emerges myth and law, gods and money, art and science, friendships and nations and computer code. A.I.'s new mastery of language means it can now hack and manipulate the operating system of civilization. By gaining mastery of language, A.I. is seizing the master key to civilization, from bank vaults to holy sepulchers.[4]

Furthermore, the authors emphasize that the human experience of reality is but rarely immediate, and that AI is able to make us see the external world the way it finds suitable:

> Humans often don't have direct access to reality. We are cocooned by culture, experiencing reality through a cultural prism. Our political views are

[3] Yuval Harari, Tristan Harris, and Aza Raskin, "You Can Have the Blue Pill or the Red Pill, and We're Out of Blue Pills," *The New York Times*, March 24, 2023.

[4] Harari, Harris, and Raskin, "You Can Have."

> shaped by the reports of journalists and the anecdotes of friends. Our sexual preferences are tweaked by art and religion. That cultural cocoon has hitherto been woven by other humans. What will it be like to experience reality through a prism produced by nonhuman intelligence?[5]

Hence, generally speaking, to introduce restrictions on the use of AI appears to be the only solution giving us opportunity to gain some time and, in this way, to avoid a kind of demise in which "a curtain of illusions could descend over the whole of humanity, and we might never again be able to tear that curtain away—or even realize it is there."[6]

While some of these warnings are certainly on the mark, it is something of a concern to realize that the authors rely on the vision of a thoroughly disembodied human being, a human being that is merely a language model and that, as a result of this disembodiment, dwells in an illusory world of culture. This is the very concept of the human being that has prevailed in multiple cultures over centuries and has been powerfully dominant in the culture and philosophy of the West. The authors themselves refer to Plato's cave, Descartes' demon, and Buddhist *māyā* as meaningful hallmarks of such an approach to the human. Taking this vision as their point of departure, they fabricate an expanded narrative of risks caused by AI. I cite their argument to show to what extent the human being tends to be reduced to the mind—thinking—alone.

Crucially, this is not the only truth of humans and the culture they produced, or at least not the whole truth. Quite a different image, one of a human being that acts and changes the world, has lingered in the penumbra of this overriding picture. The active stance is celebrated in Faust's famous monologue in Johann Wolfgang Goethe's drama:

> Tis written: "In the Beginning was the Word."
> Here am I balked: who, now, can help afford?
> The Word?—impossible so high to rate it;
> And otherwise must I translate it.
> If by the Spirit I am truly taught.
> Then thus: "In the Beginning was the Thought."

[5] Harari, Harris, and Raskin, "You Can Have."

[6] Harari, Harris, and Raskin, "You Can Have."

> This first line let me weigh completely,
> Lest my impatient pen proceed too fleetly.
> Is it the Thought which works, creates, indeed?
> "In the Beginning was the Power," I read.
> Yet, as I write, a warning is suggested,
> That I the sense may not have fairly tested.
> The Spirit aids me: now I see the light!
> "In the Beginning was the Act," I write.[7]

"In the Beginning was the Act" is an assertion that compels us to understand the human being in entirely different terms than in the dualistic theories, where thought and action are dissociated, whereby the former is accorded pre-eminence. To retrace the history of the shadow of these concepts from the ancient materialists to Spinoza, the Enlightenment materialists, Marx, pragmatism, and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology to contemporary psychological, neuropsychological, and philosophical conceptions is nothing short of tempting, but such an overview is of course completely unfeasible here. Although the specific solutions proposed in these different frameworks vary widely, all of them paint the human being as an acting and integrated creature that not only perceives the world through the lens of culture but also actively molds this world. This inevitably entails a re-appreciation of the body, the abolishment of the drastic body/mind distinction, and the recognition of corporeality as determining what the human being becomes.

This vision of the human being also applies to the social world. A vast majority of political theories primarily explored the world of ideas, which, it was tacitly assumed, initiated action, and that in turn translated into another version of the world of ideas. Major breakthroughs in this regard were marked by the work of Michel Foucault and also of Pierre Bourdieu. The former revealed that, in modernity, the production of docile bodies made it possible to control minds. In a well-known passage in his book on the birth of the prison, Foucault reversed the hackneyed metaphor of the body as the prison of the soul:

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[7] Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Faust,* trans. Bayard Taylor (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 2005) (electronic edition), I.iii.

> [T]he man described for us, whom we are invited to free, is already in himself the effect of a subjection much more profound than himself. A "soul" inhabits him and brings him to existence, which is itself a factor in the mastery that power exercises over the body. The soul is the effect and instrument of a political anatomy; the soul is the prison of the body.[8]

No matter how much of a game-changer this observation was, the body was notably treated in it as a site of oppressive operations of power, where the mind became ultimately captive.

The body was framed in a like manner by the latter French thinker, Pierre Bourdieu, who built on an entirely different theoretical foundation to show emphatically that class divisions in society were mirrored in the forms of bodiliness, shaping its habitus. Bourdieu himself explicitly explained that the concept of habitus aimed first and foremost "to break with the intellectualist (and intellectualocentric) philosophy of action."[9] However, while he pushed corporeality to the foreground, he insisted that the body reproduced class divisions across the spheres of its functioning.

The body's social and political activity provides a starting point for my argument in this book. While I acknowledge and value the work of the thinkers mentioned above, I adopt a different theoretical perspective. In my approach, bodiliness is considered a vehicle for freedom and emancipation. This idea is rooted in American pragmatism, with its classics—John Dewey and George Herbert Mead—demonstrating that interactions of the organism and the environment transform both parties to this process, constructing both mind and self, as well as the setting in which the action unfolds. Although Dewey and Mead made an invaluable contribution to the development of social thought, they did not generate a coherent conception of the acting body. This failure was only redressed by the contemporary neo-pragmatist philosopher Richard Shusterman, whose studies are both a starting point for and an important component of the theoretical framework of my reasoning in this book.

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[8] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 30.

[9] Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J.D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 120.

Shusterman's idea of *somaesthetics* as an interdisciplinary field that emerges from philosophy and is dedicated to the practices of somatic enhancement marks a turning point in Western reflection on the body. Somaesthetics regards the body as an ethical and aesthetic project to be actively engaged in. I reason along these lines to illuminate the relevance of thus-conceived corporeality in the social and political spheres. Capturing this significance is premised on looking beyond the individual and locating the individual bodiliness project within a broader—communal—context. I refer to this collective aspect of somaesthetics as *somapower*. This concept is supposed to distinguish my position, inspired by Shusterman's pragmatist thought as it is, from the various iterations of biopower, which are proliferating today. My theoretical goal primarily lies in conveying the meaning of the body as a vehicle for emancipation and liberation, rather than merely as a site of the oppressive workings of power.

To achieve this goal, I need to interrogate some of the key notions cherished in contemporary political theories. In doing this, my key point is to examine politics through the lens of everyday life, because it is mainly in this sphere of human activity that the body features as an emancipatory medium. This approach requires overcoming some petrified schemes that organize explorations of political life. First of all, the political sphere must not be regarded as an autonomous being that is governed by its own set of laws. With this in mind, I scrutinize people's everyday relationships, the common matters that preoccupy them, and the places where they routinely appear for signs of protest against the existing social order and/or the ways of doing politics. I call such areas *niches of emancipation* or, synonymously, *niches of liberation*, dubbing the mechanisms that make them work *the microphysics of emancipation*.

Throughout this book, I depict the operations of these niches, which, while often not explicitly political, are productive of alternative models of life and heterodox accounts of social reality that are eventually capable of making political change happen. One of my motives for producing this book was the memory of the authoritarian regime under which I lived a

considerable portion of my life. I remember the devices, ploys, sidesteps, and contrivances that we marshaled to find fissures in the system and set up in them what I now dub niches of liberation. I also remember the process in which activities undertaken in such places, cultural events, abstract discussions about books, and the like pursuits all of a sudden, or so it seemed, aggregated into strictly political gestures and content.

After the transition to democracy and the free-market economy, I saw, to my astonishment, that nearly identical mechanisms were at work in democratic societies. Of course, those avail themselves of quite different measures to impose ideologies, but this does not remove the need for establishing places of emancipation where people can feel a waft of freedom from the dominant hegemony, even if only on a tiny scale and for a fleeting moment. I do not investigate this issue in much detail in this volume, but it certainly deserves further studies, and I hope to take up this challenge soon.

The three chapters that make up this volume offer readers a close look at the logic of my argument. In Chap. 1, I analyze my fundamental concepts, specifically, somapower, the microphysics of emancipation, and niches of emancipation in the context of the politics of everyday life. In Chap. 2, I apply these concepts to interpret social and political life in authoritarian systems and in liberal democracy. In Chap. 3, I focus on the pandemic, which I examine as a liminal example of how the body functions under threat and social isolation. I wrap up the book with a brief conclusion that brings together my major insights.

While being a self-standing study, this book is informed by some of the ideas I developed in two of my previous publications: *Politics of Time: Dynamics of Identity in Post-Communist Poland* (2008) and *Politics of Dialogue: Non-Consensual Democracy and Critical Community* (2016), and, as it were, it caps my series of three politics—inquiries into three different aspects of today's political life.

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As already explained, my research draws on the concepts of Richard Shusterman, with whom I was able to consult my ideas on multiple occasions. I owe a lot to these discussions and to his kind support in carrying out this project, for which I am deeply grateful to him.

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