

The Militarized Gym

Written by Chris Hendershot

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CHRIS HENDERSHOT, MAR 24 2015

The purpose of this article is to further advance the importance of leisure and health to studies/practices of global relations. I do this by conducting a brief analysis of how the gym becomes militarized. When I write “the gym” I am referring to popular Anglo articulations through which contemporary practices of physical exercise become meaningful. The gym is therefore a spatial, temporal, social, economic, political and caloric entangled actualization of pursuits of fitness, health and/or the Good Life©. What makes the gym meaningful to studies of global relations, is that, particularly in its Anglo variants, it is troublingly militarized.

The militarized gym is readily realized through the reiterative arrangement of embodied capacities, desires, anxieties and compositions with the demand(s) for a fit nation, body-politic and/or populace (Verinsky, 2007, Smith Maguire, 2008; Dworkin & Wachs, 2009; Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 2011; BurrIDGE, & McSorley, 2012; Mckenzie, 2013; Sears, 2013). Militarization also comes to matter through the combative practices that secure the excesses of petrochemicals, finances and time that are required to sustain the leisure goods and activities of the gym. Dismantling these militarized arrangements, which is my overarching normative concern, cannot only be accomplished in the gym. Global relations of leisure and health come to matter through processes of commercialization, (neo)liberalization and/or human exceptionalism as much as through militarization. However, locating and challenging banal practices (see BurrIDGE, & McSorley, 2012), such as those practiced in the gym, is integral to understanding the breadth and depth of the militarization of global relations. Likewise, contesting militarized practices requires as Enloe (2007: 121) asserts, the need to make the “invisible [...] visible”.

Recalling another influential Enloe (2000) assertion that the “personal is international”, I need to acknowledge that physical exercise is too personal to me. Pleasure, employment and now study constitute my relations amongst the gym. My commitment to demilitarization is more than a textual activity. It has required that I exercise differently, which has meant that I am working on becoming undisciplined (see Halberstam, 2011). Re- and disorienting oneself from the overload of regularized, structured and purposeful training methodologies and epistemologies is certainly a playful embodied contestation. Playing with the omnipresence of discipline, commitment and regimentation in the gym is, at this moment, only a localizable effort to exercise differently. Paying close attention to the developing analysis of Kevin Mcsorley (2015) will provide one with a more in depth understanding of how exercise routines are becoming militarized in the Anglosphere and thus will provide a more thorough resource for conceptualizing more globally affective exercise endeavours.

A more generalizable move is to acknowledge the “wars” that have been and are currently being waged through the gym. At the moment the most important of these is the *War on Obesity*. Overseen by US Surgeon Generals, the *War on Obesity* has been constituted as “‘the terror within’, a threat that is every bit as real to America as weapons of mass destruction” (Carmona, 2003 quoted in Monaghan, 2008:1). In this war, “fatness is framed as the ‘polar opposite’ of fitness, with physical activity constituting ‘another weapon in the arsenal with which we [are] attacking obesity’” (Gaesser 2002 quoted in Ibid.: 139). The gym becomes the preferred battlespace through which to combat obesity because it is believed/marketed to be a space of commitment, discipline, austerity, hard work and betterment. In other words, fat cannot survive in the gym because the gym does not foster the conditions for its growth. The waging of the *War on Obesity* must therefore be properly recognized as a battle of sexualized, classed, gendered and raced determinations of bodily desirability (see Shaw, 2005; Rice, 2007; LeBesco 2011). Fat is the target, but degeneration of bodies, especially the individualized consumptive body and the aggregated symbolic

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national body, is the enemy.[1] The tactics of the Biggest Loser© are a most spectacular example of targeting fat in order to combat socio-political and politico-economic anxieties about the harmful a/effects of laziness, gluttony, lack of motivation and lack of personal responsibility.

Another, less tactically heinous, but equally unsettling war is the *War for/on the Self*. The skirmishes for the self are very much provoked by the industrialized arrangements that make the gym a real and meaningful space. Health and fitness media, apparel and equipment manufacturers and retailers, supplement manufacturers and retailers, health and fitness professionals, sponsored athletes and too many hashtags constantly bombard an individualized self with anxiety in order to induce consumption (see Dworkin & Wachs, 2009; Sears, 2013). Get Bigger. Look Better. Become healthy. Be more human (Reebok, 2015)! Buy our Stuff! These are the textual/vocal limits of an industrialized effort (Neocleous, 2007) to accrue profit through the consumption of goods “needed” to perform the unpaid physical labour of exercise. The *War on the Self* is realized through the reiteration of lack, which very much entangles this war amongst the *War on Obesity*. With fitness, health, the Good Life© assumed to be “unassailable good[s]” (McKenzie, 2013) barriers to experiencing these goods are constituted as a lack of motivation, of drive, of will. The faulty self becomes the target insofar as “critiques of social structures [are displaced] onto individual bodily failures” to consume and labour properly (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009: 22).

The wars waged through the gym are certainly not as globally destructive as the industrialized arrangement and actualization of military violence. The Anglo tendency to associate personal fitness with combat readiness does however entangle the *War on Obesity* and the *War for/on the Self* amongst the shooting wars of the past one hundred and fifteen years (see Burridge, & McSorley, 2012; McKenzie, 2013). Or in more eloquently contentious terms exercise performed in the gym “has become a type of militarized labour where the desire to continually work out encompasses both the longing to consume and the yearning to surrender the body to state, God, or corporation” (Verinsky, 2007: 25). One can “support” (Burridge, & McSorley, 2012) the *War on Terror*, *War on Drugs*, and Cold War, for instance, simply by doing the requisite number of push-ups, squats, pull-ups and planks is required to keep the economy going, keep the nation strong and by not being deterred by the predations of our enemies.

As suggested earlier, shooting wars, along with financial, trade and migration practices, also secure global hierarchies of production, distribution and consumption that work to determine which people can afford to labour for their health, happiness and goodness of life. In the militarized gym push-ups, squats, pull-ups and planks cannot only be done/made to support certain wars, but such exertions demand global arrangements that regularly exploit the energetic capacities of people, plants and petro-chemicals. The motivation of regularized energetic expropriation is certainly not a smooth process. And when (entanglements) of people, plants and petro-chemicals become understandably restive, violent pacification (Neocleous, 2011) becomes the only commonsensical reaction.

Researching how the gym is (continuously and variously) militarized thereby challenges scholar-practitioners of global relations to account for the everyday intra-actions (Barad, 2007) amongst human, not altogether human and otherly agencies that realize differential (i.e. privileged, detrimental, leisured, coerced, etc.) determinations of what “global” actually means. Acknowledging the meaningfulness of physical exercise and fitness and/or the gym also means recognizing the globalized meaningfulness of leisure and health practices and processes (see Davies, 2010; Howell, 2011; Lisle, 2013). Foregrounding militarized determinations of physical exercise means coming to appreciate how contemporary Anglo pursuits of leisure and health cannot at all be assumed to be globally healthy or leisurely.

Notes

[1] Concern that a lack of fitness is a sign of the deterioration of the body-politic has over a century long history in the Anglosphere. Zweiniger-Bargielowska (2011) writes of anxieties spurned by England’s early military defeats in the Boer War, “With regard to ‘physical efficiency’, [a popular journalist] deplored the deleterious effect of urbanization which was ‘enfeebling the British race, and thus menacing the future of the Empire’”. Likewise, prior to the United States entering World War I, high rates of rejection for men deemed unfit to serve motivated the establishment of mandatory physical education in schools (Smith Maguire, 2008: 34).

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