

Heading

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It's not often that happens, but the content of this well-written and well-formulaed book fills me with ambivalence. Not only about what men (and some women) do to their bodies (and others'), but also over my own reaction. How can a sociological study, in the most genuine sense of the word, evoke these conflicting feelings, in me; a fairly rational middle-aged white man, with previous experience of doing what academics usually do, i.e. collecting information, sorting the information into different piles, and then trying to present the pattern in a reasonably understandable way, and here I am... It's rare that a study of an area has made me so... fFencing, that's probably the best description: Confused. Or ambivalent?

In order to take a step back from this willingness and seek its underlying causes, Andersson and Johansson's book can be briefly recapitulated. The book is based on qualitative studies of three "cases" (page 11) in which each case consists of a sport, specifically bodybuilding, ironman triathlon, and mixed martial arts (MMA).

The book's outline is clearer than an NPM consultant's report on a new case management system within a municipal administration, and the outline can almost be described in the form of a flowchart where the first part (out of five) introduces the whole and the field of study, after which follows three parallel tracks where the second part deals with bodybuilding, the third Ironman triathlon, and the

fourth MMA. These three parts/parallel tracks are brought together in the fifth, final part, titled "Theorising extreme bodies", which do exactly what the title describes and puts together the previous parts in a debating and theorizing context. The position of ice is thus logical, where each of the three parallel sports tracks contains three chapters that follow their own, in their context naturally, pattern. One detail of this pattern is that each chapter is closed with its own reference list, and that a consolidated account is missing.

Each case thus constitutes its own independent study, which was then processed for the whole and added in a single volume where they are linked together into a whole. Not least the final part manages to fill out its suit with both theoretical and theorizing binders, along with numerous and relevant links to previous research. Empirin is treated consistently with respect, both in terms of the study's (numerous) participants and the stories that are soldered retold and linked together within each part.

If an ounce of unreasonably positive criticism is to be directed at the book, it is that since it is based on several different studies, a few details become a little elusive, in that the theoretical and from previous research emanating interpretation possibilities to some extent spread. Significantly, and almost unhemult impaled, some development possibilities become more similar to the fireballs that spread in all directions when a firework explodes, where the book's introduction and conclusion form the center of an expanding sphere of theoretical possibilities. Unfortunately, the theoretical and empirical glow of the different fireballs has time to go out before they really shine, which provokes a feeling

that the book's contents can lead further in different directions, for example through future (welcome) publication.

The three parallel tracks, i.e. bodybuilding, Ironman triathlon, and mixed martial arts (MMA), are in their own way equal in that the sports impose extreme but partly disparate demands on their practitioners. However, there are also common requirements, where self-discipline, together with the enforcement of limits on the body's capacity, forms a common path through the text. Early in the book, it becomes clear to the reader that the *mastery of one's physical revelation of a kind of self* is something in common. This can almost be described as a Cartesian perspective on the body as the soul's abode and means of transport through time, where the goal and means of the journey are to master the means of transport and control its direction. At the same time, this dualism is criticized, partly based on thoughts about embodiment, where the individual's "body and physical experience are understood as the basis of human experience" (page 9).

From such a perspective, it is possible to understand the existence of the self/body as being *vara* and being through *the* body. The theme recurs in the case of Ironman triathlon, but also in the part about bodybuilding. An example of mastery from the latter area is the person who trains specific parts of the same muscle in a leg kick machine. By putting their hand on the muscle and really feeling how it works, the person can vary their position in the machine so that each individual part, each muscle fiber, is trained to perfection by being pushed to – literally – the breaking point. The context also describes how the person almost voluptuously frugs with effort at each leg kick movement. This is, taken together, a symbol of the interpersonal game that consists of a lifestyle in which the gym is the arena,

and where machines, weights, and exercises form the basis and arena of individual being and creation, where the tools also serve as a kind of adjustable symbols of interaction with the others who train at the same gym. The adjustment possibilities, i.e. the choice of how many kilograms an individual lifts in a particular machine, could in turn be interpreted as a kind of interactional possibility of immediate valuation of the individual's capital (i.e. in Bourdieusk's sense).

Something that strikes me at the reading is how damn *ordinary* all the book's extreme people with their extreme bodies seem to be. This includes the book's section "Ironman and family life" (page 131f), where, for example, babysitting is discussed, but also everything else that needs to be solved in everyday life in order to get a massive dose of training and competition to work with children and family life. The theme recurs, but more sparingly, in the other parts. The book's fifth and final part, "Theorising Extreme Bodies" (page 212ff), and not least the episode "Extreme Bodies and OrdinaryLives?" (page 216f), highlights this from several perspectives, noting, among other things, that women are, generally speaking, forced to compromise more in family life in order to be able to carry out their training sessions, while men, again generally speaking, almost assume that home services should function as usual so that they can not only carry out their training sessions, but also make a career in the workplace.

Having to compromise with other parts of life in order to have more time for training and competition can lead to practitioners(especially of MMA), with an interviewee's expression, in reality being forced to *forsake* social activities, family life, and career in order to be able to hold a high enough dose of training.

MMA practitioners also tell how conditions are failing, and need to go down from full-to-half at work to free up time for training,, the latter summed up in having a "proud but poor' lifestyle" (p. 217). The view of one's own and freely chosen path through life is also based on the ideals described by MMA as "the way of the warrior" (sid 170), an almost medieval Chevalerean knight's ideal, where battles are brought man-to-man, pure-haired, and with great respect for the opponent. Such an ideal can be traced back far back in human history, such as the said medieval knight's ideal where the Knight, the True Warrior, battles others, equally Genuine, Warriors. Another example of this, almost mythical ideals, is the widespread story of the battles in the air over the trench hell of The First World War, where fighter pilots on both sides, equally friendly and respectfully, waved at each other when one's ammunition ran out, instead of the pilot with more ammunition being able to send the other to the ground, shot through, but in an angry burning double-decker. Another example is stories of legendary snipers who deliberately missed their opponent by a hair's breadth, as a greeting to the poor opponent whose ammunition unfortunately ran out of time that the battle between them had to be adjourned until the next day, the same time, the same area.

The myth includes the idea of taking a step back when one of the two Genuine Warriors has to pick up a dropped sword, retrieve more ammunition, or simply signal submission (for example, as the rules of MMA prescribe (rule 30.1: "Submission – The contestant surrenders by tapping the opponent three times or verbally informing the referee"). Subjecting itself to rules on how meetings between Genuine Warriors should take place is of course a prerequisite, where the rules can provide a more comprehensible framework for the individual's

interaction than is the case outside the arena, out in the other reality. Other rules apply to how training before the meeting can be carried out, and how the individual's capital (i.e. based on Bourdieu) is thus increased by, for example, the aforementioned "proud but poor' lifestyle" (p¹id 217), an argument that is also carried out on page 52. The choice of Bourdieu as an opportunity for understanding such an extreme existence works, and offers several possibilities for analysis of the various studies in the book underlying empiricism. From this perspective, the book is consistent, and interpretation possibilities are taken advantage of where the presence of well-chosen examples is used in parallel with interpretations from several perspectives.

Becoming a True Warrior and following *the path of the warrior*, a path that is long and tricky, requires almost total submission from his aspirants. The body is to be controlled by the will, and the different facets of the own self are trained to be directed in the same direction, towards the same goal. This direction leads at best to honor and recognition, that by other Genuine Warriors is regarded with respect, to be seen as a warrior monk among other warrior monks in a common monastery, geographically dispersed, but with a generally accepted set of rules of conduct. These rules permeate the premises of training and competition, wherever they are placed on the world map, and thus become a kind of the monastery walls of the body and soul wherewithin the promise of respect for the struggle and honor is renewed through each training session.

¹ FRobbery documents with the Martial Arts Delegation's dnr 216-6757-2017, which addresses decision 2018-02-09 regarding "Rules – International Professional Mma", available from SMMAF, Swedish Mixed Martial Arts Federation, <http://www.smmaf.se/regelverk/rules-international-professional-mma/> (downloaded: 2020-10-03).

The True Warrior has probably, as myth regarded, been around way back, possibly as a story of something better; a story that fills the human need to see goodness and meaning in a complex world, as something understandable, somewhat simpler in a complex and tedious reality, as it usually seems. An MMA practitioner captures the essence of the *warrior's path* in an interview quote that is admittedly far, possibly too far, but which far better than the undersigned can capture the core:

There's so much at stake, emotionally. The feeling you experience when you're choked or get knocked out – it's existential. It's not just a result. This is something you do that puts your whole existence on its head. Doing this... It's so extreme... it's sort of an enlightenment. I see fighting as somewhat spiritual. It's the way of the warrior. So I actually think that everyone should do martial arts as a way to learn how to handle confrontation and aggression. Humans are really aggressive you know. War, aggression, conflicts and attempts to dominate. It's human nature, isn't it? But we try to suppress that in contemporary society. So instead of teaching boys to understand their aggression – that you have this ability to maximise your performance... but there's no obvious place for this in modern society – it's hidden or suppressed. But the shell of civilization is so thin. But that's a deeper discussion. What I mean is: fighting is existential. (page 170)

Reading this long, but deeply significant quote, my confusion and ambivalence increase. Possibly there is the root of this feeling about where myths about the warrior's path and chivalry in battle with other warriors entered the arena. One reason may be that there is an obvious difference between the three sports, where

triathlon and bodybuilding aim to master the self and the body's ability in order to compete with others, but where the body's boundaries are absolute; To overturn a cycling opponent, or use their bulging muscles to suffocate another practitioner is probably unusual. Alone, on the other side in this case, is MMA, which is also based on mastering the self and the body's ability to compete with other practitioners, but where the boundaries of the body are missing, possibly apart from the rule that practitioners may not kneel the opponent in the head when the fight is brought to bed. It's simply hard to see anything noble with a size 46 foot trying to squeeze an opponent's nose, or noble with kicks and punches that crack bones and crush organs. But... Could there be something in the quote 'the shell of civilization is so thin', or that man is fundamentally aggressive and that this aggression can build something positive in the form of targeted respectful combat with a similarly voluntary adversary?

This is where my ambivalence manifests itself in a cloud of confusion, not least because the analysis is good and is brought with relevant and well-founded arguments, but I still find myself in a position of being able to explain, but still not understand, how practitioners and the practice of MMA actually work.

After all, the book is not just about this perspective, but is a good analysis of a broad and respectfully managed battery of empiricism. In conclusion, this book thus raises questions about what happens in three different fields of human activities. These fields have apparently too few outsiders tried to understand, not least because knowledge of the mere existence of these fields is not manifestly spread outside each group. I am impressed that a book consisting of three studies

and an overall analysis can both ask relevant questions about the nature of reality and answer them, and through this process bring new perspectives on the reader.

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