

Refereed article

Contemporary Body Practices in South Korea: Subjection and Agency in Late Modernity

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Summary

In this work, many peculiarities of the body practices sensationally advertised in South Korean media and often reported on in the West and other countries too are claimed to be largely the results of the drastic neoliberal restructuring of the whole society, which young women and men have had to undergo ever since the Asian financial crisis of 1997. Other social factors, including chronic problems in the medical industry itself, account for most of the remaining explanatory lacunae. After giving an overview of current forms of body practice and the socioeconomic terrain, as characterized by neoliberal restructuring and individualization, I will start my analysis by introducing “practice theory,” which explains social practices as a set of stable and evolving patterns within a community maintained by intersubjective normative judgments performed by its agents on their own performances. After a brief exposition of Brandom’s (1994) deontic scorekeeping model, I will explain the main characteristics of the social practices that this type of practice theory implies. Then I advocate for agonistic politics as the political implementation of practice theory, alongside briefly commenting on its implications for feminist politics. With the necessary theoretical tools set up, I explain what intuitions practice theory and agonistic politics offer on the issue of body practices, as the problem specifically of subjection and agency in this late modern Korean landscape. Finally, I conclude by exploring the creative space that the new social practices made possible by young Korean women are now opening up. This discussion is complemented with due caution on possible pitfalls that necessarily accompany such attempts at building new practices, and threaten to reduce them to retrogressive degeneracy.

Keywords: South Korea, body practices, neoliberalization, practice theory, agonistic politics, subjection and agency

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