

# Body Blows

From Celia Brackenridge, principal lecturer in leisure management at Sheffield City Polytechnic

Matt Seaton's article, 'Work Your Body' (MT April) is welcome as a rare attempt to put physical culture on to the Left's agenda. However, in exploring this high-profile phenomenon, Seaton conflates health, sport and fitness in a way which confuses their very different qualities and meanings.

The eating disorders, hormonal conditions and drugs-related side-effects associated with exercise obsession can hardly be described as empowering. Indeed, many of those most intensely involved in sport would probably argue that it should carry a health warning!

Seaton also falls into the trap of perpetuating the Cartesian myth of 'psycho-physical dualism' (that the mind and body are separate entities), thus denying the holism of the self which one might expect from a left critique. In his enthusiasm for participation, Seaton seems uncritically to be justifying rather than understanding the current fitness boom.

Of greatest concern is his apparent ignorance of the way in which gender mediates both access to, and experience of, exercise regimes. For example, he optimistically asserts that the new physical culture 'is "consumer-led", determined by people as agents, not passive victims, of marketing cam-

paigns' and that 'the gains are particularly significant for women'.

This view ignores the continued and indeed emphasised, marginalisation of women (especially black women, older women, disabled women, women in poverty, young mothers...) within the so-called fitness revolution.

Annual Sports Council data do chart a decade of increasing participation by both men and women, and the statistics for women's increased engagement in indoor activities owe much to the popularity of what might loosely be called exercise-to-music classes. But does this support Seaton's case? I would argue that, far from this representing a rejection of the feminine stereotype, it actually confirms patriarchal definitions of the female body.

Even for those women who do now exercise regularly in designer wear, the body cult has done little to help challenge prevailing ideologies of womanhood (especially motherhood) and has actually reinforced 1980s-style heterosexual stereotypes of femininity.

Sure, radical feminists have consistently addressed the issue of women's control over reproduction and have challenged size and shape norms (fat is still a feminist issue), but Seaton is naive in his assumption that the new physical culture has given 'a huge practical boost' to feminist ideas - far from it.

While personal physical strength can promote women's self-confidence (indeed, that has been the express purpose of some of the more enlightened self-defence/assertiveness courses), individual confidence needs to be converted into collective political consciousness and action for changes in women's status to be achieved. The objectification of the body which occurs in most 'marketed' exercise classes serves merely to inhibit women's potential to subvert the patriarchal system.

Moreover, women who fall short of the standards of the exercise culture (with its slender, toned bodies, fashion-wear, smooth-tanned skins and overt displays of female apologetics in the changing room) face ostracism and ridicule from their female peers.

Muscle definition may be more acceptable in the early 90s than it was in the 60s or early 70s but for most women, at least, it is pursued within a clear heterosexual framework. While ambiguously gay male imagery fills the exercise ads, women are still portrayed as passive, heterosexual adornments. Flo Jo provides not, as Seaton suggests, a 'more accurate role model' for women seeking self-definition, but a hopelessly unrealistic one, which colludes outlandishly with that form of hegemonic heterosexual masculinity which is most oppressive to women and a great many men.

## Just Not Cricket

Matt Seaton is right up to a point when he says that women have gained from the new surge of sports activity: a few years ago it would have been unthinkable for women to run 10,000 metres. Now, even women in their 70s and 80s take part in the London marathon.

But when are sport sponsors, the media, and many sportsmen going to recognise women in sport on the same level as men? Even in tennis, where women have perhaps made most progress, the principle of equal pay for work of equal value has yet to be established.

As for other sports, women footballers, cricketers, snooker players are good for a laugh or a patronising once-a-year showing on tv. And women sailors competing with men in the Round The World yacht race? You must be joking - whoops, they won a stage? Good show, girls. (Note to David Coleman, Desmond Lynam and all other male sports commentators: females in their 20s and 30s are women, not girls. OK?)

Margaret Woddiss, London

## Narrow Outlook

R Evans' historical analysis of German nationalism (MT April) is not only conventional, but also inappropriate in relation to what is happening across central Europe.

It is misleading and even dangerous to talk about Germany only in terms of its nationalistic potential and apparent economic superiority. Ordering the discourse around these themes and deploying us/them, inside/outside metaphors, reaffirms prejudices and mythical patterns of identification and weakens those opposed to nationalistic forces.

And it is also a matter of agenda-setting. Habermas has argued for giving the discourse around German unification a distinctly European dimension, to shift the emphasis away from 'the diffuse notion of the nation-state'. We need such analyses that address current processes on an inter-national level.

Between the abstract global and the intimate local field, on which new times analysis appears strong, there is a vast intermediate field of, for instance, European interaction. This has to be recognised as a site of actual political and cultural struggle, demanding urgent intervention.

Andreas Broeckmann, Norwich

## Family Fortunes

From Gill Butler, of the campaign for access to donor insemination.

Wendy Savage's article about the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill (MT April) rightly predicted that the anti-abortionist lobby would use the bill to attack abortion rights. Why however, was no mention made of the fact that the bill also seeks to control the provision by clinics of donor insemination (DI)?

When the bill was in the Lords, an amendment making it a criminal offence for clinics to provide DI to unmarried women was defeated by only one vote. A similar amendment is certain to be introduced in the Commons.

Supporters of restricted access have discovered that some single women and, horror upon horror, some lesbians,

are choosing to become pregnant by DI. They believe that children so conceived are 'at grave risk of subsequent emotional harm'. That there is absolutely no evidence to support this view does not deter them in the slightest.

All legislation concerning children should have the child's welfare as its paramount concern. Restricting DI to married women is in effect saying that unmarried families or single-parent families are second best. In particular, it is also saying that lesbians are not fit to parent.

Yet one in three marriages today end in divorce. A survey in 1987 showed that some 900,000 couples were cohabiting outside of marriage, and recent legislation has gone a considerable way towards reducing the legal distinction be-

tween children born within married families and those born to unmarried families.

Yet the Moral Right cling to the idea that the nuclear family is, and should be, the norm.

Law based on discrimination is not only bad law, it is dangerous law. Such a law would legitimise the prejudice that already exists about lesbians and single women as parents. It would also stigmatise the thousands of children already born by DI to lesbians and single women.

Restricting access to DI is as much an attack on a woman's right to choose as restricting access to abortion. That being so, I am disappointed that there are some in the pro-choice movement who seem to forget or overlook this. It couldn't possibly have anything to do with wanting to avoid the politically 'embarrassing' issue of lesbian motherhood - or could it? •

## Poll-Tax Pitfalls

Your two features (*MT* April) discuss the Tory poll-tax predicament but do not deal either with Labour's alternative or their response.

The only realistic strategy Labour can offer is to commit itself to repeal of the poll tax.

Any serious advocate of a Labour-led non-payment campaign would have to take on board other issues. For instance, could a Labour council simultaneously agree a budget - and hence set a poll-tax rate - and then ask constituents not to pay it?

Moreover, would the Labour Party, nationally and locally, be expected to provide help and representation for individuals facing legal action following their failure to pay?

It is one thing for the Anti-Poll Tax Federation to urge people to break the law, and quite another for a party which must project itself as a responsible party of government.

And non-payment does set an awkward precedent. How would we have felt about a nationwide campaign of non-payment by ratepayers against profligate socialist councils 'wasting money on gays and lesbians'?

Labour's tasks are twofold. At national level the party must investigate what alternative to the community charge would satisfy the criteria of good taxation and be fairer than the old rating system. At local level Labour authorities must provide services to the community by setting the best budgets they can, under a multitude of constraints; and protect the weakest and most disadvantaged by ensuring that all rebates are claimed.

This is not a 'retreat into the safety of the opinion polls' but hard politics, involving difficult decisions and compromises. If we are serious about exercising power in the localities then such tasks are more important than mock-heroics or pious generalities.

*Gerry Leversha, Acton*

### Private Limits

In his article on the ramifications of the poll tax Andrew Gamble notes that the programme for local privatisation has not moved far enough or fast enough to allow the government to implement the tax successfully.

Gamble asserts that this is largely due to the traditional

'one-nation' ethos of local Tory politicians. True, there are surprisingly few admirers of Westminster, Wandsworth and Bradford among the Conservatives' local-government cadre. But other considerations have also severely limited the political space available both for free-market liberals and penny-pinchers.

The political limits of local privatisation are clearly demonstrated by the increasing success of local campaigns in halting sell-offs, primarily in housing and social services.

Many Labour authorities in inner-urban areas have long appreciated that elected authority is not the same as local power. They have had to deal with a vocal and confident voluntary sector and often a well-organised tenants' movement. The same is perhaps true in Westminster, where the Tories' housing policy is in deep trouble.

Yet housing privatisation plans have also been defeated in Redbridge (where a tenants' movement armed with a £100 grant defeated a £500,000 campaign from the council) in Torquay, Elmbridge, Havering and Hertsmere. In Wirral the ruling Tory/Liberal coalition has been forced to reconsider its plans to sell off its homes for pensioners: a clear example of 'grey power' in action.

This is not to say that there have not been many successful privatisations - there have. Nor is it to claim that local-authority provision is an unalloyed success. But even if only in a purely defensive way, local government is still proving a painful thorn in the side of even the most arrogant of Tory politicians.

*Adrian McMenamin, Herts*

## Secular Chauvinism

The article 'Refusing Holy Orders' (*MT* March), contains so many half-truths and vague generalisations that it is difficult to treat seriously.

It seems from the two authors' writing that every brand of religious 'fundamentalism' is dangerous except their own, which they do not even care to mention.

Their brand of liberal secular fundamentalism thinks that the greatest right a woman can acquire is the right to abort live foetuses, as if this is what women all along have been struggling for.

They totally denude the human being of his most important aspect, the soul, and its need of regular nourishment and nurture, which is only possible through following a spiritual path. This is a vital component of all major theistic religions but absent altogether from all atheistic religions, of which they are active proponents.

Do they really think that women are turning towards religious 'fundamentalism' as a refuge from the racism and sexism of the host society, only to end up 'under the strict control of the male leaderships...'? Are these women so stupid as to exchange the frying pan for the fire? Surely as women writers they ought to credit their own gender with more intelligence.

As for seeking to harness the powers of the modern state and media to the service of religious ideology, I cannot understand what all the fuss is about. Or are the authors afraid that if theists were to gain control of these sources, they might become more popular than the fundamentalists of the liberal and secular Left?

*Jameela Hassan, London*

## Two Plus Two

If Cardinal O'Connor is a murderer, Rex Wockner's piece (*MT* Mar) does not prove the case.

The Catholic Church is against both homosexual practice and condoms, but someone who breaks the first rule is hardly likely to keep the second one; if he does and then gets Aids, he must be slightly unhinged to then point the finger at the church hierarchy.

The Aids epidemic is bound to produce hysteria and Wockner seems to be describing a good example. I am not surprised mainstream gay groups wanted to keep their distance.

*Ron Collins, Axminster*

## Pack Up Your Troubles

Charlotte Du Cann's article on 'Escape Routes' (*MT* April) was a surprise. I thought it was just me (and a few more) who were taking advantage of the demise of *Ile* to get our hands on some redundancy dosh and start a career of serious bumming, but obviously it has become a social trend. I thought I had detected envious glints in people's eyes every time I mentioned packing in my job!

Even the mortgage is no longer an excuse to stay put. One couple, friends of mine, are selling up their house and going travelling; another friend is exchanging his multi-burgled flat in Hackney for a camper van.

And where are we all going? Not to some exotic location - we are going to explore good old Europe!

Now there's *Zeitgeist* for you!

*Use Zambonini, London*

## It's Natural

In your article, 'Mother Nature' (*MT* Mar) Jean Grimshaw asks, 'What kind of "bond" is this?', ie, between mother and child. The 'bond' is love and for most women, in most circumstances, it is eternal.

What a lot of squeamishness over a four-letter word.

*Deborah Whitaker, Tring*

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