

Michael Schüßler: *Die Sprachen des Leibes und die Leiblichkeit der Sprache. Aspekte der Kritischen Theorie des Körpers*, Weilerswist: Velbrück, 2021, 364 pages.

In his 2021 book *The Languages of the Body and the Corporeality of Language*, sociologist Michael Schüßler aims, following the subtitle, to explore “Aspects of a Critical Theory of the Body” (translated). For this purpose, Schüßler provides a commendable close re-reading of the extensive oeuvre by German psychoanalyst and sociologist Alfred Lorenzer, which, despite its originality, has received disproportionately little attention within, and especially beyond, German discourse over the past few decades. Focusing on Lorenzer’s critical theory of the subject, Schüßler begins with Freud’s characterization of the unconscious as a non-linguistic entity (2.1). He then turns to Lorenzer’s central concept of *forms of interaction* (“Interaktionsformen”) (2.2) and convincingly attributes autonomy to its sensory-symbolic variant, in line with Lorenzer’s argument (2.3). Schüßler thereafter elaborates on Lorenzer’s emphasis on the non-identity between subjective and objective structures through the introduction of these *forms of interaction* as an essential concept (2.4) and his effort to demonstrate this materially by connecting psychoanalytic and neuroscientific concepts.

In Chapter 3, Schüßler offers an in-depth analysis of the role of language in subject formation (3.1) and the emergence of repression mechanisms and clichés (3.2), drawing on Lorenzer’s materialist-psychoanalytic perspective. Chapter 4 provides a brief interim conclusion on the relationship between language and speech. Citing Lorenzer, Schüßler first (4.1) critiques Freud’s concept of *thing-presentation* (“Sachvorstellung”), pointing out that an infant’s earliest *traces of memory* (“Erinnerungsspuren”) cannot contain solid object-relations, as the infant is not yet able to recognize distinct objects. These traces instead involve corporeal forms of interaction, which become a significant part of the unconscious to the extent that they cannot be linguistically represented. Finally, Schüßler (4.2) addresses the question of whether the unconscious is structured linguistically, as Lacan argues, or the reverse, as Lorenzer contends, answering once again in Lorenzer’s favor.

Outside of methodological discussions in qualitative research, where Lorenzer’s influence persists due to the in-depth hermeneutics method he pioneered (rooted in his symbolic theory), Lorenzer’s unique combination of Marxist materialism and Freudian psychoanalysis is given disappointingly marginal notion today. Contemporary figures in Critical Theory, such as Axel Honneth and Nancy Fraser, tend to follow Jürgen Habermas’ attempts to combine aspects of psychological and materi-

alist theory, which lean more toward cognitive approaches than psychoanalytic ones. It is, therefore, refreshing and gratifying to see the depth with which Schüßler is engaging with Lorenzer, particularly in relation to Critical Theory, a tradition in which Lorenzer is correctly placed.

It would have been even more satisfying, however, if Schüßler had devoted some of the effort he took to lay out Lorenzer's ideas to engage more meaningfully with Judith Butler's work, before he discards it. Schüßler criticizes Butler's concept of the performative body (p. 12), which he appears to misunderstand or misrepresent as a travesty, while making it the starting point for his investigation. In the first chapter, Schüßler focuses on the subject-object relationship in Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993). Both works clearly approach these questions from a gender-theoretical perspective, as already their subtitles¹ indicate, but this context goes largely unmentioned by Schüßler, aside from a brief reference in the final pages (p. 331). Consequently, it seems that Schüßler repeatedly sets up a straw-man version of Butler's argument, only to knock it down, such as when he reduces Butler's concept of performativity to an "idealistic" or "linguistic" one (pp. 29, 265). Rather than engaging fully with Butler's actual arguments, Schüßler appears to be refuting his own interpretation of them, a pattern that persists throughout the book.

Overall, it remains unclear why Schüßler chose this particular entry point, especially given that the theoretical gap in responses to Butler, which he alleges in the introduction, has long been filled by feminist philosophers of subjectivity, including entire schools of thought in materialist and affective turns. These developments, which Schüßler either overlooks or dismisses as irrelevant, make his criticism of Butler feel disconnected. His citation of authors like Villa Braslavsky, in ways that suggest that they or Butler are claiming that language or performativity somehow *magically* create bodies in a literal sense (p. 130), comes across as either a misunderstanding or a staged misrepresentation. Moreover, the desire to contribute yet another critical review of Butler seems to create a sense of internal conflict in the author at times. For example, Schüßler refers repeatedly (pp. 42, 128) and affirmatively to a passage from Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*—which, one could argue, encapsulates Butler's entire point, even though he otherwise critiques her harshly ("Because entity is not immediate, because it is only through the concept, we should begin with the concept, not with the mere datum," Adorno, 1990: 153).

¹ *Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* and *On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*

Similarly, Schüßler discusses how “identification with the father always stems from repressed homosexual desire” (p. 268, translated) without considering Butler's remarks on melancholic identification in the fifth chapter of *The Psychic Life of Power* (Butler, 2006).

Returning to Schüßler's main contributions: in his own Chapter 5, he provides a detailed analysis of the relationship between bodily and sensory experiences and language, particularly when these experiences transcend the boundaries of verbal expression. He references pre-verbal forms of interaction that have symbolic characteristics but are qualitatively distinct from linguistic structures (5.1), before he describes the entanglement of perception and cognition (5.2) and explores the role of emotions in bodily experiences. Schüßler goes on (5.3) to analyze childlike play, mimesis, and the role of imagination, showing how such experiences are expressed in *forms of interaction* and captured by language in ways that transcend ordinary discursive logic. This chapter culminates in a thorough engagement with Adorno's concept of non-identity (5.4). Schüßler explains how Adorno's reflections on language and the conceptual point to the surplus inherent in language, which is never fully absorbed by the identity of the concept. He also examines metaphor as a rhetorical device to illustrate non-identity and the mediation of bodily experiences. Schüßler skillfully unpacks the complex interactions between language and corporeality across several layers.

In Chapter 6, Schüßler draws again on Adorno's concepts of non-identity and constellations from *Negative Dialectics* to examine the configural elements of concept-object relations (6.1). He then turns to psychoanalysis (6.2), focusing on Lorenzer's understanding of psychoanalysis as a “hermeneutics of the body” (6.3). Schüßler convincingly demonstrates parallels between a psychoanalytic understanding of the unconscious and Adorno's concept of non-identity, as well as between Adorno's idea of philosophy as interpretation and psychoanalytic treatment (particularly Lorenzian psychoanalysis).

The final third of the book begins with a chapter promising a long-awaited payoff: “The Critical Theory of the Body.” In the first two subsections, Schüßler ventures into the field of psychoanalytic metapsychology. Starting with the intrauterine and postnatal phases, he then explores body schemas and subject-object relations and concludes with an outlook on secondary socialization (7.1). In this instance, as well as in his subsequent comments on early childhood gender relations regarding male and female sexual object choices within the framework of hetero-

sexual norms, Schüßler falls into many of the same pitfalls that thinkers like Freud and others have often encountered. Specifically, I am referring to the inability to sufficiently abstract from their own rationality or subjectivity. The rationality abstraction deficit leads to claims such as the fetal complex of thumb-sucking being an early form of displeasure-pleasure dynamics (p. 215), a statement that fits in very well with the thoughts described there but is not therefor valid on its own. Schüßler's entrenchment in his own subjectivity on the other hand results in theoretical remarks that warrant the critique of being androcentric. A key example of this is how Schüßler applies Klaus Theweleit's concept of "body armour" (Theweleit, 1978, p. 38), which he had specifically developed regarding men, to all –implicitly assuming just two– sexes, without questioning or problematizing this application (p. 223ff).

Starting from subchapter 7.2, the book really picks up pace and Schüßler delivers insights that one might have expected earlier in a work that, ideally, aims to engage its readers. A notable example is the term "Leib-Körper"². This term, introduced on the second page of the introduction and used almost a hundred times up until subchapter 7.2, only receives its first substantive definition on page 275, further developed on pages 280-283.

With this conceptual clarification, the reader is finally rewarded with Schüßler's compelling analysis of the body as a key element in critical theory (7.3). He argues that bodily suffering can be understood more objectively than the suffering of the soul. In countering Habermas's critiques of normativity—where Habermas, not coincidentally, shifts away from psychoanalysis and turns to Kohlberg's cognitive frameworks³—Schüßler introduces his concept of "sensual reflexivity" (p. 296, translated). By this, he means that cognition and understanding are influenced by bodily sensations and perceptions. Bodily experiences, such as pain, pleasure, or discomfort, actively shape our thoughts and capacity for reflection. It links the physical and spiritual realms in a profound way.

Schüßler thus demonstrates how our ability to understand the world is not solely based on language or cognitive processes but is deeply shaped by our physical experiences. The body, in this view, is not a passive object but an active source of

² A concept challenging to translate into English since both "Leib" and "Körper" are typically rendered as "body." However, in philosophical discourse, "Leib" refers to the "lived body," while "Körper" refers to the "physical body." The best approximation might be "body-corporeality."

³ And with that, by the way, Habermas cannot escape normativity as such, as we can read in Amy Allen's book *The End of Progress* (Allen, 2016).

knowledge. Why Schüßler feels the need to frame these valuable and comprehensible remarks in opposition to Butler—while ignoring a dialectical approach and seemingly aiming to show how bodies *really* matter—remains a mystery. A little bit of engagement with Jean Laplanche, which would have gone beyond his “The Language of Psychoanalysis”⁴ could perhaps have helped here, especially with regard to his concept of “enigmatic signifiers” (Laplanche, 2005), which maybe could have even built a bridge.

In the concluding chapter, Schüßler concretely takes aim at the existing relationship between academic sociology and the body. Not being a social scientist myself, I am only able to judge to a limited extent how urgently sociology as a discipline needs to consider Schüßler's emphasis that “nature must be considered as a conditional fact of substantial mediation” or the remark that “social relations are always also natural relations” (p. 333, translated). But amid the aforementioned movements of contemporary critical theorists away from a psychoanalytic and towards a cognitivist foundation of how society inscribes itself into us and thus (here the opinions are divided) into our bodies, I see strong indications to believe sociologists would do well to take Schüßler's criticism to heart.

Overall, I am glad to have read this book—though I emphasize the past tense. The primary reason for this specification is the nearly unbearable nominal style Schüßler employs, making his remark in the introduction, that scientific studies could “only partially or not at all adopt forms of linguistic aesthetics” (pp. 10-11, translated), seem almost self-ironic. One could generously argue that Schüßler is offering an immediate example of the connection between language and corporeality, a concept he elaborates on throughout the book. Unfortunately, the immediate experience for the reader is one of recurring physical reluctance to confront the next dense paragraph—a challenge I could only face with either detachment or considerable self-discipline.

Yet, it would have been a pity not to persevere, given the occasional insights one can gather when Schüßler isn't simply rehashing the thoughts of others (which often end up being harder to grasp than the originals). Where he presents his own ideas, however, real gems appear—like his use of the term “nutritive potential” (p. 270), borrowed from ecotrophology, to describe the psycho-physiological deficit experienced by parents who are unable to breastfeed. Accordingly, I would be very

⁴ Written and published together with Jean-Bertrand Pontalis

pleased to learn more about the original world of thought of the author himself in future writings.

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