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Körper an KörperDialectics of the Body(ies) under Nazism: Sculpting or Erasing

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**Körper an Körper**  
**Dialectics of the Body(ies) under Nazism: Sculpting or Erasing**

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HISTORY 158D

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|                                                                                         |    |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| INTRODUCTION                                                                            | 3  |
| CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH QUESTION                                              | 5  |
| PART 1. THE PARTHENOGENESIS OF AN EPHEBIC BODY                                          | 7  |
| PART 2. AESTHETICS OF A NAZI <i>PAIDEIA</i> AND A REGENERATION OF THE <i>HERRENVOLK</i> | 11 |
| PART 3. 'MEDICALIZING' POLITICS AND 'RATIONALIZING' THE EXCLUSION                       | 18 |
| PART 4. ELIMINATING THE OTHER FROM THE <i>VOLKSKÖRPER</i> : BIOPOLITICS AND CAMPS       | 25 |
| CONCLUSION                                                                              | 31 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY                                                                            | 33 |

## INTRODUCTION

By positing 20<sup>th</sup>-century Germany as the inheritor of a lost paradise eclipsed by Christian alienation, Bernhard Kummer's doctoral thesis can be construed as an intellectual prodrome to the Nazi ideological conception of the body. At its core, the argument of the future professor of Nordic languages and civilization at the University of Jena rests on the idea that sin begets sin. By imposing farcical prohibitions, sin as a heteronomous existential category hinders not only an immediate relationship with one's body but also with nature and others. The once-innocent corporeal reflexivity—epitomized by ancient social practices whereby “the Germans of both sexes had something to bathe in together”<sup>1</sup>—was later reframed as a locus of guilty desire and anguish. Now, if Germany succumbed to decadence, it was in part because bodies yield to the dominion of an unknown conjurer, bound by moralistic, absurd, and remote edicts. Hence, National Socialism endeavored to wrest the illegitimate governance of bodies from the celestial realm, reinscribing it within the ‘plane of immanence’ of the self-instituted and distinctly delineated *Volksgemeinschaft* (community of the people), wherein the very notion of transcendence was rendered void. Consequently, sin resonated only with religious anti-natural prudishness, for under the Third Reich, the ever-looming matrixial transgression was a deviation from the fundamental and inescapable biological laws that mandated the preservation of the racial body. Hence, the concept of *bionomisch*: the German people is a vital reality (*bios*), and this life is prescriptive (*nomos*).<sup>2</sup>

It is therefore clearly understood that the *Machtübernahme* (take-over of power) of 1933 was much more than just a political change. From the very outset, it was the very expression of an uprising of the body and soul of the German people against a profoundly unsatisfactory artificial order of things. Sweeping the “vacuity of the Weimar's agnostic constitution” away, 1933 proclaimed the *Volksgemeinschaft* as a “fundamental value.”<sup>3</sup> The Nazi grammar, which Hitler liked to describe as “applied biology,” considered the body no longer as an inviolable and sacred domain of the self, but rather as an experimental property of a racial whole. As Richard Walther Darré, key Nazi ideologist and NSDAP *Reichsleiter*, wrote, the “moral imperative of our time” is that “we

must be able to answer for every child born within our racial community before our ancestors,” that is, “to comply with the laws of life and blood and to venerate the ancestors” as “new tablets which will open on a German era.”<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, the body under Nazism was not merely considered through the prism of its basic acceptation—a physical structure of a living organism. In fact, National Socialist’s *Weltanschauung* (worldview) affixed a new language to the body, which had less to do with axiomatics or irrefutable truth than with a faithful interpretation of the laws of Nature. *Völkisch* ideology (movement of the folk), as developed by anthropologist Eugene Fischer in his inaugural address as Nazi rector in July 1933, integrated the body into a conceptually coherent axiological and ethical set that aimed at both spontaneity and experience, morality and bravery, force and combat. In other words, this body rehabilitation was part of a broader project designed to recover the instinct of the *Naturvölker* (native peoples, or indigenes)—yet without any primitivism—this so-called ‘common sense’ (*gesunder Menschenverstand*), which had then acquired a validity of opposability in the justification of a judicial or police decision. True “physicians of the German body,”<sup>5</sup> in the words of SS General Werner Best, the Nazis manipulated individual bodies—and, by extension, the *deutscher Volkskörper* (German national body)—must be considered if we are to construct a heuristic of the body under Nazism.

The creation of the *Herrenvolk* (master people) and the *Rassengemeinschaft* (racial community) required a meticulous, multifaceted transformation of bodies—one that encompassed discipline, education, and integration, but equally, marginalization, mutilation, and annihilation. For the Nazis, racism was a mechanism of exclusion and, more less-intuitively, a process of inclusion. Since no ontological revision was possible—quiddity defined existence, we might say—certain bodies were not merely subordinated but categorically expelled from the community, judged as inherently and irredeemably antithetical to a biological order. This foundational principle, too often treated with brevity in scholarly literature, was not incidental but central to the Nazi racial project.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH QUESTION

With this clarification in place, I can argue that the defining strength and singularity of Nazi corporeal culture lay in its ability to endow a preexisting combinatorial aggregate of ideas and content with historical depth and intelligibility—offering a past, present, and future to Germans in the throes of existential disorientation through its narrative force. Thus, the body emerges as an indispensable hermeneutic key to Nazism, precisely because it simultaneously enables a reflection on the spatiotemporal structuring of National Socialism and the ways in which its proponents situated and related themselves to it. More specifically, and because of the interpretative and analytical gaps in academic literature on the body, I contend that what was most distinctive about Nazi body politics was its development through a threefold dialectic—three stages that the consistent hermeneutic framework forged here, *Körper an Körper*, as both sursumption and paradigm (in the Hegelian model), transcends and integrates:

1) Although rooted in the anthropometric and phenotypic model of the Greek man, the standardized Aryan ideal type existed only *a contrario*, sculpted negatively through a countertype, a kind of ‘public pest’ (*Volksschädling*), that was politically constructed as repugnant—Jewish, Roma, Slavic and Afro-German peoples, homosexuals, disabled individuals—and engineered to reinforce exclusive belonging. This counter-body functioned as an inverted yardstick, defined through an antagonistic phenomenality: a series of binary juxtapositions distinguished the Aryan body from the allogeous one—clean-dirty, firm-loose, turgescient-flaccid, strong-frail, muscular-potbellied, determined-cowardly, vigilant-sluggish. Members of the racial and blood community were thus trained to recognize one another through a specific corporeal identity and stylistic, while simultaneously differentiating themselves from the ‘foreign body’ (*Fremdkörper*) and the ‘subhuman’ (*Untermensch*). This is the ‘identificationist-differentialist *Körper an Körper*.’

2) Just as blood coagulates to stabilize flow and ensure hemostasis, the Nazi regime sought to balance, cohere and solidify the German national body by fostering a heightened physical awareness among ‘healthy’ Germans—through carefully orchestrated mass gatherings and

synchronized bodily movements in grand-scale spectacles—and, as a result, to forge a metaphysical conscience of the density, unity, and strength of the collective body. In parallel, those designated as ‘parasites’ were cast as ‘superfluous weight’ (*Ballast*), to be condemned, isolated, surgically excised, sterilized—all in the name of protecting the race, reaffirming national greatness, and re-enchanting the historical diachrony. It is essential to understand that this logic—an ideological matrix imagining and fantasizing a body ideal—justified an ethics of segregation in which the body in need of regeneration was dual: both concrete (the individual Aryan body to be physically perfected) and metaphorical (the racial body of the community to be purged). This is the ‘solidarist-exclusivist *Körper an Körper*.’

3) The perfusion of the racial and individual body followed a twofold selectionist-eugenic and social-Darwinian scheme: one aimed at enhancing the purity of the Aryan body through a new *paideia*—more athletic and cooperative, less intellectual and individualistic; the other aimed at governing the body of those deemed ‘non-performing,’ ‘non-productive’ and ‘non-profitable’ beings (*leistungsunfähige Wesen*) through sterilization policies, deportation and physical extermination. This ‘anatomy-politics,’ that is, this biopolitical interference in the realm of bodily intimacy aimed at controlling and training the body according to pre-established norms and being the condition for a “right to kill and power over life,”<sup>6</sup> arose because the Nazis were gripped by a profound biological panic, rooted in the seismic demographic transformation of the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century, about the future homogeneity of the German population: between the unification of the Reich and the outbreak of the First World War, Germany’s population surged by an unparalleled 67 percent (from approximately 40 million to 67 million). It was in this context, profoundly shaped by Wilhelmine era, that Germany began to interrogate the conditions of its own survival, questioning the long-term viability of such expansion under the constraints of ‘territorial constraints’ (*Volk ohne Raum*). Compounding these fears was the racial calculus of figures like Hans Günther, who estimated that only 50 percent of Germany’s bloodline was of Nordic origin—an existential threat, as the Nordic race was seen as teetering on the brink of extinction. Hence arose the imperative to reconstitute the ‘stock.’<sup>7</sup> This is the ‘augmentationist-eliminationist *Körper an Körper*.’

Therefore, this article will seek to answer the following question: how is the Nazi *Körper an Körper*, that is, the analytical framework of the phenomenological conception of the body according to the triple dialectic, the precipitate of a multitude of considerations—physical, biological, racial, gendered, ethical, historical, aesthetic—which entered into synergy with the complicit participation of a multitude of actors to make the Nazi vision coherent and consistent?

The first part of this research article undertakes an archaeology of the Nazi body, elucidating how the discourse of origins—rooted in ancient and Nordic mythologies—suffused the newly constructed *Menschenbild* (image of man). This inquiry will illuminate the unfolding of the *corpus sanum* ideal and the meticulous orchestration of physical bodies in daily life. If this aesthetic and spiritual choreography was predicated upon a suite of policies designed to safeguard the autochthonous, or more precisely, the Indo-Germanic indigenous body—thus ‘medicalizing’ politics itself through processes of biologization—it remained structurally incomplete without a negative dialectical counterpart: the scientific rationalization of exclusion, whereby the allogeneic and the pathologized were excised from the national corpus. In this sense, we will observe that the elimination of those deemed *Gemeinschaftsunfähig* (unfit for communal life) functioned as the constitutive, equilibrating mechanism of an ideological systematization and continuum—one that inexorably extended from the elevation of a prescribed corporeal ideal to the marginalization and eventual annihilation of its antithesis, within the broader framework of state-driven zootechnics.

#### ARCHAEOLOGIZING THE BODY OF THE INDO-GERMANIC RACE AND CONSTRUCTING THE NORDICIST META-NARRATIVE OF ORIGINS: THE PARTHENOGENESIS OF AN EPHEBIC BODY

*Ex septentrione lux*: it is from the North—the *Septentrion*—and not from the East, that Germanic civilization originated.<sup>8</sup> Here is the thesis that the Nazis first took from Tacitus’ ethnographic monograph, who considered that “the peoples of Germania have never been soiled by marriages with other nations and have remained a pure species, without mixture, and similar to nothing

other than itself,”<sup>9</sup> before making it drift towards racial considerations. The Latin historian defined positively the Germanic body and flattered its ethno-type and is for this reason updated and systematized into State dogma by the Nordicism of the racial scientist Hans Günther.

This Nordic vulgate was therefore taught to the troops of the *Ordnungspolizei* (the uniformed police force), which genealogized the “homeland of the Nordic race in Western, Northwestern and Central Europe of the Ice Age,”<sup>10</sup> and taken up by the SS magazine *Das Schwarze Korps* in its very launch issue, which proposed the North Pole as the original cradle.<sup>11</sup> This symbolic co-optation transformed, in essence, the “history of Europe” into the “history of the Nordic race,”<sup>12</sup> and allowed the Nazis to claim authorship of prestigious civilizations, notably Greek and Roman: “The superior cultures created by the Indo-Germans in India, Persia, Greece and Rome sufficiently prove the creativity of the Nordic spirit. The decadence of the Nordic elite made them disappear. But even today, we feel our kinship of essence with these cultures, which are of the same origin.”<sup>13</sup> This is to say the importance of the meta-narrative of origins as the discursive rooting of Nazi politics aiming to find historical legitimacy and to convince itself of a racial majesty that should be read in the bodies. Parthenogenesis of a dynamic soil, pure blood, and bodies producer.

In that, the Nazis considered themselves to be the point of civilizational continuity and the heralds of a history that obliged them. Therefore, the art of the Third Reich was an essential instrument to materialize the idea of an aesthetic perfection of this Nordic race. As the French historian Johann Chapoutot noted: “Greek sculpture and Roman sculpture constitute a conservatory (*conservatoire*) of the racial norm, of Nordic beauty.”<sup>14</sup> Sculptures, marble statues (*Marmorstatue*) and ephebic nudes of Nazi artistic production flooded public space. So much so that they penetrated the dreams of a Berliner<sup>15</sup> as well as found themselves in the NSDAP’s ideological training booklets.<sup>16</sup> The stone as a vector of archetypes, that is, of accomplished types to be attained, was privileged in plastic propaganda because it spatially froze the timeless, namely the phenomenality of the Nordic race which nestled in an impeccable aesthetic of the body. These bodies, captured in the stone and exposed to contemplation, were defined by canons that were

specific to Aryanity, as Arno Breker and Joseph Thorak, knighted as official sculptors of the Third Reich, strived to depict. Two examples seemed significant to illustrate this new semiotics of the body: in this chronological—temporally logical—order, Breker's ancient statue *Der Wächter* (1938) as a symbol of the defense of the race and Thorak's *Das Urteil des Paris* (1940) as a representation of a domineering masculinity.

*Der Wächter* (The Guardian) features a naked warrior, tense in his effort and tense in his vigilant concentration, displaying all the elements of Nazi warrior virility, such as the impeccably sculpted musculature, the determined bearing of the redemptive sword and the intrepid engagement in the art of war coalesce into an aestheticized ideal of militant masculinity. Unsheathing his weapon, he enacts his very existence and worth in the defense of a genetic patrimony—an inheritance that transcends his individual being, yet to which he remains an inexorable custodian. This courageous combatant is adorned, moreover, with signs that recall Antiquity (round shield of the hoplite, gladius of the legionnaire, Grecian drapery) to suggest the multi-millennial permanence of a combat that opposes Jewish sub-humanity to Aryan humanity. In that perspective, he instantiates the Nietzschean *Übermensch*, both by his impressive physical dispositions, the fruit of a new *paideia* centered on the development of the body through sport (see *infra*), and by his moral and ethical qualities.

On the one hand, he conveys this metaphysics of vitalism (*Lebensphilosophie*) by being ready to die for a body-State based on “unity of blood” like the Greeks, as some Nazi exegetes of Plato thought<sup>17</sup>: Plato's very ambition, which is then embodied in this man, was the resurrection of a racial holistic principle, of a society conceived as an “organism, a solidary entity,”<sup>18</sup> a biologically united body, that is, as *Gemeinschaft*. On the other hand, *Der Wächter* vehicles the idea of an “intermingling of times” (*compénétration des durées*) theorized by Henri Bergson, whereby Nazism as an idiosyncratic political experience thought itself penetrated and thought it penetrated a non-breaking temporality that sought to present the past in the body to give it a future of a thousand years, hence the eschatological component of Nazism. The archetype of the male body promoted by the regime's discourse was, therefore, all about metallic hardness and tension,

progress and action, because it must be sufficiently “energetic” and “pure,” as Robert O. Paxton put it,<sup>19</sup> to emerge from “six thousand years of racial war”<sup>20</sup> and leave the time of History to inhabit that of the millenarian reign by the resounding victory over what the Nazis considered to be a dialectical biologism—and not a Marxist dialectical materialism. Hitler wanted bodies “swift as a greyhound, as tough as leather, and as hard as Krupp’s steel,” as he said in 1935 to the young people gathered in Nuremberg.<sup>21</sup> But far away from this depiction, the woman was represented as a desirable, even erotic body, an object of conquest as one would conquer lands.

This gendered distinction and distribution of social functions between men and women is particularly striking in *Das Urteil des Paris* (The Judgment of Paris). Indeed, three goddesses of Olympus—Aphrodite, Hera, and Athena—are exposed to the appraising gaze of Paris depicted in movement, powerfully extending his arm and the apple of victory towards Aphrodite: the contrast is thunderous between the body of a once again dynamic and closed by the effort of man, and the three open and offered bodies of women. The inclined heads and the arms freed from the trunk seem to invite the grasping of the man, attracted by the beauty of this femininity thus showcased. The slender limbs contrast with the rounded fullness of the hips, abdomen, and breasts—emblems of fecundity and auguries of a triumphant motherhood—while the ethereal harmony of their lithe, golden-haired forms elevates them as both paragons of racialized beauty and consecrated vessels of an ideologically ordained procreative destiny: they must transmit the excellence of their genetic heritage by fulfilling their biological function, which constitutes the only natural and social vocation of women. The mirror effect between the armored body of a man and the indolent bodies of women shows the Nazis’ desire to turn a biological property into a functional and moral assignment in the social domain. Indeed, the Nazis defined a canon of masculinity and femininity—thereby leaving no space for the expression of deviant masculinities and femininities—which must be read on the bodies themselves, as virility, camaraderie, harshness and discipline for the first, submission and childbearing for the second.

Here unfold the mechanics of a body dialectic. But let us refine the perspective: whereas in the fascicle *Blut und Boden*, the juxtaposition of judicial portraits—contrasting the intoxicating

Nordic type with the disheveled and criminalized Semitic countertype—served to instill an asymmetrical recognition,<sup>22</sup> the present dialectic is dimorphic: it stages two distinct visions of the body, not in opposition, but in parallel valuation, each upheld without negation of the other. In fact, although reduced to the prerogative of its sexual ontology, the woman is not devalued, far from it. Since fighting for the race and giving birth for the race led to the rebirth of a perfect race after centuries of spiritual acculturation and physical neglect: Breker's *Der Kunder* (The Announcer) is this heraldic figure that undoubtedly announces, in the depths of the World War II (1942), a triumphal victory, embodying the advent of a regenerated humanity. His body is the chemically pure precipitate of all that the Nazi aesthetic ideal venerated: an overdeveloped musculature—particularly in the torso—exuding an almost sculptural perfection, an unshakable confidence and courage inscribed in the prophetic poise of his gait and gesture, and a visage marked by an expression of resolute determination. His sublimity is rendered all the more absolute by the presumption of his blondness, for, as *Das Schwarze Korps* asserted, golden hair in ancient Greece was the mark of the *Herrenvolk*, while in Rome, it distinguished “the race of patrician lords” from the plebeian masses.<sup>23</sup>

In short, Nazism lapped the utopia of production and reproduction of perfect bodies, in conformity with the Hellenic-Nordic norm and consummation by the resurrection of an aesthetic architectonic preserved in the memory of stone. The Greek body has crossed the millennia in its petrified matrix; it symbolized a potential that the Nazi regime wanted to actualize for its soteriological virtue. This Grecianizing and Nordicist aesthetic of the body was supported by a discipline of bodies and masses, sculpted and choreographed through the medium of a new *paideia*.

#### SCULPTING, DISCIPLINING AND CHOREOGRAPHING THE CORPUS SANUM: AESTHETICS OF A NAZI PAIDEIA AND A REGENERATION OF THE HERRENVOLK

If the Aryan body, in its singularity, embodies beauty, it ascends to an even higher form when subsumed into the greater body of the racial community—not as an indistinct fragment lost in

the mass, but as a vital thread woven into the fabric of a shared fate, a communion of peers bound by destiny. The Nazis assigned the *Führer* the task of shaping the mass to transform it into a people united around the defense of the race. This idea of creating a collective body from the sculpture of an individual body was attested by Joseph Goebbels, Reich Minister of Propaganda, who wrote in an open letter to Wilhelm Furtwängler, world-famous German conductor: “We who give shape to modern German politics, feel ourselves to be artists who have been entrusted with the high responsibility of forming, from the raw mass, the solid and full image of the people.”<sup>24</sup> The metaphor of ‘Prince-artist’ was strikingly represented in Oskar Garvens’ “Der Bildhauer Deutschlands” (1933)<sup>25</sup> and later detailed by Goebbels again in his novel: “The statesman is also an artist. For him, the people are nothing more than what stone is for the sculptor. The *Führer* and the masses, that poses no more problem than the painter and color.”<sup>26</sup> Chiseling, cutting and polishing according to the antique, even burling and breaking if necessary. This solidarity between the poet and the biopolitical dictator was realized both in a new education of bodies and a new way of choreographing the unity of the total body.

Nordicist mysticism only instilled a new anthropology of the body, which must be followed to be effective by a particular formation. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler stated bluntly that the educational system of the *völkish* State must be an enterprise of “breeding” athletic, beautiful, enduring, and “absolutely healthy bodies.”<sup>27</sup> Hitler castigated a traditional schooling too oriented towards intellectual learning, an instruction that shaped brains without bodies. The intellect is disqualified because it is associated with paralysis of instinct, anesthesia of the mind and apathy of the willingness; it produces deformed savants, physically incapable scholars. Hence, the Juvenalian maxim “*Mens sana in corpore sano*” (A healthy mind in a healthy body) is brought up to date and arched to the *Lebensreform* (life-reform) of the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century—however, this does not mean that the intellectual is completely out of the picture: school curricula, for example, have drawn on Mendelian representations, mechanisms and concepts to explain eugenic policies.<sup>28</sup> Yet, a hypertrophied mind in a sick body is nothing but a symptom of degeneration. For Hitler indeed, the German educational system had omitted the fundamentals of Greek *paideia* from which it

claimed ancestry: the body, which is the receptacle of will-power and determination, combined with the training of joy in responsibility, must be developed at least as much as the mind. “In general,” affirmed the *Führer*, “a healthy and powerful mind will only be found in a healthy and powerful body. The fact that geniuses are sometimes physically poorly developed, even sick, cannot say anything against it. These are exceptions which, as always, only confirm the rule.”<sup>29</sup> The school project, which functioned as both an ‘identificationist’ and ‘augmentationist’ *Körper an Körper* was therefore primarily focused on physical cultivation, “the training of bodies healthy to the core. Only in a second stage does the development of intellectual capacities come into play.”<sup>30</sup> In that perspective, Hitler advocated two hours of sport daily, at least, as a means of reviving the spirit of the *Gymnasium*.<sup>31</sup> Eloquently, *Nationalpolitische Erziehungsanstalten* (Napola), modeled after British secondary boarding schools, were established to educate the party’s future political leader and the nation’s future military professionals. By 1940, it was planned that all officers would graduate from these institutions, where admission tests included war games and physical fitness assessments—as a matter of fact, “disproportionate numbers of Napola students became professors of physical education after the war.”<sup>32</sup>

The *Lebensreform* movement, and its correlate the *Nacktkultur*, had exalted body freedom and forcefulness (*Freikörperkultur*), its roots in Nature and soil, and work on its hygiene as a remedy to break with an urban and industrial civilization judged to be spiritually unhealthy and physically decaying—in final scenes of Robert Reinert’s film *Nerven* (1922), naked bodies find healing through the pristine and invigorating air of the mountains, offering a remedy for neurasthenic conditions acquired in the city milieu. In essence, it was a symbolic engineering that inscribed the body in an ‘Aryan-Olympic’ spirit, to borrow the subtitle of a best-seller published by a German officer in 1924, whose construction through the education of a Nordic man was the ultimate goal. In this book, Hans Surén developed the thesis that Indo-Germanic culture, if it wanted to reconnect the glorious chain of time, must rediscover the culture of naturism and harmony with Nature, in order to access not only a superior physical phenotype but also a collective psyche and an Olympic semiotics. This spirit was structured around the triptych “sun, nature and nudity,”<sup>33</sup> a

medley of sport, naturism and immediacy of the body, constant and “freed from the sheaths imposed on us by civilization and culture” exposure to air, light and *Cosmos*, which already defined the ancient Greeks, “our ancestors.”<sup>34</sup>

The nudism offered the corseted and asphalted city dweller the image of a rediscovered communion with the great Cosmic realm. Its ennoblement was further expanded when Fidus (Hugo Höppener), in his *Lichtgebet* (1894), linked it to the subversion of Catholicism through the image of the regenerated man. In this vision, the naked body, posed in a crucifixion-like stance, is not a symbol of death but of rebirth—brought about by the invigorating embrace of the elements along the German coast of the North Sea or a Scandinavian fjord—a message that would later be adopted by the Nazis. And Hanns Johst, poet and SS general, also president of the *Reichsschrifttumskammer* (Reich Chamber of Literature) and the *Deutsche Akademie für Dichtung* (German Academy of Poetry), to exhort, in a mystical-warlike flight: “Follow your own heart without reserve! It is the command post of the divine nature within you [...] If you live in a disciplined and moral manner, you will do justice to your people and your race.”<sup>35</sup> In sum, the heart and the body stand against the craven ratiocinations of reason and comprehension.

More than a renewed morality, the innocent representation of the nude told the truth and the authenticity of a race whose bodies are beautiful, mixed, in symbiosis and blended into nature, all sexes combined. But it is cardinal to underscore that the naked Nazi body, whether it was a contemporary representation or an ancient statuary, was de-eroticized—since the pornography was seen as the prerogative of Jewish degeneracy—and totally abstract, without signs of fatigue or hairiness. In that, the German scholar Reese Dagmar challenged the idea of a gender-biased education, pointing out that the key to the Bund Deutscher Mädel program (League of German Girls) was the classification of girls as ‘young people’ rather than ‘women.’ The Nazi *paideia* emphasized “fungibility” as well as “body control and discipline, rationality and efficiency.”<sup>36</sup>

The new *paideia* encompassed man between two poles of irrational drive and rational form, which must be considered in education and the building of the State, by imposing on the Dionysian pulsion the harmonious display of Apollonian reason instead of restraining them by an

ascetic repression of the oriental and Christian type, denying the body. This regenerated spirit leads to the shaping of more efficient bodies, more in conformity with the claimed Greek ideal and, in this, both exceptional and normal in their conformity to the Nazi standard. The Aryan race was therefore able to exhibit to the eyes of the world the result of this *paideia* of bodies, as shown on the front page of *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* at the opening of the Olympic Games in June 1936: the body presented was obviously masculine, naturally blond, logically determined and correctly sculpted. Actually, he symbolized the education of the citizen-soldier, the poet-athlete. Leni Riefenstahl, in her film *Olympia* (1936), shot especially for this great sporting event and largely financed by the Ministry of Propaganda (1.5 million *RM*)<sup>37</sup>—in a performative “illusion”<sup>38</sup>—staged, imaged and celebrated the trans-secular dialogue and continuity between the Hellenism of stone bodies and the German flesh. This symbolic connection was particularly made through the famous fade-in which sets in motion the resistance and permanence of the German Nordic body, with the German decathlete Erwin Huber as allegorical figure of the *translatio igni*.

Even deeper than that, the 1936 Nazi Olympics were the most opportune and strategic ground to physically feel and internationally deploy the principles of ‘self-normalization’ and ‘self-control.’ As the German scholars Thomas Alkemeyer and Alfred Richartz wrote: “the ‘muscular physis’ of bodies strengthened by sports represented the domination of state powers over the individual body.”<sup>39</sup> The intrinsic solidarity between Dionysian and Apollonian patterns is here translated in a paradigmatic way: spontaneism and naturalism were arranged in a rationally organized mass subordinated to the *Führer*. Much more than a simple celebration, the Olympics were built around a festive “design,”<sup>40</sup> in the words of Carl Diem. For the German sports theorist and chief organizer of Berlin 1936, this design, which aimed to coordinate bodies in a disciplined but efficient, servile but dynamic mass, found its performative value in the “magical powers of music, song, dance, and light.”<sup>41</sup> This transmutation of politics into a “highly ritualized and operatic public sphere”<sup>42</sup> in which “the acclamatory performance of mass political submission followed upon the destruction of the pluralism and procedural negotiations associated with the practice of democracy”<sup>43</sup> was made possible by the aesthetic attention paid to the plasticity of the body. In other

words, Olympic spectacles were the epitome of palingenetic solidarity function as a mythopoeia, that is, the transformation of the past to suit present needs.

This political process of manufacturing totalizing and unifying myths, especially about the body, was a technique of organizing the legitimacy of the ideological image of the governing group for both internal and external consumption. Because among the Nazis, the word ‘spectacle’ is to be understood according to Guy Debord’s definition, that it is arranged as an image of reality and not treated as a reality in itself.<sup>44</sup> In fact, this kind of popular festivities were a counter-proposal to the strict separation between public space and stage in ‘bourgeois’ theatre: the bodies of the ‘closed mass,’ to take up the Elias Canetti’s concept,<sup>45</sup> were not just passive spectators but active participants of a majestic demonstration of the ‘healthy,’ they engaged their bodies at the same time as they engaged their membership in the party and community. Thus, the spectacle as a mythopoeic means of communication created an extended integration of both production and consumption of ideology and bodies. Nazi body education therefore found a magnificent sounding board in sporting events as in different forms of art, as this example shows, if further film evidence were needed: a striking shot in Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* (1935) reveals Adolf Hitler alongside Heinrich Himmler, head of the SS, and Viktor Lutz, the new head of the SA, walking past a uniform body of over 108,000 faceless troops. The deliberately chosen symmetrical angle shapes a large mass by depicting it as an organ that was both biological and metaphysical, absolutely permanent and strictly ordered, entirely turned towards the immortality of the nation’s body whose all-encompassing phenomenality rests on the shoulders of the three leaders—in a triangular position.<sup>46</sup> Here, the ‘solidarist’ *Körper an Körper* was pushed to its extreme.

This discipline of the individual body in the collective body actually intersects with the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of ‘bodily *hexis*’ (*hexis corporelle*). The body fashioned by the Nazis does indeed refer to a *hexis*, that is, a “political mythology realized, incorporated, become permanent disposition, lasting way of standing, speaking, walking, and, through that, feeling and thinking.”<sup>47</sup> To put in another way, this imperative *hexis* takes on a significant heuristic dimension when it begins to translate the dual idea underlying the *Körper an Körper* paradigm: for life, to

physically feel one's peers morally and qualitatively equal through the discipline and mystification of the collective body and the *Herrenvolk*; and for death, to engage in a hand-to-hand combat, also physical but aimed at the elimination rather than the perpetuation, of the allogenic. This then involved self-sacrifice for the community, the donation of one's body, if necessary, for the continuation of the race in the biological struggle. In Hans Steinhoff's *Hitlerjunge Quex* (1933), 'Quex' (Heini Völker) transformed an abstract collective ideal—fighting against Communists, even in his own family—into an exalted martyrology on his body—scarifying his young life for “the flag [that] means more than death.”<sup>48</sup> The dramatic scenario of Carl Diem's fourth tableau of the Youth Olympic Games, 'Heroic Battle and Lamentation'—the “holy meaning of all games”<sup>49</sup>—could be construed as a staging of the idea that sacrificial death represents the apotheosis of the body.

In that perspective, it is essential to note that this *paideia* which formed, in essence, sacrificers and, in any case, sculpted their sacrificial bodies, was accompanied and permitted by the belief that the body of the *Führer* was much more than a simple natural organism. It is, moreover, distinct from the German historian Ernst Kantorowicz's concept of the 'king's two bodies.'<sup>50</sup> Indeed, the traditional separation between the sovereign's political body and his physical body vanished, since the two bodies are substantially contracted into, at the intersection of *zoē* and *bios*, biological body and political body. Hitler's body was the magnified temporal and metaphysical incarnation of solidarity of the *Volksgemeinschaft*. The *Führer* was neither a dictator, nor a despot; he was the *primus inter pares* (*einer von uns*), the one who, better than anyone else, understood the laws of Nature that have chosen him.<sup>51</sup> But the *Führer*'s body had something elusive, strange, in its distant proximity. In some of his pictures (1941), Heinrich Hoffmann, Hitler's official photographer, perfectly embraced this equivocality. Hitler's hands touch upon his subjects—which enchanted, energized, fascinated, commanded and moved the one being touched—but such touching was less conceived as a haptic experience than a “one-way street [...] maintaining distances however proximate Hitler's body may be.”<sup>52</sup> This bizarre aura underlies all the ambiguity of this figure, characterized, above all, by his singular vicinity. *Omnes viae Hitler*.

Thus, sculpting, disciplining and choreographing the *corpus sanum* and the *Herrenvolk* were the work of a *paideia* that unfolded in public art and sports competitions of all kinds and that promoted a mixture of self-assertion, self-control, standardization, aggressive spontaneity and warrior values. The body was this object to be ordered in a spiritual whole and to be given to the community if necessary. As Jean Améry, an Austrian Jew who survived Auschwitz, wrote: “Nazism abolished this tacit social contract and this dialectical metaphysics of the untouchable body.”<sup>53</sup> This enterprise of individual dispossession or control of bodies would have been difficult to envisage without solid policies of justification.

‘MEDICALIZING’ POLITICS AND ‘RATIONALIZING’ THE EXCLUSION OF “FOREIGN BODIES”:  
VOLKSGEMEINSCHAFT AND HYGIENIC-MEDICAL PREVENTION OF THE ENDOGENOUS,  
RASSENKUNDE AND LEGAL-EUGENIC PURGATION OF THE EXOGENOUS

If Nazism was able to infuse its vision of the body so well into German society, it is in part because it relied on a dual methodology of ‘medicalizing’ politics and ‘rationalizing’ the exclusion of allogeneic bodies. By the first syntagm, I mean the set of hygienic and medical measures linked to the body—and the complicity of a significant part of the scholarship elite—in the implementation of policies aimed at protecting the *Volksgemeinschaft*’s genuine ‘purity.’ The corollary to this proactive preservation, born of a racially obsessive siege mentality, was the systematic purgation of all exogenous ‘vermin,’ cloaked in the veneer of ‘scientific’ and ‘rational’ legitimacy.

The ethical centrality of the imaginary of the pure and healthy Greek body within the Nazi ideological corpus led to the development of public health initiatives that were particularly progressive in that they were based on the most recent scientific discoveries. The emphasis was above all on cancer prevention campaigns, particularly of the lungs, the etiology of which is to be found in smoking. Thus, the Nazis crafted what can be considered the first anti-tobacco campaign of the contemporary era to combat this racial poison.<sup>54</sup> Smoking not only imperiled the body’s enduring vitality through the toxins it embedded in the organs, nor merely jeopardized mental

fortitude through the dependency it engendered; more profoundly, it undermined the cohesion of the racial community by fostering an extraneous obedience, an outward attachment, an “alien allegiance in an era when both mind and body were supposed to belong to the *Führer*.”<sup>55</sup> The body, meant to be the immediate and docile vessel of a singular will, became instead a cumbersome mediator in the capture of the self by politics, its purity sullied by competing fidelities.

To this anti-tobacco aggressive campaign, a significant anti-alcohol movement was quickly added, seen as an equivalent threat. If this preventive effort had been a major social concern from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, rallying both civic organizations and scientific federations—such as, respectively, the Bund Deutscher Tabakgegner and its journal *Der Tabakgegner*, and the Central Committee for Cancer Research and Cancer Combat—Nazi leaders appropriated the issue, reframing it through the lens of the degradation of the national organic body and the contamination of the German germplasm. The American historian Robert N. Proctor argued that cancer, which is mainly due to smoking and alcoholism and had surpassed tuberculosis as the nation’s second-most common cause of death in 1928, became “the number one enemy of the state” (*Staatsfeind Nummer Eins*).<sup>56</sup>

Bernhard Fischer-Wasels, an influential anatomist, contended that cancer was a “cultural disease,”<sup>57</sup> a conspicuous sign of adulterated racial blood. Thus, curing it required shifting from “care of the individual” to “cancer prevention on a large scale—for the entire people.”<sup>58</sup> This holistic approach, fitting with “the National Socialist political principle of totality, which corresponds to our organic and indivisible vision of the unity of the German people,”<sup>59</sup> demonstrated that treating an individual was not an end in itself: according to Nazi principles, it was the entire body of the race that the physician treated through the singular body of the individual patient. The medical doctor was called “to no longer consider only the sick individual,” but “behind him, the hereditary flow of the German people, governed by eternal laws,”<sup>60</sup> to see in the patient “the link in a chain of generations,” “to evaluate him according to the performances that he can develop in the present and for the future,” “to embrace him in connection with his parents and his grandparents, as with his children and grandchildren.”<sup>61</sup> This totalizing vision of hygienic prevention arose from

the fact that biological deviance, wherever it is manifested, was perceived as the symptom of an organic pathology of the racial body. Therefore, purging the harmful foreigner, easily identified in the racial taxonomies produced by Nazi officials, seemed the only ‘solution’ to deal with this ‘problem.’ If cancer was linked to arsenic pesticides, artificial fertilizers, excessive smoking and drinking and faulty nutrition, then it appears above all the result of an infiltration of the enemies of the *Volk* by pernicious acculturation in the biological body of the Nordic race.

The exclusion, even the purifying of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, was carried out by two main routes, the target of which was the body itself, namely the legal path and the eugenic path. It is firstly evident that the Nazis relied on the belief in natural legalism, ‘Nature’ as the sole instantiator of Law, to construct an entire juridical architecture of exclusion of bodies. Since, as Himmler said, according to whom eugenic purgation must be done with the quiet tranquility of the gardener who goes about his plantations, it was a question of “eliminating an abnormal life. It had to be removed, like we pull up nettles before throwing them in a pile and burning them. No revenge in this: the person concerned had to disappear, quite simply.”<sup>62</sup> Exclusion by law was, of course, seen as a means of legitimizing racial hierarchies and engraving these inequalities in the sacred marble of the Law, but it was, above all, the pursuit of the irrepressible natural necessity—that of selection and a fight to the death between races. In the end, the real laws were those dictated by blood, and, for the Nazis, it was that which flew in the veins of the Nordic racial body, which was the purest.<sup>63</sup> It is essential to understand that these legislative texts, which defined a citizen of the Reich as a person who was “of German or related blood” and prohibit “race defilement” (*Rassenschande*) by prohibiting future intermarriages and sexual relations between Jews and people “of German or related blood,” aimed to anchor Nordicity in a soil-blood, and therefore soil-body, junction (*Blut und Boden*). The Hanns Martin Elster’s “Crossroads of Marriage Choices” illustration, part of the popular household manual *Liebe und Ehe* (1941), described Nazi requirements to consider hereditary health when applying for a marriage license.<sup>64</sup> Altogether, in opposition to Roman cosmopolitanism—championed by Zeno and institutionalized by the Edict of Caracalla and the *Constitutio Antoniniana* (AD 212)—and the disembodied ideal of the pure citizen, there

arose, in contrast, a profound emphasis on the corporeal, on “genetics and racial hygiene,” while rejecting the “modern ‘humanist value’ of social welfare for the ill, weak, and worthless individual[s],”<sup>65</sup> as well as the modification of racial nature that ultimately precipitated the fall of Rome.

In the Nazi mind, the practical scope of the Nuremberg Laws was rather limited as they could not completely prevent the infiltration of harmful, individual bodies into the heart of the national body. Indeed, the pernicious penetration, which culturally and racially (qualitative issues) weakened the *Volksgemeinschaft* from within, was all the more dangerous for it as it was experiencing serious demographic atony (quantitative issues), as the demographer Otto Helmut warned in *Volk in Gefahr* (1937).<sup>66</sup> It was precisely because the legal framework operated only on the lever of bastardization (*Mischlinge*) that it was insufficient to achieve “the extraction of the Jewish spirit and the Jewish essence from our thinking and our beliefs, from Germanic mental representations.”<sup>67</sup> That is why, Nazis envisioned eugenics as a definitive and essential measure. Since more than circumcising the bodies of the undesirables, the *Gemeinschaftsunfähig*, namely ‘inferior’ categories as well as homosexuals, drug addicts, ‘asocials’ (*Asoziale*), the homeless or the disabled, it was then necessary to get rid of them according to ‘scientific’ theories.

Several registries, under the leadership of scientists devoted to National Socialism, such as Reich Health Führer Leonardo Conti, were established to record and approach these defective bodies.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, these unhealthy bodies must be purged from the performing body of the race, at the risk of infection of the latter. Entered all the experts of *Rassenforschung* (racial science), whether they were medical doctors, psychiatrists, racial anthropologists, or biologists, who “created the conceptual framework and scientific legitimization for the implementation of Nazi racial policy.”<sup>69</sup> The complicity between the scientific elite and the Nazi body agenda regarding the body was such that, for the German historian Detlev Peukert, the ‘Final Solution’ resulted from a “fatal racist dynamic in the human sciences.”<sup>70</sup> Because it was indeed a *Pfleger* (male nurse) who endorsed, on the front cover of an edition of the *Neues Volk* (1937), the Nazi scheme of reification and commensurability of lives. Standing proudly and paternalistically next to resident of asylum, these ill or supposedly ill bodies were abnormally expensive, the infamous caption is clear: “60,000

*RM*. What this person suffering from hereditary defects costs the *Volksgemeinschaft* during his lifetime. Comrade, that is your money too.” There could be no dilemma: in addition to a biological infection of the racial body, these individuals affected public finances. Nazi biologism was a phobic of mixing, miscegenation, and intermingling. Exclusion from the *Volkskörper*, the reproductive cycle and the German genetic heritage (*deutsche Erbmasse*) under the law for the ‘Prevention of Genetically Diseased Offspring’ took place in three simultaneous or progressive phases.

First, this purge commenced with the legal definition of ‘sick’ people, harmful to the German organism. By this act of July 14, 1933, deformed bodies could no longer reproduce and were condemned to sterilization. Individuals judged to be ‘inefficient’ or ‘substandard’ were grouped into nine disparaging categories: congenital feeble-mindedness, schizophrenia, manic-depressive insanity, hereditary epilepsy, Huntington’s chorea, hereditary blindness, hereditary deafness, severe physical deformity, and severe alcoholism. Since, in the naturalizing Nazi vision, “everyone can only become what their hereditary heritage destines them to,”<sup>71</sup> eliminationist eugenics was, as outlined in the official gazette, a necessity in confronting “the innumerable inferior and hereditarily tainted people,” those flawed beings who, by “procreat[ing] without inhibition,” corrupted, adulterated and diluted the blood purity of the racial community; thus, the purpose of the act was aimed no less than “eradicate[ing] biologically inferior hereditary taints” and “promot[ing] a gradual cleansing of the nation’s ethnic body.”<sup>72</sup> The official commentary claimed that this law demonstrated “the supremacy of the State in the field of life, marriage, and the family.”<sup>73</sup>

Then, the article 11 of the law for ‘Prevention of Genetically Diseased Offspring’ provided the spatial framework within which the definition was translated into action: the sterilization operations will be carried out in special hospitals, numbered 108 as of 1936, with 144 surgeons specifically assigned to the tasks of ‘eugenic care.’<sup>74</sup> Article 12 authorized the use of public force to compel recalcitrant candidates to undergo sterilization. In some regions, such coercion had accounted for up to 30 percent of all sterilization procedures carried out. It goes without saying, then, that it was less a medicine that healed bodies than a medicine that reduced, mutilated or even eliminated those who should not be, which was institutionalized here. From April 1934, this system

was reinforced by the deployment of people's tribunal (*Volksgerichtshof*), aimed at judging, with the force of law and in a very expeditious and partial manner, 'problematic' individuals, to decide what will happen to their very bodies. This court of exception consisted of three judges, but only one was a judicial official, the other two being 'doctors,' usually psychiatrists, geneticists, demographers, or anthropologists—for instance, the anthropologist and racial scientist Hans Günther in the court of Jena. As the German historian Gisela Bock showed, there was a major shift in judicial doctrine, from the rule of lenity and its principle *in dubio pro reo* (in case of doubt, decide for the accused) to *in dubio pro patria* (in case of doubt, decide for the fatherland).<sup>75</sup>

To enhance the scope of the normative and medical message, a text, *Zehn Gebote für die Gattenwahl*, instigated by the Reich Committee for Public Health (1935), was drawn up in the format of a Biblical Decalogue. Articles 2 and 3 of these "Ten Commandments for Choosing a Mate" included the importance of getting married if one was "hereditarily healthy" and, above all, in the most expressive and solemn laconism, of "keep[ing] [the] body pure!"<sup>76</sup> The body became a duty and the very idea of the dissolution of its purity demands a remembrance, that of knowing that the personal body was never simply for and in itself but participated in a larger community (Article 1). In this, to misuse one's healthy body, for example by not directing it towards the perpetuation of the race, was a moral fault. The racial performance of the body then disappeared. This was the case for homosexual people, who by withholding their reproductive potential, were the object, within the framework of 'eliminationist' *Körper an Körper*, of judicial persecution (around 50,000 men) and biological persecution (5,000 to 15,000 men were deported to concentration camps).

If, in 1934-1935, the objective of this social Darwinism was to sterilize 1.2 million individuals "whose heredity placed them from their birth on the negative side of *völkisch* life,"<sup>77</sup> 400,000 people actually underwent this operation. This exclusion from the reproductive cycle and the German genetic heritage (*deutsche Erbmasse*) had been eventually brought to a climax by the *Aktion T4* and its extensions. Indeed, this campaign of mass murder significantly amplified and systematized the executions of the *leistungsunfähige Wesen*. At heart, it was all about 'empty human shells' (*leere*

*Menschenhülsen*), individuals deemed incurably, atavistically afflicted, 'beings unworthy of living' (*lebensunwürdige Menschen*), both in themselves and in relation to the racial community they encumber.

In the wake of the war, the repression of the body became more severe, taking, once again, legal paths based on medical-socio-biological 'observations.' The Penal Code was substantially amended on September 4, 1941, to confer on courts the right to take the life of "dangerous repeat offenders," a measure which particularly affected "asocial Gypsies" and settled "mixed-race" people.<sup>78</sup> The vanishing of 'inorganic' bodies—who represented on the brink of war both a *Volksschädling* and a very social 'type,' according to the new definitional approach proposed<sup>79</sup>—from the racial meta-body took place in near indifference, with the active approval or passive consent of the population.<sup>80</sup> This is to say how the complex, sensitively but not openly polygenist, racial topology established by the Nazis infused German society: "at the top the Aryans and all the animals of prey, the mixed humanities, then the Slavs, the Blacks and the Asians at the bottom. The Jews are next door, elsewhere: neither properly human nor truly animal, they are more a matter of bacteriology than of biological common law."<sup>81</sup> For Goebbels, "the Jew represents an infectious illness."<sup>82</sup> For Hitler, who tried to convince Admiral Horthy about the extermination of Hungarian Jews, the Jews "must be treated like tuberculosis bacilli, which can infect a healthy body. There is nothing cruel about that when you think that innocent animals like rabbits or deer must be decimated to avoid any damage. Why should we spare the horrible beasts that wanted to bring us Bolshevism?"<sup>83</sup> This perspective is vividly suggested in the film *Der Ewige Jude* (1940), which depicted the spread of rats and plague across the globe, following paths associated with the Jewish diaspora—the only policy worth having in the face of this hideous animality, it is suggested, is the salutary one of rat extermination.<sup>84</sup> In fact, associating Jews with the field of bacteriology legitimized an illness-cure logic, that is, it justified the removal, the elimination (*Ausschaltung*) of the unhealthy to stop the spread of infection within the healthy. This racist imagery was basically the result of a social mathematics.

Body hygiene therefore articulated the prevention of racial infection and the purgation of the inorganic exogenous. If the Nazis denounced, before 1933, a sadistic 'Jewish medicine,' a great lover of *Vivisektion*, they did not hesitate to carry out, within the framework of research projects of strategic interest (resistance to gases, biological weapons), experiments on animal bodies. It is often said that the Nazis were animal lovers, Hitler and Himmler themselves being vegetarians, their animal protection legislation was considered remarkable enough to remain in force until 1972 in the Federal Republic of Germany. "However, as with all nature protection regulations, the Nazis found ready-made texts and... rarely applied them. The fate of animals was hardly more enviable in Germany after 1933 than before, and it even deteriorated considerably with the entry into war in 1939."<sup>85</sup> The duality between medical prevention and hygienic exclusion was strikingly expressed in this formula by Gustav Frenssen, the *völkisch* bard: "It is [...] true and just to eradicate" the sick and the weak who threaten the health of the racial community. "What is good [...] is life itself,"<sup>86</sup> the life of the great whole of the race, not of one of its parts. But this *a posteriori* 'treatment' of the 'human machine,' which was therefore accompanied by an *a priori* 'prevention' and materialized in a set of eugenic legislations, could not suffice to ensure "the eternity of Germany."<sup>87</sup> Because the Jew, who was the most feared 'parasite,' was undetectable. It was then that the ghetto, then the concentration and extermination camps, took over. Precisely, they were the place of production of a different body, a signal which will bear witness to the fundamental, biological otherness of the Jew.

#### ELIMINATING THE OTHER FROM THE VOLKSKÖRPER: BIOPOLITICS AND CAMPS

In the "Zweck und Gliederung des Konzentrationslagers" (1941), Theodor Eicke, a Waffen-SS divisional commander, specified the three main objectives of the camp. First, the camp is an institution that distanced the *Volksfremde* (aliens to the people) and the *Gemeinschaftsfremde* (non-community parties) from the State and the *Volksgemeinschaft*. Second, the camp was not

intended to kill, but above all to re-educate. Third, the internment in a camp was not arbitrary but a legal procedure, with a mandate from the secret state police or the judicial police.<sup>88</sup>

The Buchenwald camp posted a Latinizing maxim on its entrance gate: “*Jedem das Seine*” (to each his due—*suum cuique tribuere*). It suggested that the camp’s inmates (*Häftlinge*) deserved their internment and, provocative too, that the camp was governed by a double principle of immanent justice and fairness that gave each person what they deserved, that is, bodily gratification or punishment. This was ideologically consistent because, let us remember, the *Volksgemeinschaft* must be a *Leistungsgemeinschaft* (performance community): “Everyone must receive in proportion to their *Leistung*, their performance and their production, and everyone must be evaluated on the criterion of their race.”<sup>89</sup> In other words, the ‘due’ of the Nordic man was not the same as that of the Jew. In fact, the death of the unworthy bodies in the camps took “the form of a mathematically predefined solution: the Final Solution!”<sup>90</sup>

The camp was a space representing the abyss of humanity, the very thanato-politics, precisely because it criminally symbolized the entry of the “*zoē* into the sphere of the *polis*, the politicization of bare life as such” and constituted in this “the decisive event of modernity.”<sup>91</sup> For the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, indeed, “the Jew living under Nazism is the privileged negative referent of the new biopolitical sovereignty and is, as such, a flagrant case of a *Homo Sacer* in the sense of a life that may be killed but not sacrificed.”<sup>92</sup> Nazism, and his hendiadys *Blut und Boden*, was properly a biopolitical movement since it made of natural life in general, and of body in particular, the exemplary place of the sovereign decision. In the camps, the body was bare, made bare to be more precise, because it had been the product of a systematized and planned withdrawal of its inviolability, of its sacredness. All that remained was its original vulnerability, the only one that had not been touched by the enterprise of dehumanization. “Now a naked and barefoot man feels that all his nerves and tendons are severed: he is helpless prey (...) He knows that he can be crushed at any moment.”<sup>93</sup> This scheme of dehumanization directly attacked bodies, debasing them, humiliating them, destroying them. The Jews were forced to devote their bodies and energies to meaningless and alienating tasks, such as cleaning streets with toothbrushes, because hard

labor or “honest work” were “antithetical to their natures,”<sup>94</sup> as the American historian Daniel J. Goldhagen argued.

To be a body in a camp, it was also to experience the vertiginous pain of life and the weight of death. The camp was above all a journey, a continuum of the experience of inhumanity: it was the tearing away of a body and a mind from the most ordinary life, it was the bestial compaction in the wagons, it was the total dispossession—even of goods or fundamental human properties that one thought impregnable, like wedding rings, jewelry, gold teeth, names, minds...<sup>95</sup> Everything of any value, pecuniary or symbolic, was expropriated, the trauma was there, but the body remained, it was in movement, but it reached out towards the corpse. A “being-toward-the-dead-body.”<sup>96</sup>

Inevitably, the administration of corpses was added to the administration of bodies. Killing centers were, like the whole physical and metaphysical journey that preceded it, spaces of provisional concentration and parking of bodies as well as of sticking and stacking of bodies that have become corpses or are in the process of becoming corpses. The body, having become a corpse, was so central that 8,000 videos among the archive’s 52,000 on the Holocaust mention one or several corpses.<sup>97</sup> The *Körper an Körper* as if it were a feeling not of collective power and enthusiasm, but of distress of the self reduced to its only body, to its only flesh, and nothing else besides that, thought, sensitivity and revolt having evaporated at the same time as inhumanity appeared and that it gave rise to the futility of reflection because of the predominance of chance dictating life. Indeed, Jean Améry’s testimony was enlightening in that it argued that “it is only in torture that the coincidence of man and his flesh becomes total: screaming in pain, the man tortured and broken by violence, who cannot hope for any help, who has lost the right to legitimate defense, is nothing more than a body and absolutely nothing else.”<sup>98</sup> Man was all the more ‘corporeal’ as his body succumbed desperately to pain, so torture, product of a definitional biologism, was the most terrible of all ‘celebrations’ of the body. In situations like these, Améry argued that “violence is the only way to reconstitute a decomposed personality” and to “recover physical and metaphysical dignity.”<sup>99</sup>

Because the body, fallen, “in pieces,” “torn,” “soiled,” “sweeping away all the filth, all the trash he encounters on the way,”<sup>100</sup> subjected to constant fear and excrement, began to adopt, in a Fanonian gesture of desperate resistance, the adversarial haptic structure that led it there. The body was no longer the sacred instance within its inviolable boundaries, but an “object of disgust and self-loathing,”<sup>101</sup> and even the whole self and destiny. Chilling testimonies from survivors highlighted this calculated and sought-after progressiveness in the dehumanization of prisoners, where bodies were nothing more than the shadow of a disappearing humanity. Agamben, by deepening Foucauldian theorization of sovereign power, saw in this decline of bodies, whose camps orchestrated the stripping of the human capacity for testimony, the paroxysmal act of Modernity and its motto, “to kill and let live.” The body of the ‘*Muselmann*’— in the National Socialist *Lagersprache*, name of an inmate so exhausted and starved that his death was imminent—was here in a “dead coma,” a “neomort” so to speak<sup>102</sup>: he saw himself administered, that is, made the object of processes aiming to ensure, according to the Nazi managerial lexicon whose secrets Chapoutot revealed,<sup>103</sup> the ‘productivity’ and ‘capability’ of the genocidal system, by cascading down responsibility and then making accountability disappeared. Human beings were nothing more than “bundles of reactions” without life, without future.<sup>104</sup> It was the rule of nobody as well as of ‘no-body.’

In fact, since “all burials are a performance,”<sup>105</sup> the very lack of proper burials turned the act of discarding bodies into a form of display. A striking contrast unfolded around the symbolism of the *Krematorium*. Two kinds and two types of bodies faced each other, where the executors of the Nazi will, whether they were forced (*Sonderkommandos*) or adhered to these morbid tasks, were the negative, at once racial, biological and physical, of the bodies they threw into the crematoriums. This contrast is perfectly dissected in Jonathan Glazer’s film *The Zone of Interest* (2023), which breaks with the academicism of Spielberg. Never showing the inside of the camp, the camera focuses on the fulfilled and festive daily life of the Höss family, whose father is the commandant of the Auschwitz camp and the zealous instrument of the ‘Final Solution.’ It only suggests, through sound clues—the noise of the railways, the roar of the crematoria, whiplashes, gunshots,

howls of pain, barking, shouted orders—the atrocity of the daily life of the inmates, who live only a few steps from the large and happy Höss household. Moreover, some shots are dizzying. First, the one where an officer gives a servant his shoes to remove the blood they carry, which they produced in the camp: by this double gesture of entrusting the shoes to a third party and of washing them of their crime, the director shows the effect of distancing and accustoming to the crime. Second, those where a young girl, filmed by an infrared camera, sneaks into the outskirts of the camps to put food on piles of bones, limbs, and bodies that they cannot see at night. Third, the shot of Höss and his children bathing in the river adjacent to the camps, only to find themselves caught up and confronted by inert bodies being carried away by the water, suggests that trying to distance oneself from the death one has caused is futile. Finally, and most striking still, the shot showing the relaxed and joyful attitude of the camp officers meeting at Höss's house and speaking in industrial language reveals both the absence of an ontology of evil and the Nazis' enterprise of semantic coding: these are not crimes, but *die Aufgabe* (a task), *der Auftrag* (a mission), *die Arbeit* (a work).

This logic of reification of bodies—the body agency was shot—was also illustrated in the creation of brothels (*Lagerbordelle*) within the camps. There were eight of them by the summer of 1944. If the Nazis wanted to present themselves, before they accessed power and from the beginning of their government, as “the guardians of conventional sexual morality,”<sup>106</sup> it is nonetheless true that they saw prostitution not as a practice for Jews and Marxists, regarded as *Mädchenhändler* (‘slave traffickers’),<sup>107</sup> but rather as a useful tool of biopolitics in the camps. This, to both circumscribe bodies and optimize productivity through libidinal stimulation of ‘sub-humans’ who, in addition to being “parasites on the body politic and a professional criminal,” were “work-shy” persons.<sup>108</sup> Women’s bodies were hyper-sexualized and used as instruments of labor achievements. In fact, the brothels of the concentration camps were spaces where sexuality was reduced to a purely instinctual and bestial function devoid of love, desire, individuality and eroticism.<sup>109</sup> In March 1942, Himmler gave the order for the first time that the “industrious” prisoners of the concentration camps be rewarded with a visit to the brothel, as they could be by monetary

payments or cigarettes.<sup>110</sup> As the *Reichsführer-SS* wrote in the spring of 1943: “This whole issue is not particularly pretty, but it is natural, and if I can use nature as an incentive for higher performance, then I think we have to take advantage of this incentive.”<sup>111</sup> As a woman forced to work in the camp brothel at Buchenwald told German professor of social work practice Christa Paul: “It was nothing personal, one felt like a robot. They [clients] did not take notice of us; we were the lowest of the low. We were only good for this. No conversation or small talk, not even the weather was on the agenda. Everything was so mechanical and indifferent [...] They finished their business and left.”<sup>112</sup> This “crucial piece” of camps employs about 200 women.<sup>113</sup> According to the—illusory—promise formulated by the Nazis, women deigned to offer their bodies for six months to see them emancipate themselves at the same time as their minds afterward.

The camp, as a spectrum of physical and metaphysical experiences, left traces on the body. The dizzying enigma of the Nazi genocidal mechanics, which translated itself basically and permanently in the form of blows inflicted by the perpetrators on the victims, was masterfully condensed in this “profound amazement” of Primo Levi: “How can one hit a man without anger?”<sup>114</sup> In other words, this experience of death-in-progress that the Nazis sought to create made the suffering present in the camps a lasting trauma for the survivors and survivors’ descendants: corporeality constituted and constructs an archive of culture. The body then became a “site of storage” in that it is “a container of emotion, sensation, and memory, including trauma and its effects.”<sup>115</sup> The body is an archive as it triply contains a painful memory, carries trauma and bends under “survivor syndrome,” according to the concept coined by the Israeli psychiatrist Shamaï Davidson during his casework with survivors in the 1970s.<sup>116</sup> This bodily archive can be a memory of infamous images, the clinking of a spoon associated with painful episodes, or the carnal inscription of the tattoo on the left forearm.<sup>117</sup>

For Jean Améry, the body became this “scourge,” this burden that must be endured. And to continue, with remarkable clarity and depth:

“In the end, we would, therefore, have the following equation: body = pain = death, and in our case, this equation would, in turn, be reduced to the hypothesis that the torture by which the other makes us a body abolishes the contradiction of death and makes us live our own death. [...] In this way, the murderous torturer realizes his own murderous corporality but without having to lose himself totally in it like the tortured person: he can put an end to the torture whenever he wants. The cry of pain and the cry of death uttered by the other belong to him, he reigns as absolute master over the flesh and the spirit, life, and death.”<sup>118</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Through the conceptual heuristic of *Körper an Körper*, this paper has made a significant contribution to the scholarly discourse on Nazism in general and the body under National Socialism in particular. By formulating a triple dialectic—‘identificationist-differentialist,’ ‘solidarist-exclusionist,’ and ‘augmentationist-eliminationist’—as a novel scientific approach and interpretive key to the phenomenology of the body in the Third Reich, this article has illuminated fundamental forces of Nazism that had previously remained largely unexplored. These interpretative frameworks have enabled the decoding of Nazism’s meta-logic—namely, a politically constructed, ideologically exaggerated and artificially sustained juxtaposition of opposites, encompassing racial-biological, gendered, social and cultural dimensions. Thus, the Nazi axiomatics, which claimed legitimacy through the supposed universal authority of natural law, sought to produce both the individual body of the Aryan *Übermensch* and the collective body of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, while simultaneously enacting the destruction of the bodies of those labeled as *Volksschädlinge*.

Hence, the National Socialist conception of the body was totalizing: it dictated an ethic and a *praxis*, that is, an axiologically coherent code of conduct that was based on racial-biological principles and was embedded in a biopolitical matrix. The genealogy of origins, erecting the Nordic race as a *Herrenvolk* by the very fact of its singular bodily properties, legitimized this enterprise

of the destruction of the allogenic, seen as an intruder contaminating the purity of the organic national and civilizational body and thereby threatening the existence and biological sustainability of the *Volkskörper*. This manufacture of the *corpus sanum* with Nazi characteristics went through a new *paideia* which placed the emphasis, based on the Hellenic model and the *Lebensreform* movement, on the more physical than intellectual formation of bodies. This parthenogenesis of an ephebic body was supported by a ‘medicalization’ of politics, that is, the emergence of prophylactic measures at the heart of the political agenda, and a ‘scientification’ of exclusion, to understand as the bio-socio-medical complicity of a broad field of intellectuals who contributed to give a veneer of logic and legitimacy to Nazi postulates. This dynamic of marginalization, distancing, and exclusion of the ‘parasites,’ which must be read as an ethics of segregation and semiotics of the body from which some must touch while others move away, affected everything in life. The deadly completion of this biopolitics and this attention to the body was revealed in the camp as a ‘solution’ to the fantasized degradation of the blood and body of the *Volksgemeinschaft*. There, bodies, hypersexualized for the women and debased for the other prisoners, lost their metaphysical dimension to be stunted to their physical one, becoming the bane of existence in a desacralization of the self.

To extend the propaedeutic of this paper, it would be relevant to focus on the afterlives of Nazi corporeal politics—whether in the form of neo-fascist appropriations, medical and bioethical debates, or the structural legacies of exclusionary health and social policies. Furthermore, an exploration of how the phenomenology of the body under National Socialism resonates with broader histories of racialized and gendered violence could offer a more comprehensive genealogy of modern biopolitical regimes. By situating the Nazi body-politics within a *longue durée* perspective, future scholarship might illuminate the enduring entanglements between corporeality, power, and ideology, further refining our understanding of the mechanisms through which bodies become sites of both oppression and resistance.

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