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## Phenomenology of ‘the people’ – the body goes to town. About a Finnish-Italian doctoral dissertation

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Antonio Borgogni (2012), *Body, Town Planning, and Participation – The Roles of Young People and Sport*. (Studies in Sport, Physical Education and Health, 186) University of Jyväskylä, PhD, 384 pp.

How is the body facilitated to move in town – and how should it be able to? These questions made up the horizon of a dissertation, which the Italian sociologist Antonio Borgogni defended at the University of Jyväskylä in November 2012. The dissertation combines studies in three fields: body and movement, city and town planning, and participation and democracy – and this with special focus on young people. For this purpose, the research connects, in an interdisciplinary way, three fairly different fields and disciplines of academic study: studies of body culture and sport sciences, studies of architecture, geography and technology, and political studies.

The background for this ambitious project was practical experiences in Ferrara since 1995, when the group *Il corpo va in città* (The body goes to town) combined political engagement and action research by engaging young people for participation in town planning. This was supported by the Sport-for-all organization *Unione Italiana Sport Pertutti* (UISP). The Ferrara experiences met some success, but later also problems from the side of the administration, which resulted in some political critique. Based on these experiences, the dissertation develops a comparative study in four European cities – Barcelona, Paris, Helsinki (and other Finnish towns), and Ferrara.

The study follows two main assumptions. One: The body is important for town planning – more important than often acknowledged. Two: Participation and especially the involvement of young people are important for town planning from democratic, ecological and social aspects.

### Body culture, urban ecology, and living democracy

Borgogni's book begins by presenting studies on the body, spanning from the Cartesian mind-body problem over the German philosophical *Körper-Leib* problem, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Marcel Mauss and Michel Foucault to the “post-human” prosthesis body (chapter 2). This is followed by a short history of European town planning since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century (chapter 3) and of the human body in town planning (chapter 4). This overview spans from Vitruvius and Leonardo over 19<sup>th</sup> century's hygienism, planners' concern for water supply and green parks, the ideas of Le Corbusier (with his standardization of the body) and the problem of private motorization as well as recent tendencies of traffic calming and active city movement.

The next step is a history and reflection of participation in town planning (chapter 5). The dissertation characterizes the participatory process as being more than just formal-democratic procedures, but a part of living democracy in people's life-world. Here, the chapter refers to personal experiences of the author. After presenting the methods of the study (chapter 6), the central observations, resources and analyses of planning, participation and bodily movement in the four cities and countries are unfolded in detail (chapter 7). Data from Eurobarometer concerning the satisfaction of the local population and their trust into local authorities are compared. After this, the chapter presents the four city cases each for itself, always starting by a history of local town planning, participatory processes and projects as well as personal observations while walking through the city. This is the empirical main chapter of the phenomenological study.

The complex and differentiated descriptions are summed up under “discussion” (chapter 8). Here,

the relation between the dominant private motor vehicle traffic and the light traffic of pedestrians and bicycles is in the focus, as well as the creation of public places for play and “urban voids”. Under “conclusions”, the use of case studies, variables and generalization are discussed (chapter 9). Here the study turns to some topics of theoretical relevance – the question of informal appropriation of the space and “topophilia”, the need of studies in bodyscapes. And it proposes future research in deliberative democracy.

The comparative observations and analyses of body, movement and planning in the four cities result in political critique. This critique has three main points:

- The body is not yet sufficiently recognized as an indicator for the quality of life. This is a question of body culture.
- Actual problems of planning concern especially the relation between car traffic and light traffic. This is a question of urban ecology and sustainability.
- There are relevant problems, when participation shall be implemented in a more than “demagogical” way. This is a question of living democracy.

### **Humanist studies and science – data, factors, functions?**

How does one analyse the relations between basis and superstructure, between people’s bodily practice and the experts’ planning? – This question touches the epistemological relation between humanist studies on one hand and (natural, social) science with its physicalist and positivistic undertones on the other, i.e. between understanding and explanation. The dissertation places itself explicitly into the tradition of phenomenological study, which strives for understanding. This is not a hinder for the integration of quantitative research, using the Eurobarometer and studies of trust, as this plurality is not a problem for the substantial analysis. However, the dissertation is not quite clear about its stand in relation to the epistemological difference between positivistic science and humanist studies. Though it confesses to a phenomenological approach and applies it clearly throughout the whole study, it adopts some terms from positivistic science (as experimental laboratory research), among these the chapter titles “results” and “discussion”. “Results” (chapter 7) is at closer examination much more: a rich presentation of observations and analyses of planning, participation and bodily movement in the four cities. This is not “result”, but the basic

phenomenological material for the study. And “Discussion” (chapter 8) is an in-depth comparative analysis.

There are similar problems concerning the use of the concept “data”. This term fits the empirical material in the form of quantitative data from Eurobarometer, but is not appropriate for the written sources, visual observations, oral information, and emotional impressions of the study in general. Narratives are not “data”. Also the concepts of variable, factor, function, validity and reliability, codification, and fact analysis are borrowed from positivist science and do not fit humanist phenomenology. Phenomenology starts with questions (which have an open horizon), not with hypotheses (which should be tested).

Furthermore, there is no cultural-study reason to accept that “science is a generalizing activity”. The phenomenology of the body in Ferrara, Barcelona, Paris and Helsinki cannot be generalized to what there “is” and really happens in Odense or Copenhagen. But it makes us wiser as to what human beings “can” do when moving in town and in planning their urban environment – also in Odense and Copenhagen.

In other words, the dissertation wavers between two different traditions and procedures. In (natural) science, which strongly influences some parts of the social sciences, one starts with an hypothesis, constructs an experimental situation, measures and tests, and finally concludes a result: right or wrong. In humanist studies, in contrast, one starts by a question (which is open in many directions), selects and examines sources, compares and constructs typologies, and finally finds some answers, but often creates new questions.

### **The people, the body, and the power**

Now let us go from method to content: The phenomenological strength of the study lies in its focus on the relation between the people and the power. The study attempts a sort of people’s approach, understanding “the construction of the city by the side of the people. The town is made by behaviours and ... by visible and invisible tracks and paths ... paths of the body”.

Indeed, the concept of “people” appears in many different contexts. In the case of Italy, *Unione Italiana Sport Popolare* (people’s sport) was the former name of UISP. In the case of Catalonia, the study refers to the aborted “People’s Olympiad” of 1936 in Barcelona, which should have been workers’ Olympics against the Nazi Olympics in Berlin. In the case of France, there are references

to the “Folk High School of Active Citizenship” (*Université Populaire de la Citoyenneté Active*). The term folk is familiar to the Nordic and Danish *folkehøjskole*, which is translated sometimes as Folk High School and sometimes as People’s Academy. People as demos are also fundamental for the understanding of democracy. Democracy is not just a set of formal procedures of the voters, but a practice of participation and self-determination in the bodily life world – here in people’s world of urban living.

All this leads the reader to the question: Who are the people? At this point, the study calls for some deeper reflections – for a differential phenomenology of the “folk”.

### People as farmers’ class

The sociological understanding of “folk” or “people” has a background in the history of class relations. But this class aspect is not simple.

In preindustrial times, folk were the farmers’ class, who at that time made up the majority of population, in contrast to the minorities of aristocracy and bourgeoisie. They gave “face” to what is called folk music, folk song (*Volkslied, folkeviser*), folk culture, folk art, folk games and folk sport – and later, during industrial modernity, the Danish farmers’ school called *folkehøjskole*. Earlier approaches towards a philosophy of the people referred mainly to this farmer-people class aspect, from Johann Gottfried Herder to N.F.S Grundtvig. In pictures, we see this folk culture as body culture in the paintings and engravings of Pieter Bruegel the Elder.



### People as workers’ class

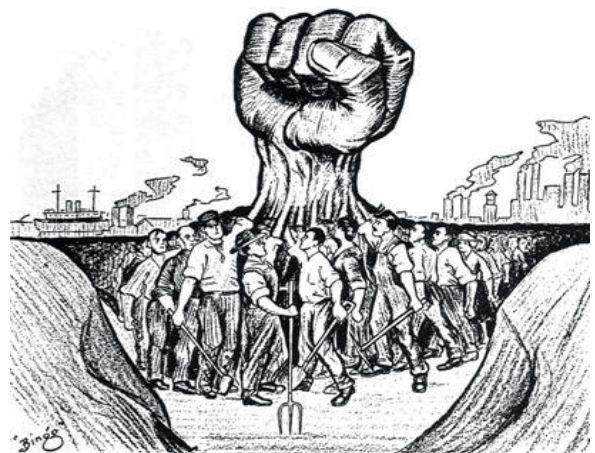
Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, the farmers as majority class were outrun by the working class.

The workers adopted “folk” for themselves, too. “People” were “the working people”.

During his exile in London, Karl Marx published the paper *Das Volk*, and other workers’ papers had titles like *Volksstimme*, *Volkswille*, *Volkszeitung*, *Volksstaat*, *Volkspresse*, and *Volksfreund* – or in French *Le Peuple* (Swiss), in Yiddish *Folksstime* and *Folkssaytung*. *The Internationale* was sung with the words “The people want only their due” (“Le peuple ne veut que son dû”) and with the German refrain “Völker, hört die Signale!” The Italian workers’ song *Bandiera Rossa* started by the words “Avanti o popolo”. In France, a *Front Populaire* was established in the 1930’s connecting Social Democrats and Communists. Danish workers founded socialist *folkehøjskoler*, and the Danish workers’ song of the red flag refers to “my people and my cause” (*min folk og min sag*). The Swedish Social Democracy established welfare society under the name of *folkhemmet*, folk’s home. Meanwhile Communists launched the utopian idea of People’s Democracy and People’s Republic. The Italian mass-sport federation UISP was part of this tradition – the workers as the people – and the same is true of the Peoples Olympics in Barcelona 1936.

Common for the farmers’ folk and the working-class people was their tense relation to certain societal elites, to power. This was called class struggle. “People” was a term of distinction and conflict. Speaking with Pierre Bourdieu, this was a distinction of habitus.

In spite of the common use of “folk” and “people” for characterizing the identity of the worker movement, socialist theory has avoided developing a theory of the people after its own premises. Instead, well-known efforts were made to write a theory of classes – which, however, has nearly disappeared today. One of the few socialist philosophers who approached a theory of the people was Marin Buber, who continued on the line of Herder and Grundtvig towards an understanding of the Jewish “Volk”.



## Demos: people in conflict, revolution, democracy

Meanwhile, the concepts of “folk” and “people” had also obtained undertones of revolution and democracy, which had an appeal also outside the farmers’ and the working class. *L’Ami du peuple* was the publication of Jean-Paul Marat during the French revolution. The call “We are the people!” (Wir sind das Volk!) appeared in Georg Büchner’s drama *The Death of Danton* 1835. It became a living slogan again during the revolutions of 1989 in Eastern Europe.

This revolutionary “people” related to *demos* as the people of democracy and self-determination. The *demos* people was linked to the concept of citizen (citoyen), but this word tended to individualize the subject of democracy.

## Ethnos: people of cultural identity

In the age of modern democracy, the concept of *ethnos*, differing from *demos* by its focus on the cultural people, developed a special dynamic, too. Borgogni’s dissertation refers to this dimension by the concept of “ethnoscapes”, describing the body spaces of ethnic minorities in the cities. In Barcelona for instance, Incas from Ecuador play their *ecuavolley* in special places. On the international level, the *Society for Threatened Peoples* (*Gesellschaft für bedrohte Völker*, *Association pour les peuples menacés*, *Associazione per i popoli minacciati*) is active for interethnic solidarity.

Also when comparing Ferrara, Barcelona and Paris on one hand and Finnish cities on the other, the dissertation points towards cultural traits like slowness versus hurry, density versus spaciousness, relation to green nature etc. These cultural mentalities are not so far from an ethnic understanding of the differences between Nordic and Mediterranean peoples. The same is true for the national differences in trust. The ethnic-popular dimension has the political point of identity and recognition, of inclusion and exclusion, and these dimensions play an important role for the dissertation.

The philosophical approaches to “folk” by Herder, Grundtvig and Buber can be seen somewhere between the understanding of *demos* and *ethnos*.

## “Mass”, “target groups” and “all” – crisis of “the people”?

Back to the history of classes: During the 20th century, the connection between “folk” and “people”

and their class background became weakened and dissolved. When the farmers’ class and the workers’ class transformed their social identity in late-industrial and post-industrial society, “the people” lost its “face”. (It was here that Fascist and populist movements succeeded in appropriating the term “folk”.) And yet, the people approach is not at all outdated – and this is what this dissertation shows. But what is its new meaning, seen in an empirical sociological perspective? Tendencies of sociological terminology point in very different directions.

One way to go was the perspective of mass, crowd or also “society”, as the dissertation describes it in connection with the Spanish *movida* and its revitalization of the city. Elias Canetti delivered a description of this phenomenon in his work *Masse und Macht* (*Crowds and Power*, 1960). However, the crowd lacks the social “face” or “habitus”, which had characterized the earlier class-related “popular culture”. It seems that we here meet what social criticism has called alienation.



Los Angeles 1950 (Borgogni, p. 313):

Another way was developed by sociological analysis, which dissolved the folk and its conflict with the elites into social groups and target groups. Social groups became a common discourse also in social policy, which talked about social groups I, II, III, IV etc. – making the conflict disappear in quantifiable patterns and creating hierarchical order in the crowd. Target groups became a preference term of welfare policies, and are also referred to in the dissertation. Target groups consist of children, young people, elderly, homeless people, migrants, disabled etc., who play an important role in this dissertation. The topic of traffic is especially illustrating as it confronts the “weak users” – pedestrians, cyclists – with the dominant users of private cars.

However, the concept of “users” is also problematic. It tends to cast light on the people from the perspective of the market and its logic of

production and consumption, supply and demand.

The dissolution of "the people" and the reduction of "folk" to consumers provoked a cultural reaction in 1968. A nostalgic people's romanticism created slogans like "To serve the people". People's universities were founded, and folk song became a new movement. The role of the 1968 protests and the following innovations of the 1970s in the fields of culture and democracy are strongly emphasized in Borgogni's dissertation.

At the same time, the all-embracing term of "all" started its career. Since the late 1960s, "sport for all" spread as a new perspective in sports policy. The renaming of the Italian sport popolare to *Unione Italiana Sport Pertutti* (UISP) bears witness to this change. In the framework of sport for all, traditional folk games like boules, boccia, and petanque were revived, in Denmark "folkelig" (popular) gymnastics as well. In town planning, the walkable, cyclable, and playable "City for all" was another outcome of the 1968 turn.

However, who are those "all"? This is the question, that the dissertation raises. The "all" of sport for all, or city for all, may be understood as all the individuals. In contrast to the fashionable assumption of "individualization" (Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck), however, Borgogni's study emphasizes that it is "not just about individual interests". The social reality of people is not individualization.

In political practice, the "all" are often understood as: most of the population, the majority, or most possible. This favors the quantification of "all" in a problematical way. And it makes the phenomenological and political aspects of the people disappear. When people during the history of modern democracy (1789, 1989) chanted "We are the people!" they did not want to express: We are the population! Or: We are all! They expressed a contradiction between "us" and the power.

Besides the vaguely defined "all" of the neoliberal "individualization" and "the majority" of the quantitative approach, phenomenological terms of collectivity like neighbourhood, protest movements, and associations have played an important role in post-1968 sociology and are mentioned in Borgogni's dissertation. In the field of town planning, *mixité*, the idea of a mixed social profile of town quarters, can be seen in this context.

In this diversity of collective actors, the conflict perspective of "the people" has returned. Sociology has adopted the concept civil society in order to characterize the people of the "third sector" in confrontation with public power on one hand and market power on the other. In town planning, the dissertation shows the confrontation of participants

versus decision makers as a cultural conflict. But also inside civil society, cultural conflicts may arise – not least in forms of riots and vandalism.

Another manifestation of conflicting forces is the phenomenological and political contradiction between "Sport for all" (also: broad sport, mass sport or "folkelig" sport) and the elite sport of the Olympic type. This typological contradiction is manifest in contradicting organizations like UISP in Italy on one hand and the Olympic CONI on the other. In Denmark this corresponds to the "folkelig" DGI versus the Olympic DIF, and corresponding tensions can be found on the European level.

### The people and the body

All these conflicts show that the people's approach is not at all outdated. In the age of globalization, it seems to have obtained a new urgency. However, does this new urgency also lead to new perspectives and a new analytical framework?

It is here that Borgogni's dissertation has its particular value – by pointing to the body as protagonist in this relation between city and movement, between people and power. The body and the people are related to each other. When "the body goes to town" (*Il corpo va in città*), it is the people that goes to town. There is no body without people, and there are no people without body. Indeed, the body – as bodily relation between human beings – has been regarded as basic in Karl Marx' early writings (*Die deutsche Ideologie*, 1845), which developed the idea of basis and superstructure – with the human bodily existence as basic. But the later Marx turned to production and economical relations as basic. The body as protagonist reappeared, however, about 100 years later in Marxist phenomenology, where it became manifest in the famous conflict between Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Paul Sartre (described by John O'Neill in: *Phänomenologie und Marxismus*, 1977).

The people as basis and the body as protagonist, "every-body" in movement – by this approach, the dissertation can be read as a philosophical challenge to mainstream sociology.

### Education and participatory culture

All this is not pure theory on the level of abstract concepts. It has practical significance, which becomes evident in the relation between policy and education. The dissertation describes storytelling and play as important media for participatory

democracy. Storytelling and play are both popular and bodily. This opens up for questions of what participatory culture is, if it is more than workshops and meetings, more than papers and discussions.

When learning from this study about the People's university in Paris as a means of education for citizenship and about some Finnish experiences, one may remember the Danish People's High School (*folkehøjskole*), which has played an important role for educating Danish citizens. "Folkelig" education took distance to "the culture of the book" by focusing not just on reading, but on doing things together, singing together, playing together. This approach is suggestive of the ways in which storytelling, graffiti and play were used in the Ferrara project. Practices of this type are especially important when training new professional figures like facilitators, mediators, and "broad actors" for future development of participatory planning and administration. What appears at the horizon is more than just educational techniques or tricks of planning methodologies – it is an alternative culture of participatory democracy. The people's approach to planning is, thus, not only relevant for the sector of planning, but much broader: for a new understanding of democracy as bodily democracy.

Or, seen from the perspective of the culture of Danish People's High Schools: Does participatory democracy maybe start by "people" singing together?

## Fenomenologia „ludu” - ciało idzie do miasta. O fińsko-włoskiej rozprawie doktorskiej

**Słowa kluczowe:** urbanistyka, uczestnictwo, demokracja, ruch, badania

### Streszczenie

Praca jest recenzją rozprawy doktorskiej włoskiego socjologa Antonio Borgogni, której obrona odbyła się na Uniwersytecie w Jyväskylä w listopadzie 2012, zatytułowanej *Ciało, urbanistyka i uczestnictwo - rola młodzieży i sportu (Body, Town Planning, and Participation – The Roles of Young People and Sport)*. Rozprawa łączy studia w dziedzinach: urbanistyki, ciała i ruchu, uczestnictwa i demokracji, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem młodzieży. W tym celu badanie łączy, w sposób interdyscyplinarny, całkiem różne dziedziny i dyscypliny studiów akademickich: studia kultury ciała i nauk o sporcie, studia architektury, geografii i technologii oraz nauk politycznych.

Tłem dla tego ambitnego projektu było praktyczne doświadczenia w Ferrarze prowadzone od 1995 roku, kiedy grupa *Il corpo va in città* („ciało idzie do miasta”) łączyła badania zaangażowania politycznego i angażowania się młodych ludzi w planowanie miasta. Był to projekt wspierany przez organizację *Sport-dla-wszystkich - Unione Italiana Sport Pertutti (UISP)*. Na podstawie tych doświadczeń, rozprawa rozwija badania porównawcze w czterech europejskich miastach - Barcelona, Paryż, Helsinki (i innych fińskich miastach) oraz Ferrara. W badaniu przyjęto następujące dwa główne założenia. Po pierwsze: ciało jest ważne dla urbanistyki - ważniejsze niż jest to często uznawane. Po drugie: zaangażowanie młodzieży jest ważniejsze dla planowania przestrzennego miasta od aspektów demokratycznych, ekologicznych czy społecznych.

Według autora recenzji rozprawa odnosi się wyraźnie do tradycji fenomenologicznej nauki, która dąży do zrozumienia. To nie przeszkadza integracji badań ilościowych, za pomocą Eurobarometru i analiz zaufania, jednak rozprawa nie jest całkiem jasna, w kwestii swojego stanowiska w odniesieniu do różnicy między epistemologicznym podejściem pozytywistycznej nauki i studiów humanistycznych. Fenomenologiczna siła badania leży w koncentrowaniu się na relacjach między ludźmi a władzą.

Rozprawa waha się między dwoma różnymi tradycjami i procedurami. W naukach przyrodniczych, co zdecydowanie wpływa na niektóre części nauk społecznych, zaczyna się od hipotezy, konstruuje sytuację eksperymentalną, środki i testy, a na końcu stwierdza pozytywny lub negatywny wynik. W badaniach humanistycznych, w przeciwieństwie do tego, zaczyna się od pytania (które jest otwarte w wielu kierunkach), wybiera i analizuje źródła, porównuje i konstruuje typologie, aż wreszcie znajdzie jakieś odpowiedzi, ale często tworzy się nowe pytania.