

## THE BODY ON WORK

*O CORPO NO TRABALHO*

*EL CUERPO EN EL TRABAJO*

**Carlos Herold Junior\***

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### Keywords

Work. Techniques.  
Philosophy.

**Abstract:** This review presents and analyzes Thierry Pillon's work *Le corps à l'ouvrage*. It shows that the book is relevant to body studies as it highlights the importance of the bodily dimension in work situations, something that is not very common in cultural studies of the body.

### Palavras-chave

Trabalho. Técnicas.  
Filosofia.

**Resumo:** Esta resenha apresenta e analisa a obra *Le corps à l'ouvrage*, de Thierry Pillon. Será mostrado que o livro tem relevância para os estudos sobre o corpo, pois ele evidencia a importância da dimensão corpórea nas situações de trabalho, o que não tem sido muito usual nos estudos culturais sobre o corpo.

### Palabras clave

Trabajo. Técnicas.  
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**Resumen:** Esta revisión presenta y analiza la obra de *Le corps à l'ouvrage*, de Thierry Pillon. Será mostrado que el libro tiene relevancia para los estudios sobre el cuerpo, ya que pone de relieve la importancia de la dimensión corporal en las situaciones de trabajo, algo que no ha sido muy usual en los estudios culturales sobre el cuerpo.

\*State University of Maringá, Maringá,  
PR, Brazil.

E-mail: carlosherold@hotmail.com

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Thierry Pillon is a professor at the University of Evry, in the Essonne department, 40 km from Paris. As a researcher in sociology of work, after other books (PILLON, 2000, 2003, 2006, 2007), he published *Le corps à l'ouvrage* (PILLON, 2012). A free translation of the title shows that the work aims at thinking about the “the body at work” or the “body working”.<sup>1</sup> The path that led Pillon to materialize this intention can be seen in other texts published by the author in addition to the book that is the object of this review, especially a collection on “body and technique” (PILLON, 2007b). Still on his studies, Pillon’s reflection on workers’ virility has to be mentioned. It was published in volume three of Vigarello, Corbin and Courtine’s *History of virility* (2013).

*Le corps à l'ouvrage* examines 53 texts written by working men and women from different economic segments who described and thought about their labor involvement in several aspects. The period in which that corpus was written covers from the late nineteenth century to the 2000s. That is a highly valuable timeframe since several production settings emerged within capitalism during the period, succeeding one another or combining.

The book has six chapters in which Pillon points out the “secret communications between those texts” (p. 12). The title of each chapter indicates the parameter used to look at the working body: 1) Work environments, 2) Gestures, 3) Looks, 4) Intimacy, 5) Burnouts, and 6) Dreams. With them, the author wants to build a “phenomenology of activity” (p. 10), dissecting testimonies apart from each other in time, in order to seek the “work experience” through the body lens. Interestingly, in the analysis of those memories, it is observed that “the body is rarely the focus of those narratives” (p. 14). That is where the analyst and his or her methodological options are presented, noting that, “however, he or she is never absent” (p. 14):

It (the body) appears in the midst of a sentence in the form of a small mention, of a shared secret, and it reveals the different ways of being affected by machines, environments and materials worked. Through descriptions – although brief – of gesture, feeling, posture, the depth of sensible experience is revealed. (p. 14)

Even if that presence is not univocal and/or ubiquitous, it is what allows Pillon to access the “most intimate in sensations” (p. 15). The chain of several accounts on the issues above resulted in chapters, although the arrangement of the analyzes was not aimed at seeking the “internal coherence” (p. 14) of those voices. In fact, it does not exist in the “documentary wealth” (p. 14) that sustains the book. Consistently, then, with the purpose of the work and its empirical base, the study is characterized by the capture of polysemy and polyphony. After all, as Pillon stresses several times, the documents he uses or the “worker’s word” (p. 183) make us hear the voice that speaks about “work experience”, thereby assumed in its “thickness” and “physical materiality” (p. 185).

The chapter named *Work environments (Milieux)* presents workers’ most striking impressions about the space where they work. We read very interesting excerpts about workers’ entrance in their workplaces, especially in the first few times it occurs. As in other chapters, mining workers deserve the most attention since their first descent creates memories relating to speed, temperature change, fear and darkness (p. 18). Heat (p. 30) and machine noise (p. 31) cause the workplace to provide a “common feeling of capture” (p. 23), responsible for “perceptual habits and [...] persistent styles of conduct, even when they are away from work” (p. 17) since they are “anchored on the body” (p. 17).

*Gestures*, the object of the second chapter, reveal the richest and hidden facets of work at the same time. They are considered products that mask the “slow learning” (p. 45) and the

<sup>1</sup> The title and quotes mentioned in this review were freely translated.

“margin of intuitive knowledge of things, of matters, of tools engaged in their success” (p. 45). Pillon divides the reflections of this part by focusing on “postures” (p. 45), “styles” (p. 52), “attention” (p. 55) and “speed” (p. 64). It is shown that gestures, even the most simple and repetitive ones, are learned through imposition that touches the “whole body” (p. 59). In this learning, the mechanical cadence, which is “uninhabitable to man” (p. 65), also gives rise to a strange but pleasant “harmony between mechanical and animal life” (p. 66).

The body as a channel of access to co-workers is the theme of the chapter named *Looks (Regards)*. We read that “between recognition and humiliation, the spectacle of the body contains the problems of integration”. The importance of the body in creating relationships between workers manifests itself in the use of aliases (p. 69) that “reduce the body to which it distinguishes” (p. 71), but also makes the environment more pleasant by “moving aggressiveness to the territory of joke” (p. 74). Initiation rites (p. 74), which can happen both in specific events and in daily work, are also significantly present in the accounts. They show that violence and humiliation (p. 80) towards beginners underscore the greatness of those who already have the strength and stamina needed to work, “making up a body work ethics characteristic of the first half of the twentieth century” (p. 82). This body ethics elects the first anti-models of the virile worker: children, adolescents, women and intellectuals (p. 83). They provide the reasons for the labels that signal weakness or clumsiness. For this reason, the “challenges” (p. 88) between workers in their daily lives and the “jokes” (p. 92) addressed to their co-workers form a “hall of mirrors” (p. 92) that cements a pedagogy based on praise of stamina and on humiliation, when the former is absent.

*Intimacy* analyzes “impregnation” (p. 100), “mixture” (p. 110), that is, the porosity of personal and collective boundaries sustained in the working body. It is noted that workers find themselves becoming the object with which they work, the substances with which they work, literally incorporating the residues of their craft, which distinguish them as belonging to one position or the other, thus producing a “durable social effect” (p. 115) encrusted in “skin folds” (p. 114). In addition to this mixture, Pillon notes the proximity of workers to odors of their co-workers’ sweat, vomit, urine, feces, as well as with blood, pain and suffering visible in accidents and resulting first aid. On the other hand, that “proximity of bodies” (p. 119) that also takes place in gazes stealthily exchanged in the locker room (p. 124) leads to “re-appropriation of the body” (p. 125) through sexual collusion. It is sometimes more implicit and indirect, like the one that occurs through patting and pinching in buttocks or even sexual organs; sometimes explicitly, as in the scenes of collective masturbation (p. 128), in exposition of the sexual organ (p. 129), in which sexual arousal “both in words and gestures, turns the other into the witness of some resistant humanity” (p. 129).

In the fifth chapter, entitled *Burnouts (Usures)*, the body’s vulnerability in the face of “machines’ gigantic proportions” (p. 131) is shown as a recurring theme in workers’ accounts studied by Pillon. We read about memory and reflection on accidents suffered or witnessed. If hands are commonly assumed to be one of the distinctive elements of man’s humanity, they are the first to suffer: perforations, large or small amputations, screams, groans or even immediate death – events that are often not immediately perceived even by those closest to them, because of the deafening noise of machines that “do not stop [...] their own life” (p. 141). Fatigue is less deadly, but also impacts on workers’ body memory. Whether it is extreme fatigue or everyday tiredness at the end of the day that cause workers to succumb, exhaustion is something “familiar to workers in all sectors and all ages” (p. 144).

In the last chapter, Pillon points out a dreamlike dimension of work in the statements he studied. The chapter is called *Dreams (Rêves)*, and the author finds a “counterpoint of work” (p. 165) in them, in which the body is also affirmed. In addition to the presence of work in hours of deep sleep at home, “remains of the factory” are also studied (p. 181), but that presence is also focused on at times of “freedom” provided by the rhythm, the cadence of the machine. In reverie, this causes “gestures to recover awareness, fluency, intelligence, beyond its mere practical purpose” (p. 167). Examples of train drivers who get “lost” or “mix” themselves to the landscape they are on the route (p. 168) alternate with situations in which bitter memories of “Metal violence” (p. 171) succeed daydream. The pleasures of a conversation in the quiet night (p. 175), sleep and the struggle against it (p. 176) present work as a situation in which “dream and reality mix” (p. 179) during the 24 hours of the day. Indeed, here too the daydreams of “sexually connotation” (p. 175) or a severed finger are the result of the “hypnotic experience described by workers on the production line” (p. 179).

To complete *Le Corps à l'ouvrage*, Pillon again underlines the importance of his choice of empirical field, stating that the possibilities opened by “workers’ word” (p. 183) are numerous. He insists on the importance of a voice that accompanies workers’ formation and transformation and the experience of work – a voice that, even without speaking directly in the body, by not abstracting from the everyday thickness of work, asserts the body relevance of those experiences, which makes the body a key element for reflection about them.

From the thematic point of view, the book in question is part of a group of works reflecting on the body/work dialectic: Deleule and Guery (1972), Rabinbach (1992), Böhle and Milkau (1998), Hassard, Holliday and Willmott (2000) and Wolkowitz (2006)). In Brazil, this value is present in an article by Alves (2005) and a book by Batista (2013). It should be noted, however, that, especially since the 1970s, consideration of “intelligent work” that would have overcome “body work” has prevented greater attention to these issues (HEROLD JUNIOR, 2009). That makes work and body highly valuable themes today, as long as they are disconnected from each other, as if one dimension had nothing to say about the other. Eagleton (1998) criticizes that by stating that in the contemporary world “while the libidinous body is in, the laborious body is out” (p. 74). As we follow Pillon’s reflections, it could be inferred that the French sociologist would claim that both bodies are always in, agreeing with Eagleton’s criticism to the analytical matrix that separates body and work for separating intelligence, pleasure and work.

Regarding the methodological approach in Pillon’s analysis, it is worth noting that *Le corps à l'ouvrage* touches an important divide in the studies on work listed above: they approach work either as a long-term and politically based historical and social dimension or in situ, in action, by focusing on the subjective specifics of the labor activity being performed. In this debate, Pillon apprehends each testimony’s particularity, which gives the text, in many instances, a tone of mere but organized and flowing collage of empirical material. Pillon allows the “workers’ voice”, which is so dear to him, to speak in long and frequent quotes. On the other hand, by handling those accounts, which cover a very extensive timeframe, the sociologist can build very interesting generalizations, part of which was used to form the presentation of each of his chapters in this review. Therefore, methodologically, Pillon can make an important contribution to show that the choice between the general and the particular with respect to the body at work is not an inexorable choice. By focusing on the body the way he does, Pillon meets – perhaps involuntarily – an important consideration made ten years earlier by another theoretician who offers important basis for thinking the relationship between body and work:

[...] All human life [...] is crossed by history. But when it comes to work, if that is also true, it is not a “little story”, a history marked by chance in individual lives: no human situation focuses or “carries” with it so many sediments, condensations, marks of debates on human history, of human societies themselves as working situations: the knowledges set in motion, the production systems, the technologies used, the forms of organization, the procedures chosen, the use values selected and, behind that, the social relationships that intertwine and oppose men to each other – all that crystallizes products of previous history of peoples. (Schwartz, 2003, p. 23)

Meanwhile, *Le corps à l'ouvrage* turns to “the relationships that intertwine and oppose men to each other”. However, just as the sociologist listens to the body in the “workers’ voice” that does not speak directly from that dimension, we can read in what Pillon writes about the body and work the “marks of debates of human history” or the crystallizations of “previous history of peoples”. By perceiving this with a careful reading, the text can become an important support for all those who think the body in its philosophical, social, historical and pedagogical aspects.

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