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The Cult of Health and Beauty in Germany: A Social History,
1890-1930 (review)

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to put women back in their places in a new, redefined gender system. They used the image of the poor, exploited seamstress to suggest that women were naturally unfit for wage work, helpless without familial protection. They told stories of poor seamstresses driven by their poverty into prostitution, in order to draw a contrast between the corrupt sphere of the marketplace and the pure, virtuous sphere of the middle class home.

Zakin's final chapters suggest that by the 1850's, men's fashion had acquired a new place in American culture. No longer criticized as the antithesis of virtue, men's fashion now functioned to help produce social order without overt coercion. The autonomous individual was not required to follow fashion, but he did so in order to avoid being ridiculed for his bad taste. Fashion was a form of majority rule which helped to enforce uniformity. By naturalizing the assumption that the abstract universal citizen was male, middle class, and a wholehearted supporter of consumer capitalism, men's fashion ensured that men would not engage in class-conscious rebellion.

This is a creative book, full of original and often brilliantly expressed insights. Skeptical readers may wonder if Zakin is putting more historical weight on the men's suit than it can actually bear. But his central point about the relationship between fashion, democracy, and the culture of capitalism in nineteenth century America is plausible and important.

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The Cult of Health and Beauty in Germany: A Social History, 1890–1930.

By Michael Hau (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003. x plus 286 pp. 48 illustrations).

If Friedrich Nietzsche had maintained a healthier lifestyle, eating more vegetables and taking advantage of alternative cures, he would have lived longer, avoided insanity and, perhaps, contributed more immortal works to the canon of German philosophy and literature. That, at least, was the opinion of an anonymous contributor to an 1895 issue of the *Vegetarische Rundschau* (Vegetarian Review), one of the many health magazines circulating in Germany at the time. But since age seventeen, the philosopher had neglected his body, resorting to medical treatment rather than bathing and a vegetarian diet when treating open wounds and lingering ailments. As a result, the *Vegetarische Rundschau* claimed, various disease substances were imprisoned in Nietzsche's body where unable to "leave" their cell, they eventually poisoned the philosopher's brain.

A cult of health and beauty swept across Germany around the turn of the twentieth century and lingered on well into the Weimar period. For four decades German scientists and pseudo-scientists, quacks and lay people turned to the body as both a reflection of their own social problems and a utopian answer in their search for control, perfectionism and an ideal world. In their approach, these "life reformers" differed widely from each other. Some simply advocated exercise, a healthy lifestyle, and a balanced diet. Many, however, turned to vegetarianism, nudism, bodybuilding, eugenics or alternative cures in their efforts

to improve and perfect the architecture and inner workings of the human body. Why, Michael Hau asks, did German society become so obsessed with physical appearance and well-being at precisely this moment in time?

To Hau, this question cannot be answered in terms of the history of science alone. He argues, instead, that what may have begun as a medical interest grew into a social phenomenon, an integral part of turn-of-the-century bürgerliche Kultur at a time when lower middle-class Germans developed an increasing amount of angst over their economic and professional future. Fears that they would never land a permanent job. Fears that they would never climb up the social ladder. Fears that their lives would never change, never improve, never realizes the hopes and promises they had had. In this scenario, control over the body became an ersatz belief for people's increasing sense of loss of power over their lives. Confronted with a future where he might never move up the career ladder, a life and a system over which he presumably held no control, a white-collar worker could at least maintain control over his own body, improve his physical self and, thus, gain additional self-respect. Stuck in a boring job with no prospect of improvement, people could improve their own lives and convince themselves of being more attractive than those blessed with a higher income or more fortunate living circumstances.

But it wasn't just that. Modernity, rapid industrialization, an overwhelming bureaucracy did not simply imbue citizens with a sense of powerlessness. All three also seemed to attack man's (and woman's) health and body directly, causing it to degenerate and decline in a very direct way. Processed food, an increasingly sedentary lifestyle, and office or factory work all inspired a sense of drudgery that seemed to force human bodies to perform in unnatural ways to the extent that obesity, ugliness, and early decay were increasingly becoming the norm. In response, life reformers offered a variety of programs centering around food intake and physical exercise designed to restore man's original fitness and, thus, withstand the onslaught of modern life.

In the most interesting sections of the book, Hau investigates how the human body became quite literally a projecting screen for different social groups and their various interpretations of what were, in the end, the same aesthetic aspirations and the same medical and hygienic teachings. Thus, middle class reformers nurtured visions of the "harmonious cultivation of body, mind, and soul." While lower-middle class reformers shared this *Bildungsideal* derived from Greek antiquity, to them fitness became also a form of "cultural capital", a term Hau borrows from Pierre Bourdieu, "markers of distinction in relation to both the educated middle class and members of the working class who could not afford to participate in such time-consuming leisure activities" (p. 5). Physicians and medical experts, in turn, sought to solidify traditional images of gender relations and the inferiority of women as "mandated" by nature and science. Feminist critics (as well as the increasing percentage of women in the work force), however, contradicted such ideas and they rushed to exhibit the economic and social motivations behind such analyses. Like gender, race and racial discourse played a key role in the health discourse. In the analyses of some life reformers images of Nordic women contrasted with lower-class, southern or "exotic" women served to solidify both conceptions of racial differences as well as the validity of the "scientific" investigation of the body at the time. The contrast between regular

and alternative medicine plays a role in this book as does the perceived link between appearance and constitution, i.e. aestheticism as a reflector of health. A final chapter is dedicated to nudist culture in Weimar Germany, complete with illustrations of advocates, consumers and parks at the time. For all its presumed innocence, nudism created a vision of equality, a *Volksgemeinschaft*, that transcended social and political divisions and, instead, created a community of happy people committed to similar hobbies and leisure activities.

In the end we may conclude that health, beauty and the human body meant different things to different people but always encompassed a vision of utopianism in a world that seemed threatening, lonely and lacking in promise to people in many different strata of society. Hau thus presents us with a wonderful example of what has come to be known as *Körpergeschichte*, body history, which ascribes both literal and metaphorical meaning to the idea of the physical self. Body history can be understood as an investigation of the human corpus and its interpretation over time. But it can also be seen as a canvas in which the term “body” assumes a meaning beyond its physical existence. By integrating medical and social history and uncovering a wealth of visual images, Michael Hau has successfully done both.

It is, however, very difficult to read this book and not think about similar phenomena elsewhere before, after, and even at the time. Hau cautions us to understand the cult of health and beauty in Germany on its own terms and not necessarily frame it by racial discourses prevalent in the Third Reich. But even so, should we not draw parallels to other areas and other times as well? For example, physical exercise and character building were an integral part of U.S. and British late nineteenth-century culture—are we to apply Hau’s conclusions to these areas as well or should we look for other explanations? Was the cult of health and beauty a western and international phenomenon with culturally specific expressions or should we understand it—as Sonja Goltermann has done—on primarily national terms? And when did or does it end? Much of Hau’s narrative will resonate with a generation today driven by the cult of fitness as exhibited in postmodern gyms, TV ads, and health advice books. Are we to look to the late nineteenth century in order to grasp the underlying meaning of this disposition?

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Butterflies Will Burn: Prosecuting Sodomites in Early Modern Spain and Mexico. By Federico Garza Carvajal (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003. xx plus 310 pp. \$27.50).

This book represents a significant reworking of a University of Texas dissertation. It interprets the early modern Spanish prosecution of sodomites, in the peninsula and in New Spain, as the result of the danger Spaniards thought sodomy posed to their concept of the New Spanish Man (*vir*) which, the au-