

SOCIAL CONTROL THROUGH THE BODY: CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN'S NEGLECTED APPROACH

ASSA Conference 2025

GUILLAUME VALLET

University Grenoble Alpes, CREG

guillaume.vallet@univ-grenoble-alpes.fr

Introduction

- The Progressive Era (1890-1920) and its three main features: industrialization, urbanization, and immigration (Vallet, 2020)
- During this period of deep upheaval (with unprecedented opportunities and sea change on the one hand, but also of inertia on the other hand (Vallet, 2020)), there was a quest for a collective order. At stake was the sustainability of the three aforementioned features.
- This implied to redesign the law with the view of contemplating what people could not do, but also to regulate people's behaviors and to channel them in the betterment of the common good, to develop "proper behavior" (Kirschner, 1975: 81).
- Among this group was Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935), a writer and activist who campaigned for the emancipation of women. Targeting "androcentric institutions", she championed a more equalitarian world.

Introduction

- The contribution of this paper lies in its examination of the importance that Gilman attached to the body in her works.
- The body here encompasses both its integumental parts, and its main vital organs (especially because for women, the internal vital organs are instrument for “reproduction of race”, a critical issue for Gilman). The body is therefore perceived as a ‘space’ alleged to serve both one’s empowerment and society. This is why it must be subjected to social control.
- However, the paper also emphasizes the limitations and drawbacks of this ‘project’: as Gilman experienced herself, in a patriarchal society characterized by relations of power, social control through the body is not an easy affair.



1. Ross' Concept of Social Control: A Brief Overview

- Gilman and Ross were good friends (Gilman Perkins 1972 [1935]: 259). There was reciprocal intellectual influence between them. Although initially critical toward the 'woman question', Ross had begun to regard the changing role of women and their social emancipation with considerable sympathy (Lovett, 2007). Likewise, Gilman increasingly adopted Ross' views on immigration, related to his concept of "social control".
- In February 1896, Ross wrote to his mentor L. Ward: "More and more as I think of control, I feel that I have stumbled onto a great social secret". The same year, he published two seminal papers on his seminal concept, Social Control, in the AJS (1896a, 1896b)

"By Social Control, on the other hand, I mean that ascendancy over the aims and acts of the individual which is exercised on behalf of the group. It is a sway that is not casual or incidental, but is purposive and at its inception conscious. It is kept up partly by definite organs, formally constituted and supported by the will of society, and partly by informal spontaneous agencies that, consciously or unconsciously, serve the social interest and function under constant supervision from above" (Ross, 1896a: 519)

- Social control should be distinguished from mere "social influence", i.e. "the ascendancy exercised over the individual by the throng of men in which he is embedded" (Ross, 1896a: 519). Social control refers to the capacity of a given society to regulate individuals' behaviors for the sake of its order: it is a system of organization (Lindsay, 1898) that shapes individuals in order to promote "obedience and loyalty and public spirit" (Ross, 1896a: 520-521)

1. Ross' Concept of Social Control: A Brief Overview

- Individuals' body is part of the process of social control. The use of the body relates to individuals' "feelings" (Ross, 1896a :517), suiting "the needs of the group" (Ross, 1896a: 518). As Ross expanded in his book *Social Control* (1901), socially-oriented individuals' feelings participate in framing habits, customs and rules that allow people to live together. At stake is not natural selection, but artificial control.
 - In light of this, Ross' social control is consistent with self-regulation, and not only state intervention.
- "The success of social organization depends on each man, whether watched or unwatched, sticking to his appropriate work and interfering with no one else in his work" (Ross, 1896a: 525)



2. Gilman's Bodily Empowerment: The Key Role of Physical culture

▪ The body in Gilman's social evolutionism

- Gilman's social evolutionism was rooted in the belief that society was a social organism mutating through different stages (Sheth & Prasch, 1996), driven forward by economic and social upheavals: "We, with all life, are under the great law, Evolution" (Gilman, 1972 [1935]: 42).
- At the center of this "reform Social Darwinism" (Allen, 2009) lies health, which participates in promoting the common good: "Again, society's advance rests on the personal health, sanity, and happiness of its members" (Gilman, 1972 [1903]: 321).
- For Gilman, health was a burning issue during the Progressive Era: "Wrong eating and wrong drinking are responsible for an enormous proportion of our diseases and our crimes, to say nothing of the still larger average of unhealthiness and unhappiness in which we live" (Gilman, 1972 [1903]: 130)
- Accordingly, individuals should pay a great attention to their body, which should be trained on a regular basis (through physical culture in particular) to improve health:

"The physical body is not an end but a means. Life is the end, action; the body is what you do with it" (Gilman, 2005 [1904]: 166).

"The rapid and increasing spread of physical culture in modern life is helping mend the low conditions of human development; but the man still has the advantage" (Gilman, 1972 [1903]: 210).

2. Gilman's Bodily Empowerment: The Key Role of Physical culture

■ Gilman applied social control to her body very early in her life

Her passion for physical culture appeared very early. It came from her will to gain self confidence, and maybe as a reaction against the repressive discipline of her mother (Vertinsky, 1989). She practiced throughout her life, albeit irregularly.

“Among the many splendid movements of the late nineteenth century was one dear to my heart, that toward a higher physical culture” (Gilman, 1972 [1935]: 64).

“What I did determine on and largely secure was the development of a fine physique” (Gilman, 1972 [1935]: 64).

“My special efforts were not toward anything spectacular, but directed to the building up of a sound physique” (Gilman, 1972 [1935]: 67).

“Five little rules of health I devised: Good air and plenty of it, good exercise and plenty of it, good food and plenty of it, good sleep and plenty of it, good clothes and as little as possible” (Gilman, 1972 [1935]: 67).

- Although she never officially acknowledged it (Davis, 2010, p. 46), she was likely influenced by her aunt Catherine Beecher's *Physiology and Calisthenics for Schools and Families* (1856). By suggesting that women's bodies could be trained, Beecher empowered women to begin viewing their bodies as uniquely their own (Todd, 1998: 161). Likewise, Gilman read her uncle Edward Everett Hale's *How to Do It* (1871). Her uncle went as far as to claim that “life is a gymnasium” (quoted in Davis, 2010: 45).

2. Gilman's Bodily Empowerment: The Key Role of Physical culture

- However, other figures were influential to Gilman:
- ✓ William Blaikie, – an American lawyer, but also athlete and writer (*How to Get Strong and to Stay So* (1879): “[Blaikie's How to Get Strong and How to Stay So was a great help](#)” (Gilman, 1972 [1935]: 64). Blaikie's principles incentivized her to envision physical culture as a rigid but emancipatory form of self-discipline (Vertinsky, 1989). Although concerning everyone, Blaikie's principles targeted particularly women in order to gain physical and mental power, self-control and enduring health. Gilman ran, lifted weight and practiced gymnastics on a daily basis (Gilman, 1972 [1935]).
- ✓ Dr Studley, a young woman physician who gave a lecture to Gilman school on hygiene. Studley “[an indelible impression on my earnest mind](#)” (Gilman, 1972 [1935]: 29).
- ✓ Dr John P. Brooks, who devised key principles, detailed in his work *Exercise Cure: The Butler Health Lift, What It Is and What It Can Do* (1880): “[The class routine included running, kicking, jumping, climbing, vaulting, performing handstands, and traversing the traveling rings, the last Charlotte's personal favorite](#)” (Davis, 2010: 47). Brooks gave physical fitness classes at the Young Ladies School in Providence, He was also the Director of the Providence Gymnasium, in which Gilman worked out.

“[Calisthenics, taught by an upright young Dr. Brooks, strongly appealed to me. I became so upright that I fairly leaned backwards and marched with such conscientious precision that he called me out as an object lesson, to march around with him.](#)” (Gilman Perkins, 1972 [1935]: 28).

- Gilman's empowerment through physical culture relates to her belief that body and soul were part of the same configuration (Gilman, 1916): “[We have seen that in every living creature there is a close and vivid likeness between its spirit and its form, between body and soul](#)” (Gilman, 2005 [1904]: 157).

This ‘synergistic’ relationship body/soul aligns with Gilman's call for the emergence of the “new woman” (Vallet, 2023).

3. Social Control of the Body is at the Heart of Women's Social Work

- Social control through the body implies work, and work is a social concern

“Human work is a thing you do for someone else outside of you; Not for parent, wife, or son – Human work is for everyone” (Gilman, 1911: 291).

“Human work is the special trade for which your body and brain were made what you can do and love the best – Done for you for all the rest. Human work goes on its way, not for praise, and not for pay. Pay must come and men be fed, but work goes on or the world is dead” (Gilman, 1911: 291).

“It is the simplest, plainest, most unchangeable duty of every one of us to so live that our bodies shall be always ready for their best work” (Gilman, 1885: 4).

- Accordingly, women should be empowered through work

“Man must work to be fully human, and so must woman” (Gilman, 1895: 10).

“To work is not only a right, it is a duty. To work to the full capacity of one's powers is necessary for human development” (Gilman, 1972 [1903]: 260-261).

3. Social Control of the Body is at the Heart of Women's Social Work

- For women, the primary and the most valuable social work is maternity.

“Why was woman the first worker? Because she is a mother. All living animals are under the law of, first, self-preservation, and, second, race-preservation. But the second really comes first” (Gilman, 1972 [1903]: 86).

- In light of this, women's body must stay healthy to improve the “reproduction of race”, and physical exercise is the cornerstone of this betterment. For ideal results, the female body must shake off certain yokes. The body is the resource on which everything seems possible, making humans distinct from animals:

“This is what gives the subtle beauty to the human body, its measureless potentiality. [...]. Man's body is an almost limitless possibility” (Gilman, 2005 [1904]: 162).

- In her poem “The Primal Power” (1923) for example, she urged women to become “full-grown mothers”, “brave and free” with “splendid bodies, trained and strong”.

- The insistence on maternity is in line with Ross' social control and... “race suicide”: the social group of white American people should raise its birthrate. To that aim, the regulation of women's body through social control – which takes the form of maternity and motherhood – is paramount.

“Physically we seem to be improving. There is far more knowledge about health, more interest in hygiene and exercise, the death rate is being lowered, we are getting ahead of some diseases” (Gilman Perkins, 1972 [1935]:

3. Social Control of the Body is at the Heart of Women's Social Work

■ The example of Herland's (manless) society

- In Herland, the 'traditional' traits of femininity are conspicuous by their absence: women are muscular – the result of regular physical exercise – and their powers derive partly from their muscular bodies. Herland's women eat healthy food slowly produced to fuel the body. Women practice physical culture outdoor on a regular basis (Gilman Perkins, 2022 [1915]: 69).
- Consequently, this bodily power flouts the traditional expectations of male and female bodies as well as the belief that women are unfit to control their own bodies: “We began to rather prize those beards of ours; they were almost our sole distinction among those tall and sturdy women, with their cropped hair and sexless costume” (Gilman Perkins, 2022 [1915]: 73).
- Once again, physical culture is the most visible proof of the efficiency of body work out is the enhanced bodily capacity to give birth for women, in a manless society. We find out here Gilman's efficient and powerful connection between body and mind through physical culture: “For five or ten years they worked together, growing stronger and wiser and more and more mutually attached, and then the miracle happened – one of these young women bore a child” (Gilman Perkins, 2022 [1915]: 49).
- More broadly, economic wealth and cohesiveness are achieved by daily physical exercise and by forms of labor which closely fit their natural and social needs:
 - “There were no spectacular acrobatics, such as only the young can perform, but for all-around development [of physical fitness] they had a most excellent system” (Gilman Perkins, 2022 [1915]: 29).
 - “Here at last was Motherhood, and though it was not for all of them personally, it might – if the power was inherited – found a new race.” (Gilman Perkins, 2022 [1915]: 49).

4. Social Control or Social Disorders? Bodily Impediments in a Patriarchal Society

(1) The home

- The home, ruled by androcentric principles, narrows women's bodily capacities

“Half the human race is denied free productive expression, is forced to confine its productive human energies to the same channels as its reproductive sex-energies. Its creative skill is confined to the level of immediate personal bodily service, to the making of clothes and preparing of food for individuals” (Gilman, 1898: 117) .

“Is this the condition of human motherhood? Does the human mother, by her motherhood, thereby lose control of brain and body, lose power and skill and desire for any other work?” (Gilman, 1898: 19).

- ✓ Corset wearing exemplifies this, spotlighting the alleged “best” traits of bodily femininity while epitomizing the primal nature of the home actually: “As women enter the larger life of the world these limitations are easily outgrown; the working-woman cannot make a conventionalized ornament of her body [...]” (Gilman, 1972 [1903]: 154-155).

- ✓ Gilman incentivized women to “go outside”...while experiencing these difficulties herself:

“It is also a matter of health for women to go outside: sun, sport, social interactions. This is “injurious to the health and vigour of the race” (Gilman, 1972 [1903]: 210).

4. Social Control or Social Disorders? Bodily Impediments in a Patriarchal Society

(2) Prostitution: women's body trapped into an androcentric institution

- Prostitution, which had hitherto been scorned as a disreputable business reached unprecedented levels and became widely perceived as a major social concern from the 1890s onwards.
 - In Gilman's views, prostitution was a threat to women and society at large:
 - For health reasons: the spread of dangerous diseases threatened the "reproduction of race"
- "At the top we will place those acts which conduce to the highest advancement of the most people; at the bottom those acts which conduce to the lowest degradation of the most people" (Gilman, 1914: 100)
- For economic reasons: prostitution impedes women's independence.
 - The underlying hypothesis was that if women were keen to accept low wages to sell their bodily labor force through prostitution, they might subsequently accept equally low wages for other bodily activities used in the traditional industrial activities.
 - A vicious circle would arise: prostitution would push down wages for both women and men, forcing women to increase their involvement in sexual services because of low wages or unemployment (Fitzpatrick, 1990: 112).

4. Social Control or Social Disorders? Bodily Impediments in a Patriarchal Society

(3) Victorian Medicine as the Gendered Institution of Social Control of the Body

- Late nineteenth century Victorian medicine relied heavily upon systems of differentiation between men and women. Women were associated with body (and nature): Women had to take care of their body to build a robust mind, with the underpinning objective of serving maternity: According to Dr. Weir Mitchell, a renowned neurologist of the time, “you cure the body and somehow the mind is also cured.” (Earnest, 1950: 229).
- This split between body and mind related to the belief that the energy women devote to reproduction prevent them from using their body for other purpose. For some physicians, too much blood was diverted to the brain to allow women adequately develop their mental stability and above all, their reproductive organs (Lovett, 2007). If excess energy was used in one direction, less would be available for other needs.
- At stake were also nervous disorders, described as the result of the tension between women’s alleged natural role on the one hand (implying a restricted use of the body: toward maternity first and foremost), and their willingness to realize themselves in every field of society (meaning an unrestricted use of the body). In other words, anorexia nervosa, hysteria and neurasthenia were described as the consequence of the emergence of the “new woman” model (Haller, 1971).
- This supported also the “family-wage” argument: “Men were providers, heads of household entitled to wages sufficient to support a family, and women were mothers whose place was in the home” (Leonard, 2016: 173).

4. Social Control or Social Disorders? Bodily Impediments in a Patriarchal Society

- If some physicians' response to these potential “damages” was to increase women's participation in sport, others such as Mitchell recommended ‘rest cure’ at home. This ‘rest cure’ meant in fact the close supervision – even total control – of women (wives) by men (husbands and male doctors), consistent with patriarchal tradition of female confinement and subordination, compliance and acceptance with her marital and mothering obligations (Vertinsky, 1989).



- Gilman had a post partum depression, and consulted Dr. Mitchell in 1887, who diagnosed neurasthenia and recommended rest cure for her. This cure created more problems than it solved, as Gilman explained in the *The Yellow Wallpaper* or in her autobiography.

Conclusion

- Gilman encouraged individuals – women in particular – to turn to their body through physical exercise as a way to better themselves and to build a stronger American nation. Physical exercise helps control the body and channel it to beneficial activities of different kinds. In her views, it was a struggle for humanness and for setting up a “human world”.
- This struggle is symmetrical: improvement of body health is conducive to the betterment of society and in turn, the latter paved the way for a more egalitarian world in which everyone is granted the opportunity to master their bodies. Such a positive circle has been put forth by several generations of feminist authors who have claimed that control of the body is the first step to envisioning freedom and empowerment.
- However, there are many obstacles to this plan. Individuals’ relation to their body is embedded in relations of power, in a male-dominated world.
- Be that as it may, Gilman was undoubtedly a pioneer, whose thought on the topic deserves more attention.