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The Quest for Self-Sufficiency and the New Strenuosity: Reflections on the Strenuous Life of the 1970s and the 1980s*

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In the 1970s and the 1980s evidence of a preoccupation with strenuous living was widespread.[1] One of its dimensions was the popularity of physical fitness.[2] Even in bone-chilling Nebraska winters, runners grimly pounded out the miles needed to reach their weekly quotas. At the local gymnasiums of the Young Men's and Women's Christian Associations and hundreds of special health centers, women did exhausting aerobic dance routines and both sexes grunted under the weights of Nautilus machines.[3] Specialists designed individualized fitness programs, complete with elaborate quantifications of performances. Millions gave up cigarettes, reduced or eliminated the consumption of red meats, and cut down on or quit drinking alcoholic beverages.

A second dimension of the strenuous life, which became increasingly manifest in the 1980s, entailed the presentation of a particular self.[4] Physical vigor and a sinewy or, conversely a muscle-bound, body became extremely important as a means of self- presentation. In scorching summers, women revealed their fitness in loose-fitting runners T-shirts or in shorts over form-fitting leotards, and men donned short shorts and muscle-revealing T-shirts. Stylish jogging

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* Several persons, most of whom in one way or another were (are) participants in the new strenuosity, aided me in doing this project. In particular, they include an anonymous reviewer, Penny Berger, Mary Jo Deegan, Gretchen Holten, Dane F. Kennedy, William J. Lewis, Norma Luebke, Patrick Miller, Barbara K. Rader, Randy Roberts, Emily Rosenberg, Norman Rosenberg, Jules Tygiel, and Kenneth Winkle.

[1] There is no general history of the new strenuosity, but see especially Patricia A. Eisenman and C. Robert Barnett, "Physical Fitness in the 1950s and 1970s: Why Did One Fail and the Other Boom?" *Quest* 31 (1979): 114-122; Randy Roberts and James Olson, Winning *is* the Only *Thing: Sports in* America Since *1945* (Baltimore, 1989), 213-234; Marc Leepson, "Physical Fitness Boom," *Editorial Research Reports,* April 14, 1978: 263-280; series of articles in New *York Times,* Jan. 3, 1988, III, 13.

[2] Despite polls reporting frequent exercise and other manifestations of a concern for fitness, one should keep in mind that the overwhelming majority of Americans were not physically fit by any of the standard definitions of fitness. See for example Robert Sullivan, "The Unfitness Boom, 'Sports *Illustrated 70* (March 13, 1989): 13.

[3] For the fascinating relationship between equipment and strenuosity see, among others, 'The Case for Nautilus: 'Full Range' Exercise," New *York Times,* July 10.1978, III: 10, and for individualized fitness programs, Lynn Langway, "Fitness with a Personal Touch," Newsweek 101 (June 27, 1983): 83.

[4] See Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life (New* York, 1959); Mary Jo Deegan, *American Ritual Dramas: Social Rules and Cultural Meanings (New* York, 1989); Stanley B. Woll and Peter Young, 'Looking for Mr. and Ms. Right: Self- presentation in Videodating," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 51 (1989): 109-114.

suits became de rigueur for weekend excursions to the supermarket as well as the local fitness center. In newspaper personals men and women presented themselves to each other as dedicated fitness freaks. Energetic, strong, willowy young men and women filled the television screens in both commercials and rock videos. Perhaps no sign of the times was more important than the decision to update the marketing of Barbie, "the ultimate Yuppie doll," by including with the doll a workout center, complete with exercise cycle, dumbbells, slant boards, and locker room with towel.[5]

Obviously, the most direct predecessor of the modern concern with vigorous living was Theodore Roosevelt's call for the strenuous life at the turn of the twentieth-century.[6] Like more recent exponents of strenuosity, Roosevelt was convinced that fitness could contribute to improved health, but in other respects his position differed fundamentally from the movement of the 1970s and 1980s. First, Roosevelt and his followers would have been shocked at the sheer intensity and degree of physical activity characteristic of the new strenuosity. While in his forties Roosevelt went on long, fast walks over hill and dale along the Potomac River, neither he nor his friends ran in marathons, or ran at all for that matter. Second, while Roosevelt wanted genteel women to be stronger so that they could bear large broods of white, Anglo-Saxon children, he certainly would have been surprised if not shocked at the conspicuous role of women in the modern strenuous life movement.

Finally, the goal of Roosevelt's strenuosity was social. Through more strenuous living, he hoped to rejuvenate his own social class, which he believed had become too soft and effeminate. Once physically strengthened, they could provide capable national leadership. Social goals, especially becoming fit enough to meet the perceived threat of the Soviet Union, also informed the President's Council on Physical Fitness organized in 1956.[7] Although the President's Council remains in existence today, it has had a negligible relationship to the modern fitness crusade. Indeed, the focus of the new strenuosity had been upon the self, upon the individual rather than upon society or the community.

The stress on the self leads to the main theme of this essay, namely that the preoccupation with the strenuous life in the 1970s and 1980s was part of a wide-ranging quest for greater self-sufficiency among the "successful." In general, the successful were the "Baby Boomers," those born between 1945 and 1960,

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5. See Anastasia Toufexis, "The Shape of the Nation," *Time* 126 (Oct. 7, 1985): 60-61.

6. For the intricate connections between the new strenuosity and earlier movements, see James C. Whorton, *Crusadersfor Fitness: The History of American Health Reformers* (Princeton, NJ, 1982); Hillel Schwartz, *Never Satisfied: A Cultural History Diets, Fantasies, and Fat* (New York, 1986); Donald J. Mrozek, *Sport and the American Mentality, 1880-1920* (Knoxville, TN, 1983); Elliot J. Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America* (Ithaca, NY, 1986). pp. 185-206; Harvey Green, *Fit for America: Health, Fitness, and American Society (New* York, 1988); Kathryn Grover, ed., *Fitness in American Culture: Images of Health, Sport, and Body, 1830-1940* (Amherst, MA, 1989); Gerald F. Roberts, "The Strenuous Life: The Cult of Manliness in the Era of Theodore Roosevelt" (Ph.D. diss., Michigan State University, 1970).

7. During the Council's existence school children have improved little if any in their level of fitness. On the creation of the President's Council, see Dorothy Stull, "A Measure of Fitness," *Sports Illustrated 7* (Aug. 5, 1957): 28-33 and on the recent fitness of children, Karin DeVenuta, "Future Stars Aren't Ready," *Wall Street Journal,* Feb. 26, 1988.

who had higher incomes than the national average, lived in the suburbs; more specifically in the 1980s they frequently fit the definition of the "Yuppies," a term applied to the young, upwardly mobile professionals.[8]

Although this group enjoyed more material success than did most Americans, ill-defined and only partly understood dissatisfactions within its ranks arose from other quarters. One of the least contestable was a growing awareness that modern medicine had no panaceas for extending life or preventing aging. Less conclusive was the absence of adequate satisfactions in work, consumption, and personal relationships. As society became more rationalized and systematized and more people worked in bureaucracies, the importance of the individual seemed to diminish. Many, especially those in white-collar occupations, experienced powerlessness and anonymity in their jobs. Neither did greater consumption seem to satisfy yearnings arising from material wants, impotency, meaningless work, loneliness, or sexual deprivation. Apart from the issue of whether consumption has the capacity to satisfy the deepest needs of the human species, the very existence of the advertising industry depended on its ability to convince people that they could not achieve fulfillment unless they purchased ever greater quantity of goods or services. Whatever the sources of anxiety and unfulfillment, the post-war successful increasingly turned to the self to nurture the resources needed to cope with modern life.

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A growing recognition of the limits of modern medicine provided the most obvious impetus for the new quest for greater self-sufficiency.[9] Americans have long been skeptical of the claims of the professional practitioners of medicine. Alternative forms of medicine flourished in the nineteenth century; reformers in the antebellum era claimed that particular diets and exercises would promote better health. The great sanitary reforms of the second half of the nineteenth century, since they proved highly effective in reducing the incidence of contagious diseases, represented measurable progress in preventive medicine.

Then in the twentieth century came the sudden medical breakthroughs, in particular the antibiotic revolution in the 1940s and 1950s, which seemed to suggest that humans could safely rely on the "wonder drugs" to protect their health and increase their longevity without worrying so much about sanitation, diet, or exercise. American confidence in the medical profession suddenly soared to undreamed of heights. Just as enthusiasm for wonder drugs had reached a crescendo in the mid-1960s, however, Americans learned about the dangerous side effects of such powerful drugs as thalidomide and antibiotics. "The result," Norman Cousins has written, "was a growing distrust not just of the highly sophisticated new drugs but of almost all medications in general."[10] The percentage of the population expressing high confidence in medicine fell, according to national public opinion polls, in a descending curve from a high of 73 percent in 1966 to only 34 percent in 1980."

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[8] See for example Martin E. P. Seligman, "Boomer Blues," *Psychology Today,* Oct. 1988, 50-55; Roger Thompson, "Baby Boom's Mid-Life Crisis," *Editorial Research Reports,* Jan. 8, 1988, 2-11.

[9] See especially John C. Burnham, "Change in the Popularization of Health in the United States," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine,* 58 (1984): 183-197; Marc Leepson, 'Staying Healthy," *Editorial Research Reports,* Aug. 26, 1983, 635-652; and Paul Starr, *The Social Transformation of American Medicine (New* York, 1982).

[10] Norman Cousins, *Anatomy of an Illness as Perceived by the Patient* (New York, 1979), pp. 113-114.

With the success of the antibiotic revolution in reducing or eliminating many dreaded killers, the main health concern transferred to the degeneration of the body rather than control of contagious diseases. Increasing longevity and a growing obsession with youthfulness made Americans all the more aware of body degeneration. In the 1960s cardiovascular diseases and cancer replaced contagious diseases as the main human killers. In both cases modern medicine offered no wonder drugs. Simultaneously, a growing body of epidemiological evidence indicated that the way persons lived directly affected their health. Indeed, according to this evidence, "lifestyle items," such as the absence of exercise, obesity, smoking, fat intake, and heavy drinking, greatly increased the risks of cardiovascular problems and possibly cancer as well.[12] The result was that growing numbers of Americans tried to alter their lifestyles. They watched what they ate, tried to control their diet, exercised more, stopped smoking, and tried to reduce stress in their lives. All of these behavioral changes could be accomplished by the self. With little or no reliance upon society, the individual seemed to be able to forestall the arrival of the Grim Reaper. Such thinking dovetailed nicely with American traditions of individualism and self-help.

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Into this favorable climate stepped a new guru of exercise, Air Force physician Kenneth Cooper. In the late 1960s, at the very time that disillusionment with the Great Society and the Vietnam War had set in, Cooper developed measurable standards of ideal conditioning, thereby giving fitness the illusion of resting on proven experimentation. Unlike earlier apostles of fitness, Cooper insisted that only exceptionally strenuous activities, such as jogging, running, racquetball, cycling, or swimming raised the pulse rate to sustained levels adequate for one to become what he called "aerobically fit." Only then could the exerciser gain significant cardiovascular benefits. Cooper personally brought to his "aerobics" movement an intensity and moral earnestness befitting his evangelical Protestant origins. [13]

Fed partly by Cooper's claims but even more by media hype, a popular runners movement blossomed in the late 1960s and early 1970s. First the public learned that astronaut-hero John Glenn followed Cooper's regimen of aerobic fitness. Then came ABC television's coverage of the marathon at the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich. Before the marathon took place, monumental blunders, sparkling heroes, and genuine tragedy at the games had already glued the entire nation to the television spectacle. With a emotionally-charged commentary provided by Eric Segal, the author of the sentimental, best-selling novel, *Love Story,* American Frank Shorter came from far behind the pack to

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[11] ABC News-Harris Survey, Nov. 24, 1980.

[12] See John Grossman, "Inside the Wellness Movement," *Health* 13 (Dec. 1981): 10-15.

[13] Kenneth H. Cooper, *Aerobics (New* York, 1968); Cooper, *The Aerobics Way (New York,* 1977). For Cooper and his influence, see, Edwin McDowell, "Publishing; 'Aerobics' Scores a Hit," New *York Times,* Dec. 3, 1982: III, 29, and Robert Reinhold, "Has the Aerobics Movement Peaked? An Interview with Kenneth Cooper," ibid, March 29, 1987: VI, 14.

whip the world's best. Shorter became an instant hero. No other specific event did more to encourage the running mania.

But Shorter's victory coincided in time with a turning away from society to the self as well. Growing recognition of the limits of expertise and disillusionment with the government's ability to deal with race, poverty, stagflation, pollution, energy shortages, and foreign affairs all encouraged the coming of what social commentator Tom Wolfe labeled the "Me Decade." Many Americans sought greater control over their lives and greater personal satisfaction in arenas other than jobs, consumption, or social movements. They became converts to charismatic religions, experimented with vegetarianism, hallucinatory drugs, psychotherapy, EST, or became apostles of the new fitness cult.[14]

After 1972 jogging and running "took off' in popularity. While many jogged for short distances only a few times weekly, an astonishing number of Americans took up regular long distance running. In 1970 only 126 men entered the first New York marathon, but by the mid-1980s the organizers accepted a maximum of 20,000 "official" entries from both men and women while rejecting thousands of others. By then hundreds of cities scheduled marathons in all parts of the nation. Again television contributed to the popularity of long distance running. To the surprise of media watchers, millions watched the telecasts of the New York and Boston marathons. As if running 26 miles were not enough exercise, the apostles of running invented the triathlon, which included a two-mile swim, a 112-mile bicycle race, and a 26-mile run. In 1986 more than a million Americans competed in one or another version of this grueling event.[15]

The runners claimed for their activity much more than aerobic benefits. Apart from building additional energy and reducing anxieties, running, according to its proponents, released endorphins, producing a mystical-like "runner's high," a trancelike euphoria that could be addictive. Running and other vigorous exercises that induced burning pain, pounding hearts, and gasping lungs also helped satisfy human yearnings for concentrated awareness, a focussed consciousness that drove away all distractions. "Your mind is consumed by the motion of what you are trying to do and by the pain factor," explained Paul Karlin, a restaurant owner and weight lifter from Bethesda, Maryland. "When you stop, it's like coming down from a high," but in this instance a high without hangovers or presumably the permanent disabilities associated with drug use.[16]

Runners as often as not candidly confessed that their activity was self-centered. "I am a nervous, shy non-combatant who has no feeling for people," wrote Dr. George A. Sheehan, running's self-appointed chief philosopher. "I

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14. See especially Christopher Lasch, The *Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations (New* York, 1978).

15. Melvin Durslag, "1st Prize: Surgery, 2nd Prize; Divorce, 3rd Prize: A Mugging," *TV Guide,* Oct. 23, 1982: 14-15; Meg Lukens, "Three *Sports Are Better Than One, "Good Health Magazine,* March 26, 1987, 26-27. For the running boom see also Rory Donaldson, *Guidelines for Successful Jogging (New* York, 1977); James F. *Fixx, The Complete Book of Running* (New York, 1977). Among the relevant periodicals, *see Jogger* and *Runner's World.*

16. Quotations in Michael Walsh, "Make Way for the Spartans," *Time,* Sept. 19, 1983: 90-92. See also Shirley James Longshore, "Fitness: A Universal Goal," *Advertising Age,* July 18, 1983, 9, 29.

do not hunger or thirst after justice. I find no happiness in carnival, no joy in community"[17] Sheehan found joy only in the self, in pushing the self to the limits. Like religious converts, runners frequently took on new identities. They made new friends while shedding old ones; they divorced spouses in record numbers; and they rejected smokers. "I abandoned the non-running world," was a typical comment of a convert. [18]

A distinctive runner's culture emerged, one which revolved not only around running, but clubs, special diets, in-group understandings and behaviors, running magazines and books, running celebrities, and a flourishing equipment industry. Even though running required no special physical talents (which was one of its attractions), it separated populations into groups who regularly ran ten miles or so several times a week and those who did not or could not. It furnished the former with at least one unambiguous source of superiority that they might not enjoy in other arenas of their lives. So important was running to individual well-being, according to a *Runners Magazine* poll in 1983, that 23.3 percent of the men and 38.1 percent of the women readers said that they would give up sex before they would abandon running. [19]

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Although by and large serious runners sought satisfactions within themselves or within their special culture, running, as well as weight lifting, jazzercise, and other kinds of vigorous exercise, might contribute to feelings of self-sufficiency in other ways. In short, strenuous activity could be instrumental as well as compensatory. Like the top-flight football or basketball player who lifted weights in order to play more effectively, the fit claimed that they worked out so that they could have an edge in both personal relationships and in the workplace over their more sluggish colleagues. They worked harder or were more mentally alert, they said, than non-exercisers. Corporate executives frequently agreed. They not only hoped to have harder working, more efficient employees but to reduce their insurance premiums and absenteeism as well. In the late 1970s a "wellness" movement swept through the corporate world. Larger corporations provided their employees with stress management and dietary counseling and set up fully equipped gymnasiums with indoor tracks, saunas, and exercise cycles. [20]

Professional women reported that physical fitness relieved them of feelings of inadequacy. Physical strength and endurance could be an assertion of gender equality as well as aid women in resisting male oppression. "I enjoy being strong," said Houston librarian Anne Mollberg, who lifted weights. "I have a sense of security knowing that I have the stamina and strength to do almost anything I want to do, physically."[21] "I want to be lean and mean," a weight lifting librarian told me in 1988. Success in physical fitness encouraged in some women a greater sense of mastery, of control over their destiny, that extended beyond fitness to other parts of their lives.

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[17] George A. Sheehan, *Being and Running: A Total Experience (New* York, 1978), p. 9.

[18] See Charles and Betty Edgely and Ronny Turner, "The Rhetoric of Aerobics: Physical Fitness as Religion," *Free Inquiry in Creative Sociology* 10 (Nov. 1982): 187-191, 196.

[19] Leepson, "Physical Fitness Boom," 273-274; Eileen Norris, "Kansas Boy Grabs an Idea and Runs With It," *Advertising Age,* July 18, 1983, 14, 16.

[20] Philip Whitten and Elizabeth J. Whiteside, "Can Exercise Make You Sexier?' *Psychology Today,* April 1989, 42-44; Marc Leepson, *Executive Fitness* (New York, 1983); Leepson, "Physical Fitness Boom," 271-273; Leslie Bennetts, "American Capitalism Sees the Profit in Exercise, "New *York Times,* June 12, 1978, II, B14; John Cavanaugh, " On the Corporate Treadmill," ibid., March 11, 1979, XXIII, 1, 9; "Companies Pour Millions into Programs Aimed at Keeping Workers Well," ibid., Oct. 14, 1984, I, 36; Jack Martin, "The New Business Boom-Employee Fitness," *Nation's Business*, Feb. 1978, 17-18; Patty Beutler, "Wellness Activities Welcomed in Workplaces," *Lincoln* (NE) *Star,* April 17, 1989.

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Perhaps the most intriguing facet of the new strenuosity was how it became in the late 1970s and in the 1980s an integral component in self-presentation. To be sure, in all cultures the shape of the body, its adornments, and its movements, have been an important means of communication, especially in the rituals of mating and matrimony as well as evidence of status and power. But in modern America self-presentation became more important than ever before. Even in the early part of this century, observers noted that individual success in bureaucracies arose as much-perhaps even more-from the impressions that one made on others as it did from what one created or the actual decisions one made while at work. Thus the management of impressions as represented supremely in the salesperson replaced the making of things as represented supremely in the skilled artisan as the most frequented avenue to success.

The modern preoccupation with appearances arose from other sources as well. As the fear of sudden death from epidemics or plagues vanished, as advertisers promoted the excitement of a youth culture, and as modern persons devoted less of their lives to the perpetuation of their families and/or communities, a person's self-esteem became increasingly dependent upon the impressions that he made on others. Given this context, body shape and physical expression could be of the utmost importance for one obtaining validation of his or her raison d'etre. "Part of what provides confidence," reported the editors of *Vogue,* an avant garde magazine of the Yuppies in 1988, "is physical appearance, which is why-in this decade of the body-the removal of body fat by liposuction has increased in the past two years by 78%."[22]

In the 1980s the new strenuosity became one of the important symbols of Yuppy status and power. It joined such items as owning one's own business, frequent travel to foreign countries, trusteeship in cultural institutions, and conspicuous but tasteful consumption as evidence of success. It was no longer enough for the "Beautiful People" of Southern California to be "just plain rich and/or successful," concluded Jody Jacobs in the *Los Angeles Times* in 1983.[23]

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[21] See for example such advertisements as "The Power Broker" of realtors Shannon & Luchs, featuring a woman in her thirties wearing a padded suit jacket and lifting a weight symbolizing her strength in the *Washington Post,* March 5, 1989, D29. I am indebted to Patrick Miller for this and several other advertisements reflecting themes in the new strenuosity.

[22] *Vogue* 178 (Oct. 1988): 198.

[23] Jody Jacobs, "For the Beautiful People of L. A. Fitness Is More Than a Fad," *Los Angeles Times,* Sept. 2, 1983, v, 1, 4-5. See also Liza Bercovici, "Golden Door: Enter Fat, Exit Wiser," *New York Times,* Dec. 27, 1973, 50; T. George Harris and Daniel Yankelovich, 'What Good Are the Rich?" *Psychology Today,* April 1989, 37-39.

They had to be tanned, sleek, lean, and physically fit. The celebrities regularly took off for a week or more to "fat farms" located in Palm Springs or Scottsdale in preparation for the fall party season. And they employed personal fitness trainers who led them through exercises three or four times a week. Ordinary Yuppies usually had to be satisfied with something a bit less, such as membership and participation in a chic health club. The number of fitness clubs multiplied from 350 in 1968 to more than 7,000 in 1986. By 1986 Americans spent more money on exercise devices in the home than they did on golf, camping, and racquet sports combined. [24]

The presentation of the self through fitness by no means included a denial of either consumption or competition. Indeed, instead of escaping the rigors of competition in the workplace or in consumption, fitness followers took it with them to the health spas, the tennis courts, and their exercise-equipped bedrooms. Fitness itself became competitive, not only with others but even with the self. Neither were the disciples of fitness ascetics. The pressures of consumption frequently extended into the fitness arena; one had to exhibit the most fashionable exercise clothing and belong to the appropriate clubs. In Southern California, it even included fitness centers for the six months to three-year old toddlers of the professional classes. [25]

Physical display in health clubs could be a means of attracting the opposite sex. While many health clubs catered mainly to members of the same sex or to families, others openly made themselves into "meat markets" for Yuppies. "Health clubs are becoming the singles' bars of the 80's," said Ronald Gasaway, the manager of the American Fitness Center in suburban Atlanta, in 1981. Everyone not only shared a common interest in getting into shape, but "when everyone's groaning together" it lowers people's "barriers," explained Victoria Horne, an official of the New York Health and Racquet C1ub.[26] Along with facilities for fitness, the clubs frequently provided restaurants, bars, lounges, and a social calendar of dances, ski trips, and other events tailored more to enhancing courtship than to losing pounds or toning muscles. Apparently women in particular felt more comfortable meeting strangers of the opposite sex in a fitness center than in a singles bar. "You . . . don't meet as many low-life creeps and insistent drunks. It's safer," explained a New York woman.[27]

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Changing notions of the ideal male and female also encouraged the commit-

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24. Nancy Giges, "Health Trend Hits Life-Style Mainstream," *Advertising Age 57* (Feb. 17, 1986): 58; "Exercise Industry Sees Spurt in Sales to Homes," *New York Times,* May 21, 1984, IV, 1; Jack McCallum, "Everybody's Doin' It," *Sports Illustrated* 61 (Dec. 3, 1984): 72-86.

25. Keith Bradsher, "You've Come a Long Way, Baby; Designer Jeans, Sleek Strollers, Exercise Gyms: Toddlers Have a Choice in the Booming Market," *Los Angeles Times,* Oct. 19, 1987, IV, 5; Stuart Copperman, "Do Toddlers Need Exercise ?" *Washington Post,* June 9, 1987, 17; Sam Howe Verhovek, "A Little Joyful Exercise: Are Exercise Classes for Infants Helpful, Harmful, or Just Fun?" *New York Times Magazine* 137 (April 17, 1988): S22.

26. Quoted in Robert Lindsey, "Health Clubs Thrive as Meeting Places for Young Single People," *New York Times,* Dec. 4, 1981, 18.

27. Quoted in William E. Geist, "The Mating Game and Other Exercises at the Vertical Club," *New York Times,* May 19, 1984, I, 25.

ment to the strenuous life.[28] Part of the ideal was a matter of physical appearance. For women in the 1960s the anorexia look promoted by fashion photographers and glamorized by Jacqueline Kennedy, Twiggy, and rock musicians had replaced the more voluptuous and sometimes imperious movie queens of the 1930-1960 era as the American ideal of female beauty. By the 1970s nearly everyone agreed that Marilyn Monroe could have lost a few pounds. American women grew to despise fat. To be fat in the United States became the greatest sign of personal failure. "Eating has become the last bona fide sin left in America," concluded columnist Ellen Goodman.[29] Obviously exercise, when joined by dieting, drugs, and ultimately plastic surgery, could aid one in achieving the anorexia ideal as well as feelings of greater self-sufficiency. [30] Unalloyed with other characteristics, the anorexia look suggested frailty and vulnerability, a parallel to Victorian notions of womanhood, rather than power and competence.

In the late 1970s a new ideal woman began to emerge, one who was thin but physically fit, energetic, possessing some muscle definition, and who was more assertive (even in intimate relations between the sexes) than her predecessors. The movie "10", which was released in 1979 and featured the body of Bo Derek, helped bring the new model to the attention of the public. Someone associated with the film ingeniously invented the title "10", thereby not only tying it to the modern fascination with numbers but also the inexact ratings systems employed in gymnastics, diving, and skating, sports made enormously popular by television. Only three years earlier, Nadia Comaneci had scored a series of spectacular "10s" in gymnastics at the Olympic games.

Derek, unlike her anorexia predecessors, was conspicuously fit and active. In order to develop tautness and body tone, she had gone into weight training with a Nautilus machine three months before filming commenced.[31] The movie also suggested a new gender relationship. The 42-year old insecure George Webber (played by Dudley Moore) could barely generate enough resolve to move beyond fantasies about the younger and much taller Jennifer Miles (Derek). It was Miles who bluntly proposed: "Wanna fuck?" And when the relationship was about to be sexually consummated, Webber was brought to his senses by a telephone call that reminded him that Miles was a married woman. Perhaps because of the overpowering images of Derek, movie fans seldom recalled or perhaps failed to realize that it was in fact the far more old-fashioned Julie Andrews who director Blake Edwards intended to be the perfect "10."

Soon other movies and dozens of television shows, rock videos, and com-

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28. For the history of female beauty in the United States, see Lois W. Banner, *American Beauty (New* York, 1983). Unfortunately, no equivalent book exists for the history of male beauty.

29. Quoted in Schwartz, *Never Satisfied,* p. 308. See also for example, Kim Chernin, *The Obsession: Rejections on the Tyranny* of *Slenderness* (New York, 1981) and Jean Rosenblatt and Sandra Stencil, "Weight Control: A National Obsession," *Editorial Research Reports,* 19 (Nov. 19, 1982): 853-868.

30. Advertisements suggested that plastic surgery improved feelings of self-sufficiency. "Sometimes cosmetic surgery shows more on the inside than the outside," read an advertisement of the Lincoln General Hospital, Lincoln, Nebraska. *Lincoln* (NE) *Star,* March 21, 1989.

31. Jacobs, "For the Beautiful People," 4.

mercials employed Derek prototypes. Perhaps it reached a final expression in Jennifer Beals as Alex (note the unisexual name) in "Flashdance" (1983).[32] In the film, Alex has an inexhaustible supply of energy. In the opening scene, she is doing man-sized work as a welder; after work she returns to her warehouse apartment over the steep Pittsburgh hills by bicycle; then by night she "works" as a dancer at a local club, which, astonishingly, is depicted as a place for good clean fun in which even Pittsburgh's steelworkers do not leer. She dances to the hard-driving beat of rock music, the kind of dancing that soon prevailed on rock videos. The sheer intensity of her life does not end there. Then we learn that Alex engages in heavy aerobics and weight lifting in order to achieve her long-held dream of becoming a ballerina.

The film and Alex had something for everyone. Although it employed the Cinderella poor girl wins rich man formula of success, Alex did it without startling physical beauty but in large part from the projection of a new kind of unself-conscious eroticism. At the night club none of the dancers were full-figured and all revealed muscle definition, though certainly falling far short of professional female body-builders. Although the dances included spectacular gymnastic-like routines, they were punctuated throughout by sexual suggestiveness. A more blatant statement of female sensuality was portrayed in "Perfect" (1985), in which the aerobics instructor, Jaimie Lee Curtis, led her class through a series of pelvic thrusts. Only the seemingly innocent setting of the class and the club prevented the scenes from being manifestly pornographic. [33]

To a far more pronounced degree than in the past, the popular culture depicted the strenuous women as the sexual aggressors. It was the women who more often used the naughty four letter words. No longer did the females coyly entice the male into making the first move. "I'm Goin' on a Manhunt," the revealing title of a song in Flashdance, included in the lyrics: "Turn it around. Women have been hunted but now we are huntin' around." Similar movies, literally hundreds of rock videos, and nearly and equal number of commercials (especially for diet foods) revealed a new female eroticism, assertiveness, and perhaps ultimately self-sufficiency. [34]

As the population as a whole became more elderly, heroines of the popular culture seemed to be those women who resisted most effectively the process of aging by exhibiting strong bodies. In 1988 *People* magazine asked its male readers to rate the best female bodies. In descending order they chose: Cher, Raquel Welch, Loni Anderson, Joan Collins, Vanna White, Jane Fonda, Christie Brinkley, and Linda Evans. When the poll was taken, six of these women were more than 40 years old, and at least four of them had exercise videos on the market. [35]

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32. See Janet Maslin, "Under the 1983 Chic, Movies Still Leer at Women," *New York Times*, May 21, 1983, II, 5.
33. See Vincent Canby's review in the New *York Times,* June 7, 1985, C18.
34. A systematic study of the content of commercials, rock videos, and exercise videos is much needed.
35. *People,* Sept. 19, 1988, 109; Craig Wolff, "Videotapes to Divert Exercisers," *New York Times,* Aug. 8, 1987, I, 52.

The popular culture also produced archetypes of physically fit ideal males. The anorexia male found in the long distance runner won few admirers, though runners invariably took great personal satisfaction in the stamina and manifest healthiness found in their lean, sometimes gaunt bodies. At the opposite pole was the professional body-builder, who used weightlifting and frequently anabolic steroids to obtain body mass. The main, uncamouflaged point of body-building was physical display; professional body-builders did not build bodies to engage more effectively in sports. Instead of considering Sylvester Stallone in terms of a model for good health or as a potential star of the NFL, one was supposed to admire his well-oiled nude upper torso as he marched through the jungles of Southeast Asia as Rambo. In a time of female challenges to male hegemony and a time of diminished individual power elsewhere, body-builders may have hoped to convey through rippling muscles continued male potency. At any rate a 1988 survey revealed that far more high school boys tried to achieve muscle mass by taking anabolic steroids to impress the girls rather than to enhance their prospects of becoming varsity athletes.[36]

But neither the exceptionally thin or the body-builders may have represented the most popular male figure. John Travolta in "Saturday Night Fever" (1977) was the male counterpart of Bo Derek; in fact appropriately he played opposite of Curtis in "Perfect." Travolta's spectacular dancing in the film touched off a disco fever that soon became a world-wide phenomena. Dark, handsome, and lithesome, Travolta embodied a relentless physical energy and a presumably wholesome eroticism similar to Beals. Like Derek, Travolta soon had a host of celebrity imitators: Michael Jackson, Tom Cruise, and Pierce Brosnan, for example.

In the 1980s, the ideal male often entailed statements of cool, expensive elegance as well as physical fitness.[37] The new Beau Brummels were full-scale participants in the unembarrassed return to luxurious ostentation embodied in the Reagan White House. They frequently employed fashion consultants, subscribed to *Gentleman's Quarterly,* supported a thriving skin care business, and had their hair permed. Upon leaving prison in the final scene of the movie "Perfect," John Travolta drove away with Jaimie Lee Curtis in a BMW-what else?

The Beau Brummels of the 1980s suggested a potentially new relationship between the sexes. Pierce Brosnan, the star of the NBC television series, "Remington Steele," and Brian Bosworth, a star linebacker with the Seattle Seahawks and the star of Right Guard men's deodorant commercials, seemed hardly to need women at all. Brosnan and Bosworth were so satisfied with their self-statement that women were an additional adornment, perhaps ultimately unnecessary or even a distraction from themselves. "The only problem here is that a lot of these people [men] look like they'd rather go home and look at themselves than somebody else [i.e., women]," was how a female New York Yuppie put it about the men in her exercise club in 1984.[38] No celebrities, men or women, seemed their equals as representatives of a new narcissism.

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[36] See Janet Maslin, "Musclebound Movies," *New York Times Film Review (1985-1986) (New* York, 1987), 83-84 and the provocative interpretations of Alan M. Klein, "Fear and Self-Loathing in Southern California: Narcissism and Fascism in Bodybuilding Subculture," *Journal of Psychoanalytic Anthropology* 10 (1987): 117-137.

[37] See Jerry Adler, "You're So Vain," *Newsweek* 107 (April 14, 1986): 48-55.

On the other hand, the presentation of a well-groomed, elegantly dressed, smooth-skinned, physically fit, energetic male may have been part of a new, largely unconscious strategy in attracting the opposite sex. In the past men had so exclusively controlled society's resources that women could not easily reject the advances of men. In the 1980s, with women far less dependent on men for physical or psychological essentials, attracting mates (at least those of the Yuppie sort) may have required the presentation of a less aggressive and more attractive self. In the 1980s the popular culture suggested something of a reversal in traditional gender relationships.

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To recapitulate, the new strenuosity of the 1970s and 1980s entailed a common effort to nurture a more sufficient self in two general ways. One stressed physical fitness; it was epitomized by aerobics, more particularly by long-distance running, and by abstention. Not only did its adherents usually abstain from lavish equipment in luxurious surroundings, but they frequently refrained entirely from, or cut back on, their consumption of "unhealthy" food and drink. Second was the use of physical robustness and energy to present a more attractive self. These participants in the new strenuosity eschewed neither consumption or competition. Indeed, they employed fitness as part of a larger strategy to gain status, power, and greater control over their personal relationships.

Although trying to comprehend recent history is an extremely treacherous enterprise, evidence suggests that by the late 1980s the new strenuous life movement may have passed its zenith. In 1988 *Newsweek* claimed that participation in marathons had dropped by more than 15,000 through 1987 and that the number of persons doing aerobics had fallen 4 million below the peak year of 1985. The magazine even predicted that the "anorexic look" might be waning in popularity.[39] That such unanorexia-looking women as Roseanne, Oprah Winfrey, and (perhaps) Barbara Bush became media celebrities lent support to *Newsweek's* prognostication. In addition, in the late 1980s the media introduced "the couch potato" as a popular culture specie who conspicuously rejected the strenuous life.

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[38] Quoted in Geist, "The Mating Game."

[39] Bill Barol, "The Eighties Are. Over," Newsweek 111 (Jan. 4, 1988), 40-48. The strenuous life movement had never been popular with the working class. Those whose jobs required physical toil might play softball, bowl, hunt, or pursue water sports in their spare time, but they rarely altered their diets and drinking habits, took up jogging, or engaged in any systematic program of physical excercise. See especially Bennett M. Berger, *Working-Class Suburb* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1969), Chap. 5, and David Halle, *America's Working Man* (Chicago, 1984), Chap. 2.