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BOOK REVIEW

Beth Linker, *Slouch: Posture Panic in Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024), pp. 392, $29.95, hardcover, ISBN: 9780691235493.

Slouch opens with a scandalous story, one revealed to the American public in a 1995 *New York Times* story. Many colleges, especially the Ivies, had taken nude posture photographs of their students as part of annual physical examinations. They did so from the early twentieth century until the 1960s and 1970s. While some of these photographs had been destroyed, many were unaccounted for, and some sat in university collections. Even more alarmingly, some photos had migrated to the Smithsonian Archives where anyone could request to view them. These included nude photographs of Hillary Rodham Clinton, George H. W. Bush, and Bob Woodward, among many others.

Historian Beth Linker argues that when this scandal broke, a mix of sensationalism and misunderstanding clouded the analysis. Were the photos part of a massive eugenics scheme? Were they evidence of mid-century Americans bizarrely swept up in pseudoscience? The elite institutions involved rushed to shred and burn the images, emphasizing how both the photos and the reasons for taking them were firmly in the past. Among her nearly forty fascinating illustrations, Linker includes an image of the shredded photographic remains. The posture photography once seen as critical in assessing mid-century bodies was now an embarrassment. (Linker also explains that some nude posture images from prisons and hospitals remain in restricted archives; these notably did not elicit the same panic.)

Why had concern about posture so quickly transformed from ubiquitous at mid-century to bizarre by the 1990s? *Slouch*, a remarkably original history of posture, offers some answers. Linker puts questions of posture at the centre of US history while she engages with an astonishing amount of secondary literature. The story of posture that Linker tells intersects with histories of immigration, of the military, of American consumer culture and business, of physical education, and of course, of medicine. Bad posture was regularly described as an epidemic, albeit a non-communicable one. That epidemic language set the stakes high and also intersected with American anxieties about race (invoking ideas of 'over civilisation') and gender (who would marry a girl with bad posture?) and sexuality (just what did it mean to stand up 'straight'?).

In one of its central contributions, *Slouch* explores the entanglement of posture panic with American anxiety about disability. At the core of posture panic was an insistence on 'normalisation' rooted in the regulation of 'deviant' bodies and behaviours. 'Posture panic', Linker explains, 'served as a powerful motivator and a ready-made disciplinary tool, deployed for multiple political ends throughout the twentieth century' (p. 7). The surveillance and self-surveillance of posture functioned to police bodies and remind the able-bodied about the precariousness of their status.

The seven-chapter book is wide-ranging, spanning from the turn of the century to the twenty-first century. It begins with an examination of the origins of the posture sciences and their ties with evolutionary biology. Linker connects languages of posture and the physical struggles of the bipedal human to a discussion of 'primitiveness'. Then, we see the influence of the posture sciences on American institutions in the early twentieth century. As Progressive Era reformers sought to rationalize bodies, they grew concerned about the inefficiency of slouchers. In response, they developed (and later institutionalised) posture standards in an absorbing story of quantification and medicalisation. In her third chapter, Linker explores the intersection of all this posture science with consumer culture. Medicalised clothing, footwear, and chairs promised technological solutions to the troubles of modernity. In the process, adaptive technologies were sometimes appropriated and rebranded as technologies to *prevent* disability.

Linker then explores how Americans not only bought Keds and girdles to improve their posture but also sometimes adopted optimising fitness regimes. It became increasingly understood that posture was

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something one needed to work at and perfect, a new public responsibility. Those who succeeded could win (literally) at posture contests held by schools and universities. Those with poor postures, however, could face discrimination and risk losing their able-bodied privilege. In Chapter 5, Linker describes how Second World War and Cold War anxieties about American fitness entangled concerns about posture and physical disability with national security. In these same post-war years, good posture was also integrated into an intensifying beauty standard for women.

After decades of concentrated attention to posture, from nude photographs to training regimens, the project crumbled in the late 1960s and 1970s. In an especially 'bottom up' chapter, Linker weaves individuals' personal accounts with other records of student resistance to university posture photography. Diverse forms of student protest, combined with the more co-educational composition of universities, women's rights activism, and the decline of *in loco parentis*, spurred the end of posture photography programs. Linker weaves these stories of resistance and universities' concerns about scoliosis into the national story of disability rights activism in the same decades.

The nude posture photos taken by American colleges and universities were largely destroyed, Linker tells us, but the logics that underpinned them were not dismantled.

The book ends with a sweeping survey of continued posture concerns, often rebranded as ways of preventing and treating low back pain. This modern posture panic (Linker notes there is no certain causal link between slouching and back pain) often echoes ideas from a century earlier, especially concerns about diseases of civilization. The rise of paleo fitness and the appropriation of Iyengar yoga continue to highlight a romanticization of 'other' bodies as more primitive and less ailment-prone.

Slouch offers a new look at the American body and opens up a wealth of opportunities for future research. Linker engages with substantial secondary literature and considers more than a hundred years of history. The wide sweep of the text is occasionally overwhelming as the narrative bounces from medical researchers to corset saleswomen to college physical education classes and as the chronology gets complex. While it can be a lot, this is also what makes the book so important. Linker tells a compelling and careful story that reflects the layered ways ideas about posture travelled through educational, medical, governmental, and popular spaces.


Rachel Louise Moran
University of North Texas, Denton, TX, USA
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