

When the history of Yoga becomes an unexplainable series of events – A review of A. R. Jain *Selling Yoga*

Summary.

*The purpose of this article is to address some general methodological issues afflicting historical studies of yoga. It argues that current yoga historiography is ineffectual attempting to unleash itself from the assumptions of **essentialism** and **anthropocentrism**. However this unsuccessful endeavour leaves the cultural memory of yoga as a series of unexplainable events. To overcome this yoga historians have to succumb to their inclination to **sociological eclecticism** and instead fully and systematically embrace social theory. This will open up for the possibility that yoga history is not only caused by heroic cultural entrepreneurs but also by social structures.*

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The clay feet of assumptions

Before the big financial crisis of 2008 John Reed, the chairman of Citicorp - one of the world's largest banks at that time – had a big problem. During the previous ten years the financial world had experienced a series of financial catastrophes but despite the fact Reed employed an army of the world's best economists they *never* had been able to warn him about a coming crisis. Hence Reed suggested a symposium where his economists could discuss this issue with physical scientists who – unlike their economic counterpart - had a long record of successful predictions.

As Citicorp's economist laid out their economic models for the physicists it became clear that all their models were based on *equilibrium assumptions*. This clearly amused the physicists. The physicists then explained that such equilibrium models were clearly a copy of the models used by physicists *before 1900*. But the last hundred years no-one within the physical sciences used such models as they *clearly did not match reality*. Instead physics were guided by *dynamic complex models* (often popular known as chaos models) and the physicists strongly advised the economists to change horse even if it was a bit late.

This example shows us that through cross-disciplinary exchange taken-for-given assumptions can be identified and problematized. Let me give another example. Around the same time another fundamental assumption of modern economic modelling was receiving a serious hit.

This blow to models of economy did not come from high status physical sciences but from the less prestigious field of social psychology. Especially it came from a social psychologist who during a lifetime had performed clever experiments clearly demonstrating that people even when making economic choices were not guided by rationality. This research was slowly being recognised by economists and understandably created deep concerns as it undermined all their Nobel winning, complex mathematical economic models which rested on the *assumption of a rational agent*. The implications of this critique was serious because these economic models were employed globally to guide the actions of governments and global corporations. A model resting on false assumptions cannot guide decisions makers – it is useless.

The social psychologist behind this research was D. Kahneman and he was given a Nobel price in economics 2002. *He had no qualification in mathematical economical modelling.* He was an outsider, not recognised as an economical expert. But coming from another academic discipline he was able to detect giants with feet of clay.

The *unforeseen (!)* financial meltdown of 2008 forced those economists who still adhered to rational equilibrium models to finally jump the sinking ship. Today social psychology and dynamic system theory is core to economic models.

The aim of this paper

This paper argues that most of today's yoga historians – even those specialising in pre-modern yoga and Sanskrit - are in a situation with many parallels. It is my conclusion that today's yoga historians also need to look much further into their fundamental assumptions and methodologies. I will argue that – just like the pre-2008 economists - *cross-disciplinary cooperation* is the remedy.

To illustrate my points I have chosen to review a recent book on modern yoga history: A. R. Jain *Selling Yoga* (2015). In order to prove my claims I have chosen a yoga historian who actually is deliberately and skilfully drawing on the insights of other academic disciplines – especially social theory. She is carefully – but I will argue in vain - trying to leave old assumptions behind which previously have guided yoga history writing.

I will argue that in order to explain the history of yoga it is not sufficient for the yoga historian to take a step towards social theory like Jain does. What is required is not a step but a *jump*: to understand yoga history the historian has to construct a cultural memory of yoga on the *foundation of social theory* and *explicit models* of how culture evolves and interact with the rest of society. Otherwise the historian will end up in indefensible *anthropocentrism* – also labelled *human exceptionalism*. Let me introduce these two notions.

Academic yoga discourse

Contemporary academic yoga discourse seems to crystalize into two arenas of interest. One arena is focusing on *pre-modern* yoga forms utilising Sanskrit skills, linguistic and hermeneutical methodologies. We could say that these yoga historians primarily focusing on Sanskrit texts are a subspecies of what is often labelled *Indologists* – the descendants of the renown *Orientalists* who eclipsed after WW2.

The other arena is concentrating on *modern* yoga forms. For these yoga historians the master ship of Sanskrit and hermeneutics is not critical. Their subject is clearly a modern *cultural phenomenon* which obviously requires different approaches than Sanskrit expertise – such as the methodologies of historical studies or cultural studies. We could label this group the *modern yoga historians*.

The two groups of yoga historians have in common that they are *not* constructing their cultural historical research on the foundation of a *general sociological model/methodology*. They lack an explicit historical sociological model where the surfacing and transformation of discourses and cultural institutions (like yoga) are comprehended as *an integral part of society* and its ceaseless social conflicts. However despite such lack of a sociological model I am NOT claiming that yoga academics are blind to historical sociological processes. On the contrary. Most yoga historians are often explicitly (and here Jain represents one of the best examples) paying respect to what they often label '*historical context*': i.e. yoga is explained in light of its "historical background or context".

The adherence to the notion 'social context' should however not mislead us to assume that yoga historians are subscribing to *historical sociology*. My trawling of academic yoga literature rather suggest that yoga historians tend to construct a cultural memory of yoga which is based on the opposite of historical sociology: *anthropocentrism* or *human exceptionalism*. By this notion I mean the belief that ideas and cultural institutions are primarily caused by exceptional cultural entrepreneurs (who accordingly are populating and dominating the pages of yoga history books) rather than "historical social structures". Yes, historical 'context' is included in the analysis of anthropocentrism but what really generates cultural change is the *exceptional human agent*: the charismatic leader, the talented genius, the great thinker, the godlike visionary.

Such anthropocentrism are one of the fundamental assumptions compromising the works of yoga historians including Jain. I will argue in this paper that such assumptions prevent yoga historians from providing a *sociological account of historical change*. The cultural memory of yoga

hence ends up as *extraordinary* – basically *unexplainable* because categories like ‘charisma’ and ‘genius’ are *eo ipso* incomprehensible.

However before discussing this I first want to discuss another assumption found in most academic yoga history: ‘*essentialism*’. I start here because like me the author of the book reviewed I also find it critical to get rid of this assumption in order to explain the history of yoga.

1. The institution of yoga essentialism

Essentialism in modern yoga discourse

A. R. Jain *Selling Yoga* in many ways set new standards within academic yoga discourse as she heretically argues that *any historical yoga form is tainted by the society it emerges within*. Doing this she demonstrates a good knowledge of contemporary sociological theory. By employing various sociological notions she is deliberately and skilfully trying to link yoga discourse directly to “historical context” and thereby distancing herself to essentialism: the view that there is an everlasting core to yoga which resist any historical influence and change. Based on this anti-essentialism her aim is to understand modern postural yoga – its rituals and meanings – as a part of a context of a *transnational consumer culture*. A ‘contextual yoga’ model replacing an ‘essentialist yoga’ model.

Yoga is framed and formed by its historical and social context, Jain argues. As history and society change so does yoga accordingly. Her overall aim is hence to show that not only is *modern* yoga a fluid category (which many yoga practitioners would agree with) but so is also all *pre-modern* yoga forms (which is very difficult to absorb for most yoga aficionados):

“As I will suggest, the most important lesson from the history of yoga is that yoga is contextual and malleable” (p. xiv).

In other words her claim is that there is - due to the power of context - not a monolithic yoga tradition as believed today by most yoga popularisers (yoga teachers, swamis, popular writers). Such people routinely repeat the romantic narrative that “*modern postural yoga is a living clone of a 5000 year old yoga system developed by sages in deep meditation*”. Thus Jain is about to upset millions of contemporary yoga worshippers.

Most if not all academic yoga historians of course agree with Jain on this point and deny the popular monolithic narrative. Most of these academics clearly make a distinction between pre- and modern yoga forms. The latter they often deplore as constituting “pop culture and commercialism” and they find that “it has nothing to do with pre-modern yoga” – which they consider to be the *real* thing. Hence many yoga pundits can only partly agree with Jain because they place the essence of yoga in various *pre-modern* yoga forms.

Jain’s aim is to demonstrate for such historians that the lesson we learn from modern yoga about its historical conditioning also applies to pre-modern yoga forms: like modern yoga so is pre-modern yoga *without essence* – it is “**malleable and contextual**”. The belief that there is an essence to pre-modern yoga is in her view a myth.

The necessity to de-mythologize yoga essentialism in year 2015 would be a surprise to most academics within social theory and humanities. Here the genealogical thinking of Foucault – eradicating all essentialism - has reigned since the 1980ies: “**discourses are unstable assemblages of faults, fissures and heterogeneous layers**” (Foucault).

So why is essentialism still to be found within today’s academic and popular yoga discourse? Is it local and coincidental or is it widespread and intrinsic?

Yoga essentialism – coincidental or institutional?

Jain does not address these questions head on. Instead she primarily demonstrates how essentialism plays an ideological role among certain groups and interlocutors within contemporary yoga discourse. She rightly demonstrates that such discussion basically are a fight about *categorisation*: The quarrel is about what yoga *really* is – its essence. In sociological terms the group who can enforce its definition of the yoga essence accordingly controls the cultural field of yoga. So it is a power struggle.

None of the groups and interlocutors discussed by Jain plays a major role in today’s yoga discourse. Her point is to show how essentialism mainly functions as a tool in religio-ideological struggles. However this raises questions: Why focus on essentialism in her book? Is essentialism widespread within the yoga discourse or is essentialism just coincidental to yoga discourse?

We do not get a straight answer to our questions. So I will provide an answer. My view is that essentialism clearly is endemic in contemporary *popular* yoga discourse. In my survey of the modern cultural field of yoga (Madsen 2013) it became evident from my engagement with popular yoga discourse and from countless discussions with yoga practitioners that yoga essentialism is widespread and not just confined to Jain's examples of petty squabbles within certain subcultures of American religio-culture.

First of all it was clear to me that the majority of yoga popularisers – hundred of thousands of professionals living from selling the yoga product – subscribe heavily to essentialism. Ploughing through their popular books, manuals, DVDs, yoga classes, websites and blogs yoga essentialism is everywhere hold up as a banner: “*yoga as prehistoric and unchanged*”; “*yoga as an unbroken 5000 year old tradition*”. The essentialism promoted is what makes yoga so special in modern society where it resonates with romantic consumer dreams. Essentialism - yoga's ancientness - is in business terms yoga's *USP* – its *unique selling point*.

Hence the endless examples *among yoga popularisers* of this romantic narrative based on yoga essentialism is in my view not accidental – it is systemic. The popularisers' essentialist view is adopted by the popularisers' audience: by the millions and millions of yoga enthusiasts – the yoga amateurs.

But there is a third group not mentioned here - what about the theoretical experts specialising on yoga and its history? The respectable authorities – mostly university based academics - whose are seen (by the cultural elites) to provide state-of-the-art yoga knowledge: do they subscribe to essentialism?

Essentialism in elite discourse around 1900

To this question Jain provides some answers. She looks back in history and find examples of essentialism among the cultural elites a century ago or more as yoga entered Western discourse.

She points out that the so-called Orientalists – the first “Western yoga experts” - dominant around 1900 typically constructed Hinduism (and thus yoga) as a *monolithic and static system* which clearly is an expression of essentialism. She does however not explain why yoga was constructed in those essentialist terms by the Orientalists.

Again I would like to provide an answer. We should recall that essentialism belonged to the *doxa* – the taken for granted assumptions - of much intellectual thinking at that time. Academic history of ideas was in its infancy and essentialism played a significant role in religio-political agendas of the cultural elites. Ideas, culture and traditions were mostly seen as autonom columns reaching far back in history. The use of genealogical (i.e. historical fluid) categories were not wide spread among the cultural elites at that time. Essentialism was the *doxa* of Orientalism.

But not only Orientalists took part in the yoga discourse around 1900. We also find many cultural interlocutors. Jain however does answer why certain elite religio-cultural groups at that time rested on essentialist assumptions. Again she rightly points towards essentialism as an ideological tool in these circles. She shows how religious reformers as for instance Vivekananda and the Theosophist around 1900 constructed yoga in essentialist terms: it fitted their political agendas and it was a part of their *doxa*.

In other words their “choice of essentialism” was rather a question of their cultural *institutional environment* – their cultural habitual thinking - than a question of deliberate individual choice.

Thus Jain traces lots of examples of essentialism in early Western elite yoga discourse. However – like in contemporary popular yoga discourse - it seems to slip the attention of Jain that the prevalence of yoga essentialism around 1900 was not due to *individuals* and coincidence but rather was *institutional and intrinsic*.

But what about today? Have the cultural yoga elite – now narrowed to the circles of yoga academics – left essentialism and its ideological Janus face behind them?

Essentialism among today's academics

Here it seems that Jain's answer is yes. Moving back to present days Jain finds that some contemporary yoga historians – she lists and quotes about seven – do not construct the yoga sign as static and essentialist. These academics have dropped the notion of *The Yoga Tradition*. Instead they subscribe to the notion of “*many yoga traditions*” each defined by a specific historical situation. According to Jain they – like her - imagine the yoga sign as *contextual*. It is however not clear if Jain finds that these few historians are representative for the entire academic yoga discourse of today.

First of all do I not agree that these historians construct the yoga sign as contextual rather than essentialist. In a *realist sociological model* (which has moved context to the centre of its narrative) this would mean that:

1. there is no commonality to yoga (except the word) across history and
2. yoga – both its content and form - in each historical period is mainly caused and explained by social structures instead of entrepreneurs.

None of the historians mentioned goes that far. Most of them are caught in an anthropocentric model which I will return to.

Leaving aside the issue of how much weight these yoga historians actually gives to sociological context (implying non-essentialism) it would be easy to compile a very long list of contemporary Indologists who implicitly or directly subscribe to essentialism: i.e. subscribing to the existence of a homogenous and static essence within the yoga sign (see Madsen 2013).

In other words the academics Jain is referring to in my experience represent a minority among yoga academics. In my experience the academic yoga discourse is steeped in essentialism. There are signs of academics – and Jain represent one of them - who are struggling to leave essentialism behind them – but most are failing (see for instance my paper on academia.edu : *The Poverty of the guru discourse of Yoga Protestantism*).

Thus wherever we look into the cultural memory of yoga – among various social groups at various points in history – we find yoga discourse is imbued with essentialism. This is no coincident. Essentialism is institutional to yoga discourse.

I find that the issue of essentialism is *intrinsic* to the yoga discourse and Jain fails to fully recognise this. In my view it is a crucial part of an understanding any historical yoga discourse – modern or pre-modern - to outline how and why yoga discourse is infused with essentialism. It should be central to any yoga history to outline why *it is crucial for the yoga discourse to construct itself as historical transcendent* – as a monolith untouched by time, an essence purified for context. In other words we need to de-construct the yoga power discourse and show how even today *yoga historians more or less deliberately are reproducing that discourse*.

Such a project will show us that each historical era has its own answer to why yoga essentialism is prevailing. By including *realist sociological models* and *theories* – particular concerning cultural fields, semiotics and power discourses - I believe we can find a consistent and systemic explanation.

Despite Jain in my view fails to see the scale and depth of the problem of essentialism then we should still welcome her interest in defeating yoga essentialism. She does deliver a range of intelligent anti-essentialist arguments.

Her purpose seems to be to rehabilitate *modern postural yoga* which by far is the most popular yoga form today. In her view postural yoga should not be valued as a pariah but be seen a respectable historical configuration on par with any other pre-modern or modern yoga configuration. A view I strongly agree with: who are we to judge what is the right way of signifying and practicing yoga? Much too often in my research I found indirect or direct pejorative remarks on postural yoga among Indologists. Among many yoga academics implicitly only Sanskrit based pre-modern yoga forms really counts. No doubt Jain delivers strong arguments against such an attitude based on essentialism.

2. Explaining yoga's popularity – the perils of sociological eclecticism

Moving from history studies to historical sociology

Bringing postural yoga in from the cold generates some questions. Does modern yoga forms have *anything* in common with pre-modern yoga forms – and if not, does it really matter? How do we map and explain the significant mutation which postural yoga represents? Finally but primarily why did postural yoga become so enormously popular and by far outshined other modern yoga forms? These are also the questions Jain sets out to answer.

If we want to explain *popularity* (being it the popularity of yoga, soccer or smart phones) then the historian clearly moves into the world of sociology and economy. Here we set out to *explain* social mass phenomena and in order to do that we need social theory not historical description.

In the following I want to discuss if Jain as a yoga historian - educated in the world of religious departments - delivers an acceptable *sociological* explanation or if she remains restricted by a historiographical orientation where descriptive *historical maps* is believed to constitute *context*.

Counter culture or adaptation?

The advance of capitalism and the forces of modernity in the 19th Century encouraged the cultural elites in the West to re consider established Christian religious culture. It is in this period beginning at the late 18th Century that yoga enters Western elite discourse. Yoga discourse became a part of the process of religio-cultural adjustment to modernity. Yoga is constructed in this period in two variants – a meditative and a body orientated version. Most elites received the more body oriented variations of yoga with hostility. However the meditative, ethical and philosophical discourses of yoga were embraced by many. Especially in the USA this form of yoga found its home in milieus like Transcendentalism, Theosophism, Christian Science and New Thought. All this is nicely accounted for by Jain.

Jain define such spiritual circles as *counter culture* and hence label yoga's beginning in the West as '*countercultural*'. However one could also argue that this claim presumes a monolithic Christian and Western culture – which is a dubious assumption. Instead one can imagine Western culture as fragmented and criss-crossed with religio-cultural and political conflict lines. In this layered patchwork of conflicting discourses the category 'countercultural' loses its signification. Following Peter van der Veer "*The Modern Spirit of Asia*" it could even be argued that Western spiritualism (embracing certain compatible yoga discourses) was an *outgrowth* of modernity. Spirituality – and yoga - not as a *counterculture* but as an *adaptation* to modernity.

From enclaves to masses

After WW2 Jain rightly claims there is a significant change. As mass production and mass consumption (and later on emerging globalisation) begins to dominate Western capitalism, new forms of yoga gained popularity in the West. Jain identifies a handful of yoga hero entrepreneurs – so-called *godsmen* – who via new methods of marketing and packaging managed to attract devotional communities of Western followers. People interested were offered an anti-materialistic lifestyle, a virtuous life, a sense of belonging and a re-mystification of life (i.e. inverting the process of modernisation).

These devotional yoga communities of cultural oppositional *enclaves* were well-known in the 1960ies and 70ies. However they should not be confused with the mass popularity yoga enjoyed later on in the 90ies. In order to explain the increasing popularity of yoga Jain introduces briefly a selection of general sociological categories like '*consumer choice*', '*identity building*', '*lifestyle*' (lifted out of works from Jameson, Berger, Featherstone) – all assembled under the umbrella of '*consumer culture*'.

In addition to these basic sociological categories of consumer capitalism she points to a range of further contributing factors to yoga's popularity like: *increased media attention, the ideal of self-development, adaptation to consumer desires, methods of mass marketing, and the emergence of transnational culture*. These events and processes she finds enabled in the end yoga to leave the counterculture of the 60ies and 70ies and enter the mass culture of today.

What strikes a sociologist is that in Jain's intelligent selection of abstract and general factors there is so to say no mentioning of fundamental sociological categories like *state* and *class*. It is further striking that Jain does not investigate the demographic and social compositions of these devotional communities. Having done this would have revealed that they did not represent an average selection of the population but consisted of a very special social composition closely related to the emerging dominant strata of the middle classes, youth revolt, and women's new role in production. I believe more satisfying answers would have been found in such a concrete sociological analysis.

Leaving this observation aside Jain is correct in pointing out that such cultural enclaves did not offer a solution for the masses. So why did yoga then reach mass popularity? Jain argues insightfully that first when yoga entrepreneurs adapted their offerings – their wares - for mass consumption, yoga was able to spread among the masses. Yoga had to be released from certain restrictions in order to become a mass product such as: *no demands for a particular (ascetic) lifestyle, no guru centrism, no commitment to a specific (Hindu) religio-worldview*. Yoga had to become a modular mass ware which the mass consumer could combine freely with any other cluster of commodities in order to build a social identity. Enter the heroic yoga entrepreneur and his postural yoga as we know it today.

I find that Jain goes wrong here with what is basically an anthropocentric explanation. Mass popularity of yoga is not about brilliant cultural entrepreneurship creating new cultural institutions. An alternative sociological explanation would have explained the mass popularity as part of first of all an *emerging female body culture related to women's new role in post war society*. It would highlight women moving into new powerful cultural fields and social positions and how they in parallel with their liberation from the household developed their *gender specific body culture*. Exactly as the men since late 19th Century had developed their *hyper-masculine* sport culture resting on warrior ideals of *power, speed and pain* (see Burstyn 1999). Now it was the women's turn and their creation of a female body culture was formed by the sensibilities of a female *habitus* emerging in metropolitan bourgeois milieus around 1900.

In the following I will show how and why Jain – representing the state-of-the-art of yoga history writing – fails to establish a *sociological* valid explanation despite her employment of certain sociological categories. It is about the hurdles of moving from theory-light history writing to theory-intensive historical sociology.

Yoga popularity explained by consumer culture

Jain's main argument is that postural yoga's success is due to its "**continuity of consumer culture**" and she does this by utilising concepts from influential sociologists like Featherstone, Berger and Baudrillard.

This leads her to the first central proposition that the post WW2 emerging mass consumer culture and increasing individualisation created new attitudes and demands among consumers.

Her second central proposition is that in this context some skilful yoga entrepreneurs successfully *adapted* their product offerings (which in fact were upgraded Western discourses of health and fitness where pre-modern "Hindu" elements had been muted) and their business efforts (new marketing- and organisational methods) to emerging global ideals and aspirations.

Because of this successful adaptation to the desires of mass consumers postural yoga – a branch of modern yoga - broke out of its countercultural and elite confinements and swept into pop culture.

Thus central to Jain's explanation is the category *consumer culture* : "**To understand how modern yoga underwent popularization, one must understand consumer culture.**" (p.70) and "**...the most successful attempts at diffusion occurred when proponents consistently did concede to consumer cultural trends. These were most often the postural yoga proponents.**"(p.71)

Clearly *adaptation* is a pivotal category here. It raises immediately two questions. Is it correct that success/popularity can be explained by *degrees of adaptation* (*fitness* in evolutionary terms)?

Secondly what is it exactly the (yoga) field is adapting to when adapting to "consumer culture"? In other words it becomes crucial for this line of argumentation to explain what is it within consumer culture yoga is adapting to.

Can 'consumer culture' explain popularity?

Answering the first question it becomes obvious that Jain is subscribing to a *functional model* of explanation. The emergence and successful settlement of cultural subsystems/ fields (like yoga) in her model is a question of them being *functional fit* with the overall system (the consumer culture). In this functional model subsystems (like cultural practices, commodities, ideas etc.) has to functional adapt to the overall system or they will wither away. Thus *functional congruency* (of a sub-system) with *consumer culture* (the overall environment) is necessary for its survival.

However making a sub-system like yoga congruent with hegemonic processes and structures of late capitalism *does not suffice to explain its eventual success* . Adaptation is a necessary condition for survival. However a subsystem can adapt to a new environment and still not succeed in becoming popular/widespread.

Thus a functional explanation cannot explain success but only a best explain survival. It only states the *conditions* enabling survival. More explanatory factors needs to be introduces to explain popularity.

Let me illustrate this point with an example.

Postural yoga as a cultural practice is not unique to late capitalism. It shares many underlying characteristic with a range of competing and more or less similar "sub-systems"/ cultural practices. They could be described loosely as *body-mind practices and discourses*. Some more body oriented than others - but all of them explicitly position themselves in the grey area

between mind and body. They all relate to self-development and identity building which Jain's finds crucial to postural yoga.

Let me mention systems like Buddhism, Jainism, Daoism, Tantra, Vedanta, various meditations styles, Pilates, Feldenkrais, Alexander techniques, kung-fu, jogging, cross-country skiing, Zen sports, Tai-chi, qui-gong, mountain biking, Nordic walking, theatrical improvisation, rhythmic dance, Gestalt therapy, CBT, NLP, and Landmark Education, to mention some.

They are all *competitors* to postural yoga offering life style related signification, self-development and body-mind practices signifying these practices in countless ways. *All* these body-mind systems adapted to and were formed by market forces and consumer culture after WW2. Otherwise – according to functionalism - they would probably not have been around today and certainly not have been known by many of us.

Some of these competing cultural practices are clearly more widespread and popular than others. Most of these body-mind systems are not as popular as postural yoga but some of them are even more wide spread. Can we explain their popularity as a function of *degrees* of fitness (functional adaptation)? I believe most would find this is not a tenable position. Other factors need to be included.

From the market economy we know that many products even if they are ideal for mass consumption *somehow* do not manage to find their customers. The reason for failure and extinction can be many. This observation illustrates that *even functional congruence does not ensure survival*. There is more to it.

Thus the category 'consumer culture' is not good at explaining success – it is rather made for explaining *conditions* for success.

If we consulted departments of economy and business schools they would confirm our conclusion. The relation between adaptation and success in business is not linear. In the business world (in which yoga also operates) there is no way of predicting the success of a new product or service in the market. It is always trial and error. An optimal functional fit does not guarantee anything – not even survival.

Thus the category *consumer culture* central to Jain's analysis is an interesting but blunt category. In summary the category *consumer culture* is too wide to explain popularity.

The problem with functional explanations

If Jain had consulted departments of social sciences they would also have advised her that functional model of explanation have not been in very high regards within the social sciences since the 1970ies. First of all they tend to become conservative in outlook and are struggling to explain change which seems to be endemic to most societies.

Further they tend to ignore conflict and social struggle which also seems to be central to most societies. Reviewing Jain's functional model we accordingly see very little mentioning of social, economical and political conflict and struggle. Conflict is reduced to petty cultural squabbles. Lacking is the everyday jockeying for material position and power between ascending and descending strata, social movements and groups; between those who want to arrest status quo and those who want change. In such a *conflict sociological view* the emergence of new discourses, ideas and cultural practices are mostly closely related to such underlying material conflicts. This perspective is missing in this functional model where new cultural practices and discourses are neatly adapting to existing culture.

Can 'branding' explain popularity?

We have now addressed the first of the two questions regarding *adaptation* in Jain's line of argumentation. The second question is: what is the emergent sub-system actually adapting to? In answering this Jain introduces *branding* as a central category.

After 1980 postural yoga exploded in popularity. Jain argues that this was mainly caused by successful *brand image management*: "... - branding is systematic and pervasive in contemporary consumer culture – is effective for understanding the popularization of yoga today" (p.74).

Hence the *branding* category in Jain's view is able to explain the expansion of certain yoga practices into popular culture from the 1980ies: those yoga entrepreneurs who did associate their brand with categories signifying *self-development* and *identity* became successful. Their branding turned their yoga style into a product which was easy to consume and mass market. Hence postural yoga entered mass culture because a handful of yoga entrepreneurs managed to link their wares to desires of mass consumers. I.e. they – and postural yoga! - achieved popularity

through skilful branding. Does this anthropocentric (or human exceptionalism) model hold closer scrutiny?

I find that Jain with this line of argument is using the branding category to explain something it is not capable to do. Jain clearly and correctly states that branding is about making very similar commodities looking different. She here quotes The American Marketing Association that branding identifies “one seller’s product good and service as distinct from those of other sellers” (p.77). The mass consumer of late capitalism requires individualised products and by differentiating their products (so they *appear* different) producers avoid the cut throat competition of mass production. Jain is here correctly drawing on Baudrillard and Featherstone showing how branding is linking a commodity with consumers desires.

I find it very problematic however when Jain then claims that postural yoga – an emerging market niche - was successful in late 20th Century *due to skilful branding*. I find that Jain here is using a category (*branding*) belonging to a lower systemic level (level of *companies*) to explain events on a higher systemic level (level of *market niche*). Branding is about explaining *individual* (company) behaviour – the micro level. It cannot explain the success of an industry or a market niche – the meso level, the level of social structures. Metaphorically branding cannot explain a wave in the sea but it can explain the success of each of the ships managing to ride this wave. Let me illustrate this with an example.

Today the PC industry is dominated by brands like Apple and Microsoft. However this fact does not imply that the success of the PC industry is due to the marketing geniuses of Bill Gates (of Microsoft) and Steve Jobs (of Apple). Of course did those two talented entrepreneurs create the two most successful companies in that business niche. Doing that they did not only draw on branding skills (skilfully tuning into the consumer demands and desires of late capitalism) but in addition to that they also mastered *a whole range of management skills*. However all this does not only explain the success and popularity of the two *companies* – Gates and Jobs clearly did *not* create the success of the PC business niche. To believe this is an anthropocentric failure.

That force – that wave - came from other places. My suggestion is that instead of focusing on Gates and Jobs (which the branding category is fit for) we should rather analyse the forces and social structures out of which the PC industry evolved (which the branding category cannot).

In other words the *branding* category is too narrow to explain the mass success of postural yoga as such. *It can only explain why some postural yoga entrepreneurs fared better than others*. We need to look for deeper structural forces.

Thus this discussion of Jain’s method of explaining sociological events by employing a *selection of sociological categories* (as opposed to a comprehensive model) shows that she either ends up in too wide explanations (consumer culture) or too narrow categories (branding).

Before I in the final part of this paper in general explore the feasibility of such a method of explanation-by-category-selection (eclecticism) I would like to return to the question regarding to what *specific* issues of consumer culture did postural yoga adapt?

So I will leave aside the unlucky usage of the branding category. Instead I want to raise the question whether the argument Jain thinks constitute the foundation of her explanation (the *explanands*) – i.e. certain traits of the consumer culture – actually is in need of being explained itself (i.e. is an *explanandum*).

3. Anthropocentrism and the heroic cultural entrepreneur

From where did new ideals come?

In explaining the popularity of postural yoga Jain is in many ways making neat usage of sociological theories of consumer culture. On one side she identifies marketers branding their products by using signs and symbols which often link directly into consumers’ desires. It is then pointed out that consumers on their side are not just passive receptors of marketing signals. They actively interact with and process the received signs and transform them to fit into their agendas and life worlds. Thus consumers often through their consumption of goods and symbols (created through branding) are assembling a social *identity*: through a bricolage of goods consumed a *lifestyle* is emerging.

Here one should keep in mind that the need for social identity is historical global. All cultures and societies show *group formations* offering individuals meaning, social identity and “lifestyle”. What is specific to the consumer culture identity is that it is created through consumption – “you are what you consume”.

Jain’s point is that the modern yoga sign (loaded with new significance by hero entrepreneurs) became a consumer product which in combination with other products could contribute to desired *identity formation* and the creation of new *lifestyles*.

This claim begs the question what specific identities and lifestyles did the consumer of late 20th Century desire? What were the new consumer ideals?

Jain correctly points to desires like *fitness, stress reduction, well being and beauty* which became crucial to much urban living of the 1980ies. Postural yoga was successfully aligned with such desires: by disciplining the self by means of postural yoga consumers could achieve the desired ideals (values/signs/identities).

In this context Jain discusses yoga brands like Iyengar, Siddha and Anusara yoga as evidence of this process of tuning into given consumer ideals. Successfully these guru-organisations created and associated their product with various desires for self development. Iyengar tapped into categories of *fitness* and *well being*, Siddha Yoga into categories of *mystical salvation* and Anusara into categories of *community* and *life affirmation*.

However this leaves us in a situation where what is presented as an explanation now itself needs explanation. The new sociological question is how and why did new consumer ideals emerge and settle and in what sociological strata did they prevail? Why did ideals of beauty, fitness and well being emerge in late 20th Century among the masses? What social strata, social movements and social habits did they evolve out of?

Jain does not provide an explanation to this. She just quotes the yoga historian Elizabeth de Michelis who observes that there at this point of time were “**drastic changes in which in turn brought about changes in popular ideals of body image and identity**” (p.78).

But why? Where did they come from and what made them widespread? Why did *certain strata and groups* develop new values, ideals and taste? In other words what needs to be explained constitutes the starting point of Jain’s analysis. In sociological terms I would say that Jain make interesting general observation of changes to Western *habitus* (“popular mores”) but she fails to relate these changes to *specific* social groups and their *specific* habitus. Hence it all remains abstract and illusive and we are left without of an explanation of what *specific* social structures caused *specific habitus* to change.

The hero entrepreneur

Further, from a sociological institutional perspective Jain is here establishing a *theory of action* where she establishes what is called a *hero entrepreneur*. This is an individual who is capable of changing *culture* (in sociology often called ‘*institutional logic*’ or just ‘*institutions*’) through skilful manipulation. In our case this implies: postural yoga became popular because yoga gurus skilfully tapped into desired consumer categories (like *fitness, community*).

On afterthought one wonder where did these heroic Indian entrepreneurs get their *rule breaking* ideas from and how did they know about the existence of such fundamental Western/global desires to tap into? Or was it all just a question of coincidence? Thus with the hero entrepreneur as the causal factor we have ended in a situation with much descriptive details but very little explanation.

Accordingly such *hero entrepreneur* based action theory often adhered to by cultural historians “**has been criticised for an overuse of descriptive case studies of institutional entrepreneurs who have the unbridled ability to freely manipulate institutions. Absent in this research is a theory of how institutional entrepreneurs discover their ideas and are embedded in or autonomous from the social system that motivate their ideas**” (Thornton, Ocasio, Lounsbury 2013, p.9).

Thus this heroic entrepreneur figure is not without apparent theoretical problems. This figure generates obvious questions like where does the new cultural ideals and desires (*habitus*) come from which he seems to formulate and make popular? And how does the hero entrepreneur break out of “traditional thinking” (his *habitus*, his institutional logic) of his society and thereby establishing new cultural institutions?

This illusive heroic cultural entrepreneur – the creator of new cultural institutions - is crucial to most yoga historians – whether dealing with modern or pre-modern society. It is him who fills and dominate the pages of their writings. The existence and power of this figure is resting on a specific *social action theory* labelled *anthropocentrism* or *human exceptionalism*. We need to look

deeper into this style of action theory which is not only widespread among yoga historians but also among any historian focusing on cultural institutions.

Actually this action theory is so dominant and adhered to that it almost has become the norm. One has to ask why? Is it a coincidence or is it the “intuitive obvious” way of approaching culture? According to the sociologist P. Bourdieu this is not coincidental but a question of an *occupational bias* of historians. Let me explore this bias.

The tendency to slide into anthropocentric narratives

The problem becomes apparent as we browse through the works of most yoga historians. Most of the analytical research energy – and written pages – is spent on describing and making sense of great metaphysical ideas and the intricate historical events surrounding them. The so-called *socio-economic context* – admittedly of crucial significance – is often dealt with in a couple of pages or occasionally referred to when required. Why – as we count the pages of the research reports – is “context” given so little space despite its admittedly importance? And why is most written space devoted to historical description of entrepreneurial ideas, deeds, biographies and the cultural institutional transformation they are supposed to have caused?

Bourdieu as mentioned claims that this bias is caused by *occupational specialisation*. Due to the nature of their profession which is ruled by an ever increasing specialisation academic cultural historians tend not to see the world as made of *institutional practices* but by *informants’ statements*, he argues. They do only see the trees which occupy their world, not the forest.

Mesmerised by the intellectual challenge of bringing order to the chaos, intricacies and sophistication of the cultural plane (let us label it “the plane of *ideation and biography*”) this ideational world begins understandably to drive and dominate the analysis. *Description* takes over as the specialised historian gets sucked into historical details. Specialists are measured on and pride themselves of adding new details to historical records. The historical truth is believed to be found in the detail – hence specialisation. In this process the specialised cultural historian becomes fixated by the complexity of particulars.

Further, cultural ideas – stored in endless amounts of texts – dominate the historical records facing the historian, whereas socio-economic context – social structures – lives a hidden world extreme hard to access and define. No wonder that the description of the plane of ideation takes over and context is relegated to second row.

Add to this that great ideas behind cultural institutions often have an identifiable author – a creative and skilful personality. This cultural entrepreneur then naturally and slowly commences to dominate the historian’s horizon and narrative. Hence slowly but surely these great entrepreneurs – implicitly or explicitly – become the causal factor of descriptive cultural historiography. Individuals – *exceptional humans* – take over the spotlight of the centre stage and context is reduced to background scenery.

The problem with human exceptionalism

This in the end also happened to Jain’s cultural analysis. She correctly and convincingly reveals how culture becomes a commodity and that yoga entrepreneurs have to be able to negotiate the market in order to become viable. But in the end most of the pages are spent on a small group of great yoga entrepreneurs who skilfully manage to create and sell the emergent postural yoga to the masses. Their creativity and talent are the causes of institutional change – i.e. the popularity of postural yoga.

The cultural memory they construct slides into *anthropocentrism*: “the temptation to see intentional human agents as the unique possessors of causal power in social interaction” (Elder-Vass 2010, p.198).

Anthropocentric is a *theory of action* which in Jain’s case is framed inside a functional model. Entrepreneurs are confined by the socio-economic context. They cannot create and cause what ever they fancy, there are limitations. Thus in our case: cultural history is driven by individual entrepreneurs who are funnelled by historical context (consumer culture and markets). The genius of the yoga entrepreneur – the exceptional individual creator of cultural history – is that he or she (in mysterious ways) is able to identify, express and creatively interact with the conditions and limitations of the context.

Thus in such biased cultural history we are easily and typically – but *not* coincidentally – left with the general impression that the historical force of institutional change is coming from great individuals reigning the cultural plan despite the historian’s explicit stated commitment to context and other sociological categories.

However this anthropocentric theory of action is as mentioned suffering from a fundamental problem.

The problem with this *human exceptionalism* is that it treats “human behaviour as uncaused, or as caused by some process that is so radically unlike other natural processes as to be beyond the scope of a causal power theory” (Elder-Vass 2010 - p. 198).

In other words the cause of the new – the exceptional human creative genius – is beyond explanation. According to their nature human skills like ‘talent’, ‘creativity’, ‘genius’ and ‘charisma’ cannot be explained. They all belong to the exceptional and mysterious romantic hero (confined by the context) who becomes the motor of events. *In this way cultural history becomes a string of basically unexplainable events.* Each major institutional change – each event - is caused by an mysterious heroic cultural entrepreneur. Yes, the entrepreneur is restricted – or funnelled – by context but the cause of his creative power remains obscure.

In summary the cultural memory constructed – despite claims of subscribing to “context and socio-economy” - is dominated and driven by *individual/organisational biographies*: inexplicable geniuses – charismatic personalities - creating brilliant new ideas; visionary inventors of new practices, skills and technologies - all fitted for and limited by modern conditions and sensibilities.

As mentioned this anthropocentric bias count for many yoga historians whether specialising in pre-modern or modern yoga forms. Especially pre-modern yoga historians are mostly utterly occupied by the translations issues and conceptual clarifications of metaphysical issues of great texts and great men. Here context tends only to contribute a distant horizon to linguistic and hermeneutical prevalence.

How can specialised cultural historians protect their analysis from being trapped by anthropocentrism and the ideational plane and its internal logic and complexity? How can it be avoided that descriptions of exceptional cultural ideas highjacks the project? Can cultural history be explained or does it only forms a series of unexplainable events? How do we explain the emergence and settlement of new cultural institutions?

This is where we leave descriptive history and enter historical sociology.

4. History versus social theory

New models via cross-disciplinary cooperation

It is my suggestion that yoga academics are in a situation similar to that the economists found themselves in before the financial crisis of 2008 as mentioned in the opening of this paper. We recall that they also relied on out-dated assumptions preventing them from explaining and predicting events. To move on they needed input from other academic disciplines and new assumptions.

Beliefs like anthropocentrism, essentialism and historical ideationalism – underlying much academic yoga discourse - has been criticised within the social theory since half a century. They leave the cultural historian in a situation where history is basically unexplainable. Cultural memory become reduced to maps of more and more detailed particulars.

In my view it is time to change and Jain is basically going in the right direction but as I have argued she does not go far enough. As we have seen a subjective selection of sociological categories found fit for purpose does not solve the fundamental problems facing yoga historians.

My suggestion is that yoga historians also need to turn to other academic disciplines. I suggest social theory.

We need to find social theories which offer us an alternative to the alleged causative power of the heroic entrepreneur. We do not want to leave him or human agents as such totally out of the picture. We need to find other causes of cultural institutional change.

I suggest we need general social theory which is based on *social structures with causative power* (see Elder-Vass, 2010). Below I will explain this. Further these social structures needs to be a part of a *comprehensive sociological model* (as an example of this see Fliegstein and McAdam 2012 and Bourdieu 1992). Models are like maps. They provide us with a diagram of the overall system. What to look for and what to ignore. They highlight the interaction of the system – the flow, the dialectics of change.

Such models and general social theories *discipline* our research efforts and protect us from the professional bias of sliding into anthropocentrism.

This is the subject of the remainder of this paper – the move from history to social theory.

The antidote: models with social structures as causal wholes

Let me make a parallel to the world of atoms and molecules. If we envisage social agents as *atoms* then what we are looking for in our social theory are the *molecules* of the social world. What is special to a molecule in the atomic world is that it constitutes a *whole*. 'A whole' is an entity which is *more than the individual parts* which composes it. Thus in our social theory we are looking for "*social wholes*" – i.e. social entities which are more than their individual parts, the agents.

Or rather it is not the agent we are interested in but his *actions*. Thus we are looking for social wholes constituted by the uniform actions of agents. That is what sociologists label '*social structures*' – patterned action. Habitual action. Action based on common choice – deliberate or sub-conscious. Such social structures can set transformations in motion which the actions of the single agent could never achieve. For instance the generation of new social structures – new cultural institutions which will inform the choices of the agents.

In this way '*social structures*' are said to have '*causal power*' – they can cause a type of change or stability which the agent could never have caused. In other words social structures are '*social wholes*' with '*emergent property*': i.e. with *the power to cause things* otherwise not possible for the singular agent (Elder-Vass, 2010)..

A simple example from the physical world will clarify what is meant with 'emergent property'. Take hydrogen and oxygen atoms. When these parts are configured in a certain whole they constitute the entity 'water'. A property of water – its power – is its ability to extinguish fire which neither of the parts is able to do on their own.

The 'specific actions of the agents' (the parts) and 'social structures' (the whole) create each other in a dialectical way. Thus when the specific actions are embedded in a system or pattern of social practices we have social structures. Emergency is arising.

Such social structures are what Bourdieu calls '*institutionalised practices*'. The power of an individual agent depends on the combination of the (1) power of the institutional practice he is reproducing and (2) the power of the position occupied within that institution. It is in this context Bourdieu has coined the notion '*cultural field*'. Cultural fields evolve out of specific historio-social configurations which infuses a certain *social space with power*. An example could be elite sport, movie acting or fashion design. Or yoga. The power of the cultural entrepreneurs – their '*cultural capital*' - is a direct function of the power of this field and his or her position within that field.

Hence *cultural institutions* – institutionalised practices - are an evident example of a social structure. The cultural institution – the pattern - is kept alive by the endless repetition of the social agents. A single agent on his own cannot cause the structure to cease – i.e. cause the multitude of agents to stop reproducing and reacting on the pattern. Mostly the established social structure – the habit - is too strong. The transformation of an established (settled) cultural institution has to come from a new emergent social structures – for instance multiple agents adapting to new circumstances. Often this is related to factors like: war, social conflicts, natural events (disasters), demography, technology, economy, social re-configurations, state formation, property relations, and so on.

With the considerations above I have provided a sketch of a *model* for institutional change. In a sociological model geared for explaining *the evolution, settlement and transformation of cultural institutional practices* – i.e. cultural social structures - we need a *cluster of interacting social structures* each of them comprising *identifiable* parts and causal mechanisms.

In such a model 'context' no longer is reduced to provide the background stage for the heroic entrepreneur but has moved to the centre of the narrative in the form of social structures with causative power. This model will keep the bias of anthropocentrism at bay.

In other words the effect of such a *realist* sociological model build on *social structures* (social wholes with causal power) are that the historian becomes *disciplined* by a coherent overall social theory specific geared to explain changes in institutions, discourses, values, ideals, taste, and cultural practices.

Institutionalised practices causing the popularity of yoga

Let us now return to the challenge of explaining the popularity of yoga in the late 20th Century. We accept that the anthropocentric model does not provide any explanation as we cannot explain the genius of the yoga guru. In his place in a realist model steps countless women – the

new layers of middle class women emerging after WW2. As they left the confinements of the household and the control of patriarchy they slowly created their own new institutional practices. Doing this they were informed by their *habitus* – the cultural habits of their gender and class.

Due to changes in a range of interacting social structures – welfare state, corporatism, late capitalism, education, work outside family, visual media, new dominant social strata, celebrity culture, cultural narcissism, habitus of romanticism, fitness culture, and globalisation (see Madsen 2013) – post-war women moved into a radical new material and cultural situation (institutionalised practices) charging them with new powers.

Out of this complex reconfiguration of female identities, their social situation and power there emerged new cultural fields and institutions enabling innumerable women – based on their daily experiences and *habitus* – to configure *new body cultures and discourses*. As they constructed a body culture many of them dismissed the ruling male hyper-masculine competitive sport culture (Burstyn 1999).

One of the many new female configurations which emerged was labelled *yoga*. This specific female body culture emerged in a complex interplay between West and East. This evolutionary process was however *driven by women – not yoga gurus – and was emerging out of their complex historical condition and habitus*. It was utterly and fundamentally a unique process women were undergoing. It was *their* process. Eastern gurus surely provided much input to this new institutional practice but basically it was assembled by women according their demands and desires – their evolving female *habitus*.

For various reasons they ended up calling their new body-mind culture *yoga*. They could have called it *female stretching gymnastic* as well and this would have eliminated much of the confusion reigning today especially concerning yoga essentialism. However understandably they opted for the much more colourful signifier *yoga* which to them and their *habitus* had strong symbolic and authoritative associations.

Thus in this realist sociological driven narrative the causal drive is social structures – especially structures configured by the actions of women. The focus in this model is on waves influencing other waves – on interacting social structures, institutionalised practices. The gurus – their discourse and practices – are minor elements feeding the wave and forming some of the small boats floating on it. Thus in this narrative the *main agent* are anonymous and countless urban middle class women – not individual gurus – and it is critical to outline how their new body-mind discourses are growing out of *their* materiality, their institutionalised practices.

Returning to *Selling Yoga* we realise that emergent social strata within the middle classes and women – charged by the power of the new social structure they embody – are conspicuously absent in Jain's narrative. They are not the creative authors of their collective history: an emergent powerful cluster of historical social structures – at best they are compilers and eclectics. Instead authorship, attention and numbers of pages in Jain's narrative are mainly given to the skilful manoeuvres, strategies and ideas of great yoga individuals whose only constraint is the funnel of consumer culture.

Despite its sociological deficiencies of eclecticism Jain's book is important as it convincingly argues and demonstrate to yoga historians – modern or pre-modern in their interest – that they need to engage with context to understand yoga – both yoga's content and yoga as a cultural phenomenon.

What Jain's book implicitly reveals is that yoga historians are in critical need of turning to *cross-disciplinary cooperation* with the social theory like historical sociology, cultural sociology, social psychology, social semiotics, evolutionary system theory, and so on.

Which returns us to the beginning of this article – the economists of the pre-financial crisis.

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