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RECENT INTRODUCTIONS TO THE SOCIOLOGY OF THE BODY

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REVIEW ESSAY

RECENT INTRODUCTIONS TO THE SOCIOLOGY OF THE BODY

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Christine Detrez (2002) *La Construction Sociale du Corps*, Paris: Édition du Seuil; Pascal Duret and Peggy Roussel (2003) *Le Corps et ses Sociologies*, Paris: Nathan; David Le Breton (2004) *La Sociologie du Corps* (5^{ème} éd.), Paris: Presse Universitaire de France; Alexandra Howson (2004) *The Body in Society: An Introduction*, Bodwin: Polity.

The social changes that gave prominence to the body in the contemporary world have been identified through the notion of somatic society (Turner 1996). In the midst of this trend, social research on the body has accelerated over the past two decades and is now acknowledged as a sub-speciality of sociology: the sociology of the body. It is not, then, surprising to see the mushrooming of courses in the sociology of the body in university curricula across France and the UK. In new fields such as this, lecturers often face problems defining the field, stating its purpose in academia, highlighting its principle theoretical influences, and conveying appropriate examples. Hitherto, amongst the few texts in this field (e.g., Shilling 1993; Turner 1996; Hancock *et al.* 2000; Evans 2002), Bryan S. Turner's and Chris Shilling's books have been the dominant resources for students and academics in the UK looking for a way in to this developing area of research. This situation is now changing rapidly, and this review discusses four recent introductions to the sociology of the body, briefly summarising each before focussing on their argument and their usefulness as introductory resources.

Initially written as a requirement for the French *agrégation*, Christine Detrez's '*La construction sociale du corps*' traces the origins of the sociology of the body and shows how the body is a 'total social fact'. This is achieved by reviewing extensively most of the very large French sociological literature on the social construction of the body (e.g., Bourdieu, Berthelot,

Foucault, Le Breton, Mauss, Vigarello). However, a reasonable amount of space is given to authors outside France such as N. Elias, E. Goffman and B.S. Turner. From the outset, Detrez states her opposition to a biological conception of the body, and especially towards biological determinism. Her stance is supported throughout by reference to numerous sociological, historical and anthropological studies. The four sections of the book – on the origins of the sociology of the body, the social production of bodies, the social and cultural uses of the body, and bodies and power – give the reader a sense that the central questions, issues and theories have been comprehensively covered. I appreciated the balanced weight given to the many perspectives she exposes; her combination of praise and criticism should appeal to a diverse audience sharing a common interest in how sociology can further our understanding of the body.

In their well-constructed book, *'Le corps et ses sociologies'*, Pascal Duret and Peggy Roussel, two sport sociologists, summarize several, mostly French, sociological work on the body. Their seven chapters address a range of topics (social structure, social interaction, emotions, modernity, ethics, sexual identity, gender and power) and will guide students through the extensive and often scattered literature on the field. Although the authors do not develop any of the themes in depth, they do cover topical issues in social science such as the body in Islam, queer theory and bioethics, and include many up-to-date and detailed empirical studies that have rarely been previously cited. The authors' background in sport studies is noticeable throughout the studies and examples they present; however, the essential features of the field are not overlooked. The theories of P. Bourdieu, E. Goffman and M. Foucault receive considerable attention and are often supported by empirical studies and accompanied by a critique. Duret and Roussel's work is clear, concise and useful for teaching, mainly because of their use of empirical examples which could give a direct focus for students.

As the author of numerous sociological and anthropological essays, David Le Breton cannot be ignored in French sociology of the body. The main thrust of his work examines the ways in which modernity shapes conceptions of the body, and he is especially known for his critical standpoint of the prevailing mind–body dualism in modernity which creates an opposition between the subject and its own body. In *'La sociologie du corps'*, Le Breton endeavours to set the parameters for a research program on the sociology of the body. For Le Breton, sociologists must reject the idea that the body is a mere attribute of the person. They must consider the body, its so-called objective reality and the significations attributed to it, as socially constructed. It is for these reasons that he rejects dualism and values historical and cultural relativity. Three domains are outlined: the social and cultural logics of the body, the social

imaginaries of the body, and the body as a mirror of the social. Each of these sections is supported by the key sociological productions in the area. The book culminates in a short account of the current state of the field and marks out further theoretical work that awaits future research in this area. There is a tangible anthropological flavour to this book that students and scholars will appreciate. The depth to which Le Breton develops his understanding of sociology of the body greatly contributes to this read.

Most likely designed for teaching purposes, Alexandra Howson's book 'The body in society' follows a classic introductory textbook format – theme-oriented chapters, up-to-date examples, a glossary, suggestions for further readings and internet resources providing supplementary material. Using a structured and scholarly style, the author successfully reaches her goals of: (a) describing the key issues concerning the body and defining what makes the body socially significant in the present day, (b) outlining sociological perspectives and conceptual frameworks which address these issues, and (c) providing a sense of comparison between sociological and other social science approaches to the body. The chapters are organized in order to present a diversity of topics (e.g., social interaction, gender, consumer culture, ageing) and key theoretical perspectives, including, those developed by P. Bourdieu, J. Butler, E. Goffman, N. Elias and M. Foucault. The formula she regularly employs of bringing together theory and practical life issues contributes to highlighting the use of abstract conceptual tools for understanding familiar situations. Howson relies extensively on recent Anglophone sources, and this might explain the weight she attributes to feminist and Foucauldian studies, usually emphasized in the UK and North America. Howson's text would work as a useful teaching tool for challenging and stimulating the interest of undergraduate students.

The overviews provided by these four books are clear, rigorous and helpful. Their richness lies in the extensiveness of their range and their constructive pedagogical features. Although they do not generate much new material, their syntheses of previous works contribute to setting the parameters and underlining the relevant theoretical approaches in sociology of the body. As a general comment, I would have appreciated an attempt to situate existing literature within the wider framework of sociology in order to assist social scientists in their initial efforts to learn about this area.

Two main questions arise after reading these texts. What is the sociology of the body and how do we understand its principal object of study? While all authors attempt to define the body, Detrez and Le Breton are the most explicit. They undertake this task in order to prevent the uncritical reproduction of its dominant representations. Because the body's 'biological nature' is so often taken for granted, they believe that

sociologists can overlook its social and cultural construction. The body, for Le Breton, does not exist in a natural state; it must be understood through a web of social significations. The two authors caution against the dominant conception of mind–body dualism, a view of the world rooted in Cartesian thinking which perceives the ‘body’ as an object separate from the mind. Both skilfully explain the consequences of this dualism on both sociological thought and on the contemporary sense of self. For instance, referring to a concept he develops extensively in other works, Le Breton suggests that the Cartesian legacy gave rise to a ‘supernumerary body’ [*corps surnuméraire*]; that is, an imaginary of denigration towards the body that tends to render it obsolete.¹ Western societies, he argues, have a contemptuous attitude towards the body because it fails to meet the societal standards of performance and reliability. As a supernumerary member, the body tends to become a malleable object that individuals try to get ‘fixed’ or ‘get rid of’ through diverse methods. In this respect, organ transplant, embryo experimentation and genetic testing are brought forth to illustrate the uneasiness of individuals trying to cope with ‘imperfect’ and ageing bodies. If sociology is to be critical of the ways we treat our bodies, Detrez suggests that it needs to depart from a philosophical and scientific tradition that conceives the body as a separate biological entity. Following in the steps of Marcel Mauss who considered the body as a ‘total social fact’, sociology should deal with ‘total persons’, and should aim to integrate body, individual and group.

Each of the four books helps to refine the definition of the sociology of the body. Duret and Roussel stress the point that this field does not study the ‘body’ but the actor that mobilizes it. Building on Berthelot’s (1985) approach, they advocate a sociology which focuses on situations where the body is brought into play in society. They contend that such a sociology should focus chiefly on broad issues of identity and social differentiation. For Le Breton, since the body cannot be defined as a practice, institution or a social group, its status is problematic for sociologists. There is no sociology of the body *per se*, but a sociology applied to the body. We must adjust sociological concepts to the body because, as he says, ‘we do not think of the body the same way as the family or as the state’. On her part, Detrez speaks of a ‘sociology of the social uses of the body’, which is constituted by two axes. One dimension explores social reproduction, bodily rituals, representations, values and norms in society (‘What body for which society?’). Another dimension studies how the body, at the organic level, has been transformed by the work of structural variables

1. The concept of supernumerary body is developed in one of his previous publications *Anthropologie du corps et modernité*, 2003 (3^{ième} éd.), Paris: Quadrige/Presses Universitaires de France.

(‘What body from which society?’). Howson’s text, without proposing a definition, sets out three features on which most sociologists agree in their approach to the body (2004: 11). Firstly, the body is more than a physical and material frame and is understood as inseparable from culture and society. Secondly, the body has increasingly become a target of political control, rationalisation and discipline in modernity, and thirdly, the body forms the basis of social experience and action. In spite of proposing slightly different readings of this area, the four texts hold similar views in defining the field.

Each book accounts for the many lenses through which sociology has studied the body. Frameworks such as those provided by M. Foucault, P. Bourdieu, N. Elias and E. Goffman receive much attention, and in so doing, point to the leading architects of this field. Anthropological and historical perspectives are also drawn upon in order to challenge the beliefs that representations of bodies are transhistorical and transegeographical. Though many topical areas are broached in these books (e.g., gender, class, power), several of them caught my attention as potentially thought-provoking. Firstly, Howson’s chapter on the life course approach is a timely addition. The author focuses primarily on the socially constructed images of the body in childhood, old age and death. By doing so, she highlights the interplay between the biological body and the social constructions attached to it. Secondly, Detrez’s chapter on ‘Incorporation as second nature’, although not developed extensively, is also noteworthy for promoting useful analytical tools. By introducing Bourdieu’s notions of ‘practical sense’ and ‘bodily hexis’, she bridges the gap between nature and culture. These concepts are not widely used in the sociology of the body in the UK and could help students understand the embodied nature of humans and how it manifests itself in society. Thirdly, Detrez’s, as well as Duret and Roussel’s argument critically assessing the modern belief of the ‘liberated body’ is an original and insightful addition to the discussion on social domination. Using predominantly Elias and Foucault, Detrez is critical of the contemporary perception that individuals are acquiring freedom from religious and cultural taboos related to the body. She shows through many examples how social domination has changed forms through time but still remains very present. Referring to J.-C. Kauffman’s (1995) *Corps de femmes; regards d’hommes* she critically examines how notionally liberating practices such as topless bathing at the beach remains heavily governed by rules and constraints. Finally, the extent to which emotions are discussed in all volumes is another interesting component, providing students with an alternative to the more widely used psychological perspective. Here, the authors rely on sociological (e.g., N. Elias and G. Simmel),

anthropological (e.g., M. Mauss and E. Hall) and phenomenological (e.g., E. Husserl and M. Merleau-Ponty) accounts in their desire to study the 'expressive body'.

If developed, many other topics could have been tied in to contemporary concerns in sociology of the body. As mentioned earlier, mind-body dualism is certainly one of the main features in the understanding of the body in society. However, with the increasing popularity of deterministic theses proposed by geneticists and socio-biologists, a wider discussion emphasising the nature-culture/structure-agency debates would also have been relevant. Other areas of research such as race and ethnicity, are only superficially examined, even though sociologists have elaborated on them since the 1990s. The political economy of bodies (e.g., organ trade, human traffic, pornography and prostitution), the impact of new bio-technologies on the way we relate to our bodies (e.g., reproductive and anti-ageing technologies) or the consequences of new modes of communications (such as the internet) on bodies have also been underdeveloped in these books. Finally, it would have been greatly beneficial if the authors had provided a clearer demonstration of the general usefulness of learning about sociology of the body. Readers will, however, find a number of empirical studies that lay the foundations for critical thinking and political action. For example, the three French texts draw on David Efron's 1942 'Gesture, race and culture', which called into question Nazi essentialism and, more specifically, the superiority of Aryan gestures (indicating sobriety and rigour), over those of Jews and Mediterranean populations (affectation and childish). The study compared gestures of first and second generation of Jews and Italians that immigrated to the United States of America. The results opposed Nazi theses that naturalize race, showing marked differences in gestures between generations, the second generation having adopted gestures similar to other Americans. This demonstrated that gestures were a product of social and cultural fashioning rather than being racially determined.

In conclusion, these books should be considered, as they consider themselves, as introductory texts and should be complemented with further reading. However, scholars interested in this important field should, however, be aware of these books' specific cultural influences. Although sociology of the body appears to have a core theoretical foundation, French and English texts each have their own store of literature and set of culturally relevant examples. Most importantly, all texts show that sociology is developing a number of approaches, tools and methods to deepen our understanding of the complex connections between the body and society.

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