

The body has become an increasingly significant concept over recent years and this Reader offers a stimulating overview of the main topics, perspectives and theories which surround the issue. This broad consideration of the body presents an engagement with a range of social concerns, from processes of racialization to the vagaries of fashion and performance art. Individual sections cover issues such as:

- The body and social (dis)order
- Bodies and identities
- Bodily norms
- Bodies in health and disease
- Bodies and technologies
- Body ethics.

Containing an extensive critical introduction, as well as a series of introductions summarizing each section, this Reader offers students a practical guide and a thorough grounding in the fascinating topic of the body.

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ROUTLEDGE STUDENT READERS

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Cover image: 'Self-Portrait, Helsinki' (1976) by Arno Rafael Minkkinen.

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A READER

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PART TWO

Bodies and social (dis)order

INTRODUCTION

THIS SECTION INCLUDES A SELECTION of texts in social theory that have come to be regarded as 'classic' in stating the fundamental importance of the body to the problems of social order, social control and social stratification. They tend to agree in one observation, namely, that the body at first appears *inconspicuous* as a sociological object and as an object of social regulation, but also that regulatory effects are all the more powerful thanks precisely to this inconspicuousness.

Marcel Mauss' chapter 'Techniques of the Body', first published in 1935 and celebrated as a pioneering text, still conveys with fresh immediateness the process of articulating – and thus, in a sense, discovering – the thoroughly social character of bodily actions, probably for the first time in the history of social science. Mauss begins by observing ordinary bodily actions such as swimming, walking, digging, resting or throwing, and how the manner of performing these differs across societies and across generations. It is only through cultural and generational variation that these actions become sociologically conspicuous, that is, visible as *social* actions. Otherwise they appear to the social scientist, as indeed they do to the social actor, to be '*actions of a mechanical, physical or physico-chemical order*', outside the remit of culture and of social scientific interest. Mauss reflects on the fact that this particular assumption typically applies to traditional actions an anthropologist would classify as *techniques* rather than *rites*. Viewed from an anthropological perspective, of course, both types of action (*rites* and *techniques*) bear the marks of a specific culture, of particular traditions. From the native's perspective, however, technical actions (such as grinding grain or carrying water through particular implements) appear devoid of any cultural specificity or meaning; they are experienced in purely physical and mechanical terms, and pursued with physical and mechanical aims in view. Mauss argues that, when it comes to considering everyday bodily actions, the

anthropological perspective can be as blind to the role of culture as the perspective of a native. Mauss writes: 'I made, and went on making for several years, the fundamental mistake of thinking that there is technique only when there is an instrument.' His mistake was to suppose that physical action could be classified as a technique, or as a cultural practice, only when mediated by an artificial object, an instrument – that is, a visible token of 'culture'. By implication, the naked body, the body acting without instrumental mediation, would appear to be a purely 'natural' object, independent of social relations of authority and power. These assumptions are powerfully challenged by Mauss' claim that the body is 'man's first and *most natural technical object*' (our emphasis).

The problem of classification, and of how to understand the relation between nature and culture in connection with bodily phenomena, is also central to Mary Douglas' work. In the chapter included here, Douglas addresses what she sees as limits in the contrasting approaches of Mauss, on the one hand, and structural anthropologist Lévi-Strauss on the other. In Douglas' view, Mauss' focus on bodily action as technique placed too exclusive an emphasis on cultural variation, to the point of generating the mistaken impression that there is no such thing as natural behaviour. Lévi-Strauss, on the other hand, was intent on 'discovering' universal symbolic structures corresponding to the structure of the human mind, which he believed informed how human bodies and their activities are socially controlled. Unlike Mauss, Lévi-Strauss focused on symbolic universals that left little room to account for local and specific cultural variations. Against this background Douglas carves an original and deeply influential explanatory model, designed to accommodate local differences whilst making substantive claims with regard to universals. In this model, the categories of nature and culture are displaced from their customary locations: they do not map on to the physical body, on the one hand, and to society on the other. Douglas argues that what is 'natural', in the sense that it is universally found across cultures, is not the physico-biological body as such, but rather a certain principle of correspondence between *two bodies*, the physico-biological or individual body and the social body. What is universal is a 'drive to achieve consonance in all levels of experience' which, Douglas claims, 'produces concordance among the means of expression, so that the use of the body is coordinated with other media'. There is therefore a kind of parallelism and mutual reinforcement between messages (or meanings) relative to the physico-biological, individual body, and messages (or meanings) relative to the social body. The physical body is never immediately perceived, but always experienced through the mediation of cultural categories; social preoccupations and concerns – typically in relation to the demarcation of boundaries or hierarchies – translate into preoccupations and concerns regarding flows to and from bodily apertures, or the relation between different bodily organs in the upper and lower body. Such concerns are materialised through techniques of control, ranging from the control of physiological processes (such as excretion) to that of posture, movement and appearance. This is the sense in which 'the physical body is a *microcosm of society*', its experience always sustaining a particular set of cultural meanings, a particular social order. The body is also a *natural symbol*, in the sense that it universally expresses the relation of parts (or individuals) to a whole (or society).

Mauss and Douglas articulate the social character and significance of the body in the idiom of anthropology, where variations across cultures constitute perhaps the main focus

of explanatory interest. With Goffman and Bourdieu we are in quintessentially sociological terrain, where one of the main concerns is with how social order and stratification are internally maintained and reproduced, at a micro- and a macro-sociological level. In the text included here, Goffman focuses on the body as an instrument of communication that conveys information about a person's membership to, or exclusion from, a given situational order. Embodied information is a crucial condition of face-to-face interaction, and defines such interaction as marked by a profound symmetry or mutuality: '... to use our naked senses is to use them nakedly and to be made naked by their use. ... Copresence renders persons uniquely accessible, available, and subject to one another.' For this reason, the question of how society is possible can be thought of, at a micro-level, as having to do with the normative regulation of situational presence and of interpersonal accessibility. Situational presence signals social membership, in the sense that it signals the readiness and willingness to participate in a commonly defined interaction. Such presence, however, is not simply given – it must be demonstrated through the appropriate bodily demeanour. The body and its expressions have to be managed so as to indicate concern and interest in the setting and its participants. Correspondingly, disruptions or breakdowns of the interaction typically become conspicuous as/in bodily manifestations (e.g. blushing, yawning, etc.).

In this extract from Bourdieu's *Logic of Practice*, practical sense – our intuitive and implicit beliefs concerning how the world works – also figures as a condition of membership to a given social field, and one which is implicitly demonstrated through 'countless acts of recognition'. Somewhat counter-intuitively, Bourdieu describes practical sense or practical belief as 'a state of the body'. Social values are literally incorporated, in the sense that they are 'made body', through 'seemingly innocuous details of bearing or physical and verbal manners'. In this way, social values (and the ordered social structure to which they correspond) become invisible as aspects of culture, and appear instead to be perfectly natural. What is 'learned by the body' is therefore something that does not properly figure as knowledge and does not become an object of consciousness; it is inconspicuous as a form of training, and it involves an 'implicit pedagogy' enacted through participation in play and ritual, rather than the teaching of explicit precepts and rules. Accordingly, embodied practical sense is not something the individual can stand before, contemplate, and possibly reject; it is something the individual *is*, or has become. For Bourdieu, practical sense speaks not only of situational membership, but of membership to a particular structural segment of society – such as class or gender.

In the work of Mikhail Bakhtin the concern with boundaries and hierarchies, and with how these correspond to expressions and representations of the body, becomes explicitly political. The focus here is on the body as a locus of transgression and a revolutionary tool, one by which social hierarchies can be destabilised, inverted, mocked and satirised. To illustrate this potential for the body to act as a site of resistance, Bakhtin focused on particular occasions in social existence when control of the body is ritually abandoned: carnivals, fairs, festivals, masquerades, banquets and spectacles all enact challenges to the established order of things, in the form of ritual inversions. In the course of a carnival men would dress as women, paupers would be crowned kings, peasants would abuse nobles, and everyone would swear, curse, sing, and most importantly, laugh. In this momentary suspension of the customary rules of social conduct, the body invaded the social scene as

its most conspicuous actor, unrivalled in performing distortion and exaggeration – in other words, in the task of turning the world upside-down.

In this extract, Bakhtin discusses the grotesque, or carnivalesque body in contrast to what he calls the 'new bodily canon' to be found increasingly prevailing in European literature starting from the sixteenth century. The chief point is that in the grotesque mode or genre '[t]he confines between the body and the world and between separate bodies are drawn ... quite differently than in the classic and naturalist images'. The grotesque body is a body whose boundaries are uncertain and always changeable, since its most conspicuous features are its apertures and the flows they allow. The grotesque body is thus open, protruding, bulging, extending and secreting; it is wet, bloody, sweaty and odorous. Above all, it is connected to the world, and to other bodies, in such a way that it is difficult to consider it as an individual. This is probably the main point of contrast between the grotesque and the classical body of the new canon, whose surface is closed and smooth, an 'impenetrable façade'. The classical body is a finished body, that is 'self-sufficient and speaks in its name alone'. It is a body from which all ambiguity has been purged, whose features stress the demarcation between self and other, self and society.

The emergence of the classical body as a new 'canon' around the sixteenth century corresponds, in European history, to the emergence of new standards of refinement and delicacy, as well as new thresholds of disgust, shame and embarrassment. Bakhtin's periodisation here broadly agrees with that provided by Norbert Elias in his studies of the history of manners, in connection with what he called the 'civilising process' (see Elias 1994). Like Bakhtin, Elias stresses that the experience of the self as an enclosed individual, standing opposite other individuals and society rather than merging with them, is correlated with changes in the quality and degree of control exerted over bodily functions, activities and expressions. These changes, in turn, are linked to large-scale structural transformations such as the progressive centralisation of political authority within nationally defined territories, resulting in the pacification of social relations. The text included here is from a previously unpublished lecture that Elias delivered to a congress of physicians specialising in psychosomatic medicine – the branch of medicine that studies the role of psychological factors in physical illness and disease. As well as offering an outline of the essential features of the civilising process, the text links this process explicitly to an increase in so-called psychosomatic disorders in the modern period. The civilising process involves a process of internalisation of tension and conflict: whereas previously these manifested themselves as physical violence *between* individuals or groups, over time they disappear from the social scene. Instead, as individuals learn to exercise increasing amounts of self-control over their emotions and behaviour, tension and conflict become intrapsychic and tend to play themselves out *within* the individual. A particularly interesting claim being made in this text is that the features of social order, and the different forms of bodily regulation they imply, produce patterns not only at the level of behaviours and demeanours, but also at the level of the body's internal functioning, namely our physiology.

The last reading in this section is an extract from Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* – a text that, perhaps more than any other, is associated with placing the body at the centre of a new sociological agenda. The reason for this is that Foucault's analysis of the body in terms of its 'political investment' involved a simultaneous change of perspective not only on the body itself, but also on the relationship between power and knowledge. This

was a conceptual shift of broad significance to the social sciences as a whole; in this text, the body is the occasion demonstrating the necessity of this shift. Unlike other authors included in this section, Foucault stresses how the body is involved in relations that are political not only in an implicit sense, but explicitly and consciously so. The body is an object of techniques and strategies that bear on its materiality in order to channel it, train it, mould it and subject it, rendering the body 'docile' for economic or military purposes. Foucault names 'political technology of the body' a form of knowledge that is at once politically interested, and yet true to the materiality it seeks to affect. To imagine such a knowledge is to contradict a long-standing assumption according to which 'knowledge can exist only where power relations are suspended', and interest is deemed antithetical to truth insofar as it constitutes a 'bias'. Foucault here demonstrates how power and knowledge mutually imply each other, rather than cancelling each other out.