

Part One

THE SOCIOLOGY OF THE BODY

The new sociology of the body is, in one sense, quite as concerned with meaning and symbol as its classical predecessors. Indeed, it sees the "body and sexual practices... [as] socially constructed and variable, involving changing assumptions about what is or is not 'natural' or 'normal.' They have, in other words, a history and a geography."³ What the sociology of the body emphasizes, however, is that the body and physical experiences are of central importance to individual and social life. Moreover, whereas the ways in which we regard illnesses or the process of aging may change over time and between cultures, our perceptions and our experiences are a result of constant interaction between the cultural and the biological. The latter cannot be ignored.

One reason for growing sociological interest in the body is the highly visible and growing preoccupation of the public at large with the whole area of physical health and well-being. There is enormous interest in the effect of different foods on our bodies and health, as evidenced by successive food scares, by the flight of the American population toward any food that is low fat or fat free, followed, more recently, by the enormous success of the no-carbohydrate Atkins diet. Diet foods, plastic surgery, and health clubs have been some of the fastest growing industries of the late twentieth century. Alongside this, there are growing concerns about the impact of unprecedented levels of obesity in the population, including children.

Chris Shilling links this to the general changes in society that were discussed in Chapter 4, and, in particular to what Giddens and others refer to as high modernity. Shilling observes that

the position of the body within contemporary popular culture reflects the unprecedented individualization of the body. Growing numbers of people are increasingly concerned with the health, shape, and appearance of their own bodies as expressions of individual identity. . . . [O]f all the factors which have contributed to the visibility of the body, two apparently paradoxical developments seem to have been particularly important. *We now have the means to exert an unprecedented degree of control over bodies, yet we are also living in an age which has thrown into radical doubt our knowledge of what bodies are and how we should control them.*⁴

The growing self-consciousness of modern human beings and their inability to take things for granted have been described at length by, for

³L. McDowell, *Gender, Identity and Place* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 1998), 36.

⁴Chris Shilling, *The Body and Social Theory* (London/Newbury Park: Sage, 1993), 1-3; italics original.

example, Jürgen Habermas in his analysis of the rationalization of society. The new theorists of the body emphasize how this self-consciousness, allied with the belief that everything can be controlled, encourages us to focus on our own physical selves. Bauman argues that our modern obsession with health and beauty is "an attempt to belie the ultimate limits of the body."⁵ Yet in the end those limits hold: we cannot all look like supermodels or champion bodybuilders, and in the end we all die.

Representing the Body

The work of the postmodernist Michel Foucault (1929–1984) has been important in awakening sociologists' interest in the human body. Foucault was not a professional sociologist in the American tradition: the chair at the prestigious Collège de France that he held at the time of his premature death⁶ was in history and systems of thought, and his degrees were in philosophy, psychology, and psychopathology. However, his work has had a major impact on sociological theory, as well as on the study of literature and culture. He is particularly interested in the prison and the asylum, which to him exemplify the modern world.

Foucault explores changes in the way people have thought and behaved with respect to a variety of activities and behavior, in all of which the human body plays a central role. His books reproduce vivid contemporary descriptions of torture, madness, and prisons. In premodern times, he notes, torture and public floggings and executions were the state's main tools for securing order.⁷ Then came a major transition to the use of confinement—for convicted criminals, but also (and often, at first, in the same place) for the insane and the indigent. An "entire population . . . almost overnight found itself shut up, excluded more severely than the lepers"⁸ of the Middle Ages. "In a hundred and fifty years, confinement had become the abusive amalgam of heterogeneous elements."⁹ In the early nineteenth century, suddenly "everywhere we find the same outrage, the same virtuous censure"¹⁰ of the way the insane and criminals are imprisoned together. Similarly, throughout Europe and the United States, in the space of a few decades, modern codes of law were drawn up. "At the beginning of the nineteenth

⁵Zygmunt Bauman, "Survival as a Social Construct," *Theory, Culture and Society* 9, no. 1 (February 1992): 1–36.

⁶From AIDS.

⁷Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Allen Lane, 1977), and *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Random House, 1965).

⁸Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, 45.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid., 227.

century . . . the great spectacle of physical punishment disappeared; the tortured body was avoided."¹¹

People came to find disgusting the very idea of public floggings and hangings, or of going on a Sunday outing to view the insane. However, it was not, in Foucault's view, that society was now characterized by "more kindness, more respect, more 'humanity'."¹² Rather, the old ways were incompatible with the whole emerging "scientifico-legal complex."¹³ Instead of physical punishment, the new prisons ensured "both the real capture of the body and its perpetual observation";¹⁴ change was rooted in new, far-reaching "mechanisms and strategies of power."¹⁵

Foucault's three-volume *History of Sexuality* similarly traces links between physical activities—and what could seem more straightforwardly physical than sexual acts?—and changes in both how people think and underlying structures of power. We have a simplistic view, he argues, that people used to be repressed sexually and no longer are. But human history is far more complicated than that. Take, for example, homosexual relations between men and young boys. In classical Greece this was marked by "intensity," "seriousness," "vitality,"¹⁶ but by the Roman era, attitudes had changed. "What seems to have changed is not the taste for boys . . . [rather] a fading of the importance it was granted in philosophical and moral debate." There was a conflict with the power of the Roman father, who was determined to maintain control over his sons, not cede it to adult lovers; hence "love for boys was practised for the most part with young slaves, about whose status there was no reason to worry."¹⁷ It was not that a partiality for boys was criticized or seen as illegitimate, but that the value attached to it altered. This in turn paved the way for new perspectives on sexual intercourse, with the Stoics arguing that "an equal exchange of enjoyment" is crucial, and impossible with a boy.

Today we view any form of sexual intercourse between adults and minors as reprehensible and unnatural, whereas at the same time our societies are increasingly tolerant of sexual relations between same-sex adults. Foucault's point is that one cannot see any of these sexual activities, in any era, as purely physical, and the outcome of biological drives that may be "warped" in some people. On the contrary: the sexual activities that we engage in, and that we wish to engage in, are mediated by ideas that themselves relate to

¹¹Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 7, 14.

¹²Ibid., 16.

¹³Ibid., 23.

¹⁴Ibid., 304.

¹⁵Ibid., 305.

¹⁶Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, vol. 3, *The History of Sexuality* (London: Allen Lane, 1988), 189.

¹⁷Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, 189–90.

underlying structures of power. We must recognize how sex is "historically subordinate to sexuality."¹⁸

Foucault argues that modern society is characterized by the extension of administrative rationality: ever more detailed processes of administration and control, whereby people are regulated and also taught to regulate themselves. Instead of the old systems of the Middle Ages, with the state operating a code of justice based on physical punishment, modern states are characterized by "governmentality," with a whole series of specialized government apparatuses and experts. These maximize control over the population and the state monitors demographic variables carefully: "the 'body'—the body of individuals and the body of populations—appears as the bearer of new variables," Foucault claims.¹⁹

Foucault's work was very important in directing sociologists' attention to the body, but his analytical methods and conclusions also tend to deny the body any fixed reality at all, implying, rather, that how we view and how we experience our bodies is *entirely* a social construction. Foucault concentrates on textual analysis, and on how people viewed and talked about the body, because he seeks structures of knowledge. As we discuss further in Chapter 9, Foucault's postmodernist perspective implies that an age is defined by the particular way in which we see and comprehend the world, and that this is also what governs how power is exercised.²⁰ In the process, as Shilling points out, the body itself "disappears as a material or biological phenomenon . . . reduced to an inert mass which is controlled by discourses centered on the mind."²¹

Bryan S. Turner also emphasizes that our bodies must be understood as socially constructed; but in his work the biological remains far more apparent and important. Turner is currently Professor of Sociology at the University of Cambridge, England; he previously held chairs at Deakin University, Australia; Essex University, England; Flinders University, Australia; and the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands.²² He sees his work as symptomatic of a more "general movement in social science . . .

¹⁸Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction* (London: Allen Lane 1976), 157.

¹⁹Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge. Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–* (Brighton: Wheatsheaf, 1980), 172.

²⁰See Chapter 9, pp. 422–24.

²¹Shilling, *The Body and Social Theory*, 80.

²²Turner's most important publications in this area are *The Body and Society: Explorations in Social Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984); *Regulating Bodies: Essays in Medical Sociology* (London: Routledge, 1992); with Colin Samson, *Medical Power and Social Knowledge*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1995); and M. Featherstone, M. Hepworth, and B. S. Turner, ed., *The Body, Social Process and Cultural Theory* (London: Sage, 1991). See also his and others' contributions to A. Bainham, S. D. Sclater, and M. Richards, *Body Lore and Laws* (Portland, OR: Harvill, 2002). The development of the approach is particularly associated with the journal *Theory, Culture and Society*.

which has attempted to come to terms with the embodiment of the human actor and hence with the relationship between emotionality and feeling in relation to purposeful activity."²³ We have encountered this movement at various points in this text—for example, in discussing Hochschild's sociology of the emotions, or Goffman's work on "personal front."²⁴ However, Turner advances a more systematic theory and classification of the body in society, and he also emphasizes how strongly the model of social actors as intrinsically rational and disembodied still holds sway in social science. "We have to assert that in the beginning was the body" and overcome the still-pervasive mind-body division, he argues.²⁵

Turner does not believe that there is some universal scientific way of describing how our bodies "are" in society. On the contrary: how we feel our bodies to be, how others perceive them, and how they function and behave are in large part (not wholly) a function of culture. One of the challenges for a sociology of the body is to distinguish between and relate these different layers—for example, to distinguish between and look at both the "organic" fact of handedness (that is, that people favor one hand over another) and the "cultural representations and social meanings of right-handedness."²⁶

Turner defines the sociology of the body as being concerned with the "historical and social consequences of the management of the body in human affairs."²⁷ He argues that bodies in human societies have to be regulated—trained and disciplined in the appropriate techniques of a given society and culture. Human babies learn to walk and gesture in all societies; but how they carry themselves, how they move, and the sorts of gestures they make vary enormously. The body is also an important part of what Bourdieu, as we saw in Chapter 3, would describe as "cultural capital": a way of differentiating people within as well as between societies. For example, there have been enormous changes in the last one hundred years in the way tanned skins are perceived in Western societies. They were for a long time the mark of relatively low status—the result of open-air work, probably in the fields. Then they became a sign of wealth: the ability first to take summer holidays in the sun, later winter ones too, while poorer people toiled in factories or offices. More recently, as more and more people can do this (or frequent a tanning salon), tans have lost much of their cachet while also starting to acquire undesirable associations with skin cancer.

Turner describes how diet used to be seen as a way of promoting mental stability and reason as well as health but is now promoted in terms

²³Turner, *Regulating Bodies*, 162.

²⁴See Chapter 5, parts Three and Four.

²⁵Turner, *Regulating Bodies*, 7.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 9.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 15.

of longevity and sexuality.²⁸ He also notes, "The new emphasis in body-beautiful culture on self-preservation and self-maintenance . . . may . . . be closely associated with the aging of the populations of the Western industrial societies." Thus, the "way in which human bodies are represented in terms of aging processes has changed fundamentally. . . . The image these days is of an endless youth stretching before us. But one knows that these representations of the young body can only be achieved by continuous exercise and athleticism, topped up by the periodic face-lift, draining off human fat, operations on the eyelids, and so on. These 'young' bodies are literally constructed but they are constructed *against* aging."²⁹

The emphasis on the "body beautiful" has a far greater effect on women than on men. Young women have always been concerned with their physical appearance prior to marriage. However, social changes, and especially the growing belief that the body is almost infinitely malleable, have had a profound effect on the degree to which women's self-image is associated with physical appearance throughout their lives. In affluent societies, more and more women are following the example of the singer Dolly Parton when she explains, "If I see something sagging, dragging or bagging, I have it sucked, tucked and plucked."

In discussing the role of women in society, we discussed Dorothy Smith's analysis of how femininity is associated with clothes and image.³⁰ To this must be added physical appearance and especially body weight. Although in the past being "pretty" or "plain" were seen largely as givens, a matter of luck and fate, the modern belief that one's body can be constructed is associated with an equally strong belief that the shape one is relates to one's inherent worth. A writer who describes herself as "frankly fat" observes:

Fatism is . . . a hidden prejudice and as such it is perhaps the most vicious of all. . . . Fat is hated and despised and fat people are coerced to the outer limits of mainstream society—that is if they dare to try to be part of it.³¹

Visiting a health and beauty spa, she found that only small, one-size robes were available. This was a policy of the place; they did not want to encourage fat people to come, and many of their clients supported this. As one such client explained,

"They only have small robes . . . because a place like that is not meant for fat women. It's really offensive to have to look at women like that—it must have

²⁸Turner, *The Body and Society* and "The Discourse of Diet," *Theory, Culture and Society* 1, no. 2 (1982): 23–32, reprinted in Featherstone et al., *The Body, Social Process*. See also M. Featherstone, "The Body in Consumer Culture," *Theory, Culture and Society* 1, no. 2 (1982): 18–33.

²⁹Turner, *Regulating Bodies*, 165, 262. Italics original.

³⁰See Chapter 6, Part Three. See also Goffmann, "The Arrangement Between the Sexes," *Theory and Society* 4 (1977): 301–32.

³¹Shelley Bovey, *Being Fat Is Not a Sin* (Boston: Pandora Press, 1989), 1.